ANALYSIS

Media Control as Source of Political Power: Differentiating Reach and Impact

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Abstract
This article analyses the control of business and state actors over mass media in Russia. First, the most important media sources for political news are identified for the last two decades. While constantly increasing state control is clearly visible for these media, the impact on audiences is more complex. Therefore, second, different forms of media impact on political views of the Russian population are discussed based on a review of related academic studies.

Introduction
When Boris Yeltsin, Russia's highly unpopular president, managed to win a second term in the presidential elections of 1996, his success was largely attributed to support from influential business magnates, so-called oligarchs, who had used their media assets to support his candidacy. At the time the media holdings of oligarchs became a hot topic for political analysts. It was, therefore, no surprise that Vladimir Putin, when he became Yeltsin's successor in 2000 with the agenda to strengthen state power, started his attack on oligarchs with those who controlled the most important media outlets, namely Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky.

However, their media assets were not brought under direct state control. Instead, Putin initially established a competitive authoritarian regime, in which—according to the definition by Levitsky and Way (2010)—"formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents. […] Competition is thus real but unfair."

Accordingly, mass media in Russia remained formally independent. The most important media assets from Gusinsky's Media-Most group, for example, were acquired by the Russian gas company Gazprom, which used the opportunity to create its own media holding. Gazprom is, however, in turn majority controlled by the Russian state. This marked a change in the balance of power between big business and political elites. Under Yeltsin there was "state capture", i.e. oligarchs dominated politics in order to promote their narrow business interests. Under Putin, analysts increasingly saw "business capture", i.e. political elites were now putting pressure on private companies to promote their political aims. In line with this development, private control over media assets changed from an instrument of political meddling to—as one manager quipped—"a birthday present to the president". Seen from the perspective of the political leadership, media control was now "outsourced" to private companies in order to maintain a façade of democratic media pluralism.

However, media control is not identical with public support. The Soviet Union was a prime example of this. In Soviet times all media were state owned and subject to direct censorship. They produced a coherent and omnipresent message in support of the Soviet state. However, as soon as free speech was allowed in the late 1980s, this message was ridiculed and largely ignored, indicating that most people had long before stopped believing it. Accordingly, diagnosing media capture by the Russian state is not enough to understand the role of mass media in Russian politics. First, it has to be established how much of the media landscape is at least indirectly controlled by the state. In a second step, the impact of this control needs to be assessed.

Russian Media as Source of Political News
In order to understand the role of mass media in political power, it is not so much total consumption which matters, but sources of political news. Independent representative surveys of the Russian population conducted by the Levada Center regularly ask people where they "most often get to know news from the country and the world". Multiple answers are possible. That means the results, presented in Figure 1 on p. 6, reflect all relevant sources of news.

Though the share of TV as a major news provider is in long term decline, in 2020 it is still named by over two thirds of the Russian population as one of the major sources of news. Even more importantly, when asked which source of news they trust most, regularly about half of the population names TV (see Figure 2 on p. 7). As the most important source of political news, national TV stations were the first mass media to be brought under state control after Putin's rise to power. Already by the end of Putin's first term as president all major

TV stations were either state-run or under the control of Gazprom media.

In the 2000s, the other two important groups of mass media named as a source of political news were national newspapers and radio stations, which both reached about a third of the population. At the end of Putin's first term six Russian newspapers with political news reached more than 1% of the population, Argumenty i Fakty (18%) and Komsomolskaya Pravda (14%) being the most popular, according to a Levada poll. Both were still owned by Yeltsin-era oligarchs, as were most of the less popular national newspapers. At the same time, the most "opposition-friendly" political radio station, Ekho Moskvy (reaching 2% of the population), belonged to Gazprom Media, thus providing a rare example of a case in which ownership alone does not determine reporting.

During the 2000s, the internet started to emerge as a major source of news in Russia, first through journalistic websites and later also through social media. While in 2009 less than 10% of the Russian population named the internet as a major source of news, by 2020 journalistic websites and social media were each named by over 40%, with over 20% considering each of them to be especially trustworthy. As Jason Gainous et al. (2018) argue social media became a game changer in Russian politics, strongly contributing to the mobilisation of protesters since the big protest wave of 2011/12.

As the landscape of print as well as online media is much more diverse than in the case of TV stations, the state increased control less dynamically and less visibly. However, a network of oligarchs close to the political leadership around Putin acquired most of the influential Russian print and online media. Grigory Berezkin took over Komsomolskaya Pravda in 2006, and a decade later the investigative news platform RBK. Alexander Mamut bought LiveJournal, the most popular platform for personal blogs in 2007, and in 2013 acquired the two most prominent online news media outlets. The owner of the most important social media platform, VKontakte, who had denied data access to the Russian security service, was forced out of the country and lost his company to oligarch Alisher Usmanov in 2014.

