

Russian media – under state control

Media freedom in Russia peaked in the 1990s after censorship was abolished in 1988. However, since then the country has fallen to the bottom of the international league tables compiled by NGOs Freedom House and Reporters without Borders. There has been a sharp deterioration over the last few years, with restrictive new legislation and repression of the few dissenting voices left.

How Russia has re-established state control of the media

State ownership/control: directly or indirectly (through companies such as Gazprom Media, a subsidiary of state-controlled Gazprom, and National Media Network), the state has built up a huge media [empire](#), including six national TV networks, two national radio networks, two news agencies, two national newspapers and over 60% of the remaining press.

State ownership translates into a strong pro-Kremlin bias, for example during the 2012 presidential election in which Vladimir Putin was the subject of '[lengthy ... documentaries praising his achievements](#)', in 2013 when opposition leader Aleksei Navalny was [not mentioned](#) as a candidate in the Moscow mayoral elections, or more recently, with several TV and press outlets marking the first anniversary of an alleged massacre of anti-Maidan activists in Odessa by Ukrainian '[neo-Nazi Banderites](#)'.

Editorial interference: although effectively state-owned, [Moscow Echo](#) radio station and REN TV (owned by Gazprom Media and National Media Network respectively) retain a certain degree of editorial freedom but both have been reined in recently – Moscow Echo's director was [dismissed](#) in 2014 after the station posted criticism of the Kremlin on its website, while a few months later REN TV [axed](#) *The Week with Marianne Maksimovskaya* show, known for its independent take on current affairs. There have been similar developments in privately owned media belonging to Putin allies, with the editors of [lenta.ru](#) news portal and [Kommersant](#) newspaper having to make way for more Kremlin-compliant successors.

The media are encouraged to cooperate with the authorities through [subsidies](#) (36 billion roubles (€640 million) in 2014), access to exclusive news stories in exchange for compliance, and regular '[political planning meetings](#)' between media bosses and Kremlin officials, who also communicate by means of a '[yellow telephone](#)' hotline.

Foreign-owned media such as *Vedomosti* and *The Moscow Times* dailies have resisted such interference, but that may change with a [recent law](#) restricting foreign ownership of outlets to 20%.

Legislative restrictions on free speech: the [Russian constitution](#) guarantees 'freedom of ... speech ... and of mass communication', and bans censorship. However, these rights have been progressively compromised by secondary legislation: inciting extremism or public disorder, publishing offensive content, defamation, '[insulting a state official in public](#)' and '[violating the Russian Federation's territorial integrity](#)' have all been made crimes. Over the past two years the list of such offences has expanded and fines have [sharply increased](#) – by a factor of ten, in the case of 'extremism'. Vaguely worded definitions mean that such legislation can easily be used to silence wayward media outlets, and also [encourage self-censorship](#).

Some legislation specifically targets the Internet: since 2014 bloggers with [more than 3 000 daily readers](#) must register as media outlets (and may not therefore remain anonymous); at the same time, social media (including foreign operators such as Google or Facebook) must keep six months' data on users, stored on Russia-based servers to facilitate government access.

Media regulator Roskomnadzor is increasingly zealous in enforcing legislation: in its [2014 report](#), it records a 50% annual rise in both the number of media offences and total fines imposed. Using its [powers to block illegal content](#) (for which it does not require a court order), Roskomnadzor added [29 000](#) URLs to the 'Single Registry' of banned websites.

Other constraints on media freedom: at least two journalists [died](#) in unexplained circumstances in 2014; others faced [physical violence](#) or [trumped-up charges](#). Online media have been targeted by [hacker attacks](#). Media independence is hampered by economic constraints as well – *Novaya Gazeta* paper, known for its critical stance, may have to [suspend its print edition](#) soon due to political pressure having scared off investors and advertisers. Independent TV channels will also lose revenue due to a new law banning advertising from pay TV, potentially [jeopardising the survival](#) of around 150 outlets.

Trust in the media: in spite of the above, trust in the media remains high, with [70%](#) believing that coverage of events in Ukraine by state TV channels is fully or mostly objective. Belief in the need for pluralism is declining, from 67% in 2012 to [57%](#) in 2015, and a mere [5%](#) believing that media censorship should be abolished, according to surveys by independent pollsters, Levada Centre.

Television

Russians can now watch a much wider range of TV channels offering far more [appealing content](#) than in Soviet times; however, the level of state control remains high, with nearly all the main channels belonging to the Kremlin and its close allies. The three main national channels, all offering a similar mix of news and entertainment, are Channel One, the most popular and longest established TV channel (51% state owned, [15%](#) of total audience share); Russia One (state-owned, 13%); NTV (Gazprom Media, 10%). Other channels include light entertainment channels TNT (6%) and CTC (4%), and St Petersburg-based Channel 5 (6%).

Independently owned TV stations offering an alternative perspective struggle to reach a wider audience. In January 2014, pro-opposition Dozhd TV lost 90% of its (already small) audience after a [controversial poll](#) led to it being dropped from cable packages, allegedly under government pressure. Regional TV channel TV-2 from Siberia was another independent broadcaster to [fall foul](#) of the authorities.

Of all the media, it is television, and above all the three main channels, which have the most influence on public opinion. Television is Russians' main leisure pursuit – [79%](#) regularly watch TV, compared to reading books or newspapers (36%). Some [90%](#) of Russians learn about the news from TV, and for 43% TV is their only source of information about current affairs. By far the most popular provider of news and political analysis is Channel One, whose news programmes are watched by [82%](#) of the population.

Press

As in many other countries, the Russian press is much less influential than TV – only [28%](#) regularly read daily newspapers, down from 39% in 2003. There is less state ownership than in the TV sector: Moscow City Council recently [acquired](#) *Argumenty i Fakty* ([5.6 million](#) readers) weekly, the country's most widely read paper, and it also controls *Vechernyaya Moskva* ([600 000](#)); National Media Group owns quality broadsheet *Izvestia* ([300 000](#)); but many papers are in private hands, including popular tabloids *Komsomolskaya Pravda* ([3.6 million](#)) and *Moskovskij Komsomolets* ([700 000](#)). However, most are either pro-government, such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, which recently suggested the US government might be [behind the Charlie Hebdo attack](#), or avoid criticising it directly. Business paper *Vedomosti* and English-language *Moscow Times* are more independent, but only reach a limited readership (200 000 and 40 000 respectively). The most outspoken critic of the government is *Novaya Gazeta* (circulation: [200 000](#)), employer of the murdered journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

Internet

Compared to broadcast media and the press, the internet remains an area of relative freedom. Social media were used to coordinate opposition protests in 2011 and 2012, while opposition leader Alexei Navalny achieved prominence through his [blog](#). Rather than operating Chinese-style Internet censorship, the Russian authorities have used a more indirect approach – trolls [allegedly](#) linked to pro-Putin youth group Nashi or from the Kremlin's '[troll factory](#)' disrupt political discussions on online fora and social media.

However, new legislation (see above) has made it much easier for the authorities to clamp down on the Internet – in the first half of 2014, anti-extremism laws were used to close down [85 websites](#), including those of opposition activists such as Garry Kasparov and news portals sympathetic to the opposition.

In any case, the internet is much less influential as a source of news than TV. Even though a rapidly growing percentage of Russians regularly go online ([57%](#) in 2014), only [24%](#) use it to keep up to date with current affairs (TV: 90%) and within this group the main preference is for aggregators such as [Yandex](#) which, unlike TV, merely compile news stories without offering analysis.