

RUSSIA AND THE NEW AUTHORITARIANS

JONATHAN BECKER

BARD COLLEGE

Abstract: Russia has adopted a neo-authoritarian media system that has more in common with similar non-democratic systems around the world than with the Soviet system that once prevailed on the same territory. Though the picture for media freedom in Russia is bleak today, the types of control imposed are significantly different from the Soviet era in terms of breadth, depth, and mechanisms of control, and the role of ideology. Fearing the kind of revolutions that took place in Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia, Russian President Vladimir Putin is imposing tight restrictions, setting an example for authoritarian regimes around the world.

More than twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and twenty-five years after Soviet Communist General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev unleashed the heretofore moribund Soviet press with the policy of *glasnost*, the landscape of media in the post-Soviet space has changed. And for the worse. After the liberalization of the late 1980s and relative freedom amidst the chaos of the 1990s, the press has taken a big step backwards in the Putin era, and not just in Russia. In the 2013 *Freedom House* rankings, nine of the fifteen post-Soviet countries were rated “not free,” with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine listed as “partly free,” and only the three Baltic states, now European Union and NATO members, free.¹ Russia has ignominiously made the Committee to Protect Journalists’ Impunity Index’s top ten list for countries “where journalists are slain and the killers go free.”² Reporters without Borders expresses a

¹ Freedom House. 2013. “Freedom of the Press 2013: Global Press Freedom Rankings,” At <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Global%20and%20regional%20tables.pdf>, accessed November 9, 2013.

² Committee to Protect Journalists. 2013. “Getting Away with Murder.” 2013 Impunity Index, At <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2013/05/impunity-index-getting-away-with-murder.php>, accessed November 9, 2013.

Jonathan Becker is Vice President and Dean for International Affairs and Civic Engagement at Bard College, PO Box 5000, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504-5000, USA, email: jbecker@bard.edu.

similar view, with their map of the former Soviet space (with the exception of the Baltics and Kyrgyz Republic) swathed in red and black, their lowest categories of press freedom. They also name Russia's Vladimir Putin and Belarus' Alexandr Lukashenka as leading "enemies of press freedom."³

That things have not gone well for the media in most of the former Soviet states is undeniable. But it does not necessarily follow that the current challenges are the same as those during the Soviet period. The primary purpose of this paper is to answer the following question: Is there something uniquely post-"Soviet" in media systems in Russia and many of the countries which emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union? In other words, in using the word "Soviet," whether the modifier is "neo" or "post," are we speaking of a geographic space or specific and unique legacies of the Soviet era that continue to shape and impact the media in those countries?

I will argue that the media landscape, particularly in the critical sphere of government control, has more in common with other authoritarian countries than it does with the immediate Soviet past. In this context, the media systems are better described as "neo-authoritarian" than "post-" or "neo-" "Soviet."⁴ This distinction is important for two reasons. From a politics perspective, it helps to clarify analytically that what is taking place in the post-Soviet space is very different from Soviet times: authoritarianism may be on the rise after the failure of the democratic hopes of the 1990s and the colored revolutions of the 2000s, but we are by no means witnessing the rebirth of the Soviet Union. Second, from a media studies perspective, it moves forward the analysis of differences between various forms of non-democratic media systems, a subject which media scholars often lament as understudied.⁵

In order to answer the primary question, a number of related questions will be addressed: What is a neo-authoritarian press and how does it differ from the post-totalitarian press that typified the Soviet Union? How is the current Russian press similar to and different from the Soviet press? How is it similar to and different from media in authoritarian countries outside of the former Soviet space and what does that mean for the relationship between the current press and Soviet legacies? Finally, what are the implications of similarities and differences of current media vis-à-vis

³ Reporters without Borders. 2013. "Press Freedom Index 2013," <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013,1054.html>, accessed November 9, 2013.

⁴ See Sarah Oates. 2007. "The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 39:8 (December) or Clifford May. September 19, 2013. "Vladimir Putin, the Neo Soviet Man," At <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/358894/vladimir-putin-neo-soviet-man-clifford-d-may>, accessed December 11, 2013.

⁵ Kaarle Nordenstreng. 1999. "Normative Theories of the Media: Lessons from Russia." In eds. Yassen N. Zassoursky and Elena Vartanova, *Media, Communications and the Open Society*. (Moscow: IKAR), p. 150. See also Oates, "The Neo-Soviet Model."

Soviet times and other authoritarian media (historically and not) and what do these mean for countries' future? The paper will first and foremost concentrate on Russia because of its size and influence on its Eurasian neighbors, but other post-Soviet states will be brought into the discussion to illustrate some of the key points.

Soviet (Post-Totalitarian) vs. Neo-Authoritarian Media Systems

In order to understand where the media in Russia and many of the states of the former Soviet Union stand today, we need to step back to look at the conceptual distinctions between the Soviet (or what I have previously termed "post-totalitarian") press system⁶ and neo-authoritarian media systems. Differences emerge in terms of the perceived role of the press, access, the relative autonomy of the press vs. the center of power, and the interaction between censorship and ideology.

