

Why and how
vladimir putin is trying
to regain control over
russia media essay
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“ Without truly free media Russian democracy will not survive and we will not succeed in building a civil society” (Sakwa, Richard) these were the words of Vladimir Putin in the summer of 2000 soon after he replaced Boris Yeltsin as the president of Russia. The media breathed a sigh of relief because all indications were that Putin would support free media to nurture and grow democracy in Russia.

In a democratic setup, freedom of the press is enshrined in the constitution which guarantees “ the public speech often through a state constitution for its citizens and associations of individual extended to members of news gathering organizations and their published reporting” (<http://en-wikipedia.org/wiki/freedom-of-the-press>). However, in Russia the media claim to be independent but “ respect the elected politicians” which can be referred to mean that they cannot criticize openly the ruling class.

During the reign of Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980's, before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, he favored freedom of speech. During Boris Yeltsin's era, the media was privatized and now was run by powerful Oligarchs who “ proceeded to use media as a weapon in their struggle against each other and to influence the policies of the state” (Sakwa, Richard). The greatest challenge then for the Russian media was the fact that the law for the on media was based on European Media laws and did not necessarily reflect the emerging events in Russia. (Russian Development Portal, (24 June 2005)

To understand or comprehend the situation that the Russian people were facing, it is important to understand the views in regards to the executive

decisions that affected them during the era of Boris Yeltsin. They had a tremendous dislike for the newly formed concepts of market economy's and democracy, which they regarded as imposition from the west. They felt that Boris Yeltsin had bungled up by giving-in to the foreign and align concepts. Under Boris Yeltsin Russia sunk into the Chechen war, between 1994 and 1996 Russia was humiliated in this war demoralizing the entire nation that was once a super power.(Human Rights Watch. (February 1995))

Besides, the living standards had taken a nose dive and the general populace had lost all faith in the regime of Boris Yeltsin. Therefore in 2000 when Putin took over power, people's hopes were raised. Putin was "fairly young, healthy, forceful, charismatic are very intelligent man" with a clear understanding of both local and foreign affairs and experience gained while in the K. G. B. (Lipman, M. and M. McFaul, (2001) the people had faith in the young man, despite warnings from the media and some lawmakers. The general populace did not mind a powerful executive, because they were used to the rule of powerful monarchs with immense power, in fact western Democracy was an align concept here. (Timothy J. Colton, Michael MacFaul (2003)

Therefore, after Putin ascended to power, in 2000, the media role in the country took a new turn from being "relatively free during Yeltsin".

(<http://www.carnegieru/en/point/67662>: print. htm)

Under Yeltsin the level of corruption had escalated "organized crime began to morph through into a semi-legitimate institution."

([www. pinr. com/report. php? ac= view_report+report](http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report+report))

The oligarchs, made up of several wealthy and powerful individuals in Russia, had an upper hand in the destiny of the economy. The Russian people on the other hand had lost so much faith in the government and their confidence in it was at extremely low points. (BBC, September 8, 1999)

Background

Upon ascending to power in 2000, Putin who is the Russian President undertook a spirited campaign to increase state ownership of the media and censor the materials that were available in the mass, print and electronic media. The major reason why Putin took these otherwise drastic measures was towards ensuring that he consolidates power. He used several methods to suppress or contain the freedom that the media enjoyed. He resorted to using the state machinery and policies to accomplish this.

Today Russia Media fraternity is awash with lack of objective reporting which goes towards increasing Putin's popularity rating. (Timothy J. Colton, Michael MacFaul (2003).

The media has continued to play a major role in shaping the political landscape of Russia. In certain situations the public were duped about issues and made to believe falsehoods that wanted to portray the government in good light. A good example is the Chechnya war where the Russian media has continued to demonize and vilify the Chechens yet ignoring or downplaying the sufferings that the war is bringing to the general public within the affected area. The media chose to downplay the destruction of

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villages and towns leading to refugee crisis and the brutality meted out to the Chechens by the Russian troops. (Gordon, Michael R., (2000)

Putin realized that to remain in power, any form of opposition had to either be contained or neutralized all together. Putin realized the role a powerful media played in the affairs of Russia. The media had the capacity to make or break a president. Boris Yeltsin his predecessor knew this too well because through the support of the media he was elected president in 1996. The media did not spare him but criticized him during his reign especially in the botched first Chechnya war.(Human Rights Watch. (May 1995)

During the 1996 Russian campaign many voters were swayed after watching footages of Boris Yeltsin dancing with a dancer in one of the youth rallies. The footage alone bolstered Yeltsin's chance of being reelected president. The footage wished to convey the message of " a dynamic, youthful reformer". The media did not tell the truth as Yeltsin was at the verge of another massive heart attack. (McNair, B. (2000)

Putin's image was also boosted by the media in March 26 election being depicted as a " Russian artillery blasting Grozny to rubble". (McNair, B. (2000)

However, one cannot clearly understand under what circumstances this was happening especially in the modern day and time. It is important first to understand the background before casting any aspersions.

