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**WEEDING OUT THE UPSTARTS:  
THE KREMLIN'S PROXY WAR ON  
INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM**

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## Introduction

“Freedom of speech was and remains a sacrosanct value of the Russian democracy,” Russian leader Vladimir Putin said in his first state of the nation in 2000.<sup>1</sup> Revisiting the topic in December 2014 at a meeting with national ombudsmen, he spoke with less pathos, but no less conviction: “As for prohibitive tendencies in mass media, I hear about it, of course, but I don’t really see any such tendencies.”<sup>2</sup>

The media reality in Russia, however, appeared to deviate from these statements. In fact, Putin’s very first move as the newly elected president in 2000 was to force a leadership change in the oligarch-controlled television channels ORT and NTV. They have since become the main mouthpieces of state propaganda and arguably the major staple of the contemporary Russian regime, characterized as a new type of dictatorship based on information manipulation (Guriev and Treisman 2015). Putin made the Reporters Without Borders’ “Predators of Press Freedom” list in 2001, and has stayed on it ever since,<sup>3</sup> following a template of suppressing free media typical of resource-rich non-democracies (Egorov, Guriev and Sonin, 2007).

Not all media in 2000s’ Russia was Kremlin-run, however. The decade saw the emergence of a two-tier system, under which the government retained close control over leading outlets – primarily television channels, the source of information for most of the nation – while under the surface, independent and opposition-minded print and online publications were allowed to broadcast their views to news-literate audiences too small to sway an election (Hopstad 2011, Duhn 2014).

The Internet, in particular, has long been blissfully ignored by the Kremlin. At a famous meeting between Putin and Internet community representatives in 1999, their only request was for the state to leave them alone – and it did: Russian internet regulation and state interference with the Web have been, until 2011, non-existent.

At the turn of the millennia, it was understandable: The Russian segment of the internet (“the Runet”) was nothing more than a politically negligible curiosity, used only by a tiny percentage of Russia’s 140-plus-million populace. However, it has since provided a proof of Russia’s grossly underrated entrepreneurial spirit (when free of state meddling), growing into an industry worth 1 trillion rubles (\$29 billion as of pre-crisis mid-2014), with domestic companies competing with Facebook and Google on equal terms – and an audience of almost 74 million as of 2014.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2000/07/28782.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47179>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ifex.org/international/2001/11/06/rsf\\_publishes\\_list\\_of\\_thirty\\_nine/](https://www.ifex.org/international/2001/11/06/rsf_publishes_list_of_thirty_nine/)

<sup>4</sup> <http://2015.russianinternetforum.ru/news/684/>

The belief that the internet is negligible backfired spectacularly during what can be dubbed the “Slavic Spring,” a string of public protests in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine in 2010-2014 that, similar to the Arab Spring, were largely coordinated online – and, particularly in Russia’s case, boosted by robust online media. Only in Ukraine have the protesters succeeded in changing the regime – but the biggest protests in years have given the Russian and Belarusian governments a lot of headaches (especially given the extreme examples of how such protests may end, as provided by Libya and Syria).

Underestimating the online media has been one of the Kremlin’s greatest political miscalculations. The television’s information dominance has eroded (Oates 2013): In 2009, a mere 9 percent of the nation obtained their news from the Web, but the figure hit 39 percent in 2014.<sup>5</sup> News websites with an independent, often fiercely critical stance such as Lenta.ru and Gazeta.ru had audiences of millions, and print media such as respected dailies Kommersant and Vedomosti boosted readership to comparable figures through their websites. The second tier of the media spun out of control and challenged the first.

The backlash was not long in coming, and the halcyon days of Internet freedom were officially over. The Kremlin’s two-pronged counterattack targeted, on the one hand, the Web in general, hit with extra regulations and quickly mired in governmental blacklists. And on the other hand, strange things began to happen to Russian online media.

Media censorship has many forms. Reporters Without Borders list 180 countries in their World Press Freedom Index, approaches differing from “ban everything” for North Korea to “do nothing” for perpetual leader Finland. In between, the best-known beacon of censorship is China, notorious for its “Great Chinese Firewall,” which blocked 50,000 URLs as of May 2015.<sup>6</sup> However, the very notoriety of the “Great Chinese Firewall” is a deterrent for a censorship-prone government conscious of its global image – as was Russia’s, at least until recently (Ortung and Walker 2013, p.5). Nevertheless, many other tools of media suppression are available, from advertisement withdrawal to direct violence (69 journalists were killed worldwide in 2014, according to the Press Freedom Barometer<sup>7</sup>).

In this paper, I posit that since late 2011, Russia has seen a suppression campaign against leading independent online media, which never crosses a line to explicit political censorship, but has nevertheless seriously curtailed freedom of speech through indirect means. The preferred methods of suppression are editorial takeover and legal attacks or public smear campaigns on non-political pretexts. The government maintains a distance from the campaign, and its involvement can only be established through indirect evidence or *cui bono* reasoning, but is nevertheless a direct beneficiary, as critical online media are silenced altogether or losing audience.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: poll by the independent Levada Center (one of the “big three” of Russian pollsters) (<http://www.levada.ru/17-06-2014/rossiiskii-media-landshaft-televidenie-pressa-internet>).

<sup>6</sup> <https://en.greatfire.org/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-barometer-journalists-killed.html?annee=2014>

The practice can, in fact, be compared to Russia's involvement in the "proxy war" in eastern Ukraine. There, too, the Kremlin denies official military help or direct ties to the pro-Russian separatists, claiming grassroots efforts by volunteers, but a wealth of indirect and/or unofficial evidence indicates that the involvement is actually arranged and coordinated in the Russian corridors of power. The description fully applies to the Kremlin's media strategy.

The campaign is of interest beyond Russia as Putin is widely seen in the world as a model authoritarian leader for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many other aspiring strongmen can be expected to adopt his template of indirect censorship, attracted by the hands-off approach that is less damaging for international reputations than direct censorship à la China. (It is worth noting that the Kremlin has already attempted to boost state intervention in online affairs on a global scale, lobbying to hand over control of the key internet infrastructure from the US-based non-profit organization ICANN to the UN, where Russia and other authoritarian states have considerable influence.<sup>8</sup>)

This research paper is structured as follows: Section 1 offers an overview of the internet growth and media situation in Russia. Section 2 analyses the main tools of online media suppression deployed since 2011, which are editorial takeover and legal pressure on non-political pretexts. Section 3 touches on methods proved inefficient or not widely used in the campaign: economic pressure, cyberattacks, direct violence and counter-propaganda. Section 4 offers a case study of coverage change in targeted media. The findings are summarized in the Conclusion.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russia-wants-state-control-of-root-internet-infrastructure/509989.html>

# 1. Internet & Freedom

## 1.1 Statistical Overview

In the 15 years of Vladimir Putin's reign, Russia has gone from a relatively free and Internet-less nation to a fully authoritarian state with a web-savvy population. Numerous polls and studies exist on both counts, and speak for themselves:

### Internet audience in Russia:

2003 – 9.9 million monthly users (9 percent of adult population);

2011 – 54.5 million (47 percent);

2015 (early) – 73.8 million (63 percent).<sup>9</sup>

### Sources of news (percent, multiple answers)<sup>10</sup>:

	<i>TV</i>	<i>Online media</i>	<i>Social networks</i>	<i>Newspapers</i>	<i>Radio</i>
2009	94	9	-	37	41
2014	90	<b>24</b>	<b>15</b>	19	18

### Freedom in the World survey on Russia:

1992-2004 – Partly Free; 2005-now – Non-Free<sup>11</sup>

### Freedom of speech (rank among countries/territories):

	<i>Freedom House</i>	<i>Reporters Without Borders</i>
2002	<b>110th</b> of 186 <sup>12</sup>	<b>121st</b> of 139 <sup>13</sup>
2015	<b>180th</b> of 199 <sup>14</sup>	<b>152nd</b> of 180 <sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Source: seasonal polls by state-run Public Opinion Foundation, one of the “big three” of Russian pollsters (<http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/11889>). 2015 data via XIX Russian Internet Forum (<http://2015.russianinternetforum.ru/news/684/>).

<sup>10</sup> Source: Levada Center (<http://www.levada.ru/17-06-2014/rossiiskii-media-landshaft-televidenie-prensa-internet>)

<sup>11</sup>

<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Individual%20Country%20Ratings%20and%20Status%2C%201973-2015%20%28FINAL%29.xls>

<sup>12</sup>

[https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTP%202002%20Global%20Press%20Freedom%20Scores\\_0.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTP%202002%20Global%20Press%20Freedom%20Scores_0.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> [http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id\\_rubrique=297](http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id_rubrique=297)

<sup>14</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FreedomofthePress\\_2015\\_FINAL.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FreedomofthePress_2015_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <http://index.rsf.org#!/>

It is also worth noting that Reporters Without Borders, which included Putin among the “Predators of Press Freedom,” describe him, as far as his media policy is concerned, as a “control freak.”<sup>16</sup>

## 1.2 Media Regulations

In the decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia developed a flawed, but working media system where the main outlets were controlled by rival oligarch groups, which did little to provide impartial coverage, but at least ensured its diversity.

Putin earned the “control freak” tag mostly due to his 2000-2001 takeover of the NTV and ORT television channels, controlled by oligarchs Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, respectively. Gusinsky was arrested on fraud charges unrelated to NTV and released when he – by his own claim – agreed to hand over NTV, now owned by the state-run Gazprom corporation. Berezovsky, who turned from Putin’s supporter to his bitter rival, quietly sold his 49-percent share in ORT (since renamed Channel One) not long before emigrating. The template, as we will see, remained relevant in the 2010s. NTV and Channel One, along with the state-run Rossiya-1, became the nation’s most watched channels<sup>17</sup> – as well as Kremlin’s mouthpieces on public affairs.

