

# RUSSIA'S NONGOVERNMENTAL MEDIA UNDER ASSAULT

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**Abstract:** During Vladimir Putin's first presidential term, the Kremlin established control over Russia's major television networks. Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 and Russia's role in the Ukrainian crisis have exacerbated constraints on media freedom. Nongovernment media fell under strong pressure and new limits on Internet communications were imposed.

In developed democracies, the news media are an inseparable element of a network of checks and balances that help society to ensure the accountability of powerful actors (first and foremost, the government). At least, such is the understanding, even if in real life the news media do not always live up to these expectations and the goal of public accountability is not easily achieved.

In Vladimir Putin's Russia – long before his return to the Kremlin in 2012 and the shift toward a harder authoritarian model – political power was heavily monopolized, and democratic checks and balances existed only nominally. While the collapse of the Soviet communist system created a promise of democracy – the 1993 constitution defined a multiparty system with the separation of powers and mechanisms of public participation – the new institutions did not take root, and as soon as Putin came to power in 2000, they were steadily and radically eviscerated. The system of governance that Putin built virtually eliminated public accountability.

Despite some obvious similarities, Putin's system was not a return to the Soviet model. In the media realm, Putin's Kremlin did not seek to reintroduce preliminary censorship across the board, the key element of the Soviet media scene. Far from it: though the national TV networks with the largest audience were taken under control within just a few years after Putin became president, elsewhere, opportunities for self-expression

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remained. A range of media continued to pursue reasonably independent editorial lines; some were even openly anti-government.

These nongovernment media<sup>1</sup> occasionally exposed government abuse of authority and reported other politically meaningful information, yet actors who could follow up on these reports and use them in politically relevant ways were missing. In the absence of an independent parliament or genuine political opposition, media reports remained mere political texts that were not converted into political events. In other words, in the early 2000s press freedom as a democratic institution that could hold the government to account ceased to exist.<sup>2</sup>

The establishment of the Kremlin's political monopoly, as well as the elimination of press freedom, were facilitated by a weak public demand for political rights and civil liberties, media freedom being no exception. Put more broadly, the long decades of Soviet oppression precluded the emergence in Russia of a sense of "we, the people," or a belief that the people can hold the government to account.

By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, however, a minority that did not share the habitual sense of acquiescence toward government authority began to emerge. It was this constituency that in December 2011 took to the streets chanting "Russia without Putin." The protests continued through 2012, and in May that year the government responded with a crackdown and a conservative shift that the protesters were too weak to oppose. The freedom of expression remaining at that time did not make much difference. Moreover, in 2012-2013 the nongovernment media came under increasing pressure. The crisis in Ukraine followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea exacerbated the oppressive trend: the TV networks have been turned into raw propaganda machines,<sup>3</sup> and dissenting voices were condemned as *natsional predатели* ("traitors of the people").<sup>4</sup> In late 2013-early 2014, the regime dealt several critical blows to what was left of the nongovernment media realm, leaving in doubt the viability of those nongovernment media outlets that have not been destroyed or submitted.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "nongovernment media" is used here to designate those media outlets whose editorial policy is not guided by the desire to demonstrate their loyalty to the powers that be. Their degree of independence may vary. The form of ownership is of less importance, since in Russia the borderline between state and private property is blurred. The media that are technically private commonly shape their editorial policy strictly in the interests of the government.

<sup>2</sup> On the media in Putin's Russia see, for instance, Maria Lipman, "Freedom of Expression Without Freedom of the Press." *Journal of International Affairs*. Spring/Summer 2010, vol. 63, # 2, pp. 153-169.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21599829-new-propaganda-war-underpins-kremlins-clash-west-1984-2014>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2014/03/putin-new-hunt-for-internal-enemies.html>

### **Putin's Kremlin and the Media Realm in 2000-2008**

Putin's political monopoly sought to neutralize the political challenges faced by his predecessor and anointer, Russia's first president Boris Yeltsin. By the end of Putin's first term both chambers of the Russian parliament, the Duma and the Federation Council, regional governors, political parties, big business – all previously independent (and not infrequently unruly) political actors – were taken under control. National TV networks – Russia's largest-audience media – were among the first targets.