Media background and restructure in Russia

Putin did not lay the ground work for the censoring of the media; this was done by his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin's government laid the framework within which the media could be silenced. It is worth noting that Yeltsin himself was not quite keen in trying to silence the media. However through the legislation that he helped set up, any future President could utilize it to control the media. Putin did exactly this.

On 8th May 1998, Boris Yeltsin issued a decree that saw the all local and government facilities which included transmitters brought under the jurisdiction of RTR. This meant that as it deemed fit, RTR could institute measures to control the media. This also meant that the commercial T. V. was now dependent on the RTR for any technological support. Thus the RTR could be an effective tool to control and manipulate all the stations in Russia. (Gunther. R. & Muga. , 2000)

Moves to Consolidate Power

When Putin took over power, he faced various challenges at the home front that threatened the very existence of his régime. Several challenges faced him:

1. i) Sinking of the Kursk

On 12th August 2000 the submarine disaster caught the world's headlines. Kursk the Russian submarine which was nuclear powered sunk in the Barents Sea, in an exercise that was supposed to be a show of might by Russia.()

While this was happening Putin was out on a holiday in a Black Sea Resort of Socchi. The media highlighted the disaster pointing finger at Putin and his

lethargic military chiefs. On 22nd August after meeting, the families of the dead crew, Putin attacked the media especially the magnates for trying to make political mileage of the disaster on T. V. (Lipman, M. and M. McFaul, (2001). He declared 23rd August 2002, a national day of mourning in the entire country. The navy was portrayed by the media as inept in the whole rescue mission.

Some media houses went further to even secure the list of the dead sailors although these were classified military material. Komsomolskaya Pravda managed to get the list by bribing a naval officer with 18, 000 rubbles. (<http://keesings.gvpi.net> , 26 May 2004)

Putin put measures to make sure that the media was kept away from the scene of the accident. Only RTR under Oleg Dobrodeev was allowed close to the scene. Anything that would have been damaging politically for Putin was cancelled.()

Though initially the state had fumbled managing the crisis, it eventually did manage to contain the whole situation including ensuring only Kremlin friendly stations were allowed access to the site.

Dubrovka Theatre Siege

On 23rd October 2002, about 800 people attending a stage show at the Dubrovka Theatre were held hostage by about 50 Chechen terrorists or rebels of whom many were women. The rebels threatened to blow up the whole place if their political demands of bringing an end to the Chechnya War were not fulfilled. The media took centre stage and went further ahead

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and ventured in the theatre to interview the hostage - takers.(Speckhard, Anne & Akhmedova, Khapta (2005). Russian laws don't allow this, within no time the government got the opportunity to censor the information the public was accessing and started taking control of the flow of information in the mass media.

The NTV investigated and reported 129 hostages died of nerve gas poisoning. This happened after the Russian army was called in to rescue the hostages in an operation that lasted about 57 hours. Another reason for the high number of deaths was also because of lack of adequate and efficient medical attention for the victims after the gas poisoning. This report was supported by Boris Nemstov of Union of Rightist Forces (SPS) who had carried a similar investigation. The Russian security forces had bungled the whole rescue operation that led to the death of innocent Russians.

NTV's revelations did not go down well with Putin who termed the investigation as " business in blood" and went ahead to declare the report by NTV as a piece of work geared towards seeking cheap sensationalism from the public. After this controversy the head of NTV was replaced by the Kremlin. (White, S., McAllister, I. And S. Oates (2002)

Having this in mind Putin, saw the need for the " media to be subservient to the government". Thus he sought ways of making the media to be a part of the government. In the new doctrine of the Information Security of the Russian federation of 2000, Putin spelled out the importance of the media as an asset for national security.

The government came up with various methods that enabled it contain and control the influence the media wielded.(Zassoursky, I. (2004)

Methods of gagging the media

i). Forceful acquisition and intimidation

This was first method that Putin chose to utilize to ensure that the government had full control of the media. (Nemtsov, B. (1999))

After Putin took the reigns of power he moved with speed against the two oligarchs who had the control of the major electronic and print media in Russia. The two powerful and wealthy businessmen were Vladimir Gusinsky who owned NTV a major private television-station with some publishing interests. The other was Boris Berezosky who controlled the state television channel ORT including newspapers which had great influence.