The ensuing media system was characterized as “neo-Soviet” by Jonathan Becker (2004) and Sarah Oates (2007), though Hopstad (2011) and Duhn (2014) contested it was still an improvement from Soviet times due to a robust second tier of media outlets, which were unable to compete with state TV on audience, but enjoyed editorial freedom for the very same reason.

However, the 2011-2012 election cycle in Russia resulted in the biggest street protests since 1993, a time when supporters of the Kremlin and the parliament clashed in the streets of Moscow (an event best known worldwide for the iconic images of tanks blasting off at the scorching building of the Russian White House). Protests against Putin’s victory and alleged vote fraud brought tens of thousands into the streets of Moscow. Violence was kept to a minimum, but the Kremlin saw the need to react – and lashed back.

In media regulations, the chief innovation was blacklisting of websites promoting “unsanctioned public gatherings” or “extremism.” The latter is an especially oblique criminal charge routinely used in Russia as tool of political persecution.<sup>18</sup> Libel, decriminalized under Putin’s quasi-liberal placeholder Dmitry Medvedev, was made a criminal offence again at the start of Putin’s third presidential term in

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<sup>16</sup> <http://en.rsf.org/predator-vladimir-putin,44517.html>

<sup>17</sup> Weekly audience share as of mid-May 2015: Channel One 13.3% (#1), Rossiya-1 12.8% (#2), NTV 10.0% (#3). No other channel exceeded the 6.5% mark. Here and below, all audience figures from TNS Russia unless stated otherwise.

<sup>18</sup> As meticulously tracked by the Russian anti-xenophobia watchdog Sova Center, see, for example: <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/misuse/reports-analyses/2014/06/d29660/>.

2012, offering a potentially devastating tool of persecution of journalists in a country where the judiciary is notoriously loyal to the Kremlin.

A broader prohibitive trend was also clear, highlights including:

- tougher punishments and tighter rules for public rallies.
- a “foreign agent” tag (a derogatory term from Stalin’s times) and extra red tape for NGOs involved in “political activity” that receive any funding from abroad. “Political activity” was so poorly defined that the rule has been applied, in one case, against a bird conservancy – though the main target were NGOs critical of authorities, many of which were slapped with heavy fines and/or forced to shut down.
- Criminal cases opened against opposition figures, including protest leaders Alexei Navalny and Sergei Udaltsov. Both called the cases fabricated in retribution for their activism; Amnesty International declared the two politicians prisoners of conscience.
- Popular bloggers (more than 3,000 readers) obliged to register with the state and bear all responsibilities of a media outlet – without any of the rights – or risk blacklisting. Though the law has not seen any systematic use, it remains a sword of Damocles hovering over well-read bloggers, many of whom are critical of the government. (Meanwhile, 135 people were convicted over Internet posts on existing laws in 2014 alone, perhaps proving the new blogger law’s redundant.<sup>19)</sup>

Finally, the Kremlin has also embraced an ultraconservative ideology, depicting Russia as a stronghold of healthy traditionalist values besieged by the godless and amoral West in an ideological and geopolitical standoff (Lucas 2014, pp. 133-155). This concept has allowed the Kremlin to paint any opposition to the rulers of “fortress Russia,” especially the pro-Western liberals – who were at the heart of the anti-Kremlin protests – as the “fifth column” of the enemy. Admittedly, the West-bashing, while ubiquitous in official rhetoric, rarely translates into actual persecution or broad on-the-ground anti-West campaigns – for now, at least.

### 1.3 Sites Used

This study focuses on most popular independent news websites in Russia, with a few additions, explained below. This included legacy media that had a considerable web presence.

Selection criteria were audience and citation. Statistics were derived from five sources, all available online: three leading online catalogues (Rambler<sup>20</sup>, Yandex<sup>21</sup>, Liveinternet<sup>22</sup>) that offer media charts; Medialogia<sup>23</sup> database tracking

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/publications/2015/03/d31575/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://top100.rambler.ru/navi/?theme=440>

<sup>21</sup> [https://yaca.yandex.ru/yaca/cat/Media/Online\\_Media/and](https://yaca.yandex.ru/yaca/cat/Media/Online_Media/and)  
<https://yaca.yandex.ru/yaca/cat/Media/Periodicals/>.

most cited Russian media (i.e. those most often used as news sources by other media); and TNS Russia data on media audiences.<sup>24</sup> The timeframe was mid-April to mid-May 2015, or the latest stats available as of mid-May 2015. Only websites from the top 10 of the rankings were considered. The rankings use different grouping approaches – some separate news websites and legacy media with web presences, some lump them together – and in the former case, both were considered.

The results are in the table below, listed alphabetically. “M,” “p,” “r,” “t” and “w” denotes, respectively, magazine, paper, radio, TV and website rankings. If a media publication has several media formats (i.e. radio and newspaper for Kommersant), all were factored in. A number of outlets only feature once across the five rankings; these were omitted.

	Rambler	Liveinternet	Yandex	TNS	Medialogia	Monthly web audience <sup>25</sup>	Citation <sup>26</sup>
<i>Echo of Moscow</i>	+	+	-	w	r	6.4 million	441
<i>Forbes Russia</i>	-	-	m	-	m	4.8	520
<i>Gazeta.ru</i>	+	+	p	w	w	9.8	1,222
<i>Izvestia</i>		-	p	p	p	2.3	2,064
<i>Kommersant</i>	+	-	p	p	p, r	5.0	2,328
<i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i>	+	+	p	w	p	11.8	310
<i>Lenta.ru</i>	+	+	w	w	w	10.3	1,335
<i>Lifenews.ru</i>	-	-	+	-	t, w	4.5	648
<i>Moskovsky Komsomolets</i>	-	-	p	p	p	13.2	331
<i>NEWSru.com</i>	+	-	w	-	w	2.9	322
<i>Rain TV</i>	+	-	-	-	t	3.3	234
<i>RBC</i>	-	+	w	p, w	p, m, w	12.5	1,294
<i>RIA</i>	+	+	w	-	-	19.5	-
<i>Rossiiskaya Gazeta</i>		+	p	p, w	p	11.4	970
<i>Vedomosti</i>	+	-	p	p	p	4.9	1,122
<i>Vesti.ru</i>	+	+	w	w	r, w	12.2	249

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.liveinternet.ru/rating/ru/media/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/>

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.tns-global.ru/services/media/media-audience/dannye\\_issledovaniy\\_auditorii\\_smi/](http://www.tns-global.ru/services/media/media-audience/dannye_issledovaniy_auditorii_smi/)

<sup>25</sup> TNS Russia for March 2015, except for figures in italics, which are Rambler stats for April 2015.

<sup>26</sup> On a point-based system, scale from 0 to 2,500 points.

Vz.ru	+	-	p	-		7.3	54
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The leaders can be split into three groups:

1. privately owned and/or editorially independent (as of 2011):

Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru, RBC.ru, NEWSru.com (news websites); Kommersant, Vedomosti, Novaya Gazeta (newspapers); TV Rain alias Dozhd (cable television); Echo of Moscow (radio); Forbes Russia (magazines).

2. state-owned/pro-government:

Vz.ru, Lifenews, Vesti.ru (websites); Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Izvestia (newspapers); RIA Novosti (newswire).

3. (predominantly) non-political:

Moskovsky Komsomolets, Komsomolskaya Pravda (general interest newspapers).

This study is focused on the first group. It also includes a number of high-profile incidents with smaller media that complement a given trend. Such cases are marked “minor” in the description, referring to the site’s popularity.

## 2. 'Links of the Goddamn Chain'

The phrase in the headline became a short-lived meme in the Russian journalistic community in the early 2010s, used to describe the string of odd sackings, reshuffles and scandals that affected editorially independent Russian media at the time – in short, the topic of this article. This section examines the crucial links in the said chain, putting official explanations against the actual political and editorial context and, where possible, indicating the driving force behind each shakeup. The cases within each subsection are arranged chronologically.

### 2.1 Editorial Takeover

In several high-profile cases, senior editor(s) of a critical media outlet were fired, or had to step down because of interference by the owner. In most instances, the media outlet in question, while enjoying editorial freedom, was owned by an oligarch – who, while formally independent businessmen themselves, have to a man received the message sent in 2003 by the jailing of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the only tycoon who publicly challenged Putin – and spent a decade in prison for his trouble.

#### Gazeta.ru

When: December 2011; March 2013

What happened: Ahead of the State Duma elections of 2011, Gazeta.ru entered a partnership with Golos, Russia's top independent vote monitor, running a banner for Golos' crowdsourced "Violation Map" for the electoral campaign. The banner was taken down a week before the polls, which prompted deputy editor-in-chief Roman Badanin to resign in protest, citing the site owner's interference with editorial policy. Then-editor-in-chief Mikhail Kotov claimed the banner was removed for commercial reasons and denied the owner's involvement.<sup>27</sup> Two years later, Kotov himself stepped down over a conflict with the website's new commercial director.

What really happened: The 2011 vote, narrowly won by Putin's United Russia, was highly contested, and Golos became the main whistleblower, accusing the pro-Kremlin party of rigging 10 to 15 percent of the votes in its favor. The allegations were the main trigger for the wave of protests in 2011-2013.

As for Kotov, he stepped down after the new executive director claimed oversight over editorial policy, in violation of Russia's media law (no legal consequences followed). Novaya Gazeta newspaper also claimed, citing anonymous sources

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<sup>27</sup> Both spoke to Forbes Russia: <http://www.forbes.ru/sobytiya/rynki/77027-ya-tsenyu-zhelanie-sohranit-izdanie-hot-v-kakom-vide>.

close to Kotov, that the owners demanded the editorial line to be “less oppositional,”<sup>28</sup> though no on-the-record confirmation exists.

