

How Kremlin controls major Russian media



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Mass media in Russia have changed significantly since the days of President Yeltsin and the contrast with the free and independent media in Russia of just 20 years ago has been ever so evident for the past three years, with Russia's media turning from a market into a state-organized system of propaganda machine. When did it all start? The demise of Russia's independent media market did not occur recently or suddenly. Indeed, the first ominous signs emerged as far back as President Putin's first term in the early 2000s and the early signs of a huge propaganda machine to come were seen during such turbulent events as, for example, the Estonian Bronze Soldier controversy¹ in 2007 and the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. In the light of the events surrounding the 2016 U.S. elections, it is worthwhile to note that in 2007-2008, it was the first time that Estonian and Georgian government websites were hacked, along with the ongoing media propaganda campaign against these two countries and the events on the ground.

Putin's return to presidency in 2012 was to become fateful for the Russian media leviathan, as illustrated by his 2013 decision to abolish RIA Novosti and to make Rossiya Segodnya ("Russia Today") the official state media giant, right in the middle of revolutionary events breaking out in Ukraine at the time [1]. Today, Russian state media became not only the inward-oriented propaganda machine but also an outward-oriented weapon targeting minds of both foreigners and Russian expats. Moreover, it is a system, a network of media institutions and *de jure* independent organizations tied to them by relations and personal connections, ultimately converging on the president's office in the Kremlin.

One of the biggest and oldest state media corporations in Russia is the VGTRK ("All Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company"). The current head of VGTRK is Oleg Dobrodeyev, one of the founders of the NTV channel and a veteran of Russian broadcasting media. His son, Boris Dobrodeyev, is the chief executive of Russia's biggest social network – VK.com (earlier known as "Vkontakte") and the chief strategist of Mail.RU, which took over VK.com after Pavel Durov, the website's founder, was forced to give up his share under pressure from FSB (Russian Federal Security Service) and left Russia in 2014 [2] [3]. VGTRK's primary activities involve broadcasting in Russian and in Russia, as well as other parts of the Russian-speaking world, especially to the regions located near Russia's borders with the majority of the population there being ethnic Russians, and to the Russian expats living in the West. The channels it broadcasts include Rossiya-1, which involves general programming, including that of political nature, Rossiya-24, broadcasting news and analytics, and RTR-Planeta, which focuses on outside broadcasting, providing 24/7 coverage for the Russian speakers in other parts of the world.

However, perhaps the largest media corporation in the country is the Gazprom-Media-Holding (GMH), headed by Dmitry Chernyshenko and ultimately by Aleksey Miller, the head of the Gazprom's board of directors. The GMH itself is a subsidiary of Gazprombank, yet it owns a large chunk of consumer media in Russia, such as the TV channel NTV, satellite broadcaster NTV-Plus, entertainment channel TNT,

¹ The Estonian government's decision to move the Soviet-era Bronze Soldier statue caused a backlash from the Russian government (including allegations that Russian state-employed hackers were behind cyberattacks against the Estonian government's web sites), and violent clashes between the police and the Russian youths in Tallinn [21].

nationwide radio service Ekho Moskvyy (Echo of Moscow), and many others [4]. The story behind GMH and its growth is complex and involves controversy, such as the downfall of Vladimir Gusinsky's "Media-Most" corporation and acquisition of its assets by GMH. Currently, its primary TV asset NTV is headed by Aleksey Zemsky, who also was the editor-in-chief of VGTRK's Rossiya HD from 2012 to 2015. The channel's chief producer is Timur Vaynshtein, a member of STS Media's board of directors and a cousin to Gary Kasparov, an émigré and a well-known opposition leader in Russia. On that post, he replaced Danila Sharapov, a former deputy chief of the socio-political broadcasting branch of the First Channel. NTV became known for pitching in the propaganda campaign against Ukraine that began in 2014, and for slanderous accusations against Russian opposition leaders².