The role of the press in the Soviet Union was utilitarian: it was a form of ideological education, the party's main tool to shape public opinion. Indeed, the Soviet approach to the press emerged in part because of the modern belief in the indoctrinating and transformative power of mass communications. Access to the entire press in the Soviet Union was controlled by the Communist Party. The party/state owned all print and broadcast facilities and exerted both positive and negative control through an elaborate system of management that included guiding the education of journalists, power over the appointment of media personnel, and the imposition of a complex system of pre- and post-publication censorship.⁷ The press enjoyed no relative autonomy vis-à-vis the party/state.⁸ Journalists operated as extensions of the party apparatus, behaving no differently than others who worked in the sphere of ideological education. In this context the nature of the ideology was critically important: because the Soviet ideology, Marxism-Leninism, was supposedly based on scientifically determined truths that explain history and the nature of human order, the Soviet press was the object of ideological censorship that meant that journalists were not only restricted in what they could say, but in the language they could use. Journalists were bound by a special discourse that suffused all public communication and words became so loaded with evaluative connotations that it was difficult for them to express ideas beyond the accepted, official beliefs.⁹ As Young put it, "for every politically significant

⁶ Jonathan Becker. 2002. *Soviet and Russian Press Coverage of the United States: Press, Politics and Identity in Transition*. London: Palgrave.

⁷ For a complete discussion of totalitarian media systems, see Becker, *Soviet and Russian Press*, pp. 1-45.

⁸ Robert A. Dahl. 1982. *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy vs. Control*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 26.

⁹ Jeffery C. Gorfaryb. 1991. *Beyond Glasnost: The Post-Totalitarian Mind*. Chicago: Univer-

word, one meaning; for every historical event, one interpretation; for every social problem, one solution..."¹⁰ The citizen, in the words of one Soviet journalist paraphrasing Lenin, was treated as "an imbecile who doesn't know what is good for him and therefore has to be agitated, propagandized and collectively organized."¹¹

It should be noted that there were always small amounts of manufactured diversity, small differences in press coverage encouraged by the party/state in order to appeal to audiences of different regions, educational levels and occupations.¹² With the decline of ideological fervor in the late (pre-*glasnost*) Soviet period, there was even sanctioned diversity or what has been called "permitted dissent,"¹³ which suggests the appearance of non-uniform press content that, although not explicitly endorsed by the leadership, is tolerated by it. However, in the Soviet case the relaxation of controls was both narrow and selective. Sanctioned diversity was most likely to be found in publications with extremely limited, elite audiences, such as cultural and literary journals, or in specialty academic journals.¹⁴ The press remained identified with and subordinated to the party, which retained and regularly exercised strict positive and negative control over the entire press. Finally, even as the ideology lost its vibrancy, strict ideological control continued, binding society in a common language and in so doing limiting any potential opposition to the regime.

Neo-authoritarian media systems, on the other hand, are an essential element of the tactical choice that many modern authoritarian leaders make: to allow some elements of openness and contestation in exchange for greater legitimacy both domestically and internationally. As Krastev argues, these leaders recognize the "status of democracy and elections as the only acceptable sources of legitimacy in the modern world," and "the increasing costs of violence as an instrument for preserving political power."¹⁵ They therefore choose to allow simulated forms of democratic governance, including elections, but ensure that in doing so they create

sity of Chicago Press, p. 55.

¹⁰ John Wesley Young. 1991. *Totalitarian Language*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, p. 31.

¹¹ Alexander Pumpyansky. 1990. "Are We Really So Tired of the Truth?," *New Times*, no. 14, pp. 8-14

¹² Juan Linz. 1975. "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes." In eds. Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, *Macropolitical Theory*. Reading: Addison Wesley Publishing, p. 191.

¹³ Dina R. Spechler. 1982. *Permitted Dissent in the USSR*. New York: Praeger.

¹⁴ Goldfarb, *Beyond Glasnost*, p. 57; Becker, *Soviet and Russian Press*, p. 25.

¹⁵ According to Krastev, "Democracy's doubles can best be understood as an attempt to construct political regimes that mimic democratic institutions but work outside the logic of political representation and seek to repress any trace of genuine political pluralism." Ivan Krastev. 2006. "Democracy's 'Doubles'," *Journal of Democracy*, 17:2 (April), p. 54.

“conditions of radical unfairness” in the competition for political power.¹⁶ For these new autocrats who seek “to reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty,”¹⁷ the mass media is perhaps the most important tool in limiting meaningful pluralism and undermining the capacity of citizens to make informed choices.¹⁸

Neo-authoritarian leaders recognize that in today’s world of relatively low-cost international travel, cell phones, instant messaging, the internet, and satellite television, they cannot, without great cost, seal their citizens off from alternative messages, as did totalitarian and authoritarian leaders of old. With an increasing emphasis on participation in the world economy, and the technological openness that that entails, and an emerging, sophisticated and mobile middle-class, the hermetic seal of the past has too many negative social and economic consequences. They therefore assert a rhetorical commitment to a free press, eschewing totalitarian and post-totalitarian claims that the role of the press is to support state- or party-determined ideological priorities. While such claims of press freedom are grossly overstated, the breadth and depth of control are both different and less robust than in the Soviet system described above.