Additional scandals at the time saw the state media watchdog Roskomnadzor officially cite Gazeta.ru in December 2011 over its allegedly biased coverage of United Russia (two citations allow the authorities to shut down a media outlet), and a web show at the media outlet suspended in March 2013 after an interview with a leader of the anti-Putin protests.

The culprit: The decisions in both cases are either traced to or could not have been done without the authorization of the owners. In 2011, these were Alisher Usmanov (whose fortune stood at \$17.7 billion at the time)<sup>29</sup> and Alexander Mamut (\$2.3 billion in 2011). Usmanov sold Gazeta.ru to Mamut in 2012.

Usmanov, a metallurgy king with vast holdings in telecoms, has publicly admitted he coordinates his business ventures with the authorities<sup>30</sup> and confessed in 2012 to “admiring” Putin.<sup>31</sup> In July 2013, he received from Putin the Order “For Merit to the Fatherland” (4<sup>th</sup> class).

The very non-public Mamut was on the Kremlin inner circle in pre-Putin’s times. He has neither known close ties to nor explicit conflicts with Putin, but has quietly emerged in the 2000s as the owner of Russia’s leading online media entities, including the then-popular blogging platform Livejournal.com and news websites Gazeta.ru and Lenta.ru. This is not the last time both men are featured on our list.

### Kommersant

When: December 2011

What happened: When covering the 2011 Duma elections – including anti-Kremlin voting and alleged vote fraud – Kommersant Vlast, a weekly within the Kommersant media holding, run a photo of an actual vote bulletin inscribed with the words “Putin, fuck off!” Oligarch Usmanov (see above), who owns the holding, said it constituted an ethical violation “bordering on petty hooliganism” and sacked Vlast’s editor-in-chief, respected journalist Maxim Kovalsky, as well as the holding’s general director Andrei Galiyev. The head of Kommersant publishing house (legally owned by the eponymous holding), Demyan Kudryavtsev, stepped down in protest.

What really happened: An open letter signed by 131 then-Kommersant staffers and contributors explicitly called the sackings “an intimidation action aimed at preventing any criticism of Vladimir Putin.”<sup>32</sup> “We’re being forced into cowardice,” added the letter, some of whose signatories, such as renowned reporter and

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/57069.html?p=2>

<sup>29</sup> All fortune estimates are from 2015 by Forbes Russia unless specified otherwise.

<sup>30</sup> Interview to Vedomosti, 2005: [www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/article/2005/05/17/92122](http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/article/2005/05/17/92122)

<sup>31</sup> Interview to Reuters: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/09/28/us-russia-summit-usmanov-idUSBRE88R0WK20120928>

<sup>32</sup> <http://os.colta.ru/media/paper/details/32772/>

columnist Oleg Kashin, ended their collaboration with Kommersant after the editorial purges.

The culprit: Usmanov denied a political motive to the crackdown (the claim dismissed by the open letter as a “falsification”). But as stated above, the tycoon, one of Russia’s richest men in the early 2010s, strictly adheres to a policy of staying on the Kremlin’s good side.

### *Bolshoi Gorod (minor)*

When: June 2012

What happened: Originally a lifestyle bi-weekly, Bolshoi Gorod gave extensive and sympathetic coverage to anti-Putin protests, whose driving force – young educated urbanites – coincided with the magazine’s readership. Editor-in-chief Filipp Dzyadko, who was involved in the protests, stepped down in 2012, saying the investors insisted the magazine refocus back from politics to lifestyle, a stance he disagreed with.<sup>33</sup> The magazine’s publisher said Dzyadko quit because Bolshoi Gorod was in the red.<sup>34</sup>

What really happened: Whatever the reasoning behind Dzyadko’s forced stepping-down, Bolshoi Gorod’s political coverage ended with him – despite its considerable interest for the audience: challenging poor performance accusations, TNS figures show that the magazine’s average issue readership in Moscow increased 60 percent in the spring of 2012 compared to the same period of 2010.

The culprit: Bolshoi Gorod is part of a rare independent media holding controlled by the opposition-minded businesspeople Natalia Sindeyeva and Alexander Vinokurov, with no known ties to the Kremlin. The holding also includes major news and opinion website Slon.ru and TV Rain, Russia’s sole independent television (see below, section 2.2). Explaining Sindeyeva and Vinokurov’s unusual crackdown of the Bolshoi Gorod, leading Russian journalist Alexei Venediktov surmised that the investors “decided it’s worth sacrificing a pawn...to protect the bishop (Slon) and the queen (TV Rain).”<sup>35</sup>

### *RIA Novosti*

When: December 2013

What happened: In the 2000s, RIA Novosti emerged as Russia’s top newswire. While state-run, the agency earned a reputation for “offering professional and semi-independent coverage,” according to the New York Times<sup>36</sup>; it gave

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<sup>33</sup> [http://www.vedomosti.ru/management/articles/2012/06/07/filipp\\_dzyadko\\_pokidaet\\_bolshoj\\_gorod](http://www.vedomosti.ru/management/articles/2012/06/07/filipp_dzyadko_pokidaet_bolshoj_gorod)

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.mn.ru/society/20120607/320063950.html>

<sup>35</sup> <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/aav/896994-echo/>

<sup>36</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2013/12/10/world/europe/putin-scraps-kremlin-news-agencies.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/10/world/europe/putin-scraps-kremlin-news-agencies.html?_r=0)

extensive and balanced coverage to the anti-Kremlin protests as well as to the high-profile trials of Pussy Riot and the opposition politician Alexei Navalny.

Three months ahead of the Sochi Olympics, for which RIA was the host broadcaster, Putin issued an order to “liquidate” the agency, sack the editor-in-chief, Svetlana Mironyuk, and merge it into a new structure centered around the notoriously propagandist state television Russia Today. Firebrand TV personality Dmitry Kiselyov, known for his threat to reduce the United States to “radioactive dust,” was put at the helm. The Kremlin decree said the move was to ensure a more efficient use of state spending on the media.

What really happened: Channel One’s in-house ultraconservative analyst Maxim Shevchenko said that with the liquidation, “a systemic nest of anti-Russian information forces was taken,” which succinctly sums up the situation from the Kremlin’s point of view. The post-revamp RIA quickly ditched balanced coverage for the sake of vehement propaganda, lambasting, in particular, the domestic opposition, US leadership and Ukrainian officials while extolling the pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine. As for funding, the agency remained heavily reliant on state support both before and after the crackdown.<sup>37</sup>

The culprit: When asked about the crackdown on RIA Novosti, Putin said in late 2013 that “state propaganda must be handled by patriotic-minded people.” This failure to distinguish between news reporting and propaganda is a sufficient answer, but it is also worth noting that numerous sources, including those cited by Forbes Russia and Russian investigative weekly the New Times, linked the crackdown to Alexei Gromov, first deputy head of the presidential administration, a hardliner and a long-time enemy of Mironyuk’s.<sup>38</sup> The next section will have more examples of officials interfering with the media.

### Lenta.ru

When: March 2014

What happened: Editor-in-chief Galina Timchenko was fired in March 2014 by the owner Alexander Mamut (see above) and replaced with Alexei Goreslavsky, whose main claim to fame was heading the explicitly pro-Kremlin news and opinion website Vz.ru (see section 3.2.d). Mamut never publicly commented on his motives, but the sacking came after state media watchdog Roskomnadzor slapped Lenta.ru with a fine for an interview with the leader of Right Sector, a radical nationalist group in Ukraine that played a key role in the second “Orange Revolution” and was vilified in Russian state media at the time.

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<sup>37</sup> Combined state subsidies allotted for RIA, Russia Today television and Voice of Russia radio in 2015 increased 15% year-on-year to 21.8 billion rubles (\$640 million as of mid-2014), according to data from RBC and Novaya Gazeta (<http://top.rbc.ru/politics/23/09/2014/950629.shtml> and [http://www.novayagazeta.ru/storage/c/2012/10/29/1351464951\\_001267\\_27.png](http://www.novayagazeta.ru/storage/c/2012/10/29/1351464951_001267_27.png), respectively).

<sup>38</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2013/12/10/world/europe/putin-scraps-kremlin-news-agencies.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/10/world/europe/putin-scraps-kremlin-news-agencies.html?_r=0)  
[http://compromatwiki.org/wiki/%D0%A1%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA\\_%D0%93%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0](http://compromatwiki.org/wiki/%D0%A1%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA_%D0%93%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0) FIND SOURCE!

Most of the newsroom quit in protest and went on to found Russian news website Meduza.io (see section 3.1; section 4), based in Latvia and headed by Timchenko.

What really happened: The 84 staffers who resigned over Timchenko's sacking said in an open letter that her removal and replacement with a "man directly controlled from the Kremlin cabinets" was censorship and a crackdown on independent journalism.<sup>39</sup> RBC cited an anonymous source at the old Lenta.ru newsroom as saying that Mamut told Timchenko the Kremlin demanded her removal.<sup>40</sup>

The culprit: See above for details on Mamut, a one-time Kremlin insider with no track record of antagonizing or opposing Putin.

### Nedelya @ Ren TV (minor)

When: August 2014

What happened: Marianna Maksimovskaya's "Nedelya" ("The Week") was the black sheep of Russian television. Airing on Ren-TV, a federal broadcaster recently focusing on pseudoscience and low-brow sitcoms, it was the only weekly news show to offer a critical outlook, complete with reports on authorities' failings and interviews with opposition figures, down to ex-oligarch and Putin's nemesis Mikhail Khodorkovsky. In 2014, the channel's management announced that the show would be shut down to allow Maksimovskaya to focus on her duties as the deputy editor-in-chief of Ren-TV.