It should be pointed out, however, that from the start the Kremlin refrained from harassing or persecuting those independent media figures who had enjoyed broad public popularity. Instead, the Kremlin opted for less straightforward tactics – that of a redistribution of media property. Putin's Kremlin promptly got rid of the two biggest media tycoons – Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky – who sought to preserve their status of political players gained in the 1990s. Both fled abroad, their major media assets either redistributed in favor of the state itself or entrusted with politically reliable owners.

In the framework of this property redistribution, the national gas monopoly Gazprom (Gazprom-media holding) took over Russia's largest privately-owned media holding, Media MOST, which had been created by Vladimir Gusinsky. NTV, a national TV network that Gusinsky had built from scratch, was the crown jewel of his media empire. In the spring of 2001 rallies protesting against the takeover of NTV repeatedly brought together thousands of people. People strongly sympathized with their beloved journalists who had run afoul of the government, but since the journalists remained safe and at large, the protests promptly faded away. A national survey conducted in 2001 showed that a mere four percent of Russians regarded the squelching of NTV as a state encroachment on media freedom; likewise, an overwhelming majority did not see it as an infringement on their own civil liberties.

The government promptly turned the three major national TV networks into its own political resource, a one-way communication tube that it has since used effectively to shape public opinion. Since the crisis in Ukraine began to unfold in late 2013 the national TV networks have shifted to disseminating raw propaganda.

The Kremlin did not completely squash the freedom of expression: a number of smaller-audience nongovernment outlets continued to operate, but the bulk of the Russian audience remained with TV. After the national TV networks had been turned into government mouthpieces, the viewing audience did not rush to read or listen to alternative, nongovernment media.<sup>5</sup> The latter remained “niche” outlets for a critically minded and

<sup>5</sup> Still today, and even in modernized Moscow, national TV networks remain by far the most

politically concerned minority.

The Kremlin policy vis-à-vis the Russian media thus included: Constraints on media freedom through the redistribution of media assets, not through the repression of journalists; and allowing a reasonable degree of freedom of expression in smaller-audience media, yet turning it politically irrelevant through tight controls on the political realm.

The change of ownership did not necessarily entail an immediate change in the editorial line. For example, both NTV and Ekho Moskvyy (formerly parts of Gusinsky's Media MOST group) were owned by Gazprom-media, but, as far as the political coverage was concerned, their editorial lines differed quite substantially: NTV, like other national TV broadcasters with news programming, was tightly controlled so nothing unexpected or unpleasant for the Kremlin would ever appear on air. Meanwhile, Ekho Moskvyy, Russia's most popular political talk radio, continued to offer the listener a diversity of voices, many of them fairly critical of the government. But the ownership factor ensured that those media that pursued a relatively independent editorial line remained at the government's discretion.

The limited freedom of expression that the Kremlin permitted served regime interests by working as a means to let off steam among those who did not support the status quo. Yet, this freedom remained politically innocuous since the authorities maintained secure control over both the political and business realms and benefitted from broad public acquiescence to their continued rule, ensured by a combination of growing living standards, carefully orchestrated TV coverage and a low demand for nongovernment sources of information.

The nongovernment media of the mid-2000s and their audiences were often described as "ghettos" or "islands." And they were, for the most part, preaching to the converted. The "converted" – roughly speaking, the liberal constituency – may have enjoyed listening to the critical voices, but, just like the rest of their compatriots, they acquiesced to controlled politics and to being denied political participation. That is the way the system worked through the end of Putin's second term in 2008.