In summary, already during his first term Putin managed to get (at least indirect) control over the most popular mass media, in the form of all major national TV stations. Control over other media was increased more incrementally in a process which is still ongoing. It is also important to note that while ownership allows for direct control, including the option to fire critical journalists, other forms of pressure on journalists, ranging from libel cases in court to physical violence, strongly influence media reporting, as they encourage self-censorship.

In line with these developments, indices of media freedom by Reporters without Borders and Freedom House show increasing restrictions on mass media in Russia over the last three decades. However, within the broader trend, there are important differences. To capture them, Toepfl (2020) distinguishes between uncritical, policy-critical, and leadership-critical publics. While only the first shows unquestioned support for the existing political regime and its representatives, the second restricts criticism to specific issues and lower-ranking officials, allowing the leadership to save face and intervene, and only the third public addresses criticism to the country's leadership, thus potentially demanding political change.

Since Putin's first term, national TV has been solidly situated in the uncritical public. At the same time, in print and online media critical publics continue to exist. In Toepfl's assessment "within Russia, as of mid-2017, highly visible [policy-critical] publics could be identified: […] a range of privately owned news websites, such as Moskovskiy Komsomolets or Kommersant'. Participants in these publics were collectives of professional journalists (who were employed by news organizations whose owners typically had close ties with the Kremlin) and mass audiences of several millions of readers daily." However, the space for policy-critical publics has been shrinking continuously. In 2019, over a dozen journalists left Kommersant in protest against censorship. In 2020 a similar story unfolded at Vedomosti, another prominent part of the policy-critical public (for more on this see the following article by Esther Somfalvy.).

The space for leadership-critical publics has been much more restricted, and journalists in this sphere have been the most likely to face strong state pressure and physical violence. As a result, these publics were smaller and more diverse. As Toepfl summarizes.,"In Russia, as of mid-2017, some of these leadership-critical publics constituted themselves in traditional one-to-many mass media environments [like the newspaper Novaya Gazeta or the internet TV channel Dozhd/Rain]. Other leadership-critical publics, by contrast, operated in novel interactive environments, including, for instance, social network site accounts. […] For instance, one public that operated outside a classic one-to-many environment and did not involve professional journalists as participants [was created by the leadership-critical content […] published on the Facebook account […] of Alexey Navalny, Russia's most influential opposition activist, which was followed by approximately 380,000 users in September 2017."

Forms of Media Impact

Though media control is important for political influence, the idea that media can easily "brainwash" the audience

is not supported by serious evidence. In her recent study on Russia, for example, Elena Sirotkina argues on the basis of a representative opinion poll that it is not frequency of exposure to information that has an impact, but perceived credibility. Moreover, people tend to avoid the cognitive dissonance caused by media reporting which contradicts their own views. As a result, they tend to consume media which are in line with their worldview. Exposure to alternative views can, in fact, lead to a hardening of their own positions, as they are permanently defended against attacks from the media. For the case of Russia a forthcoming study by Ruben Enikolopov et al. is telling. They offered free access to a pro-opposition online TV channel in Russia and used a randomized field experiment and a pollster to measure the effect of that exposure. The result was stronger polarisation. Those who had been in support of the opposition now felt emboldened and were more outspoken supporters. Those who had been critical of the opposition, in turn, were even more supportive of the existing regime after exposure to the pro-opposition channel. That indicates controlling some media can be used to mobilize supporters, but it is not enough to shift public opinion.

If, however, a critical mass of media promotes the same message, they can also inform political world views. The two most important effects highlighted in media studies are agenda-setting and framing. Agenda-setting means the power of media to influence which issues are being discussed. If during an election campaign the media report a lot about the state of the economy, people are more likely to base their voting decision on economic issues. In times of economic crisis, it would, therefore, be in the interest of politicians in power to shift media reporting to other issues, where they are perceived more favourably by the population.

Similarly, if a new issue emerges media have considerable influence on the public perspective on this issue. Western sanctions after the Ukraine crisis can, for example, be framed as an economic challenge, which will cause concerns about living standards among the audience and doubts about the competence of their political leadership. But sanctions can also be framed as a geopolitical struggle with an aggressive enemy, which is more likely to evoke feelings of patriotism and raise support for the regime. For example, Christina Cottiero et al. (2015) have shown that the framing by Russian TV of the Ukraine crisis as an issue of "fascism" and "American aggression" is reflected in internet search terms used by the Russian population. In such a situation, Sarah Oates (2016) argues it is "not so much who owns or controls the media that is key to understanding information control; rather, it is knowing who is constructing and disseminating the most compelling national narrative that holds the key to power in Russia."