The other important state media corporation is Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today), headed by now infamous propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov and Margarita Simonyan. It was founded on December 9, 2013 by Putin's personal order that abolished RIA Novosti and gave its assets to the new corporation. It took its name after the English-language TV channel called RT (previously "Russia Today") which was founded by RIA Novosti and began broadcasting in 2005, carving itself a niche for fringe elements in societies it broadcasts to. RT is Rossiya Segodnya's flagship project, broadcasting in English, Arabic, and Spanish, and getting much attention from Western governments and the public for its media practices and content. However, another powerful branch of the corporation is a global radio service called Sputnik, prior to 2014 known as the "Voice of Russia" and "Radio Moscow" during the Soviet era. This radio service broadcasts in a wide range of languages, including those of the European Union, like Czech, Polish, French, German and Latvian, among others. It even came to the point that the Latvian edition of Sputnik was banned in Latvia in 2016 [5].

Then comes the Pervyi Kanal (The First Channel), which, unlike Rossiya Segodnya or VGTRK, is a joint stock company. The majority (51%) of its stock is owned by the state and the other half is split between the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich [6] and the National Media Group (Natsional'naya Media Gruppya) or NMG³. The channel's unchanging chief executive since 1999 is Konstantin Ernst, who also worked as a TV and film producer, director and TV host. The channel broadcasts to the EU and the US, as well as Israel, where there is a high demand for the Russian-language programs aimed at Russian speakers. The current chief of the Pervyi Kanal's information branch, Kirill Kleymyonov, used to work as a deputy for the chief of Lukoil's public relations just prior to his new job. Another important person in the channel is Dmitry Borisov, who works as a TV host for "Vecherniye Novosti" (Evening news) and also as a chief producer of "Pervy Kanal. Vsemirnaya set'" (First Channel. World network) subsidiary, as well as a radio host in some programs on "Ekho Moskvyy" (Echo of Moscow). The First Channel's other subsidiaries include nation-wide broadcasters in Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia, who usually re-broadcast most of the First Channel's programs for local audiences.

² NTV made outrageous claims, such as that the Georgian ex-president and then the governor of Odessa Mikheil Saakashvili had sex with an underage cross-dressing prostitute [22], and published a secretly recorded sex tape depicting a Russian opposition leader Mikhail Kasyanov [23]

³ NMG published information about its share on its official website at <http://nm-g.ru/#sostav-holdinga>

TASS is another state organization of interest, it is perhaps the oldest one in Russia which survived since the USSR times. Renamed from “ITAR-TASS”, as it was known between 1992 and 2014, TASS is headed by Sergey Mikhaylov, a Russian journalist, whose tenure as the chief advertiser for RZhD (Russian state railway company) gained him some controversy. On this post, he replaced Vitaliy Ignatenko, who was the chief executive of ITAR-TASS from 1991 till Putin’s return in 2012. From 2013 until May 2016, Mikhaylov’s wife, Yuliana Slashcheva, was the chief executive of a private media company “STS Media” which is a publicly traded company, listed on NASDAQ, whereas Mikhaylov himself is an active member of the Public Relations Society of America⁴. TASS is a more of a state news agency rather than a broadcasting corporation such as the ones mentioned above, but as such, it is inevitably tied to the Kremlin.

Some of the private channels have engaged in rebroadcasting the state propaganda or taking a firm pro-Kremlin stance during the conflict in Ukraine. These include all the TV and radio companies of the National Media Group (NMG) mentioned above: Pyatyi Kanal (Fifth Channel), REN TV, and RSN (since 2016, Life.Zvuk – a radio subsidiary of Lifenews); and the newspaper “Izvestiya”. The NMG’s board of directors is headed by Alina Kabayeva, an Uzbekistan-born Russian gymnast, whose very close relationship with President Putin (she is considered as a love partner of Putin) is a constant subject of rumors.