The mechanisms for controlling media, like other important institutions, are often more subtle than in Soviet or traditional authoritarian systems. The center of power asserts control over the most popular forms of communication, usually television, while allowing relative autonomy in media that have a more limited reach and impact. The state asserts control in a variety of ways. It institutes rules on government ownership and erodes barriers that are meant to ensure the autonomy of public broadcast outlets. It co-opts private media through mutually beneficial relations with owners, who often have a symbiotic relationship with the political leadership. The political center may direct subsidies and advertising revenue to sympathetic media organs.¹⁹ If owners of opposition media resist the blandishments of the center of political power they are likely to face various forms of intimidation. They might find themselves the subjects of quasi-legal processes involving issues like registration and license requirements. They may also find themselves the focus of the selective enforcement of tax codes. Imprisonment and exile are not unheard of. The stage is set for

¹⁶ Andreas Schedler. 2002. “The Menu of Manipulation,” *Journal of Democracy*, 13:2, (April), p. 43. See also Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. 2002. “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy*, 13:2, (April), p. 53.

¹⁷ Schedler, “Menu of Manipulation,” p. 36.

¹⁸ From this perspective, neo-authoritarian systems differ from more traditional ones because in the current environment the control over television and other forms of mass communication is not the product of technological necessity, as it was in the early days of the airwaves, but of a conscious political choice.

¹⁹ Jonathan Becker. 2004. “Lessons from Russia: A Neo-Authoritarian System,” *European Journal of Communication*, 19:2, (June), pp. 139-163.

disloyal owners to surrender control over high impact media to private entities with close links to the state. It is also often the case that in countries with neo-authoritarian systems, foreign ownership, which might be more insulated from pressures, is limited and discouraged. Alternative forms of communication, including satellite television and the internet, often face hurdles – financial, technological, linguistic, or legal – that limit their impact and allow the media controlled by the new autocrats to continue to dominate.

Message shaping in neo-authoritarian systems is neither as extensive nor intensive as in post-totalitarian systems, because there is no all-encompassing ideology. The media landscape as a whole is influenced by market forces, and thus focused often on least common denominator popular programming rather than ideological education. While tight reins may be placed on current events topics, and on television in particular, they are not as ubiquitous, and there may exist windows of pluralism, and even privately owned stations, which, although often with limited reach, may offer criticism of leaders and their policies. There might exist vibrant print media, or at least publications, that are independently owned (by individuals, parties, or foreign corporations), relatively autonomous, accessible to the population, and highly critical of the regime, in spite of periodic harassment, violence and closures. The same is the case for radio.

As far as content is concerned, the closer any issue may rest to the heart of the political leadership, the greater the assertion of control. For example, during elections, large audience media are regularly mobilized to improve the position of the center of political power and its selected candidates. The party of power gets the vast majority of (usually adulatory) coverage, while the opposition faces some combination of “information blockade” and merciless attacks, often from prominent journalists who in the former Soviet space have earned the sobriquet “information killers,” for their brutal attacks on opposition politicians.²⁰ Similarly aggressive message control may extend over such critical issues as internal unrest, corruption, and governmental responses to manmade and natural disasters. The mass media may still contain sharp criticism on such issues. However, critical voices would normally appear in media with limited effective public reach and/or drowned out in a sea of regime-sympathetic messages.

Journalists in neo-authoritarian systems also face a litany of hurdles that limit their capacity to criticize the center of power. They are often told in formal and informal ways by politicians and activist owners where the limits are, and they may be dismissed if they cross the line of acceptable dissent. They are often confronted with an array of laws related to professional licensing, access to information, and state secrets that impede

²⁰ Marta Dyczok. 2005. “Breaking Through the Information Blockade: Election and Revolution in Ukraine 2004,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 47 (September-December), p. 242.

their freedom of action. They are also increasingly the victims of civil and criminal defamation and libel laws, including laws barring insults to state leaders, which effectively preclude criticism of political decisions.²¹ Foreign journalists, who often pave the way for satellite and/or internet coverage, often face challenging visa regimes. Finally, they are the objects of physical attacks, imprisonment, and even murder. Journalists are always cognizant that there may be an exorbitant cost for criticism, either personal or financial, thus promoting self-censorship, the most ubiquitous limit on freedom of expression worldwide.

The neo-authoritarian approach has found resonance across the globe. Whether it is in Yemen,²² Ethiopia,²³ Singapore,²⁴ or Venezuela,²⁵ leaders pay homage to the importance of freedom of expression and attempt to bask in the glow of democratic legitimacy while at the same time supporting an environment that fundamentally undermines political competition. Today's Russian press fits in well with the neo-authoritarian approach. Indeed, as Leon Willems and Arch Puddington have argued, "Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has emerged as a laboratory for the development of methods to suppress media freedom in the post-totalitarian era."²⁶

Russian vs. Soviet Media

The Russian press has experienced tremendous backsliding since the halcyon days of *glasnost* and the early days of the 1990s. Typical of neo-authoritarian leaders, Putin professes support for a free press, calling media freedom "one of the cornerstones of democracy" and asserting that "if we don't have a free mass media, we shall very soon slide back into the past."²⁷ However, his actions are not consistent with these priorities. There

²¹ Marina Ottaway. 2003. *Democracy Challenged*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, pp. 52-155; Article XIX, 2000. "Defining Defamation," At <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/standards/definingdefamation.pdf>, accessed November 21, 2013.