What really happened: The official explanation is unconvincing: Maksimovskaya had worn two hats at Ren-TV for years. Moreover, the show had higher ratings than Ren-TV in general,<sup>41</sup> so the channel shot itself in the foot by pulling the plug on "Nedelya." Maksimovskaya herself has never commented on the move – but the real result was the disappearance of the only critical news show in Russian federal broadcasting. A number of leading Russian media figures said the show was gently put to sleep after an agreement between Maksimovskaya and the channel's management that it was too politically risky. "Maksimovskaya, a brave journalist with a good reputation, struggles to work in today's conditions, and it is hard for the channel to keep such a program," said renowned liberal journalist Nikolai Svanidze.<sup>42</sup>

The culprit: Founded by independent media figures Irena and Dmitry Lesnevsky (mother and son), Ren-TV was acquired in 2006 by the National Media Group, a private media holding with an incredibly murky ownership structure, most of which was traced in an investigation by RBC news website to Putin's close affiliates, tycoons Yury Kovalchuk, Gennady Timchenko, Vladimir Bogdanov and

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<sup>39</sup> <http://lenta.ru/info/posts/statement/>

<sup>40</sup> <http://top.rbc.ru/society/12/03/2014/910657.shtml>

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/08/01\\_a\\_6154997.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/08/01_a_6154997.shtml)

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/08/01\\_a\\_6154997.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2014/08/01_a_6154997.shtml)

the Rotenberg brothers.<sup>43</sup> Kovalchuk and the Rotenbergs have been sanctioned by the U.S. and EU over their alleged involvement in Russia's takeover of Crimea and war in Ukraine (Timchenko was only sanctioned by the U.S.). The National Media Group also owns stakes in Kremlin propaganda mouthpieces Channel One and Izvestia newspaper.

## 2.2 Direct Hit

### Rosbalt (minor)

When: October 2013

What happened: Rosbalt is a medium-sized news agency based in St. Petersburg, which publishes, among other content, opinion pieces critical of the government. State media watchdog Roskomnadzor issued two warnings over swearwords in its publications (a legitimate cause for a warning) and sued to have its media licence withdrawn. It won the case, but the ruling was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2014.

Three things indicate the pretext for closure to be a sham: first, two warnings allow, but do not require the authorities to shut down a media outlet – the decision is up to the watchdog. Second and more important, the expletives were in YouTube videos linked by Rosbalt and not original content. Third, Russian media teem with expletives, and punishment for those is highly patchy and arguably selective.

What really happened: The suit came shortly after the new law banning media from expletives in publications came into force, and the attack on Rosbalt showcased both the new legislation, and Roskomnadzor's vigilance in upholding it. The move – which was blasted by the OSCE and Reporters Without Borders – appeared to pave the way for a media witch hunt, the regional journalist union said in an open letter.<sup>44</sup>

The culprit: Rosbalt gave no cause for a crackdown, and not even the agency itself alleged that any of its publications could have caused the ire of authorities (though Rosbalt was briefly investigated in the case of a powerful ultraconservative lawmaker mistakenly reported to have called for a ban on oral sex).

But Roskomnadzor, which has a long and colorful history of issuing odd media warnings (a website for pregnant women was once cited over a video of a birth, dubbed “pornography”), has recently made a name for itself as a restrictive authority whose main function is banishment of questionable content. Rosbalt, in this case, appears as a pretext for the watchdog to flex its restrictive muscles and showcase the new restrictive law.

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<sup>43</sup> <http://top.rbc.ru/business/17/11/2014/5468ae40cbb20f2878362373>

<sup>44</sup> <http://spbsj.ru/last-news/v-spb/4451-rosbalt-roskomnadzor.html>

## TV Rain

When: January 2014

What happened: TV Rain, Russia's sole television with critical political coverage apart from the late "Nedelya" on Ren-TV, ran a routine online poll during a talk show on history, asking if the bloody Siege of Leningrad in WWII, which resulted in 1 million Soviet casualties, was better avoided by surrendering the city to the Wehrmacht. The poll – deleted 12 minutes after posting – caused outrage among leading political figures, including Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who said the channel "crossed the red line." A handful of prosecutor checks were launched based on complaints by siege survivors – despite the channel's prompt apology – though no violations were found.

But though it was cleared legally, TV Rain was dropped by all major cable television operators in Russia. Head of Russia's Cable Television Association, Yury Pripachkin, said his "civic stance" made him wish to "take on certain censorship functions."<sup>45</sup> TV Rain said it lost 80 percent of its audience and 90 percent of revenue due to the cable operator boycott.<sup>46</sup>

What really happened: The scandal came shortly after TV Rain reported on an exposé by Alexei Navalny, who alleged that leading Russian officials, including the Kremlin's latest grey cardinal Vyacheslav Volodin, first deputy head of the presidential administration, illegally obtained expensive real estate. Channel's co-owner Natalya Sindeyeva directly blamed the presidential administration for the crackdown, claiming it had pressured cable operators into dropping the channel.<sup>47</sup> (Neither Volodin nor the operators commented on the allegations.)

It must be noted that Russia has a cult of World War II, increasingly used for propaganda by the Kremlin; the Soviet victory is sanctified, and a special entry in the Criminal Code bans criticism of the Red Army. That said, the need for the Siege of Leningrad was previously questioned, among others, by Viktor Astafyev, a war veteran and much-respected Russian writer, who faced no backlash over it.

The culprit: Volodin, who supervises domestic policy in the Kremlin, is believed to be spearheading both the crackdown on dissent that followed the 2011-2013 protests, and the neo-imperialist jingoist propaganda that provides the ideological backing for it – which relies heavily on taking the moral high ground, especially against the liberals. He was blacklisted in May 2014 by the EU and the United States over his alleged involvement in Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian Crimea peninsula.

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<sup>45</sup> <http://ria.ru/society/20140131/992412770.html>

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2014/02/05/vzbesivshijsya-kabel>

<sup>47</sup> <http://sobesednik.ru/politika/20140207-natalya-sindeeva-istinnyy-povod-travli-dozhdya---syuzhet-ob>

As for cable operators, representatives for the domestic telecom giant Beeline implied that the decision to drop TV Rain was made under pressure, though stopped short of naming names.<sup>48</sup>

Grani.ru, Kasparov.ru, Ej.ru (minor)

When: March 2014

What happened: Three fiercely oppositional news and opinion websites were blacklisted for access in Russia by the Prosecutor General's Service based on a recent law that allows blocking sites if they "promote mass disturbances." The law requires prosecutors to specify actual webpages that do advertise rioting, but in this case, they said that "the majority" of content on offending websites qualified, and they have to be blocked in their entirety. Court appeals have failed; Amnesty International launched a campaign to provide access to the blacklisted sites via mirrors.

What really happened: Grani.ru, Ej.ru and Kasparov.ru do not enjoy a massive readership, but are hardline opposition sites full of acerbic criticism of President Putin and his policies. Many of their op-eds predict a bloody fall of the regime or report about upcoming unsanctioned rallies, which can be construed as "promoting mass disturbances."

The culprit: In this case, the initiative appears to come not from Putin, but from a lower bureaucratic level. Not even the targeted sites alleged the Kremlin's direct involvement; but the Prosecutor General's Office was busy in recent years exposing and punishing the enemies of the regime, most notoriously through hounding NGOs qualifying for "foreign agents," viewed as a subversive presence and slapped with heavy fines.

There was no immediate pretext for its attack on Grani.ru, Ej.ru and Kasparov.ru – they did not say anything lately that they had not said many times before – but the prosecutors have made a show of force while also showcasing the new blacklisting law. Russian security agencies race each other to prove themselves the most vigilant defenders of the regime, and the prosecutor service – which usually lags behind the Investigative Committee on political cases – most definitely scored bureaucratic points in the race by hitting the opposition websites.

Vedomosti

When: October 2014

What happened: A new law, effective 2017, limited foreign ownership of Russian media, including print, to a 20-percent stake (much less than comparable in

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[http://tvrain.ru/teleshov/govorite\\_s\\_yuliey\\_taratutoy/osnovatel\\_vympelkoma\\_dmitrij\\_zimin\\_ob\\_otk\\_ljuchenii\\_dozhdja\\_iz\\_paketa\\_bilajn\\_eto\\_ne\\_ih\\_samostojatelnoe\\_reshenie-361915/](http://tvrain.ru/teleshov/govorite_s_yuliey_taratutoy/osnovatel_vympelkoma_dmitrij_zimin_ob_otk_ljuchenii_dozhdja_iz_paketa_bilajn_eto_ne_ih_samostojatelnoe_reshenie-361915/)

Western countries or in Russia previously; print media are usually exempt from such regulations). Pro-Kremlin lawmakers who penned the bill cited a “cold information war” as the reason.

The bill is estimated to affect a third of the Russian media market, including the likes of Disney Channel and glossy magazines. But on the political/business front, the top casualty is the respected Vedomosti daily, co-owned by the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times and Finnish publishing house Sanoma – all of which now have to sell their shares in it.

What really happened: Vedomosti – until recently – stood a good chance of ending up in the hands of yet another pro-Kremlin oligarch. Bloomberg<sup>49</sup> and the Russian investigative magazine The New Times<sup>50</sup> both named as prospective buyers either Gazprom Media, the media arm of state conglomerate Gazprom, or Yury Kovalchuk (worth \$650 million as of 2015), a close affiliate of Putin’s (see section 2.1, Nedelya, for more on him).

“The Kremlin sees Vedomosti’s shareholders as foreign governments,” Vedomosti editor-in-chief, Tatiana Lysova, was cited as saying by Bloomberg. “The WSJ equals the U.S. and the FT the U.K. They want a Russian owner so they have someone to call.”