The Fifth Channel is a nation-wide broadcaster located in Saint Petersburg, which – like its sister channel Life – became entangled in a propaganda campaign against Ukraine, exemplified by weekly dosage of propaganda disguised as “analytics” and hosted by Nika Strizhak. About 73% of the channel’s shares are controlled by the NMG⁵. The chief executive of the channel is Aleksey Brodsky, a former deputy chief of the First Channel’s information branch.

REN TV is primarily an entertainment channel, originally founded as a private and independent TV channel. It is less notable for any outright propaganda activity and is more known for producing and broadcasting pseudoscientific documentaries. Nonetheless, one of its most acclaimed TV presenters, Marianna Maksimovskaya, who hosted a weekly independent analytics program called “Nedelya” (The Week), left the channel after the end of her contract in 2014 to join a communications agency called “Mikhaylov i Partnyory” (Mikhaylov and Partners) of Sergey Mikhaylov, the chief of TASS.

RSN (Now “Life.Zvuk”) is a radio version of a notorious news agency, continuously accused of forging propaganda materials and producing fake news – Lifenews. Lifenews (or just “Life”) is owned by Aram Gabrelyanov, who is also the head of the board of directors of the “Izvestiya” and other corporate bodies tied to NMG and Life. Among them is the Baltic Mediagroup (Baltiyskaya Mediagruppa), headed by Gabrelyanov since 2015, which controls a large portion of news publishing and broadcasting in Saint

⁴ From Mikhaylov’s biography at his company’s website: <http://m-p.ru/eng/company/mikhailov/>

⁵ The current ownership of the channel is taken from its 2012 report (http://5-tv.ru/shared/files/201207/2077_220256.pdf), consequent amendments from summer 2012 are available as well (http://5-tv.ru/shared/files/201208/2077_226852.doc)

Petersburg and the Leningrad Oblast. Gabrelyanov received an Order of Honor in 2014 for Lifenews' coverage of events in the Crimea [7]. His son, Ashot, moved to the US in 2015 to launch *babo.com* – a “citizen journalism” project selling apps and other software to that end [8].

Another Russian channel deserving special attention is the so-called Spas TV, a TV channel owned by the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church⁶. It was founded by Ivan Demidov, a TV persona and producer known for hosting entertainment programs in the 1990s. The channel broadcasts religious programs primarily, however its programs include the one titled “The Ukrainian question”, which regurgitates the official Russian propaganda, hosted by the channel's chief executive Boris Kostenko. Another notorious member of its staff is Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian philosopher known for his irredentist and obscurantist views.

Among other religious broadcasters is Tsargrad TV, owned by Konstantin Malofeyev and headed by Malofeyev along with Aleksandr Dugin and Yelena Sharoykina⁷ [9], while its editor-in-chief is Denis Davydov, a head of Malofeyev's another initiative – an Internet censorship advocate, the Safe Internet League (“Liga bezopasnogo interneta”). The biographies of people involved in this channel are even more interesting than its propaganda content. Aside from being a producer of the channel, Malofeyev is also a head of the Fund of the Saint Basil the Great, which was involved in funding the National Front of Marine Le Pen in France, as reported by the Russian edition of RFI [10]. At the same time, Sharoykina is known as a proponent of anti-GMO legislation in Russia and she heads the All-National Association of Genetic Security (“Obschenatsional'naya Assotsiatsiya geneticheskoy bezopasnosti”), which promotes pseudo-scientific views and sells its “approvals” of various products as “non-GMO” for the highest bidder [11].

Russian state's relationship with the media

The Kremlin, aside from being directly engaged in broadcasting, also gets involved in controlling nominally independent and private media through its institutions. Such institutions significantly contribute to the “chilling effect” in the Russian media market, promoting (self-) censorship and groupthink. The Russia Today's highly non-transparent financing scheme and the lack of scrutinizing public oversight over it (Rozhdestvensky & Surganova, 2015) is just an example of a special treatment accorded to state broadcasters. Such leniency is countered by the punitive character of the Roskomnadzor (RKN), which is a state organization that tries to bring broadcasting and the Internet content in line with the Russian law, which can be highly punitive of certain sorts of dissent.