²² Joel Campagna. 2006. "Attacks, censorship, and dirty tricks: In Yemen, the press climate is deteriorating," Committee to Protect Journalists, At <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2006/03/yemen-press.php>, accessed November 21, 2013).

²³ Mohamed Ademo. 2012. "Media Restrictions Tighten in Ethiopia," *Columbia Journalism Review*, At http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/ethiopia_news_crackdown.php?page=all, accessed, December 6, 2013.

²⁴ Garry Rodan. 2003. "Embracing electron media but suppressing civil society: authoritarian consolidation in Singapore," *The Pacific Review*, 16: 4, (2003), pp. 503-524.

²⁵ Boris Munoz. 2013. "The Media and the Citizen in Venezuela," *New Yorker*, August 30, 2013, At <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/currency/2013/08/venezuela-the-media-and-the-citizen.html>, accessed December 11, 2013.

²⁶ Leon Willems and Arch Puddington. 2013. "Russian Model Gains as Press Freedom Declines," At <http://www.freedomhouse.org/blog/russian-model-gains-press-freedom-declines>, accessed November 27, 2013.

²⁷ *Communication Law in Transition: A Newsletter*. November 1999 , 1:2, At <http://pmlp.socleg.ox.ac.uk/transition/>, accessed November, 2007.

are some important similarities to the Soviet era. The Russian government continues to dominate the media landscape. It owns or controls through sympathetic parties the vast majority of news media, including the most important form of communication, television. The media is viewed in instrumental terms: control is used to achieve the ends of the party of power, both in terms of promoting government leaders and policies and assailing enemies. There is limited pluralism and diversity: television is President-centric, especially when it is Vladimir Putin's turn to be president, and opposition voices are severely constrained. Due to the political and economic environment, self-censorship remains a critical and ubiquitous problem, whether the media is publicly or privately owned. As Masha Gessen said, "Where the Soviet regime used direct censorship, with a specially assigned person at every media outlet clearing every story before publication, the instrument of control today is fear. Reporters, editors and media owners are constantly looking over their shoulder."²⁸

In spite of the bleak picture in Russia, it is still the case that things are substantially different from the Soviet period in terms of the breadth and depth of control of the media as well as methods of control, differences that reflect the neo-authoritarian approaches discussed above and witnessed increasingly across the globe. They occur in key areas such as diversity of content, the role of ideology, access to media, and the scope and methods of control.

The Russian media are undoubtedly more diverse than throughout the vast majority of the Soviet period, particularly when they are not covering sensitive domestic concerns like Chechnya, or important international topics like Georgia or Syria. In terms of print media, while the major national daily newspapers and most major weeklies toe the president's line, on the streets, at least in big cities, one can purchase newspapers covering a wide array of views. There are several hundred titles available, more than in Soviet times, although it should be noted that several of the most popular publications are tabloid in style and substance, and not well trusted.²⁹ Alternative views are also heard over the radio waves via Ekho Moskvyy, which has maintained its approach of presenting divergent and even critical voices, in spite of the fact that it is owned by the state energy giant Gazprom. However, its reach (and that of other alternative radio voices) remains limited, ranking as only the tenth most popular station in the country.³⁰ Per the neo-authoritarian playbook, television remains

²⁸ Masha Gessen. 2013. "As Russian Journalists, our lives are dark comedy and tragedy," *Globe and Mail*, May 3, 2013. At <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/as-russian-journalists-our-lives-are-black-comedy-and-dark-tragedy/article11687214/>, accessed January, 2014.

²⁹ Oates, "Neo-Soviet Model," p. 1286.

³⁰ Olga Khostumova. 2013. "A Complete Guide to Who Controls the Russian News Media,"

largely controlled by the Kremlin: the top five television stations by audience reach (Perviy Kanal, Rossiya 1, NTV, TNT and Pyatyi Kanal) are all controlled by the state or state enterprises.³¹ The leadership's focus on television still appears to have merit: around 90 percent of the population prefers to get news from television and around 50 percent cite it as the most trusted form of communication.³² It should be noted that even on the president-centric television, news and current events programs occasionally have alternative voices, debates and disagreements, and the opposition can even make the occasional appearance. The cable and internet station *Dozhd'* TV offered robust coverage of the post-2011 election protests and regularly presents opposition figures. As *Dozhd'*s editor-in-chief Mikhail Zyagar said, "We're not an opposition TV channel, we're just a normal TV channel giving the floor to representatives of different movements and people with different points of view."³³ In this context, it is also important to note that the internet has grown rapidly in Russia in recent years, reaching between 50-60 percent of the population, up from around 10 percent a decade earlier, with the vast majority of that group, particularly those in large cities, being regular users. Broadband usage is also growing greatly.³⁴ The internet has more diverse ownership and more voices, and social media is thriving. While there have been rumblings of efforts at greater control over internet service providers, the state has yet to show the inclination or the capacity to take a Chinese-style approach of control. The internet certainly played an important role in the protests that followed the parliamentary elections of 2011.