If, in a next step, there is rather comprehensive control over the media, or at least over those media which inform the majority of the population, this control can be used to cancel out the opposition from public awareness. An analysis of media reporting on Russian presidential elections in 2000 and 2008 by Nozima Akhrarkhodjaeva (2017) has demonstrated that shift. While in 2000 the programmes of oppositional parties were discussed, though overwhelmingly with a negative bias, in 2008 there was hardly any reference to policy proposals from opposition candidates, as reports in mainstream media focused on their lifestyle and character—of course, again with a negative stance.

In a similar logic, the most prominent oppositional politician of the 2010s, Alexei Navalny, is mostly ignored not only by President Putin, who has never used his name in public speeches, but also by the country's main TV stations, as an analysis by Anastasia Kazun (2019) shows. She concludes: "In a situation where simply ignoring Navalny is out of the question, while covering him too much even in a negative light can raise the public awareness about him, occasionally running smear items about him can serve as a good compromise." Similarly, as Rolf Fredheim (2017) has shown in the case of two prominent Russian online media outlets, a shift to pro-regime owners coincided with an editorial shift to lifestyle and human interest subjects, while reporting about controversial legal proceedings was substantially reduced.

For these reasons, Russia has been moving from a competitive authoritarian regime, where competition is real but unfair, to a fully authoritarian regime. In such a regime, the opposition has no access to mainstream media at all (Heinrich/Pleines 2018). Even if comprehensive control over the media has been established, the audience will still not be "brainwashed" about strongly-held beliefs. But these beliefs can be profoundly confused. Several studies have concluded that this is the strategy behind Russian media reporting on controversial issues. Here, the result is not so much the persuasion of opposition supporters, but their demobilisation in face of an avalanche of contradictory information. Moreover, as Carter/Carter (2018) argue, in fully authoritarian states the aim of propaganda is not necessarily to convince people, but to demonstrate the unchallenged strength of the regime, which also has a demobilising effect on opposition supporters.

Conclusion

With a small number of national TV stations dominating Russian news reporting in terms of reach as well as trust, Putin was able to swiftly gain a leading position by taking over the media assets of two oligarchs. With that, Putin also changed the balance of power in

his favour. While under his predecessor politicians had courted oligarchs in order to get their support, Putin was soon in a position where he could outsource media control to loyal allies. An increasing number of print and online media have been taken over by oligarchs close to the Kremlin. However, establishing fuller control of the media landscape was a more incremental process, which became much more complicated with the emergence of news websites and social media.

As a result, the Russian state has so far not established full discursive hegemony. Moreover, even full control over media reporting does not allow one to simply switch the world views and political alignment of the population. Instead, media control is used by the political leadership to shift the attention of supporters and the larger unengaged public to topics which show it in a more favourable light. Moreover, strong dominance over media reporting is increasingly used to discourage the disappointed from mobilising.

About the Author

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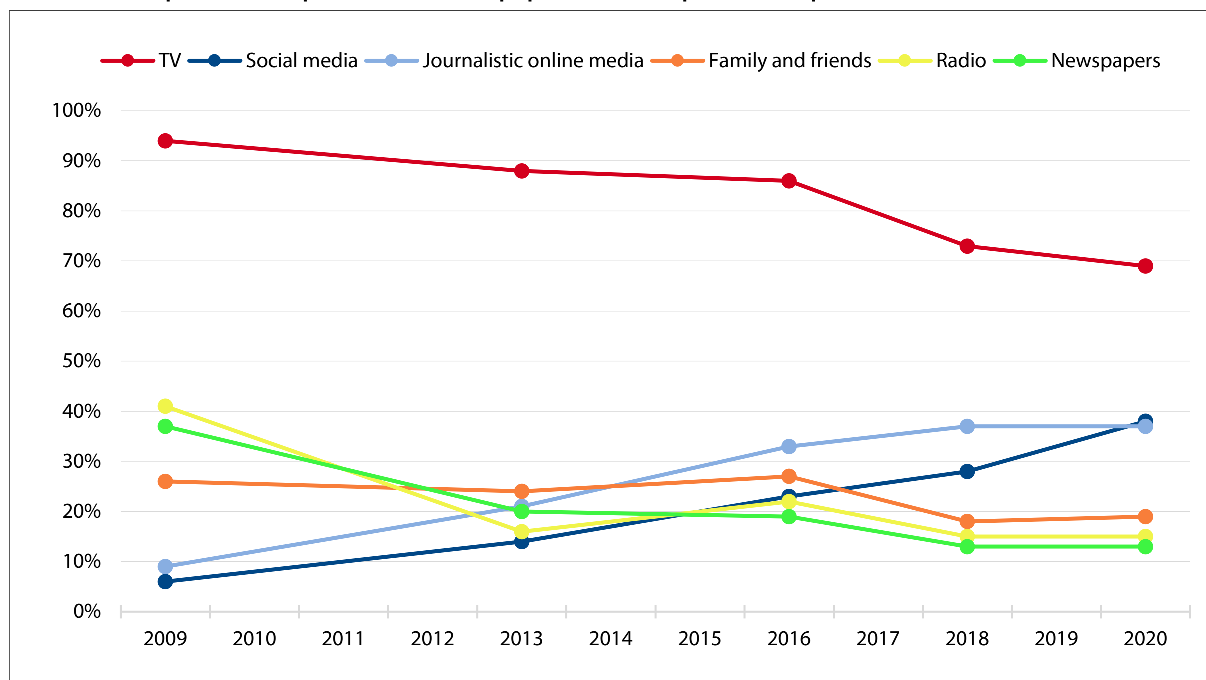
OPINION POLL