### **Tandem Rule: Societal Shifts and Media Developments**

The period of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, better known as the "tandem rule" (Putin, who had moved to the position of the prime minister, remained Russia's most powerful man) was marked by a societal modernization which also affected the realm of public communication. The following factors contributed to this process:

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popular source of information for the Russian people, the sharp rise of the number of Internet users notwithstanding. <http://www.levada.ru/15-07-2013/istochniki-informatsii-moskvichei>

- The high and rising price of oil had produced extensive new wealth and stimulated the emergence of a post-industrial economy, especially in Moscow. This gave rise to a new, “non-Soviet” constituency that no longer shared the habitual Soviet paternalism and developed an interest in charitable activities and civic activism. Journalists were an important element of this constituency.
- President Medvedev’s liberal rhetoric, such as his famous line “freedom is better than nonfreedom,” generated a new sense of liberty among younger constituencies as well as broader civil society circles, journalists included.
- Rapid penetration of the internet in Russian society and the spread of social networks facilitated the exchange of information and opinions.

During Medvedev’s presidency, Russian citizens began to use freedom of expression more avidly, the media environment grew more vibrant, and a modicum of political liberty emerged even on TV. For example, the NTV network launched a few late-night shows that took liberties with sensitive political subjects. A number of new niche outlets, such as TV Rain and Kommersant FM radio station began broadcasting in 2010 and targeted younger, liberal audiences. Some of the glossy journals and the so-called “hipster press,” such as *Afisha* or *Bolshoi Gorod*, grew politicized.<sup>6</sup> In short, the “ghetto” life grew more intense.

Meanwhile, the redistribution of media assets continued. Putin’s government took pride in ridding Russia of “oligarchic media,” but during the years of Putin’s leadership the concentration of media properties significantly exceeded that of Gusinsky’s or Berezovsky’s holdings in the 1990s. The difference between the “media oligarchs” of the 1990s and the media magnates of Putin’s Russia is that the latter are fully loyal to Putin. Among the magnates who vastly expanded their media holdings under Putin, the most prominent is Yury Kovalchuk. Numerous press reports indicate that he and Putin have long-term personal ties. Kovalchuk’s *Natsionalnaya Media Gruppy* (National Media Group) included two national television networks and a range of print and internet resources. In 2010, his affiliated business interests became 100 percent owners of Video International, a major company that sells advertising on TV, and, in particular, on Russia’s largest TV network Channel One.<sup>7</sup> In early 2011,

<sup>6</sup> Russian *Esquire* magazine was the first among the glossies to turn to political themes. For instance, in its October 2008 issue it published an interview with the jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky by a highly popular author, Boris Akunin (three years later Akunin was among the most prominent figures of the Moscow protests). In the interview-by-correspondence, Khodorkovsky admitted that Akunin was his first “understanding and interested” interviewer [http://www.khodorkovsky.ru/docs/8737\\_\\_aku.pdf](http://www.khodorkovsky.ru/docs/8737__aku.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Konstantin Gaaze, “Otdel’no Vzyaty telekanal,” February 9, 2011, [www.forbes.ru/ekonomika](http://www.forbes.ru/ekonomika).

Kovalchuk further increased his holdings by purchasing a 25 percent share in Channel One. Other major owners included Gazprom-media (for more information, see footnote 12) and Alisher Usmanov, a metal tycoon and Russia's richest man. And, of course, the state itself.

While Dmitry Medvedev's presidency brought a whiff of liberty, the general political pattern, that of unchallenged centralized power, remained unchanged. Politics was still tightly controlled, business companies and entrepreneurs depended on the benevolence of the powers that be, and public participation existed only on paper.

In September 2011, Medvedev announced that he would "vacate" the presidency for Putin. The switcheroo – Putin promptly announced that he would appoint Medvedev his prime minister – is a graphic illustration of the Kremlin's political pattern in which decisions are made secretly by a close circle of people at the very top. Both Medvedev and Putin made it clear<sup>8</sup> that they had agreed a few years earlier on who would run for president in 2012. To many in Russia such statements, which read like "we decided who would be president beyond 2012," sounded like utter contempt for the people.