One key issue that distinguishes the Russian from the Soviet press is that there is no highly developed ideology. Indeed, if anything, with new market pressures, the press has shifted from being highly politicized in Soviet times to largely de-politicized, with the media welcoming the same

At <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/12/brief-history-russian-media/#sdfootnote-2sym>, accessed December 10, 2013.

³¹ Khostumova, "Who Controls Russian Media."

³² *The Moscow Times*. 2013. "88% of Russians Prefer to Get News from TV," At, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/print/article/88-of-russians-prefer-to-get-news-from-tv/482864.html>. accessed December 14, 2013. See also: Khostumova, "Who Controls Russian Media."

³³ Courtney Weaver. 2012. "Dozhd' TV: A Breath of Fresh Air," *Financial Times*, February 27, 2012, At <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2012/02/27/dozhd-tv-a-gust-of-fresh-air/#ax-zz2mgiM5pC4>, accessed December 12, 2013.

³⁴ "According to Public Opinion Fund data for autumn 2012, Russia has a monthly internet audience of 61.2 million people over 18 years of age – which is more than 52% of the adult population. For the majority of users, the internet has become a regular part of everyday life. Three-quarters of users (almost 47 million people) are online daily. According to TNS data, in cities with a population of more than 100,000 people, practically all users (94%) have internet access at home – and the majority have broadband." *Development of Media in Russia's Regions*. 2013. At http://download.yandex.ru/company/ya_russian_regions_report_2013.pdf, accessed, December 14, 2013.

entertainment and tabloid press that dominates entertainment systems around the world.³⁵ To the extent that it is politicized, the Russian media is more sultanistic (in which, according to Linz and Stepan, there is “almost never political pluralism, because political power is so directly related to the ruler’s person”)³⁶ than totalitarian: while there may be a cult of leader, there is no guiding ideology, no claims to truths that are scientifically determined and which can transform human history.³⁷ As a consequence of this, particularly combined with the diverse forms of ownership, there is nothing like the highly developed system of ideological control that existed during the Soviet period. There is no all-encompassing system of ideological education from cradle to grave, a less distinct “party line,” and no GLAVLIT censors conducting pre-publication censorship at all media outlets. As Owen Mathews explained, “The Kremlin’s approach to media control was and is essentially pragmatic rather than ideological—the rule of thumb is that newspapers such as *Novaya Gazeta* or radio stations like Radio Ekho Moskvy are allowed to be critical, as long as they are not too widely listened to or circulated.”³⁸

The neo-authoritarian approach is also manifested in methods of control. With the absence of ideology to justify subordination of the entire legal press to the party/state, more subtle and creative methods are used to ensure that the most important parts of the media system are subordinated to the party of power.

One of the key trends in Russian media ownership since the 2000s has been a transformation of media ownership from commercial capital to state and mixed (state and private, non-media) capital.³⁹ Ownership of key media organs has been secured by stripping sometime hostile owners of control through steps ranging from licensing, to fire, safety, and sanitary regulations, to customs and tax rules that target both publications and their

³⁵ Oates, “Neo-Soviet Model,” p. 1286.

³⁶ On sultanism, Linz and Stepan declare: “In sultanism, there is a high fusion by the ruler of the private and the public. The sultanistic polity becomes the personal domain of the sultan. In this domain there is no rule of law and there is low institutionalization... (There) is almost never political pluralism, because political power is so directly related to the ruler’s person.” Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press), p. 52.

³⁷ As Peter Pomerantsev said in relation to Russian television, particularly RT, “Russia’s view on the world” turns out to be less about proposing one’s own ideology as the USSR did than undermining western narratives.” Pomerantsev. 2013. ‘The Kremlin’s attempt at soft power is back-to-front,’ *Financial Times*, December 6, 2013, p. 11.

³⁸ Owen Mathews. 2010. “The Real Reasons Newsweek Russia Folded,” October 20, 2010, At <http://www.newsweek.com/real-reasons-newsweek-russia-folded-73747>, accessed December 10, 2013.

³⁹ Elena Vartanova. July 2012. “Media Ownership and Concentration in Russia,” Faculty of Journalism, Moscow State University, p. 34. See also Khostumova, “Who Controls Russian Media.”

owners.⁴⁰ The latter came to the fore early in the Putin era when some of the most important opposition owners came under attack, including Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, whose holdings included the all-important television stations. The crippling of Gusinsky's Media-Most empire, including the transfer of NTV, the leading source of non-state broadcast news and the only station with a national reach that was not state-owned and controlled, was the most devastating. Through the selective application of tax and criminal law, including the arrest, and subsequent exiling, of Gusinsky, the invasion of Media-Most premises by hooded and heavily armed tax police, the direct pressure of the Ministry of Press, Radio and Television, and boardroom intrigue, Media-Most collapsed.⁴¹ This is not to say that Gusinsky or Berzovsky were paragons of press freedom – they were activist owners interested in promoting their own agendas – but the impact of the assault on them, and the message it sent, were devastating, with the state reaping the benefits and sympathetic owners swept in to claim the orphaned assets and instill more sympathetic, if not sycophantic, editorial lines.