Interestingly, the Vedomosti takeover combination – if one is surmised – floundered so far. Gazprom Media’s head Mikhail Lesin stepped down in December 2014 over what observers called a defeat in a power struggle, and the new prospective buyer is Demyan Kudryavtsev – the very same man who stepped down as the head of Kommersant publishing house after intervention by its oligarch owner Alisher Usmanov (section 2.1). However, Kudryavtsev only obtained Sanoma’s 33-percent stake in Vedomosti, and neither WSJ nor FT have indicated any willingness to part with their share in the daily, known for its balanced coverage and op-ed pieces – which means a fair share of criticism of the Kremlin (Bloomberg listed the newspaper among the “intellectual troublemakers”).

The culprit: Kremlin deputy chief of staff Volodin accused Vedomosti of “serving foreign editors,” according to editor-in-chief Lysova, also via Bloomberg. The story is corroborated by a source in the Russian publishing industry who spoke to me in December on condition of anonymity. Volodin never publicly voiced any criticism of Vedomosti, but a crackdown dovetails with his zero tolerance policy toward dissenting voices.

The bill’s nominal authors are three lawmakers with pro-Kremlin parties, but in the current Russian legislature, deputies are routinely used as smokescreens for bills originating in the Kremlin. No important law is passed without the Kremlin’s approval, due to strict discipline in the ruling United Russia party, which is utterly

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-10-15/putin-allies-said-angling-to-wrest-paper-from-wsj-ft>

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/88545/>

loyal by Putin (he topped the party list at the 2011 Duma vote, while Volodin heads United Russia's apparatus).

### Echo of Moscow

When: (February 2012), November 2014

What happened: The radio station, which has a veritable online presence, has long been hailed as an example of the Kremlin's tolerance of criticism: while owned by state monopoly Gazprom, it serves as a platform for the leading opposition figures – among a myriad of other voices.

In recent years, however, the Echo faced a number of attacks on its editorial team. In 2012, Gazprom Media holding sought the replacement of the station's veteran editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov and a board reshuffle. The plan fizzled out amid media outcry.

In November 2014, state media watchdog Roskomnadzor issued Echo of Moscow a formal warning over alleged "positive description" of Ukrainian nationalist group the Right Sector, recognized as extremist in Russia. Two warnings allow authorities to shut down a media outlet. Independent anti-xenophobia watchdog Sova noted that the report was not, in fact, positive of the Right Sector.<sup>51</sup>

The same month, Gazprom Media head Mikhail Lesin ordered an Echo journalist sacked and threatened the editor-in-chief with removal for not complying. The reason was ethical, as with TV Rain: The journalist tweeted irreverently about the accidental death of the son of Putin's close ally Sergei Ivanov, the late young man being notorious for killing an old woman with his car and escaping prosecution. Lesin eventually backed away after Echo of Moscow created a new ethical code for its journalists.

What really happened: Venediktov, despite his oppositional stance, has admitted to his connections in the Kremlin, which gives him means to defend himself in an apparat struggle. However, the crackdown, along with the "yellow card" by Roskomnadzor, also paves the way to self-censorship, indirect indications of which can be found in the fact that Echo of Moscow is stagnating<sup>52</sup> among reports that its oppositional coverage is diluted to homeopathic doses.<sup>53</sup>

The culprit: The ham-fisted Lesin, who was Putin's advisor in the 2000s, appears to follow the same template as rich private owners of media outlets in Russia, his censoring zeal possibly exacerbated by his state job. His surprising stepping-down from Gazprom Media in late 2014 was attributed to a defeat in a turf war for

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2014/11/d30667/>

<sup>52</sup> Audience figures unchanged since 2011.

<sup>53</sup> A recent example found in a column by ex-Kommersant reporter Oleg Kashin: <https://slon.ru/posts/51902>.

influence against other state media.<sup>54</sup> In any case, Echo of Moscow remains in Gazprom's hands, with all that it entails.

Roskomnadzor, for its part, has been active in censoring Internet websites and blogs – 2,600 blacklisted as of late May 2015, both on non-political grounds and over extremism accusations.<sup>55</sup> It has also issued 134 warnings to media outlets in 2014 alone (not counting 981 requests to censor user comments on media websites)<sup>56</sup> though it has never attempted to close any of the top federal media outlets (Rosbalt, described above, remains a second-tier, if respected, publication).

## 2.3 Findings

Editorial takeover and moral/ideological persecution, instigated by authorities or benefitting them, appear to be the Kremlin's favored media pressure strategies. The former is enabled by the fact that most critical media with editorial independence are in fact owned by large media holdings, either state-run or owned by oligarchs, who, in a post-Khodorkovsky world, are generally reluctant to oppose the Kremlin.<sup>57</sup> The latter is possible due to the regulatory and prohibitive binge that Putin's government embarked on after the protests of 2011-2013, rallying the public and the elites under conservative ideological banners and painting any opposition as enemies of the nation, a frenzy that reached uncharted heights after the breakout of a proxy war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, with opponents of the pro-Russian separatists (i.e. the nation of Ukraine) presented as fascists in Russian official rhetoric.

The jingoist frenzy has seen many pro-Putin activists, officials and legislators jump on the propagandist bandwagon. In the media pressure campaign, they both act as proxies for crackdowns apparently originating in the Kremlin and display personal initiative that, while not directly ordered by the government, advances its goal of subduing and harassing independent media.

The Kremlin's preferences of pressure strategies appear to shift with time. Editorial takeover was favored in the early part of the crackdown, while since 2013, the focus shifted on moral or ideological (i.e. "anti-extremism") pressure. The new strategy of taking the moral high ground spares the Kremlin the PR damage, or at least mitigates the image of "predators of press freedom" that it obtained during oligarch-perpetrated editorial takeovers. However, it also appears to be less "final" – media outlets targeted with moral accusations are

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<sup>54</sup> <http://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2014/12/22/olimpijskij-smenschik-lesina>

<sup>55</sup> Data by independent online freedom watchdog Rublacklist.net (<http://reestr.rublacklist.net/visual>). It put the total number of websites blacklisted in Russia at the time by courts and the five state agencies with the power to do so at 10,180.

<sup>56</sup> Watchdog's own data: [http://rkn.gov.ru/docs/doklad\\_o\\_rezultatakh\\_goskontrolja\\_2014.docx](http://rkn.gov.ru/docs/doklad_o_rezultatakh_goskontrolja_2014.docx).

<sup>57</sup> An indication that the Khodorkovsky case was no isolated incident can be found in the 2014 crackdown on oil company Bashneft, whose owner Vladimir Yevtushenkov (\$9 billion in 2014) found himself under house arrest on corruption charges and was released only when Bashneft was nationalized. The company has long been an acquisition target for state giant Rosneft, run by Putin's close aide Igor Sechin.

harassed and/or lose audience, but do not implement radical changes to the editorial line.

### 3. The Missing Links

This section examines what was left on the cutting floor of the alleged media campaign – that is, websites qualifying for a crackdown but not affected by it, and pressure strategies that could be, but are (so far) not broadly used in the Kremlin’s campaign against independent media.

#### 3.1 The Unaffected

A handful of popular websites offering independent and critical coverage of domestic affairs have not come under pressure. This section lists them and offers tentative explanations as to possible reasons.

##### NEWSru.com

What: Established in the days of yore by Putin’s now-late nemesis, tycoon Boris Berezovsky, the website is a news aggregator that focuses on comprehensiveness rather than speed. After Lenta.ru’s takeover (section 2.1), it featured widely on the list of still-reliable news sources by 31 leading journalists and opposition figures, compiled by Colta.ru culture and politics news website.<sup>58</sup> It also publishes translations from Western media – few of which are supportive of the Kremlin – and blogs by ardent Putin critics, many of them regular contributors to the banned Grani.ru and Ej.ru (section 2.2), though the blogs are a side note to the site’s main concept.

Why not: NEWSru.com produces no original content. All of its reports are available elsewhere online, though scattered throughout many websites (it *is*, after all, an aggregator). It also generates no original investigating reporting or opinion pieces (outside of blogs, most of which are also republications), which lends it a flair of impartiality.

##### RBC

What: RBC is a business media holding owned by oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, who was Putin’s sparring partner at the 2012 election, campaigning as a moderate liberal, but never daring to mount any harsh criticism of the Kremlin. The holding comprises a 24-hour business news cable television, a magazine, a newspaper and a slew of news websites, including a general news one, which reports on the opposition and occasionally publishes exposés targeting the government, most notably on the Russian army’s involvement in the Ukrainian conflict. RBC also featured on Colta.ru’s list of reliable news sources as compiled by independent journalists and opposition activists.

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.colta.ru/articles/media/2785>

Why not: RBC remains primarily a business news website, and the main bulk of its content is politically neutral. Prokhorov's tenuous connection with the Kremlin, implying apparat influence, could also be a defending factor. However, it may not be enough: RBC – which emerged recently as the top independent news website simply because most competitors were eradicated – is often listed as the next target for the Kremlin, and in January 2015, the state watchdog Roskomnadzor slapped it with a “yellow card” (first warning) over a photograph of a stack of Charlie Hebdo magazine copies with caricatures of Prophet Muhammad, which was deemed to be fanning religious hatred.

### Meduza.io

What: After the ouster of Lenta.ru's editor-in-chief, she and most of the newsroom went on to establish another news website with broadly the same concept and coverage. The website, which went online in October 2014, is prudently based in Riga along with most of its staff of Russian nationals. Its financial backers remain unclear, though the recently released Khodorkovsky was mentioned. While the coverage is not explicitly oppositional, it offers an extensive overview of the Russian government policy and propaganda failings. While nowhere near Lenta.ru in popularity, Meduza.io already boasts a monthly audience of almost 1.6 million (as of March 2015).

Why not: There is not much leverage against a website based in the EU and bankrolled by anonymous figures – short of a direct ban à la Grani.ru. But public image losses from a second campaign against the same editorial team would also be considerable – no amount of smooth-talking would be able to cover up its political nature. And since Meduza.io remains too small and too young, the costs of a potential crackdown would outweigh the benefits.