Preferred News Sources of the Russian Population

Figure 1: Where Do You Most Often Get to Know News from the Country and the World? (representative poll of the Russian population, multiple answers possible)

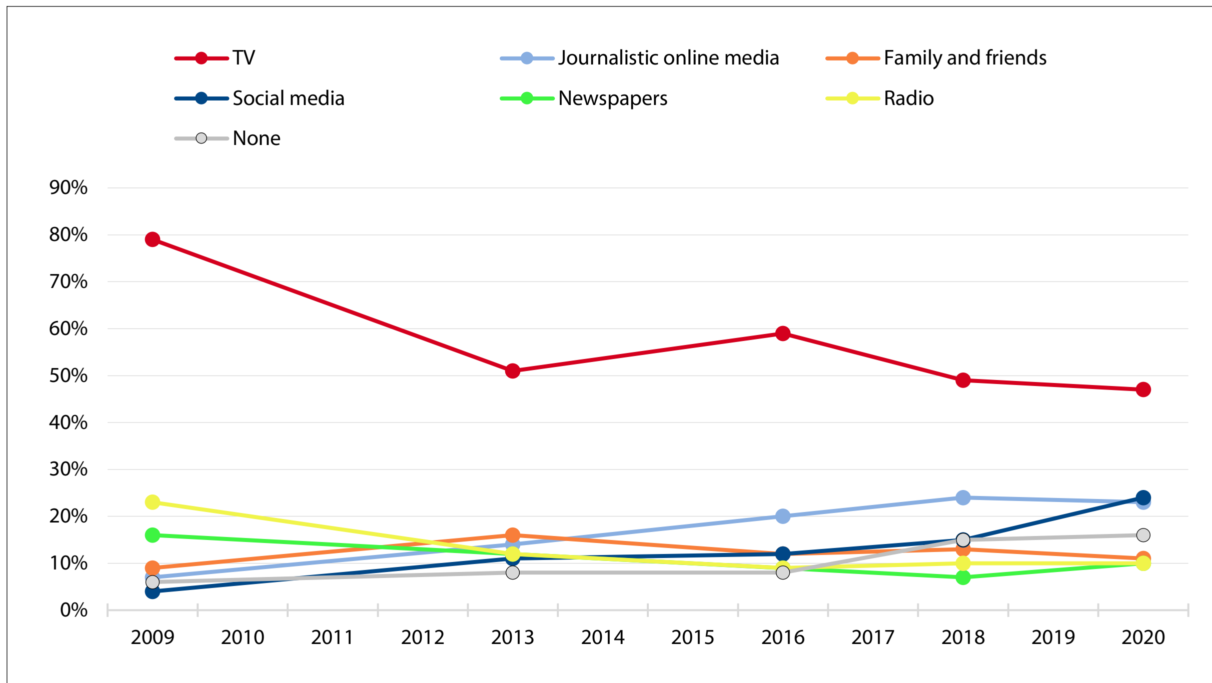


	2009	2013	2016	2018	2020
TV	94%	88%	86%	73%	69%
Social media	6%	14%	23%	28%	38%
Journalistic online media	9%	21%	33%	37%	37%
Family and friends	26%	24%	27%	18%	19%
Radio	41%	16%	22%	15%	15%
Newspapers	37%	20%	19%	13%	13%

Note: Answers mentioned by less than 10% of respondents in all years were not included. All polls were conducted in the summer of the respective year (June, July or August).

Source: Data provided by the Levada Center.

Figure 2: Which Sources of Information for News from the Country and the World Do You Trust Most? (representative poll of the Russian population, multiple answers possible)



	2009	2013	2016	2018	2020
TV	79%	51%	59%	49%	47%
Journalistic online media	7%	14%	20%	24%	23%
Family and friends	9%	16%	12%	13%	11%
Social media	4%	11%	12%	15%	24%
Newspapers	16%	12%	9%	7%	10%
Radio	23%	12%	9%	10%	10%
None	6%	8%	8%	15%	16%

Note: Answers mentioned by less than 10% of respondents in all years were not included. All polls were conducted in the summer of the respective year (June, July or August).

Source: Data provided by the Levada Center.