

Russia's Return to State-Controlled Media

The post-Soviet era was filled with immense change for the newly-independent Russia—the country had begun to open itself to the world as many of its former institutions underwent great liberalization and democratization. Yet in many regards this change did not stick and the country reverted back to some of the same controls it had in place under Soviet rule. Few industries experienced this whiplash-like change more than the Russian media. Many readings and news articles point to several key events that served as catalysts for the reversion to state-control, but further research and firsthand accounts paint a different picture of the changes the media underwent in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This dichotomy between the causes of a return to state-control indicate a distinct separation of perspectives: an American-Western perspective, and a Russian perspective.

In order to understand both perspectives one must first look at and make sense of the history preceding the return to state-controlled media. The Soviet Union officially collapsed in 1991 and Boris Yeltsin became the first president of Russia. Yeltsin had become a fierce anti-communist in the final days of the Soviet Union and the press helped him spread this message to the public. In doing so, he essentially became a proponent of an independent media as they had done so much to prevent a communist resurgence. The government under Yeltsin passed progressive laws regarding the media and the industry underwent large-scale liberalization. Many new outlets and networks appeared, with control of them—including the state-owned outlets—lying in the hands of private actors. In all, the first half of the 1990s saw great freedom of the press and media.

It was after Yeltsin's reelection in 1996 that the media industry began to change again, and with it, the American-Western and Russian perspectives of the causes and reasons for a reversion to state-control. As previously mentioned, the press and media industry following the collapse of the Soviet Union were widely-regarded as free and independent of the state by Western standards. The industry was growing both professionally and commercially as more and more outlets opened and journalists and organizations began to adopt democratic principles of operation, such as independence, objectivity and accuracy. Although incredibly powerful people led many of the most prominent outlets according to their own agendas, "at least it ensured pluralism and independence from the state" (Lipman, McFaul).

The late 1990s began to bring about media changes that alarmed some watchers in the West. Yeltsin's government had created an agency meant to monitor and regulate the media industry while state broadcasters were consolidated and regional television networks were subordinated to the All-Russian State Radio and Television Company. These national and regional networks proved very important in the political campaigns of 1999-2000. From an American-Western perspective, these changes showcased the Russian government's intentions to play a larger role and exert control in the media industry.

Ultimately, this history builds the foundation of the American-Western perspective of the events that caused the reversion to state-control. Firstly, the rise of Vladimir Putin to the presidency – a man widely-regarded by the West as ambitious and autocratic. Secondly, the tragic sinking of the Russian Navy's crowning achievement, the *Kursk* submarine, and the media backlash that followed the accident.

The final cause of the reversion to state-control according to the Western school of thought is the various terrorist attacks that plagued the nation during the early 2000s, drawing criticism from the media and the public for the government's botched rescue efforts.

Vladimir Putin rose to the presidency through a very elaborate process created by The Family. It involved the heavy use of state-owned media to promote then-candidate Putin, who had a very interesting, albeit concerning, take on the purpose and power of the media. In the documentary *How Putin Came to Power*, Sergei Dorenko, a popular journalist on the state-owned network ORT, recalled a statement Putin once made to him regarding the media. Dorenko claims Putin said that "Reality is what we show them. That's all they know or need to know. If you don't show it, it doesn't exist." This statement perfectly captures the role of the media, at least in Putin's mind – it is a source of power for whoever controls it. Thus, when he was officially elected to the presidency in March of 2000, one of his main objectives was to centralize power in the presidency, which involved bringing the media and press under his control. Referring to the 1990s, he said, "At some point many people decided that the president was no longer the center of power. I'll make sure that no one ever has such illusions anymore," (Lipman, McFaul).

The second event causing a return to state-controlled media, according to American-Western outlets, was the sinking of the *Kursk*. *Kursk* was generally considered the pride of the Russian Navy, which in years prior had seen its standing and reputation fall within the world order. Then, on August 12, 2000, the submarine sank in the Barents Sea, killing all 118 service members onboard. Although the true cause of the accident remains unknown and disputed, the Russian media did their best to investigate the tragedy and hold responsible parties accountable. Many Russian officials refused to acknowledge the severity of the event and offered false or misleading statements to the families of victims as well as the public. Yet reporters disproved their accounts and demanded answers. The backlash faced by the government at the hands of the media infuriated the Kremlin, and as Russian lawyer Boris Kuznetsov sees it, the tragedy marked a turning point for modern Russia, saying, "When the *Kursk* sank, the government began interfering with the legal and law-enforcement systems. The government began gathering all the mass media under its control. The entire process of undermining democracy in Russia, in many regards, began with this," (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty).