The two media houses were dramatically and forcefully taken over by the government and the owners (the media barons) forced to flee Russia. The government took over these companies under the pretext that the companies were performing poorly at the economic front and that they were highly indebted to the state. Currently the state controls all media in Russia and any criticism of the government or the executive is very rare indeed. (White, S., McAllister, I. And S. Oates (2002),

Besides the media, Putin ensured that the biggest industrial earner in Russia was under government's control. To do this he made a spirited campaign to acquire Yukos one of the biggest oil companies in Russia. Mikhail

Khodorkovsky who was the head of Yukos was jailed under the guise of the <https://assignbuster.com/why-and-how-vladimir-putin-is-trying-to-regain-control-over-russia-media-essay-sample/>

indebt ness of Yukos to the government. Khodorkovsky prior to this arrest had begun financing political forces against Putin using the finances from Yukos, he had to be silenced and contained.

The government of Russia today controls virtually every aspect of the energy and media sections. Such control goes towards consolidating power and suppressing any form of dissent that any powerful individual or movement would want to express against the government.

ii). Policing the Web

In Russia, all internet service providers are required to link their computers to the FSB (formerly the KGB). Seven more law enforcement bodies have been mandated by the government to monitor the World Wide Web and in particular screen emails and monitor the electronic traffic. “ This is by definition, a violation of the fundamental and constitutional rights of the citizen” (Yuri Udovin, deputy chairman of the St. Petersburg-based group citizens’ watch. The media have been silent on such violations

iii) Appointment of friendly personalities in key positions

Another common tactic the government started to put in to use by mid 2002 was appointing individuals friendly to Kremlin into pivotal posts within the state media.

Prominent personalities appointed in this manner include

-Marat Gelam an influential member of Moscow's artistic Community was appointed as Deputy General Director in charge of political analysis and public relations for the ORT. (The Moscow Times, 2002)

-General Kobaldze of the Foreign Intelligence Service was appointed the deputy General Director of ITAR-TASS.

-FSB Lt. General Alexander Zdnovich was appointed as the Deputy Chair of All- Russian Television and Radio Company (VGTRK) responsible for the security (Yakov, V. 2002).

- General Vladimir Kozolov was appointed Deputy Media Minister; prior to this he was one of the leaders of FSB Anti-Terrorist Center.

- General Aksionov from the Interior Ministry was appointed as the Head of TV-7.

iv). Legislation and Investment barriers

There are various world radio stations that operate in Russia. These include Radio free Europe (of the US government media grouping) and BBC which has not had any incidences of crossing swords with the Russian authority. However the Russian government has continuously put up barriers to curtail any form of overseas investments especially in the media. This year the government passed laws that go towards prohibiting majority foreign ownership in the countries television media. (McNair, B. (1994)

This legislation saw CNN's Ted Turner attempt to invest in Russian media run into legislature bottleneck.(Emma Gray(2005)

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After the enactment of this law, the government took control of the media a notch higher, it refused to negotiate with the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (the biggest foreign investor in Russia) to repair the Ostankino Television Towers. The idea was to enable all broadcasters could use at uniform prices. The government refused so that it could use its own pricing mechanism as a tool to censor messages that ran contrary to its ideologies.

v). Economic Methods

Kremlin also uses other forms of economic techniques to gag the media.

In January 2002 Putin assented to a new law that saw the transfer of the control of government subsidies that benefit the regional newspapers. In the new law the responsibility was transferred to the Press Ministry from the local politicians. (Androunas, E. (1993)

The move generally affected about 2000 newspapers that enjoy the subsidies in the country. This is a mechanism that is put in place to ensure that the central government is able to reign in on 'rebel' presses. Most medias (electronic and press) especially in the rural areas of Russia depend solely on the local administrators to finance some of their operations.

Another economic method that the Russian Government uses is persecution for tax arrears colluding with banks to recall overdue loans, or bureaucratic red tape to acquire operating permits.

Conclusion

In Russia, the public fully embraces the policies their president Vladimir Putin has continued to introduce. He is viewed as the strong man that the country has been yearning for because Russia once more is having a say in major world issues a clout that it had lost over the years because of not so popular presidents.

The general citizenry has continued supporting the control of the media, which they view as an extension of the democracy the west have continued to subscribe for Russia. Democracy has no place in Russia.

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