### Forbes Russia

What: The Russian edition of Forbes emerged as the most cited magazine in the country.<sup>59</sup> It focuses, obviously, on business coverage, but that includes exposés of shady dealings of government-affiliated firms. Its news feed reports on the opposition, and its strong and well-read column section features regular contributions by leading independent economists pointing out flaws in the government's policies (the Russian economy has been slowing down since 2013, according to official data).

Why not: Magazines remain the weakest link in the Russian media chain: they are few and so is the readership, which means the impact of Forbes is not as strong as it could be. It is also a business publication, with politics as a secondary focus. As for its business exposés, those are counteracted in courts (notoriously loyal to the Kremlin): Igor Sechin, Putin's friend and head of Rosneft, successfully sued Forbes Russia in 2014 over its estimate of his annual salary

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<sup>59</sup> Medialogia data for April 2015: [http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/federal\\_smi/3561/](http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/federal_smi/3561/).

(which the magazine put at \$50 million, a world record for oil execs), though he only sought refutation, not compensation.

Finally, Forbes Russia is, in fact, another potential victim of the foreign ownership law that affected Vedomosti business daily (section 2.2). However, there has been no indication of Forbes being the law's main target and not collateral damage.

### Novaya Gazeta

What: The staunchest bastion of anti-Putinism, Novaya Gazeta newspaper is the mouthpiece of the Russian liberal opposition in its most vitriolic form. In addition to a slew of angry columnists – drawn from a pool largely shared with the banned Grani.ru and Ej.ru (section 2.2) – it is known for its investigative journalism. While much of it focuses on the affairs in the North Caucasus (the beat of journalist Anna Politkovskaya, shot dead in 2006), it also routinely targets the federal government. One of the latest exposés touched on the death of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, assassinated in plain view of the Kremlin in 2015 – Novaya Gazeta was the one publication that directly linked the murder to Chechen leadership and spoke extensively about Chechnya authorities' under-the-rug conflict with the Federal Security Service (which comprises many veterans of the Chechen wars).

Why not: Novaya Gazeta has in fact faced a lot of pressure in the 22 years of operation (see section 3.3 for details), but no decisive move was made for its closure. One important factor is readership: at a print run of 227,000 copies, it is small enough to pass below the radar – though that did not save Grani.ru and Ej.ru. However, while a crackdown on those two websites originated at a lower tier of the bureaucratic hierarchy (Roskomnadzor), attacking Novaya Gazeta would require a sanction from the top because of its ownership: former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev has a 10-percent stake in the paper. Novaya Gazeta is also well known in the West (thanks, not least, to the late Politkovskaya), and global image losses in case of a decisive crackdown would be not worth the benefit of getting rid of an irritant with a minor impact on domestic affairs.

## **3.2 What's Not Done**

There are many ways to neuter a publication. Notable practices not mentioned above include economic pressure, most commonly through withdrawal of advertisements; cyberattacks; direct violence; and counter-propaganda (see Price and Krug, 2000; Becker, 2002, pp. 168-170; Schönfeld 2012, pp.251-256 for more details). Most of these have, in fact, been applied against Russian media in the two post-Soviet decades, but they did not feature prominently in the early 2010s' campaign that is the subject of this paper. Below follows an overview of these practices' prior application in Russia and possible reasons for their absence in the new crackdown.

### a) Economic pressure

Media is business, and an authoritarian state has many ways of affecting an enterprise. Two main sources of revenue are retail sales (i.e. readers paying for content) and advertisements.<sup>60</sup> Both can be targeted, either through closure of distribution channels or through withdrawal of advertisements.

There have been no reports from Russia on any attempts to deny distribution to federal media. This source of revenue, however, is shrinking: as the state press watchdog points out, digital sales of Russian media do not exceed 5-7 percent, and print distribution networks are shrinking. Of online media examined in this article, only two (Rain TV and Vedomosti) have a paywall.

Withdrawal of advertisements is a practice better known worldwide. A typical case in 2007 saw the Kenyan government incurring the wrath of Reporters Without Borders by denying state advertisement contracts to critical-minded media holding, the Standard Group.<sup>61</sup> As for Russia, anecdotal evidence exists for such practices: Novaya Gazeta spokesperson Nadezhda Prusenkova told me in an interview in 2014 that major advertisers in Russia refuse to work with her publication because of a tacit ban from the Kremlin; journalists from regional media also often claim in private talks that critical reporting can prompt local authorities into pressuring regional advertisers to blacklist a media outlet.

However, local media in Russia is a world unto its own, requiring a separate study. As for the federal media, no outlets considered in this article, with the exception of Novaya Gazeta, reported any political trouble with advertisers. A speculative explanation could suggest that the Russian advertisement market has too many players to efficiently control it, or alternatively, that the Kremlin is reluctant to meddle with the media market too much, afraid that panic amid advertisers could affect non-political media.

### b) Cyberattacks

DDoS attacks are, in fact, routine in Russia; outlets such as Lenta.ru, Vedomosti and Kommersant are known to have been affected. A cyberattack at any website can be ordered in Russia through a quick web search and at a mere \$50/day. However, such measures are only harassment, not a strategic solution: they do nothing to disrupt a publication in the long term or change its editorial line.

### c) Violence

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<sup>60</sup> Data by Russia's Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications:  
<http://www.fapmc.ru/rospechat/activities/reports/2014/polygraph-in-russia2/main/custom/0/01/file.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> <http://en.rsf.org/kenya-government-orders-state-sector-to-19-04-2007,21804.html>

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists lists 56 journalists killed in Russia since 1992 for motives confirmed to be related to their professional activity.<sup>62</sup> Novaya Gazeta alone lost at least seven reporters since its inception to contract hits or suspicious accidents, and Kommersant reporter Oleg Kashin was beaten into a coma and lost a finger in 2010.

However, a closer look would show that the most dangerous beat in Russia is not the Kremlin, but regional affairs. The majority of slain journalists in the country have been covering North Caucasus, a very special region with ruthless leaders and long-running traditions of violence. The colleagues of Anna Politkovskaya, shot dead in 2006 and arguably the most well-known casualty of Russian journalism, blamed her death on Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, whose rampant rights abuses she had exposed. Kashin has criticized officials in Pskov and Moscow regions, and listed both as suspects; another possible culprit are pro-Kremlin youth movements, whose enforcers – mainly football hooligans – have never been tightly controlled by the government. A popular sentiment claims that in Russia, it is safer to criticize Putin than your governor – and our study bears it out: Of publications examined here, only Novaya Gazeta and Kommersant (in Kashin’s case) saw physical violence against their journalists. Perhaps it is just not elegant enough for the Kremlin, or maybe the devastating reputational costs are taken into account.

#### d) Counter-propaganda

Technically this is an incorrect term, as it implies propaganda on the other side, and not independent journalism. But the Kremlin has long tried to spread its model of drowning out criticism in the sea of sycophancy from television to other media formats (the practice was applied online as early as 2004, see Alexander 2004). Notable examples of the pro-Kremlin species include:

- Vz.ru, a news and opinion website (audience 7.3 million,<sup>63</sup> 28<sup>th</sup> on Medialogia’s top 30 of most cited news websites for April 2015). Created in 2005 by Konstantin Rykov, now a lawmaker with the United Russia party, Vz.ru attempted to offer a conservative alternative to liberal websites such as Lenta.ru and Gazeta.ru, but has since lapsed into vehement opposition- and Ukraine-bashing.

- Odnako, a web spinoff of the eponymous talk show on Channel One (1.1 million,<sup>64</sup> not on Medialogia’s index). The show is hosted by Mikhail Leontyev, a firebrand ultraconservative political pundit (and spokesman for Rosneft) who called opposition “idiots,” branded the people who said that Russia shot down a Malaysian jet over Ukraine in 2014 “swine,” and claimed the West set out to “strangle Russia.” His site offers more of the same, in the format of analytical publications.

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<sup>62</sup> <https://cpj.org/killed/europe/russia/>

<sup>63</sup> Site not covered by TNS, figure by Rambler for April 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Site not covered by TNS, figure by Rambler for April 2015.

- Lifenews.ru online television (4.5 million, Medialogia - #10/websites, #1/TV channels). Unabashedly yellow press, Lifenews is mainly focused on accident reports and celebrity gossip, but has recently added a political slant, bashing the opposition and reporting on “atrocities” by Ukrainian troops fighting separatists. This is credited to its owner Aram Gabrielyanov, a notorious tabloid mogul who repeatedly proclaimed his fondness of Putin. Political coverage, however, remains a secondary focus for Lifenews.ru.

- Izvestia, a daily newspaper and website (2.3 million, #26/websites, #2/newspapers). A once-legendary paper founded in 1917, it is now owned by Putin friend’s Kovalchuk’s National Media Group (see section 2.1, Nedelya) and managed by Gabrielyanov of Lifenews, who said he intended it to rival Kommersant as the most respectable national daily. But instead, Izvestia emerged as a platform for pro-Kremlin opinion, a dump for insider political reports and mudslinging – thanks to Gabrielyanov’s loyalty to the government and connections in the security services due to his tabloid involvement. Izvestia is notorious for a high percentage of exclusive reports that turn out false.

(Note that Russia Today TV channel is not considered here as it is 1) a television project, and so closer related to Channel One and VGTRK, and 2) it is aimed at foreign audiences.)

All of these publications enjoy considerable audience, if not reputation or high citation indexes. However, the main problem with them, from a counter-propaganda point of view, is their inability to replace and/or drown out independent critical publications. As Regina Smyth and Sarah Oates have shown (2015), Russian media consumers tend to pick outlets that reflect and reinforce their views and ignore the rival narrative (usually diametrically opposite to theirs). Loyalist and opposition audiences exist in separate “echo chambers” that the opposite party has no chance of breaching (see also Toepfl 2014). Hence the large and pro-opposition readership remains for Lenta.ru and its ilk as of 2011, despite Vz.ru et al.’s best efforts.