This lies in high contrast with the established media practices in the West, exemplified by such public broadcasters as the BBC in the UK, CBS in Canada, or public access media in various European

⁶ Information on ownership available on the official web site at <http://www.spastv.ru/history.html>

⁷ Information on the management and ownership available on the official web site at <http://tsargrad.tv/pervyi-russkij>

countries. These are typically held to a high level of scrutiny as publicly funded enterprises, whose entire accounting is available for the public they are supposed to inform. Even the services under the United States' BBG (such as Radio Free Europe or the Voice of America) are held accountable to the US Congress. That level of scrutiny is hard to achieve in Russia, where the parliamentary system, being overwhelmingly held by fiercely pro-Kremlin "United Russia" party, is unable to counter the executive branch.

The federal watchdog, RKN, is currently headed by Aleksandr Zharov. Zharov clearly stated that his organization's goal is to engage in blocking "particular content" on the Internet, targeting certain web pages and web sites, instead of engaging in massive censorship campaign akin to that in the People's Republic of China (Golitsyna & Bryzgalova, Intervyu - Aleksandr Zharov, rukovoditel' Roskomnadzora [Interview - Aleksandr Zharov, chief executive of the RKN], 2014). Zharov himself is not a media specialist, nor a social scientist, being a physician by education, whose doctoral (candidate) dissertation was on "promotion (Rus. "propaganda") of a healthy lifestyle"⁸. Moreover, he worked as a deputy chief of the VGTRK in the past, as well as a member of the First Channel's board of directors. His past position in the government (deputy chief of the Minkomsvyaz' – the Ministry of Information) did not stop him from working in a for-profit broadcasting body, even in a one owned by the government.

Channels belonging to VGTRK and the Russia Today are subordinate⁹ to the Kremlin, making it highly difficult to hold them accountable to the public through the State Duma (the lower house of the Russian Parliament) or by a court order. Partially state-controlled public companies such as the First Channel or GMH, as well as those owned by NMG, are accountable to their shareholders only (which also includes the Russian government) with chances to demand responsible broadcasting by the wider public being close to nearly impossible. Other resources are privately owned, but they enjoy favorable treatment from the state depending on their content.

Those media outlets that maintain their independent stance usually have three options: 1. Find alternative funding schemes, like the TV channel Dozhd' which had to go with a paid subscription scheme in order to fund itself (BBC Russian, 2014); 2. Tread a thin line between subservience and independence, avoiding certain topics and issues, as well as opinions, which may harm the medium's stance – as happened with the Rosbalt.ru in late 2013, which was nearly closed for "posting content containing swearing" (Interfax, 2013); 3. Move completely out of Russian authorities' reach, typically going online and outside the .ru domain, which, however, does not stop the RKN and Russian courts from ordering local ISPs from blocking access to these outlets, as happened with Grani.ru website, which was blocked in March 2014¹⁰.

⁸ Zharov's biography is available on the RKN's official website at <https://rkn.gov.ru/about/head/p612/>

⁹ VGTRK: <http://old.vgtrk.com/about> or <http://vgtrk.com/#page/221>; Russia Today is a part of the "MIA Rossiya Segodnya", formed in 2013 after the state media re-organization per Putin's decree (full text of the decree available here: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19805>).