The outrage over the "job swap" was further exacerbated by the egregiously rigged parliamentary election in December 2011. These events triggered a series of mass protests that lasted in Moscow through the first half of 2012. The most common slogan was "Russia without Putin." For the first time since he came to power over a decade earlier, Putin faced large-scale public defiance.

### **Putin's Response to the Protests and the Contraction of the Mass Communications Realm**

As soon as Putin returned to the Kremlin, the Medvedev-era flirtations with liberty vanished. The timid signs of political liberty promptly disappeared from NTV. In 2012, the Kremlin shifted to repressive policies that included the prosecution and harassment of activists and protesters. In May, a protest rally for the first time ended with clashes with the police. Subsequently, about three dozen participants were arrested and charged with "mass unrest," leading to trials known as the *Bolotnoe delo* (the Bolotnoe Affair).<sup>9</sup> New pieces of legislation encroaching on the rights and

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mika-opinion/vlast/63087-otdelno-vzyaty-telekanal; Aleksandr Polivanov, "Pervy plyus Pyaty," February 11, 2011, [www.lenta.ru/articles/2011/02/10first/](http://www.lenta.ru/articles/2011/02/10first/). Ksenia Boletskaya, "Who owns Video International," *Vedomosti*, June 29, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> <http://ru.reuters.com/article/topNews/idRURXE78N00320110924> and <http://news.rambler.ru/11196015/>

<sup>9</sup> The *Bolotnoe* affair is named after Bolotnaya Square where the rally was staged. The court hearings in the case were a demonstration of the lawlessness and egregious anti-defendant bias common to all politically motivated trials in Russia. Of the almost 30 defendants who

freedoms passed through the parliament in quick succession with barely any debate or amendment (this law-making frenzy earned the Duma the nickname “a printer gone wild”).

Nongovernment organizations that received foreign funding came under pressure. Other elements of the crackdown included a harsh campaign of anti-Western and anti-liberal propaganda and a shift toward social conservatism. The government's rhetoric increasingly focused on issues such as faith, sex, school curricula, art and culture and condemned “nontraditional” practices. The goal of the new policy was to consolidate the conservative majority and pit it against the modernized minorities. What began as a tactical move aimed at discrediting and neutralizing the excessively modernized trouble-makers has gradually evolved as a new “ideological choice”: Russian traditions and morality vs. the decadent and immoral West and its “fifth column” within Russia that included liberals, gays, activists, and protesters. Any criticism of conservative laws and policies came to be seen as unpatriotic and undermining Russia's traditional values.

The nongovernment media thoroughly covered the surge of civic activism and the protests, and many journalists took an active part in the protest activities. Yet, unlike the nongovernmental organizations, media outlets did not become a direct target of harassment. There are no journalists among those prosecuted for “mass unrest” in Bolotnaya Square. But the nongovernment media have come under pressure in a different way.

Just as during the early stages of Putin's presidency, control through ownership proved to be an effective tool to impose constraints on media. The new round of pressure can be traced back to late 2011 when staffers of *gazeta.ru* quit as a sign of protest against the owner's interference with the coverage of the parliamentary campaign.<sup>10</sup> The *gazeta.ru* staff has since been thoroughly reshuffled and its top editors replaced twice. Beginning in early 2012, numerous journalists and editors lost their jobs (dismissed or forced to quit) and a few media outlets that pursued independent editorial lines have been closed. In all these cases the immediate “offender” was not the Kremlin or a biased judge: it was the owner, and the dismissals and closures were explained by purely economic reasons, if they were explained at all.