## 4. More Putin! A Case Study in Coverage Change

But maybe the takeover extravaganza really wasn't political? Perhaps the reshuffles and the scandals did not affect the editorial lines, and censorship allegations are just the opposition crying wolf in a bid for attention?

A comprehensive analysis of Russian independent media's coverage since 2011 would be a Herculean feat: we are looking at tens of thousands of articles, even excluding reprints. Luckily, a pair of candidates uniquely suited for a case study is found in Lenta.ru and Meduza.io.

A brief recap: Lenta is a leading news website in Russia, with an arguably critical voice in the early 2010s. In 2014, its oligarch owner sacked the editor-in-chief, which caused most of the newsroom to resign in protest. Lenta continued with a pro-Kremlin journalist as the new editor-in-chief, while the sacked collective established another news website, Meduza.io, essentially continuing where they left off at their previous job.

In other media outlets examined in this article, a coverage shift could be argued to be a natural evolution of the editorial line in changing political circumstances. But in Meduza and Lenta, two media teams – one renowned for independence and the other a post-takeover one – are covering broadly the same stories, and so if the tone and topics have changed, it must be attributed to the newsroom's forced revamp.

I examined a sample of Lenta and Meduza's articles over a single time period, from April 15 to May 15, 2015. The sample includes only "proper" articles – a type of original content offered by both sites that is separate from the shorter and more neutral news reports. Also included is a sample of Lenta's pre-takeover coverage ("old Lenta") – a month's worth of original articles from April 15 to May 15, 2013. The articles are compared by topic categories; headline keywords; dominant story subjects; and tonality of the coverage (praise/criticism), though the last part is only supplementary due to limitations of available tools for sentiment analysis.

### 4.1 Categories

The articles were first classified into broad categories by subject matter. Each article was allowed up to three category markers as many fall into several categories at once – e.g. a publication on the healthcare reform falls into both "politics" and "society" groups.

Some of the findings were neutral. On the number of articles, Lenta had 396, Meduza 101, old Lenta 133; on category markers, Lenta had 536, Meduza 141, old Lenta 185. In other words, Lenta tripled its output after the revamp. As both websites did and continue to aspire to be general news media, many articles had

nothing to do with politics (sports, science, real estate etc.). Nevertheless, category frequencies showed a focus on political affairs for all three: top 3 were politics (94 markers), foreign affairs (89) and economy (58) for Lenta; politics (31), society (18) and foreign affairs (18) for Meduza; and politics (31), cars/science/technology (27) and foreign affairs (30) for the old Lenta.

But coverage on human rights (mostly domestic issues) varied greatly, as seen in this self-explanatory table:

	<b>Lenta</b>	<b>Meduza</b>	<b>old Lenta</b>
<i>articles</i>	6	17	11
<i>% of coverage</i>	≈1	≈12	≈6

## 4.2 Keywords

The top headline keywords for the three sites are spelled out below. Neutral words such as “year” or “interview” were omitted; related items such as “Putin” and “Russian president” were grouped together in all cases.

<b>Lenta</b>	<b>Meduza</b>	<b>old Lenta</b>
Russia (69)	Russia (12)	Russia (15)
Putin (24)	war (7)	human (7)
world (24)	history (7)	Boston bombings (4)
victory (20)	Ukraine (6)	country (4)
war (18)	army/military (5)	Moscow (4)
Ukraine (14)	great (4)	president (4) <sup>65</sup>
United States (13)	world (4)	war (4) <sup>66</sup>
crisis (9)	[the rest <4]	world (4)

We can see that Lenta is much more focused on Putin than either its past incarnation or its current doppelgänger. Meduza is interested in all things war – no wonder, given the war in Ukraine – while the old Lenta had no specific focus beyond a humanistic slant.

Note that the interest in history for Lenta and Meduza was due to the Victory Day that took place during the time of the sample. The same goes for the “victory” keyword for Lenta – though it is notable that, while the victory over the Nazis was

<sup>65</sup> Not Putin; a different president in all four cases.

<sup>66</sup> Three out of four times used figuratively.

much touted in Russian state media in 2015, Meduza stayed away from the belligerent patriotic revelry and wrote about “war,” not “victory.”

### 4.3 Story Subjects

Story subjects varied in all three cases, but not too much. Again, non-political topics such as sports are not included in the breakdown below.

<b>Lenta</b>	<b>Meduza</b>	<b>old Lenta</b>
Ukraine (26)	oppressed groups (12)	authorities (15)
WWII (24)	authorities (12)	opposition (11)
authorities (21)	WWII (10)	ensorship & propaganda (11)
Putin (20)	ensorship & propaganda (9)	social issues (6) <sup>67</sup>
Russian foreign affairs (20)	Ukraine (8)	crisis (3)
crisis (17)	intellectuals (5) <sup>68</sup>	corruption (3)
social affairs (17)	crisis (4)	[the rest <2]

The current Lenta is fixated on Ukraine, past glories and Putin – quite in line with the Russian state television. Meduza shares the interest in the war (though, as shown in section 4.2, not the victory), but also focuses on human rights and censorship issues, completely ignored by the post-revamp Lenta. The old Lenta is close to Meduza: it was also interested, prophetically, in the rise of censorship, as well as in both authorities and the opposition, who were, at the time, locked in a standoff.

Interestingly, the old Lenta had a mere two articles on Ukraine and one on World War II – those were the halcyon days before the Ukrainian war or the propaganda-mired Victory anniversary.

### 4.4 Sentiment Analysis

This section offers a stab at opinion mining. Lenta, Meduza and the old Lenta were studied on tonality of coverage for five evergreen topics of the Russian media: “opposition”; “Ukraine”; “the United States”; “Putin”; and, separately, “authorities” (which, for the purposes of this paper, also included a smattering of articles on state corporations, as those are important political players in Russia). In a few cases, articles fell into two groups at once (e.g. stories on relations

<sup>67</sup> E.g. healthcare or prison conditions.

<sup>68</sup> In this case, interviews on societal and cultural topics with prominent public figures, mostly liberals unaffiliated with the Kremlin.

between Ukraine and the United States) and were analyzed twice for different topics.

Two tools were utilized: media tracker Medialogia's online database of media publications for content analysis, and a free web tool by Russian firm Brand Analytics. Neither tool is perfect and both differ in numerous aspects, outlined below, but their combination boosts the chances of successful machine analysis of human-written texts.

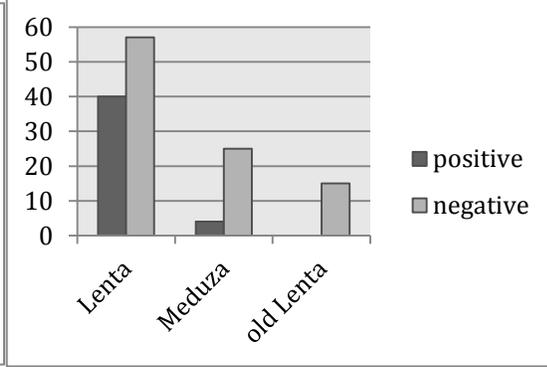
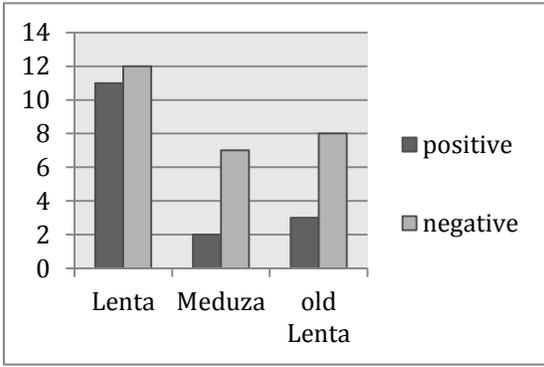
Both tools evaluate multiple keywords in a text on tonality (positive/negative). Of the five topics, for two — "opposition" and "authorities" – batches of keywords were used, comprising all relevant subjects, i.e. leading personalities and agencies (parties, authority bodies such as parliamentary chambers, governors, etc). Brand Analytics also estimates tonality strength, which is graded on points, usually between 0 and 1 (though a few articles ranked up to 3 points). In this study, articles with less than .1-point difference between its positive and negative marks were ranked "neutral." Neutral articles were far less than positive/negative ones in Brand Analytics' evaluation and far more in the case of Medialogia, which utilizes a different story database (see next graph).

For Brand Analytics, the articles required the tedious process of running them through the web form one by one. Medialogia has its own database of publications, which can be machine-searched on differing parameters, including timeframe and type of article (news report, op-ed, etc.). Medialogia's type-of-article classification has differences from hand-made one used elsewhere in this paper – the tool adds search results from secondary mentions of keywords in an article of unrelated topic (e.g. a brief mention of Putin in a story on fishing in Russia).