¹⁰ <http://graniru.org/wiki/Blocked/>

However, a more traditional way of reining in independent media was implemented against Lenta.ru and RBC, which were taken over in a manner similar to the NTV in the early 2000s. Lenta.ru's editor-in-chief Galina Timchenko was fired in March 2014 by Aleksandr Mamut, the owner of the "Afisha-Rambler-SUP"¹¹ media holding and replaced by Aleksey Goreslavskiy, who previously worked as an external communications deputy chief in the Afisha-Rambler-SUP (Lenta.ru, 2014). Timchenko, in her stead, founded the Meduza.io project operating from Latvia and employing many of the former Lenta.ru journalists. Another example is the RBC controversy, whose editors were subjected to searches and harassment following publications related to Putin's family and the Panama leaks, the editor-in-chief Elizaveta Osetinskaya was put on leave, and its owner, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, pressured to give the RBC up (Meduza.io, 2016) (Bershidsky, 2016).

Thus, whatever is left is presented in three categories: 1. Either state-funded or financially independent, wholly or partially state-owned media (e.g. the First Channel, VGTRK's channels, NTV or Moscow's TVC), which enjoy wide reach and high approval ratings, supplied by entertainment programs and a regular "dose" of propaganda disguised as "analytics", panel discussions or as regular news reports; 2. Non-state media, which, nonetheless, are friendly to the Kremlin or its agenda, often presenting one-sided, poorly checked and sensational news (such as the Life's first reports of the MH17 crash as a "shot down Ukrainian AN-26"¹², also presenting "alternative" theories of the crash (Pieters, 2015)); 3. Independent and opposition media, which face constant harassment, threats of closure or having their websites blocked online, with a few still trying to balance journalistic integrity and adherence to the "party line" set by the Kremlin, which makes self-censorship and avoiding certain topics necessary for preservation of the status quo.

The lack of independent and self-regulatory watchdogs makes it difficult to maintain fair and balanced news content and environment inside Russia. Moreover, broadcasting abroad would remain out of reach of such organizations, imposing the task of monitoring Russian state media influence upon the target countries, especially in Europe. Subordination of the Russian media giants directly to the Russian government turns their employees into the state officials tasked with fulfilling the state's demand for rallying and mobilizing population around the Kremlin and the figure of Vladimir Putin. Additionally, the tangled informal relationship between different state, private and partially state-owned media holdings and companies makes the Russian state media machine far more expansive than VGTRK and the Russia Today.

State media such as those in Russia are guided by official decrees and state-imposed guidelines, and not necessarily by ethical principles taught to professional journalists. Indeed, it is often the law that shapes the content and the limits of the Russian state "journalism", instead of in-house ethical principles

¹¹ The statement by Timchenko and Lenta.ru journalists who left Lenta.ru is available here: <https://lenta.ru/info/posts/statement/>

¹² The originally archived segment was deleted by Life (then Lifenews.ru) but was preserved by different users online. It is available here: <https://vimeo.com/184960756>

or an independent editorial policy. Such understanding of the role of journalism is fundamentally different from that in the West.

In this context, journalists are not independent inquirers tasked with delivering truthful news to their audience, but state employees, even “soldiers” on the frontline, who are awarded for following orders and reprimanded for showing signs of defection. The problem, however, starts when we try to locate a clear boundary between the Kremlin’s soldiers and honest journalists. As the example of Andrey Babitsky¹³ shows, not all journalists working in the Kremlin’s favor are official employees of the Kremlin’s own media, and – moreover – they can become “turncoats” after having a long career in media, which are independent from the Kremlin’s direct influence. Furthermore, private channels, not affiliated with the Russian government, can pose even bigger threat, with their journalists and other representatives being able to travel abroad and broadcast pro-Kremlin propaganda without being encumbered by concerns over the state funding or restrictions imposed upon the state employees of another country (if such restrictions exist).

Conclusion

The informal or semi-formal nature of the whole Russian media machine makes distinguishing the legitimate journalism from propaganda a rule-of-thumb task. As the above examples of some of the most notorious propaganda media demonstrate, one has to search for more than a formal affiliation between a medium and the government to identify a source of pro-Kremlin propaganda. This is the nature of the Russian state media machine – a network of professional journalists, media producers, bureaucrats and public officials with the center in the Kremlin – tasked with utilizing available resources to present a point of view demanded by the state.