The state has not simply acted from on high: it has used a number of other political, economic, and legal tools to pressure journalists. It has controlled journalists by selectively providing and limiting access to information, official events and press conferences. Criminal and civil defamation lawsuits have been unleashed to intimidate and silence journalists.⁴² In the case of Gregory Pasko, known for his reporting on environmental and nuclear safety issues related to Russia's Pacific fleet, charges related to revealing official secrets resulted in a lengthy imprisonment. After the 2011-12 protests, the Russian leadership reinvigorated what it has called in the past the "dictatorship of law" to assure compliance. A law was passed in July 2013 to reintroduce criminal defamation, including fines of up to five million rubles (\$153,000) and criminal penalties of up to 12 weeks of forced correctional labor for violations.⁴³ Blogger and opposition organizer Aleksei Navalny, who published several allegations about official corruption among government officials, was charged with criminal fraud and, in addition to being arrested, was thoroughly smeared in the official media.

Others face attacks whose origins are more murky. *Newsweek* Russia (since closed) editor Mikhail Fishman was outed as an oversexed, drug-using degenerate, when a heavily edited video of him with a scantily clad woman named Moomoo and a white powder, allegedly cocaine, popped

⁴⁰ Khostumova, "Who Controls Russian Media."

⁴¹ Becker, "Lessons from Russia."

⁴² Khostumova, "Who Controls Russian Media."

⁴³ Freedom House. 2013. "Freedom of the Press 2013, Russia," At <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/russia>, accessed December 11, 2013.

up on YouTube.⁴⁴ Far more insidious has been the well-documented list of crusading Russian journalists who have been murdered in crimes that largely remain unsolved. The most notable was Anna Politkovskaya, who wrote extensively on the war in Chechnya and was a strong critic of President Putin, including in her book *Putin's Russia*. In response to the assassination, Putin demonstrated the pathos of an unchallenged and undaunted authoritarian, dismissing her as “insignificant” and “well-known only in the West.”

The picture painted here gets to the heart of the neo-authoritarian approach. It is not that journalists cannot speak out against the state or political leadership in some media: unlike in communist times, they can. The problem is that it takes great bravery to do so, and the uncertainty of the situation creates significant disincentives for journalists to challenge the state or press the limits of what it (or anxious owners) will tolerate.⁴⁵ This institutionalized uncertainty and the pressures of market forces breed doubt and self-censorship. This is not the ubiquitous system of heavy-handed ideological control, which was described by Gorbachev's immediate predecessor Konstantin Chernenko as a “well-tempered orchestra, where every instrument has its voice and plays its part, and harmony is achieved by skillful conducting.”⁴⁶ Present-day Russia has a less elaborate, but more varied and chaotic structure in which the center of political power has employed a wider array of techniques to gradually reclaim control when and where it sees fit.

Implications of Neo-Authoritarianism and Conclusions

What are the implications of neo-authoritarianism for our understanding of media systems and for the future of Russia and the post-Soviet space? From a media studies perspective, it is important to draw analytical distinctions between different types of authoritarian media systems: it is clear that the current system in Russia is different from the Soviet past in terms of breadth, depth, and mechanisms of control, as well as the role of ideology.

It should be noted that some students of comparative media, who primarily focus on evils of the market in so-called “democratic” or “free” media systems, find Russia unremarkable, the state in their eyes being just

⁴⁴ Michael Idov. 2010. “Russia’s Amazing Drugs and Hookers Scandal,” March 23, 2010, At <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/03/23/russias-amazing-drugs-and-hookers-scandal.html>, accessed December 14, 2013.

⁴⁵ In describing what he calls “hybrid regimes,” Diamond sees the situation as follows: There may be an “arena of contestation,” but it is sufficiently distorted so that “while an opposition victory is not impossible... it requires a level of oppositional mobilization, unity and skill and heroism far beyond what would normally be required for victory in democracy.” Larry Diamond. 2002. “Thinking about Hybrid Regimes” *Journal of Democracy* 13:2, (April), p. 24.

⁴⁶ K. Chernenko. 1984. *Pravda*, 12 December 1984, p. 1.

a different, but equally malevolent, center of power compared with the corporate concentration that dominates the West.⁴⁷ But as I have argued previously, this analysis ignores the fact that both historically and in the present era the state poses the greatest threat to freedom of expression.⁴⁸ There may be a variety of sources of power, but the state retains the greatest potential to encroach upon media autonomy, limit pluralism, unleash violence, and turn the media into a tool of political manipulation.⁴⁹ It is likely that most journalists in Russia, or Uzbekistan, or Somalia would gladly trade their “enabling environment for freedom of expression” with those of colleagues who work in the United States, United Kingdom, or France.⁵⁰ The same can be said of the citizens: whatever the limits of commercially-oriented media, and whatever convergence might be occurring in terms of concentration of media power, it is difficult to conclude that citizens in Russia are not in a disadvantageous position in terms of their capacity to make political decisions “on the basis of informed choice,” vis-à-vis citizens in much of Europe and North America and countries around the world in which the state’s control over the media is reasonably circumscribed.⁵¹

A politics lens provides further clarity as to the distinctions between neo-authoritarian and (post) totalitarian systems, and also provides a silver lining. The relative weakness of the neo-authoritarian system compared with the Soviet/post-totalitarian systems leaves open opportunities at strategic times for potential challenges to the leadership. In the past, in more traditional authoritarian regimes, such as in Iberia and Latin America, the

⁴⁷ See John Downing. 1996. *Internationalizing Media Theory*. London: Sage, and Colin Sparks. 2000. “Media Theory after the Fall of Communism,” pp. 35-49 in eds. James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, *De-Westernizing Media Studies*. New York: Routledge, pp. 35-49.

