Media freedom trends 2017: Russia

In Russia, the state controls strategic media (such as national TV), and restricts independent media and the internet through increasingly repressive legislation. However, there is still some scope for media pluralism, with a few outlets openly criticising the authorities.

Background: main trends in 2017
Media freedom has been in decline ever since Vladimir Putin became Russia’s leader in 2000, ending an era of relative openness (‘glasnost’) that began during the final years of the Soviet Union under President Mikhail Gorbachev. Attacks on media freedom are part of a broader clampdown, with increasing repression of civil society and the political opposition.

Current challenges
Direct and indirect Kremlin ownership of media outlets
After critical coverage (for example, of the Chechnya conflict) on TV channels owned by oligarchs Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, the Kremlin seized control of their media assets in the early 2000s. Since then, state ownership of media outlets, either directly or indirectly (through companies such as Gazprom, which owns a vast media empire), has steadily expanded. By 2015, all five national TV channels (the leading source of news for 86% of Russians), two thirds of the country’s 2,500 television stations and most of the leading newspapers and magazines were in the hands of the Kremlin and its allies.

In 2016, foreigners were banned from owning more than a 20% stake in Russian media companies. Finland’s Sanoma and Germany’s Axel Springer groups have sold their stakes in a string of publications, including English-language daily Moscow Times and business newspaper Vedomosti, to Russian owners.

Independent media also under state control
With an estimated 60-70% of the Russian economy in public ownership, independent outlets cannot escape state economic influence. In 2016, according to Glasnost Defence Foundation, 10 outlets were refused printing services and five TV or radio stations were blocked from the airwaves. Companies are reluctant to do business with outlets, such as independent TV channel Dozhd, which get on the wrong side of the authorities. In 2014, Dozhd came under attack after running a controversial poll; the channel lost 90% of its (already small) audience due to being dropped by cable providers, and the lease on its offices was not extended.

Even in privately owned media, journalists who produce content that the Kremlin objects to are liable to get fired – for example, the editor of lenta.ru news portal, and three editors from the highly respected RBC media group – in the latter case not long after RBC coverage of the Panama Papers scandal.

Media targeted by violence and threats
Journalists risk more than their jobs: according to the US-based NGO Committee to Protect Journalists, Russia is one of the world’s deadliest countries for the profession, with 80 killed since 1992. Reporting on the Chechen conflict for investigative newspaper Novaya Gazeta, Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead in 2006; in April 2017 a journalist from the same newspaper was forced into hiding after threats of ‘retribution’ for a story on arrests of gay men, again in Chechnya. In 2016, Russian NGO Agora documented 50 cases of actual or threatened violence against journalists and bloggers. Despite such threats, the number of media killings has declined sharply in recent years, with one reported incident in 2016 and two in 2017 (as of 30 April).

Repressive legislation limits freedom of speech
The Russian constitution guarantees ‘freedom of ... speech ... and of mass communication’, and bans censorship. However, since the Federal Law on Combating Extremist Activity was adopted in 2002, these
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Rights have been progressively compromised by secondary legislation: inciting 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 years, the list of such offences has steadily expanded and penalties have increased. Vaguely worded definitions mean that these laws can easily be used to silence criticism of the regime, thus encouraging self-censorship.

Increasing repression of the internet

In contrast to broadcast and print media, the internet is relatively free. Developing a Chinese-style firewall would be technically challenging, given that the Russian internet is closely integrated with global networks. Although fewer Russians (37%) trust the internet as a source of news than state-controlled TV (56%), that percentage has risen steadily since 2012, when it was just 29%. In March 2017, social media played a key role in triggering and organising massive anti-corruption protests, after millions watched Alexei Navalny's YouTube video accusing Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev of corruptly amassing wealth.

However, repression has gradually increased since post-election protests in 2011-2012: in 2015, 194 persons were convicted of online extremism, compared to 52 five years earlier. Heavy fines and prison sentences (up to five years) are handed down not just for posting content (such as criticisms of Russia's annexation of Crimea), but even for merely sharing it. Internet freedom is further limited by the repressive 'Yarovaya' package adopted in July 2016; under these new anti-terrorism laws, internet and telephone providers will have to keep records of communications for six months, and metadata for up to three years. The prohibitive costs (estimated at €75 billion) of implementing this legislation as well as resistance from the companies concerned may delay its entry into force for several years yet.

The Kremlin also uses a range of covert measures to compromise internet freedom: trolls, some apparently on the government payroll, disrupt online discussions; automated accounts ('bots') disseminate fake news; social media and email accounts of independent media and activists are targeted by hackers (in 2016 there were 122 cyber-attacks, up four times from the previous year). Reflected in these problems, in 2015 Freedom House downgraded Russia's score for internet freedom from 'partly free' to 'not free'.

In spite of challenges, some Russian media pluralism survives

State-controlled TV channels closely follow the Kremlin line. An example was the recent massive anti-corruption protests in March 2017; a three-day-long silence was finally broken by talk shows in which pro-Kremlin experts denounced the protests as a 'provocation', echoing an earlier statement by Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov. There is evidence that TV coverage of such events is closely coordinated through regular meetings between the presidential administration and TV executives.

However, some media pluralism survives in print and on radio, where the TV news blackout of the March 2017 protests was not followed. Popular radio station Ekho Moskvy, known for airing pro-opposition views despite being owned by Gazprom, published several articles criticising the authorities' response to anti-corruption protests. For its part, the Moscow Times speculated that anger at state corruption would cost Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev his political future, showing that, even after the paper's 2015 sale by its former Finnish owners to Russian businessman Demyan Kudryavtsev, it is still capable of taking an independent line. Though less outspoken, papers such as Kommersant and Vedomosti are known for their high-quality, objective journalism.

What the EU is doing: set up in 2015 within the EU's External Action Service, the East StratCom Task Force publishes a weekly newsletter exposing disinformation published in Russia and elsewhere by pro-Kremlin media. The task force also produces a Russian-language website with information and infographics on the EU targeted at readers in Russia and neighbouring countries.

Current tensions between the EU and Russia make direct EU support for Russian media difficult. Recent financial support within Russia has been limited to two small projects, funded by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights: one provides legal assistance for journalists facing extremism and similar charges, and a second contributed to the 2016 start-up of online broadcaster Radio Salt. The EU also provides regular seminars for Russian journalists, explaining the priorities of each new Council presidency. Some EU funding for independent media is channelled through the European Endowment for Democracy. European Parliament resolutions have repeatedly criticised restrictions on media freedom in Russia, such as the cancellation of Crimean Tatar TV channel ATR's broadcasting licence.