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had been charged in the Bolotnoe Affair, two opted for a plea bargain and were sentenced to long terms in jail nonetheless. One person was locked up in a psychiatric asylum. A few were amnestied in December 2013. In February 2014, seven protesters were sentenced to 2.5 to 4 years of prison camp and one to house arrest (members of this group had spent 16 to 21 months in pretrial detention). <http://lenta.ru/news/2014/02/24/sentence/> Up to one thousand people came to the courthouse on the day when the verdict was announced; several hundred were detained, many of them roughed up by the police. The most common punishment was a fine; in a few cases the detainees had to spend a few days in jail. As of this writing four more participants of the May 6 rally are in pretrial detention awaiting trial.

<sup>10</sup> [http://slon.ru/russia/roman\\_badanin-1027489.xhtml](http://slon.ru/russia/roman_badanin-1027489.xhtml)

Media outlets are additionally vulnerable because private business in general, just as any nongovernment actors, is at the discretion of the Kremlin. Profitable media outlets can be easily stripped of advertising revenues – no firm would want to displease the Kremlin by placing its ads in a publication deemed unwelcome by the powers that be. *The New Times* weekly magazine, arguably the most uncompromising and daring publication, has lost all its advertisers. It struggles to survive and lives off private donations and subscription fees.

The nature of control differs for big and small businesses. Magnates like Usmanov, who owns the *Kommersant* media holding, are especially keen to avoid political risks because of their large-scale and diverse business interests. Anxious to maintain good relations with the Kremlin, such major owners often preempt political “instructions” or “requests” and make sure their media do not show disloyalty. But small-scale owners or media managers who are still ready to take some risk and let their media practice a degree of editorial freedom are aware that sooner or later they will face the Kremlin’s displeasure. Nikolay Uskov, the editor-in-chief of the media project *Snob*, said in late November 2013: “Any media outlet that seeks to be objective can fall under the government’s steamroller or lose the advertising revenues drawn from state corporations.”<sup>11</sup>

The “owner factor” gained additional potency after the stepped-up concentration of media assets and coincided with Putin’s return to the Kremlin. In late 2013 Gazprom-media purchased the TV and radio holdings of ProfMedia. “The Kovalchuks’ empire” now controls 11 of Russia’s 17 largest TV networks, according to *The New Times* weekly.<sup>12</sup>

There is little doubt that the closures of outlets and programs and dismissals of journalists, whether explained by economic factors or not explained at all, reflected growing political constraints. *Kommersant*, once Russia’s best mainstream newspaper, lost about a dozen journalists. The

<sup>11</sup> [http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/11/26/uskov/?utm\\_source=rubrics&utm\\_medium=clicks&utm\\_campaign=ClickFromRubrics](http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/11/26/uskov/?utm_source=rubrics&utm_medium=clicks&utm_campaign=ClickFromRubrics)

<sup>12</sup> Dmitry Kamyshev, Olga Beshlei, and Zhanna Ul’yanova, “Kooperativ ‘Ozero’: efir vzyat!” *The New Times*, № 40, 2.12.2013, pp. 14-19, [http://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/74981?sphrase\\_id=237051](http://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/74981?sphrase_id=237051). Gazprom-media, which was originally launched as the media company of Gazprom, in recent years has gradually come under the control of Kovalchuk’s business structures. According to a report published in *The New Times*, “structures controlled by Yuri Kovalchuk” through various property schemes own “at least a blocking package” in all major media holdings except for VGTRK (All-Russian State Television and Radio Company). *The New Times* quotes Russia’s leading media expert Anna Kachkaeva: “The new giant media holding (of Yuri Kovalchuk) reaches out to maximum-sized audiences as applies to age, social groups as well as the segments of politically active and apolitical citizens.” The purchase of ProfMedia marks yet another radical expansion of the Kovalchuks’ media empire to include a few of Russia’s best entertainment TV channels. The total daily audience share of the TV channels connected to the Kovalchuk brothers is close to 60 percent; their share of Russian TV advertising revenues is about 80 percent.



first in the line of dismissals in the *Kommersant* media holding was Maksim Kovalsky, the editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine *Kommersant-Vlast*: Shortly after Putin's election in March 2013, Kovalsky ran a photo of a ballot on which a voter had scribbled a profanity referring to Putin.

