The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why All Autocracies Need State-Run Media

By Robert Orttung

February 05, 2014



The unprecedented price tag of the Sochi Winter Olympics — an estimated $51 billion — far outstrips that of any past Winter Games. The Sochi Games' bloated costs are widely understood to be a result of massive graft that is ending up in the hands of a small Kremlin-connected circle.

This sort of high-profile corruption should receive serious journalistic scrutiny, but in Putin's Russia state-run media avoid coverage of how these enormous resources have vanished. For most of the Russian public, this issue and others, such as the Kremlin's recent $15 billion aid package to Ukraine taken out of the National Reserve Fund, are not a subject of discussion because they do not receive critical attention in the mass media.

Despite the Internet,
the Kremlin is finding new
ways to use its media to stay

in power.

The state-run media treatment of the Sochi Games' huge levels of corruption speaks to the ongoing ability of the authorities to adapt their media tactics and prevent independent news and analysis from reaching much of the population.

Despite the rise of new media outlets that are generally far more diverse and competitive than they used to be, authoritarian regimes are finding alarmingly effective ways to use media to help themselves stay in power. Media outlets controlled formally or informally by the state have become necessary to the durability of undemocratic governments around the world like Russia. The messages that such media pump out — and the public apathy that they promote — help to keep regime elites from defecting and prevent alternative power centers from rising within society.

The media outlets in question may be owned and run by the state, or they may be nominally private but, in reality, under government control. Most authoritarian regimes employ both their own state media and private media to do their bidding.

Russia's state-media system includes not only television but also newspapers, radio and new media equipped with rapid technological and communications advances. State television, from which about 70 percent of the population gets its information, is the main instrument for delivering a consistent flow of regime-friendly reporting. The main national television news stations routinely tout the achievements of the regime, in particular President Vladimir Putin, portraying him as outperforming his western counterparts and doing everything possible to promote the stable development of Russia.

State-controlled media does not exist solely to praise the powers that be, however. A vital companion function is to discredit alternatives to the authoritarian status quo before these can gain traction with citizens at large. In this way, state-run media is a tool for marginalizing any potential political opposition or civic movement. Without meaningful access to the airwaves, opposition groups find it hard to reach potential supporters or become significant voices in the public discussion.

In democracies, open media helps foster a robust civil society and political opposition. In authoritarian regimes, state-controlled media seek to isolate civil society organizations from mainstream society, with the idea of preventing any political coordination between the former and the latter. To this end, state-run media tries to discredit in the public's mind any notion of a political alternative to the existing regime. Media attacks delegitimize civil society and the opposition, paving the way for other repressive measures aimed at them. An authoritarian regime that wants to convict a civil society leader of trumped-up criminal charges will often make him the subject of unfavorable media coverage.

Russia's state-run media typically accuse opposition activists of wanting to cause chaos, a charge that may resonate widely and deeply in a society with a history of political instability. Opposition spokespersons, as a rule, never receive direct access to state-run media's jealously guarded audience. Critics of the regime may be painted as witting or unwitting tools of the West, a popular ploy in countries as diverse as China, Zimbabwe, Azerbaijan, as well as Russia. International broadcasters such as the BBC and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty face

enormous obstacles from the Russian authorities to disseminate their reporting, thereby preventing an important source of independent news and information from reaching domestic audiences. The current attack on Dozhd is just the latest blow to independent news outlets in the country.

To be sure, new media outlets are challenging the authorities' dominance of the Russian information space. In the Sochi case, opposition activist Alexei Navalny has created an innovative, interactive online website that tries to shine a light on information that the Russian authorities work so hard to keep in the dark. This effort, along with other ways of leveraging new technology, offers some hope.

But it is a decidedly uphill struggle. As Internet use and penetration increases in Russia, the authorities are working harder than ever to find ways of impeding the circulation of credible political information through cyberspace. The 2012 law allowing the government to shut down sites with inappropriate content and the state decree that will allow the Federal Security Service to monitor all Internet traffic, IP addresses, telephone numbers and usernames, mark a clear step backward in terms of Internet freedom.

In Russia, things may get worse before they get better for media freedom. As the economy and the regime's legitimacy come under increasing pressure, the Kremlin will undoubtedly feel compelled to stamp out politically relevant news and information even more.

Robert Orttung is assistant director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University's Elliott School for International Affairs. Christopher Walker is executive director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy. This article is adapted from a longer article published in the January 2014 issue of the "Journal of Democracy."

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/02/05/why-all-autocracies-need-state-run-media-a31767