It is fundamentally different from the public and state-funded media in the West, where journalists and media organizations are held accountable to elected officials and the wider public. In Russia, such oversight is impossible as both the organs of oversight, such as the RKN, and the legislative branch of the government are held by the ruling party, which remains obedient to the executive branch and serves largely as a set of rubber stamp organs, designed to create a visibility of proper bureaucratic process. However, any semblance of a real separation of powers quickly dissipates. Therefore, state media are not held publicly accountable for either the funds spent on them or the quality of their reporting and content.

This framework gives the Kremlin an advantage in spreading disinformation to placate the Russian citizens and to create an image of a foreign threat emanating from the West, urging ordinary Russians to remain supportive of the current regime. Countering this disinformation threat is a serious challenge,

¹³ Babitsky was fired from Radio Free Europe for – as he claims – refusing to see the war in Ukraine from a “one-sided” point of view, and has been known to openly support separatism in Ukraine since 2014 [24].

especially due to its complex nature, as it was highlighted above. Regardless, it is a challenge worth taking, as it becomes necessary to differentiate parts of the state media machine, its propaganda affiliates, and professional journalists. However, the key takeaway here is that it is impossible to look at mass media in illiberal and undemocratic or pseudo-democratic regimes as a reliable source of information and current news. Indeed, their primary purpose is three-fold: 1. Whitewash unjust, illegal or illegitimate actions by the ruling regime; 2. Increase the regime's popularity and influence abroad, using foreign broadcasting; 3. Maintain regime stability through ensuring contentedness of the population through propaganda. The former two elements both come down to the third element of purpose, tasked with ensuring regime survival. Therefore, such regimes' media policy serves as an extension of their defense policy, which explains hierarchical and almost militaristic nature of large state media and their non-state auxiliaries, especially in their treatment of truth.

An example of such weaponized propaganda comes to mind in the case of one Lisa F, a 13-year-old Russian-German girl, allegedly raped by asylum seekers in Germany – an outrageous story trumpeted by the First Channel, causing demonstrations by the sizeable Russian-speaking minority in Germany (McGuinness, 2016). This story is an example of a combined offensive – with three sides going on full assault against the German state: 1. Russian state and auxiliary media; 2. The Kremlin itself through its ministry of foreign affairs; 3. Local social media users and ordinary citizens who believed in authenticity of the case. Through stories like this, the Russian state can manipulate foreign countries' population (particularly ones with sizeable Russian and Russian-speaking minorities, many of whom watch Russian TV channels at home) and use liberal democratic states' weaker points to achieve the Kremlin's goals.

In the end, persons in charge play a significant role in this system, with their formal and informal connections being the key to the whole state-media relations' framework. Those who refuse to fit into this framework are harassed, ostracized and eventually eliminated, with survivors remaining in the margins of the media environment. Those who adapt can either fade away by avoiding controversial topics through self-censorship or become auxiliary pro-regime media. However, the "commanding heights" (using an old Soviet term) belong to the state, while state-connected networks of oligarchs, state functionaries and their media holdings preside over the rest. Only a few independent outlets remain, but they do so either at a big cost or by keeping a relatively low profile and a fairly small but dedicated audience. Indeed, a dire situation with the press freedom in Russia is evident from its ranking in the 2016 World Press Freedom Index – 148th place out of 180 (Reporters Without Borders, 2016). Similarly, the Freedom House's 2016 Freedom in the World rating gave Russia 22 out of 100, while most European states manage to keep their scores above 90 (Freedom House, 2016), and its Freedom of the Press rating classified Russia as "not free" (Freedom House, 2016). Such status-quo satisfies the Kremlin, and allows it to move on to broadcasting abroad, which threatens democratic and liberal states that often display dangerous tolerance, fail to recognize the Russian mass media as an extension of the Kremlin's destructive policy, and thus are unable to combat that threat in an effective and timely manner.

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