The top editor of *Kommersant FM*, a radio station that had been launched in the freer atmosphere of Medvedev's presidency, was replaced twice. The current editor's background is in regional government administration.<sup>13</sup> A new high-quality magazine, *CITIZEN K* (another publication of the *Kommersant* media holding), was closed soon after its launch. Those who remain employed by *Kommersant* publications complained – in private — about the growing interference of the owner in the editorial line. In another example, *Bolshoi Gorod*, a Moscow youth magazine whose coverage grew politicized during the period of mass protests, lost its top editor, and its editorial policy was subsequently reformatted in order to avoid risky, political subjects.

In the summer of 2013, Gleb Pavlovsky, once a Kremlin insider and currently an insightful and critical commentator said:

“The reorganization of the media (that employ) disloyal journalists is done by a transfer of property from one owner to another. It is done quietly ... The journalists assume that they have a professional and reputational weight and can quietly move to another outlet. They fail to see that the space... is shrinking. And they begin to ... censor themselves... They may write about the same [topics], but they try not to cross an invisible line.”<sup>14</sup>

There are other ways to “tame” excessively independent journalists and editors. For instance, in early 2012, Gazprom-media initiated an urgent reshuffling of the board of directors of *Ekho Moskvy*. In February 2014, the new board that is now dominated by government loyalists fired the station's executive director Yury Fedutinov. For many years Fedutinov worked in close cooperation with *Ekho*'s legendary top editor Aleksey Venediktov. He has been replaced by a woman whose background is in government media. Her appointment to the position of executive director means that Venediktov's authority in editorial decision-making will be significantly constrained.

Several other major blows were dealt to journalistic freedom in late 2013 and early 2014. In December the government announced that it was abolishing its major news agency, RIA Novosti, and replacing it with

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.forbes.ru/news/241727-kommersant-fm-vozglavila-eks-zammera-saratova-po-ideologii>

<sup>14</sup> <http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/06/18/newsmi/>

the international information agency *Rossiya segodnya* (Russia Today).<sup>15</sup> The announcement came as a complete surprise to everyone in the media community. Many in the liberal journalistic circles were shocked by the liquidation itself: RIA Novosti was Russia's best and most modern news agency whose operation, despite its government status, was guided by high professional standards. But an even deeper shock came with the appointment of Dmitry Kiselev as the top manager of the newly created information agency. RIA Novosti had been run for many years by Svetlana Mironyuk and she enjoyed considerable respect in nongovernment media circles. Kiselev, one of the aggressive loyalists who gained prominence and promotions since Putin's return to the Kremlin, is notorious for his raving anti-Ukrainian and anti-gay statements (in March 2014, Kiselev became a target of European Union sanctions following Russia's annexation of Crimea). Besides, he has little, if any, managerial experience.<sup>16</sup>

The next victim of the assault against press freedom was TV Rain, a private TV channel launched in 2010, at first as an Internet TV outlet, and later included in cable TV packages. TV Rain's target audience was mostly younger, urban, well-educated professionals – the same social group as the participants of the Moscow mass protests of 2011-2012. The editorial independence and defiant reportage of TV Rain undoubtedly irritated the Kremlin. Besides, the channel made powerful enemies because it exposed the abuse of authority by high-ranking officials. In January 2014, TV Rain came under an orchestrated public attack after an online vote question it had posted on its website was deemed “unpatriotic.”<sup>17</sup> Almost instantly nearly every cable provider terminated its contract with TV Rain. In March, the station's owner and top manager announced that the broadcaster would not survive more than a few months.<sup>18</sup>

The next major event in this line was the firing of Galina Timchenko, the top editor of *lenta.ru*, Russia's most popular online news and analysis