The last event serving as a cause for the reversion to state-controlled media was the various terrorist attacks that occurred in the country in the early 2000s. First, in 2002, terrorists seized a Moscow theater and held hundreds of people hostage. Then, in 2004, another group of terrorists attached a school in southern Russia, holding as many as 1100 people hostage, most of whom were children. Media coverage of these two events, while less investigative than the response to the *Kursk*, drew attention to the mishandlings of the government's rescue operations. In the case of the theater, many of the victims were hostages who died as a result of the poisonous gas used by the rescuers. The 2004 terrorist attack, in which 334 hostages were killed, also left the public with doubts regarding the government's competency towards security. As the media highlighted these issues, "the Kremlin, and Putin personally, started to feel that the free media in general and incoherent opinions in Russia were damaging both Russia's international reputation and clearly complicating the electoral process for both presidential elections and for the Duma," said Vasily Gatov, a Russian media researcher (Public Diplomacy Magazine).

As opposed to the American-Western perspective in which specific events caused the reversion to state-control, the Russian perspective offers a very different explanation as to why the state reclaimed the media. According to the Russian perspective, the events often cited by American-Western sources represent only a very surface-level approach to explaining why media changed, and in fact, the true cause lies much deeper.

Two individuals who witnessed and experienced Russia during this very turbulent time—Irina Anatolyevna and Holly Nielsen—offered their own impressions of the causes for the reversion to state-controlled media. One cause that both agreed on was the extreme power and influence of the oligarchy. Another potential cause, according to the Russian perspective, was the humiliation and diminished reputation of the country after the chaos and hardships of the 1990s. A final cause for the reversion to state-control asserts that it was simply a product of survival as the country tried to stabilize itself and recover.

The reach and influence of the Russian oligarchy often went overlooked or downplayed in American-Western publications—the sole focus was simply whether the state had a hand in media or not, rather than determining who exactly controlled the media and what they decided to broadcast. According to Holly Nielsen, an American lawyer who lived and worked in Russia during the 1990s and 2000s, the oligarchs essentially ran the government and had as much influence and power as Yeltsin himself during a stretch of the 1990s. The media landscape was quickly bought up and controlled by these oligarchs, and although they were technically independent of the state—which appeased Western morals—the press, especially major TV broadcasters, were far from free, rather, they simply promoted the agendas and propaganda of the oligarchs. Irina Anatolyevna echoed this sentiment, explaining that the oligarchy's interests did not align with the interests of the country, and in the end, the oligarchs were only focused on fulfilling their own needs and interests. Ultimately, Yeltsin's government was unable to control the oligarchs, and when Putin came to power in 1999, he quickly asserted himself as a force against the oligarchy.

The 1990s and 2000s were full of hardships for the Russian government and its citizens. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economy was in shambles and the country struggled financially. When other events occurred, such as failures of the military or government, the media highlighted these issues and drew negative attention to the country, further diminishing its reputation both domestically and internationally. For the former world superpower, losing its status as a great global power dramatically impacted the country's governance. In order to regain some control of the narrative surrounding the country and its dealings, the government sought more power and oversight of the media, allowing it to have a greater say in how the country was perceived within its borders and beyond.

As previously mentioned, this particular time period was marked with difficulties and hardships for Russia. The 1990s had been truly chaotic in the country as economic conditions deteriorated and citizens' quality of life worsened. Thus, when Putin emerged as leader in 1999, he centralized power in the presidency in order to stabilize the country and manage its operations and governance—this included taking back some control of the media. These three reasons—the power of the oligarchy, the country's tarnished reputation, and the struggle to survive—serve as the foundation for explaining why the press was brought back under the control of the state, according to the Russian perspective.

After considering both perspectives and the specifics of each, one can draw several overarching conclusions regarding the media landscape and its many changes during the 1990s and 2000s. First,

contrary to many American and Western sources descriptions of Russia's media as completely controlled by the state, many publications in print, radio and the internet still maintain independence from the Kremlin. TV is largely controlled by the state, but a significant number of the country's other sources of media enjoy a relatively high degree of independence. Secondly, attributing the changes in media to several events, as commonly done in the West, is a very superficial approach to explaining why and how the state sought to regain control. While the events may be regarded as catalysts, it is actually the issues at the root of those events—the oligarchy, the country's reputation, and its need to survive—that actually caused the reversion to state-control. Lastly, Russia continues to recover and grow following this turbulent and difficult period in its history. According to Holly Nielsen's prediction, Russia will change again in the long-run. As the nation continues to become more prosperous, citizens may start to demand greater accountability and civil institutions, and the Russian media will undergo liberalization again.

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