⁴⁸ Becker, “Lessons from Russia,” p. 20. See also Jonathan Becker. 2003. “Keeping Track of Press Freedom,” *European Journal of Communication* 18:1: pp. 107–12.

⁴⁹ It is difficult to argue with Lee’s conclusion that “if a liberal state is considered both an enemy and friend of democracy... the authoritarian state is... nothing but an enemy of democracy... because it dominates, if not monopolizes, the political and economic resources upon which the media depend.” Chin-Chuan Lee, “Rethinking Political Economy: Implications for Media and Democracy in Greater China,” *The Public*, vol. 8 (2001), p. 86. See also a World Bank study of 97 countries which found that “countries with more prevalent state ownership of the media have less free press, fewer political rights for citizens, inferior governance, less developed markets and strikingly inferior outcomes in the areas of education and health.” Simeon Djankov, Caralee McLiesh, Tatiana Nenova and Andrei Schleifer. 2001. “Who Owns the Media?,” World Bank, At http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2001/07/28/000094946_01070604285972/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf, accessed April 8, 2014.

⁵⁰ See Article 19. 2009. “Camden Principles on Freedom of Expression,” At <http://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/1214/en/camden-principles-on-freedom-of-expression-and-equality>, accessed February 2014.

⁵¹ Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan. 2000. “The Media in Democratic and Nondemocratic Regimes: A Multilevel Perspective,” in *Democracy and the Media*, eds. Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 3-5.

existence of private ownership, the regular presence of minority discordant voices in the media, and the absence of a highly developed ideology became pivotally important when transformative moments for change emerged, such as after the death of a leader or following a military defeat or economic shock.⁵² Masha Gessen is correct when she points out that private owners in Russia are subjected to tremendous pressures from the state. However, as the experience in more traditional authoritarian countries has demonstrated, this does not mean that the interests of all private owners are the same: in periods of crisis or change this can become significant. At such times, when the press already enjoys significant pockets of freedom, journalists can take advantage of leadership fissures to make a quick transition to more open forms of communication that challenge leaders and orthodoxies.

This is precisely what happened in Georgia during the 2003 Rose Revolution and Ukraine in the 2004 Orange Revolution. In both countries, the media were dominated by the party of power, but both, unlike in Soviet times, had pockets of openness, including on television. In the case of Georgia, the private television station Rustavi-2 showed significant autonomy in the run-up to the fraudulent parliamentary elections, and then reported extensively on the electoral fraud, becoming in the words of David Anable, “the voice and vision” of the revolution.⁵³ Central control was even tighter in Ukraine on the eve of the Orange Revolution, but the regime’s media monopoly was pierced by Channel 5, which played a pivotal role in informing the public about fraud allegations and the protests, in spite of the fact that it reached only 37 percent of the population. Together with opposition newspapers and websites, it not only covered the rigged elections and subsequent protests, but in so doing placed pressure on journalists from other print and broadcast venues to acknowledge what was taking place and emboldening others to act.⁵⁴

The Ukrainian and Georgian cases are indicative of the dilemmas faced by authoritarian leaders who aspire to some form of democratic legitimacy: They seek to control the press without too obviously appearing

⁵² “The Press in Authoritarian Countries.” 1958. IPI Survey no. 5, Berne: International Press Institute, pp. 139-155; Stanley G. Payne. 1987. *The Franco Regime*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 420; Jean Seaton and Ben Pimlott. 1980. “The Role of the Media in the Portuguese Revolution,” in *Newspapers and Democracy*, Anthony Smith ed., Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 177; Eugenio Tironi and Guillermo Sunkel. 2000. “The Modernization of Communications: The Media in the Transition to Democracy in Chile.” in *Democracy and the Media*, eds, Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan eds, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 171.

⁵³ David Anable. 2006. “The Role of Georgia’s Media—And Western Aid—in the Rose Revolution,” *Press/Politics*, 11: 3, pp. 18-20.

⁵⁴ Lucan Way. 2005. “Kuchma’s Failed Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy*, 16, no. 2 (2005), p. 137ff; Dyczok, “Breaking the Blockade,” pp 243-262; Anable, “Georgia’s Media,” pp. 18-20.

to do so, but this dynamic is imperfect, and in allowing some freedoms openings can emerge that can become critical at pivotal moments, presenting transformative opportunities.