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/19805>

<sup>16</sup> Two opinions on the liquidation of RIA Novosti and the appointment of Dmitry Kiselev cited by a pro-Kremlin website *Nakanune.ru* are interesting in the way they reflect the current political atmosphere. Both come from journalists who, like Kiselev, can be referred to as aggressive loyalists: “Svetlana (Mironyuk) is a good professional and not a bad person, but she was ideologically inappropriate. She was loyal, she accomplished corporate tasks, but ideologically she was unfit”... “The state wants to have more influence on the media realm as it prepares for difficult media wars that will be unleashed by the liberal media...” <http://www.nakanune.ru/articles/18417>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2014/02/asking-the-wrong-question-on-russian-tv.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://lenta.ru/news/2014/03/04/months/>. In March TV Rain launched a crowdfunding campaign and was able to collect enough funds to last about 30 or 40 days. <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2440645>

website.<sup>19</sup> Obviously, this dismissal will not be the last attack on the Russian media.

### **The Internet as a Public Realm**

Internet outlets are no less vulnerable to the government crackdown than are traditional media. Today Russian social networks still remain a realm of free expression, but in early 2014 the most popular among them, VKontakte, with its 60 million daily users, came under the control of businessmen allied with the Kremlin.<sup>20</sup> Over the past years the Russian government has developed a variety of tools to facilitate restrictions for online communication. This tool set includes a number of new legal norms, such as “Internet black lists” or the “anti-piracy law” that can be used to impose constraints on the Web. A much more radical piece of legislation that grants the government the authority to block websites without a court ruling<sup>21</sup> was passed in February 2014. In March, three nongovernment websites were blocked, as well as Aleksey Navalny’s page on LiveJournal.<sup>22</sup> According to Internet experts, the relevant government agencies have made significant progress in establishing censorship of the Web. Specialists in this field point to Russia’s highly effective filtration of websites as well as total surveillance of communications organized during the 2014 Winter Olympics Games in Sochi<sup>23</sup> and forecast that the Russian authorities will eventually force global platforms such as Google, Gmail and Facebook operating in Russia to register as Russian legal entities.<sup>24</sup>

Given today’s level of communications, it is hardly possible to entirely block information exchange as in the Soviet Union, but the nongovernment media, both the traditional outlets and internet communications alike, are unable to defend themselves from the current assault on media freedom. The liberal constituency is too small and weak, and the public at large appears to be in favor of the government’s censorship.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup> <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=54951>; <http://www.newsru.com/russia/12mar2014/lehtaruu.html>. Most lenta.ru staffers quit as a sign of solidarity with their top editor.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/opinion/the-kremlins-social-media-takeover.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/opinion/the-kremlins-social-media-takeover.html?_r=0)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/internet-block/1842488.html>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2014/03/140313\\_russia\\_oppo\\_sites\\_blocked.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2014/03/140313_russia_oppo_sites_blocked.shtml). As of this writing Aleksey Navalny, the most prominent civic and political activist, is under house arrest and is prohibited to use the Internet. In late March, the Moscow prosecutor’s office issued a formal warning to providers that amounts to a ban on reposting Navalny’s texts and other materials. <http://www.colta.ru/news/2710> The legal ground for such a ban is unclear.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.cyberdialogue.ca/2014/03/why-we-should-care-about-russias-stance-on-the-internet-by-andrei-soldatov/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://agentura.ru/projects/identification/Internetregulating>

<sup>25</sup> In a national poll conducted in March 2014, 62 percent said they have more trust in government media and only 16 percent prefer nongovernment outlets. Over 70 percent do not

After the military intervention and the annexation of Crimea, there is every reason to expect further constraints on press freedom as well as other civil liberties.

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mind if, in some cases, information is withheld in pursuit of the government's interests, and over 50 percent see nothing wrong if, in order to meet the government's goals, information is intentionally distorted. <http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/11427>