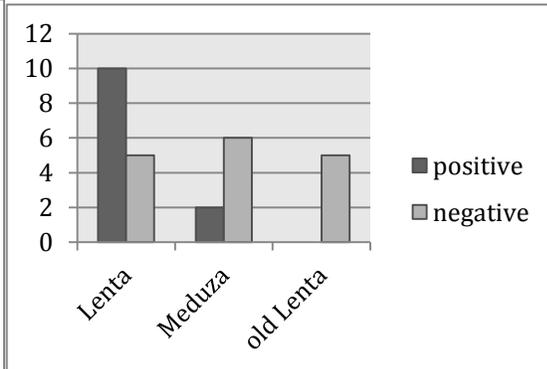
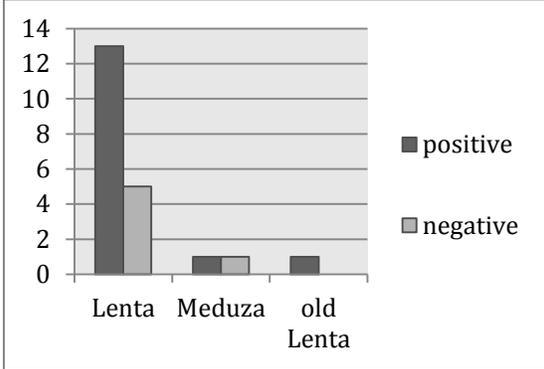
The Medialogia results were used "as is"; in case of Brand Analytics, manual adjustment of results was required, because the tool struggles with certain types of content, particularly reports on economic crimes; sarcasm (Medialogia also tags sarcastic articles manually); or strong emotional undertones (e.g. articles on terrorism are ranked "negative" regardless of topic). This required adjustments in three cases: reporting on the Boston bombings of 2013; on the opposition trials that same year; and on officials' income declarations, disclosed annually in Russia. The first two were given a negative slant by the articles' general context (terrorism and criminal charges, respectively); the last one has critical undertones in Russia due to rampant corruption, but is usually presented in media "as is" without any commentary. All three cases were rated "neutral" coverage in this study. Also, interviews with officials and opposition figures were evaluated based on the speaker, bypassing machine analysis – e.g. if the speaker was a US diplomat, it was rated "positive" coverage of the U.S., an interview with an anti-Kiev figure rated as "negative" coverage of Ukraine, etc.

With these provisions, the results are as follows. Brand Analytics' results are on the left, Medialogia on the right. Columns give the number of articles.

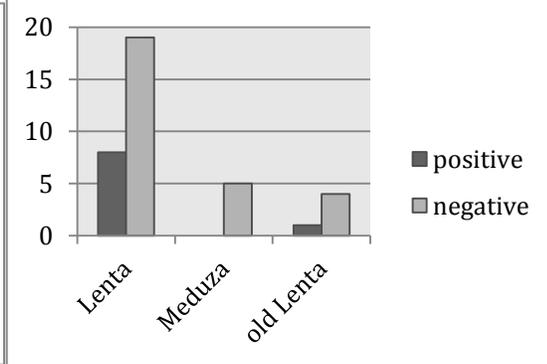
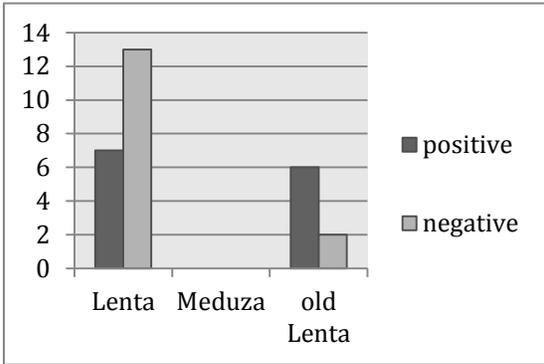
Authorities:



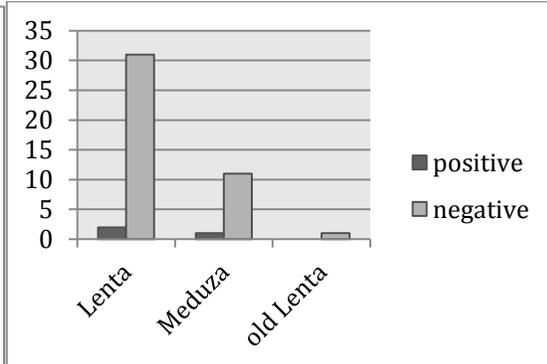
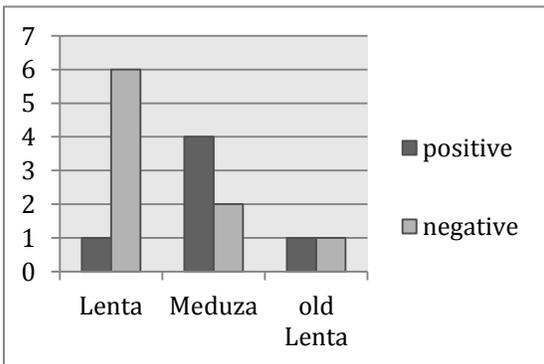
**Putin:**



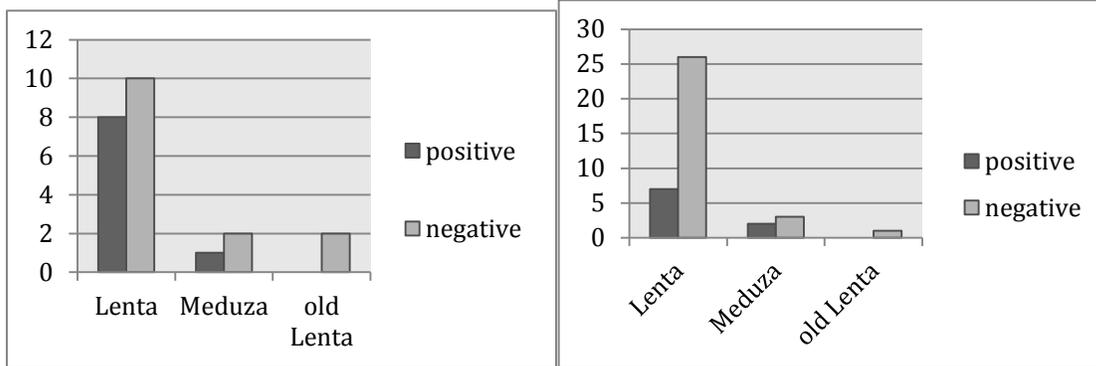
**Opposition:**



**Ukraine:**



United States:



The figures dovetail with the findings of keyword and subject analysis. The new Lenta is much more sympathetic towards Putin and critical of the opposition and Ukraine than it ever was in its past life. Neither Meduza nor the old Lenta did care much about Putin, but both were appreciative of his opponents – domestic in the case of the old Lenta, and Ukraine in the case of Meduza (domestic opposition fizzled out in Russia by 2015).

Interestingly, the new Lenta, while eschewing its predecessor’s and rival’s critical slants, still offers an overall balanced coverage on domestic authorities beyond Putin, i.e. it is allowed a degree of freedom. “Criticizing the courtiers but not the tsar” is a generally popular approach in Russian media and society, dating back at least to the Soviet times. Finally, the US-bashing rampage of Russian state media is curtailed in Lenta – it is far more obsessed with America than it was before (aside from the Boston bombings), but offers balanced coverage, not demonization of the evil Yankee that is still, after all these years, favored by the Russian TV.

## 5. Conclusions

The brief summary is that there has indeed been a “proxy war” on the “second-tier,” editorially independent Russian media, following the anti-Putin protests of 2011-2013. The focus is on the most popular websites, though newspapers, magazines, radio and TV are also affected, as are a handful of less popular websites still capable of making a splash.

Weapons of choice are editorial takeover and “moral outrage,” e.g. pressure/persecution by authorities on ethical pretexts. The former usually affects media outlets owned by oligarchs, who, by and large loyal to the government, have the capability to sack an unwanted editor-in-chief. The latter affects media with more independent ownership or state-run but with apparat clout.

Other methods of crackdown – economic pressure, cyberattacks and direct violence – are not widely used. The deciding factor appears to be reputational costs/benefits: while the three unpopular methods would paint the Kremlin as a “predator of the press,” editorial takeovers can be said to be politically neutral, and ethical attacks give the authorities the moral high ground, in line with the Putin government’s general propaganda line of posing as defender of traditional modals. Another method, counter-propaganda, was attempted online, but failed to silence the critical voices due to the way Russians consume information – because of a deep ideological divide in society (pro/anti-Putin), audiences tend to only read websites that confirm their ideologies and ignore the alternative narrative.

The pressure is usually applied not by the Kremlin itself, but through proxies: oligarchs, lower-tier bureaucrats (prosecutors, state media watchdog Roskomnadzor), pro-government lawmakers, or industry groups (cable broadcaster associations). It is impossible to prove unequivocally whether they act on the orders from the top or show initiative following the general Kremlin line. But in any case, their actions benefit the Kremlin, exerting pressure on the independent media.

A case study has shown that, despite claims that the crackdown is not political, it affects the editorial line on political issues. The affected website – in our case, Lenta.ru – greatly increased positive coverage of Putin, lambasted Ukraine (Russia’s geopolitical opponent) and abandoned previously extensive coverage of rights abuse and state censorship, drifting close to the propagandist agenda of the state television. However, it retained a degree of freedom in covering authorities beyond Putin (who can still be criticized) and the United States (which are criticized but not vilified).

For future studies, one area of exploration would be a broader examination of coverage in the affected media outlets; this would require access to and familiarity with content analysis tools such as SPSS Statistics. Another topic is the remaining independent media landscape – new outlets emerging amid pressure and existing ones’ coping strategies. Finally, an area of great interest is

regional Russian media, whose impact on domestic politics is widely and undeservingly underestimated. Tellingly, the Kremlin has been making moves since 2014 to lessen the governors' hold on the local media and make them more dependent on the federal authorities, mainly through state subsidies.

Beyond academia, there seems to be a need for updated media policy recommendations, and possibly new international legislation. The Russian crackdown on free press has not escaped international watchdogs such as Reporters Without Borders, but they are helpless to prevent it from happening. As authoritarian regimes across the world grow more inventive in silencing free press – indeed, Russia's recent successes in the area may inspire other autocrats – it is vital that the international community come up with measures to clearly recognize and discourage (possibly through sanctions) such moves as a threat to democracy and public freedoms in ways that are more subversive, but no less dangerous, than old-school political purges - or war.

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