The challenge faced in the former Soviet space is that having witnessed what took place in Georgia and Ukraine (and Serbia before it), many leaders, led by Vladimir Putin, have redoubled their efforts to assert control of the press, particularly over television. As Ivan Krastev has said: “The response of people in power to the rise of ‘people power’ has been the politics of total manipulation.”⁵⁵ In Russia, as stated above, there is an increasing attention to all facets of information dissemination at home and abroad. The recent closing of the state-run RIA Novosti news agency and its folding into the new Russia Today under a staunch Kremlin ally demonstrates how concern over central control extends even to state-run media organs. As RIA Novosti’s report on its own demise said, the changes “appear to point toward a tightening of state control in the already heavily regulated media sector.”⁵⁶ As the Sochi Olympics came to a close and echoes of revolution again emerged in Ukraine, this trend appears to be confirmed. Gazprom media has replaced the long serving business manager of Ekho Moskvyy, Yuri Fedutinov, in what he described as a “totally political decision” aimed at changing editorial policy.⁵⁷ Dozhd’ TV saw its audience cut by 80 percent when cable and satellite providers dropped it, supposedly in response to an insensitive poll concerning the second world war.⁵⁸ There is no doubt that a bad situation is worsening.

The result is that while the current Russian press fits the broad description of neo-authoritarianism, the leadership, having recognized the threat of even small windows of pluralism, increasingly sees the benefits of severely constricting alternative voices in mass audience media as outweighing the damage that such actions have on democratic legitimacy. In political science terms one might say that they have made the transition from a competitive neo-authoritarian to a hegemonic neo-authoritarian system, in which, to paraphrase Diamond, the institutionalized ruling party increasingly monopolizes the political arena, using media control, as well as coercion, patronage, and electoral fraud to deny formally legal opposition parties any real chance of competing for power.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Krastev, “Democracy’s “Doubles,” p. 61.

⁵⁶ Amar Toor. 2013. “Putin’s controversial news Agency Merger Tightens Grip on Media, At <http://www.theverge.com/2013/12/11/5199516/putin-tightens-his-grip-over-russia-media-dissolves-ria-novosti>, Accessed December 11, 2013.

⁵⁷ BBC News. 2014. “Russian Ekho Moskvyy Radio director Fedutinov dismissed,” February 18, 2014, At <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26239715>, accessed February 2014.

⁵⁸ Courtney Weaver. 2014. “Russian TV Dozhd loses distributors after crossing ‘red line,’” *Financial Times*, February 4, 2014, At <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ef0398b0-8dba-11e3-bbe7-00144feab7de.html#axzz2uFzcJaib>, accessed February 2014.

⁵⁹ Diamond, “Hybrid Regimes,” pp. 21-35.

Significantly, Russia is not alone.. Although it is difficult to track causality, the growth of neo-authoritarian tendencies in the wake of the “colored” revolutions and Arab Spring suggest that much authoritarian learning is occurring and spreading in a wave across the globe, particularly within the former Soviet states, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. As Freedom House points out in its 2013 report, “the percentage of people worldwide who enjoy a free media environment fell to its lowest point in more than a decade.”⁶⁰ It should also be noted that this learning also appears to incorporate the worst practices of governments in countries more traditionally associated with press freedom, including national security responses that emerged as a part of the “war on terror.” As one Russian journalist lamented, “Here in Russia the authorities are always eager to borrow from the worst elements of western experience.”⁶¹

The Russian experience demonstrates that transitions are not a unilinear process and that change can occur in multiple directions. The Russian press today is radically different from during the Soviet period, and yet it leaves free press advocates feeling cold and getting colder. When the Soviet regime was collapsing, and Russia was emerging, the press enjoyed the best of all worlds with a highly engaged citizenry, massive state support, and relatively little state/party control. The current situation is the most challenging since the Soviet period, with a corrosive market, meddling owners, and an intrusive state that both imposes tremendous punitive actions on journalists and owners, and actively seeks to depoliticize media and the citizenry. But this still leaves present day Russia more akin to traditional authoritarian regimes like Franco’s Spain, Salazar’s Portugal, or the military dictatorships of Latin America, than to the Soviet past, with its all-encompassing ideological straight-jacket.

The pockets of freedom that currently exist, in contradistinction to the Soviet period, may prove important at some point in the future. For now, however, the Russian state is not only unremittingly tightening its control over the media, but its approach sets an example for new authoritarians everywhere.

⁶⁰ See Freedom House. 2013. *Freedom of the Press 2013*. At <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2013>, accessed February 2014. Reporters without Borders, in its World Press Index 2014, writes, “Alarmed by the Arab Spring turmoil, authoritarian regimes in the Arabian Peninsula and Central Asia have stepped up media censorship and surveillance to head off any “attempt at destabilization.” Reporters without Borders. 2014. At <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php#>, accessed February, 2014. Nuamnjoh describes the “clawback measures” which are taking place “across the (African) continent,” Francis B. Nyamnjoh. 2005. *Africa’s Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. London: Zed Books, p. 134.

⁶¹ Anne Cooper. 2002. *Attacks on the Press in 2001: A Worldwide Survey by the Committee to Protect Journalists*, Richard McGill Murphy ed., New York: Committee to Protect Journalists.