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Amid Ukraine Crisis, Russia Puts the Squeeze on Independent Media

By Oleg Sukhov

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Journalists from independent news website Lenta.ru, which saw its long-time editor-in-chief dismissed this week, posing for a photograph after many decided to quit in protest.

Fears of all-encompassing censorship were rife in Russia on Friday after several major opposition-leaning news sites and the blog of anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny were blocked by the federal media watchdog.

The moves followed the appointment earlier in the week of a pro-Kremlin editor-in-chief at Lenta.ru, a popular independent news site, after a government warning over supposed extremist materials linked to on the website. And they come after major cable providers dropped Russia's leading independent television channel, Dozhd, while changes have been made in the editorial policy of other media outlets — actions that some observers say were orchestrated by the Kremlin.

Analysts said that the authorities were stamping out the last remaining independent media

due to fears of developments similar to the Ukrainian revolution and a lack of economic incentives for boosting support of the government. Some also argued that the crackdown was aimed at preventing critical coverage of the Kremlin's involvement in Crimea, which is set to hold a referendum on joining Russia on Sunday.

Concerns over pressure on media outlets intensified after the Federal Service for Mass Communications and IT Oversight said late Thursday that access to news websites Grani.ru, Kasparov.ru and Ej.ru had been restricted due to "calls for participation in unauthorized rallies" contained in site materials. All three websites often feature articles that are critical of the authorities.

Navalny's LiveJournal blog was also blocked late on Thursday, with the media regulator arguing that it was being written in violation of the conditions of the politician's house arrest, according to which he is not allowed to use the Internet. The opposition leader has argued that he did not violate the rules because he had been writing messages on paper that were subsequently posted online by employees of his Anti-Corruption Fund.

Access to the site of Ekho Moskvy, Russia's main liberal-leaning radio station, was also restricted Thursday because it contained a link to Navalny's blog. The site was unblocked on Friday when the link was removed.

All the sites were blocked under a law signed in December that allows the authorities to restrict access to Web pages without court authorization.

The regulator's actions were interpreted by analysts as part of a massive crackdown on independent media.

Dmitry Oreshkin, head of the Merkator research group, said by phone that while previously the Kremlin was satisfied with controlling most major media and left minor outlets alone, now it was aiming to destroy even small independent media because it no longer had economic incentives for the population at its disposal.

As the economic situation deteriorates, it becomes difficult to deal with reality but it's easier to manage a "virtual reality" created by state propaganda, he said.

Vladimir Rimsky, a political analyst at the INDEM think tank, attributed the crackdown to Kremlin fears that the Ukrainian revolution could trigger political destabilization in Russia, and to its displeasure with criticism of Russia's involvement in Crimea.

//News Site Upended

Lenta.ru, which has extensively covered the situation in Ukraine and Crimea, has arguably been hit the hardest so far by the crackdown.

On Wednesday, Galina Timchenko was abruptly dismissed as editor-in-chief of the news website after holding the position for a decade and was replaced by Alexei Goreslavsky, the former editor of Kremlin-friendly online publication Vzglyad.ru. The reshuffle came after the federal media watchdog warned the site that it could be shut down for "extremism" because of a hyperlink to materials published by Right Sector, a Ukrainian nationalist group.

"I don't want to think about [the reasons of the dismissal]," Timchenko said by phone, adding, however, that political reasons behind the move were "obvious."

More than 35 Lenta.ru journalists resigned in protest following Timchenko's dismissal. Ilya Azar, one of the site's most prominent correspondents, said by phone that Timchenko's firing demonstrated that she was very important for independent journalism in Russia. Azar argued that Lenta.ru was targeted because of its popularity, with the web site having about 2 million viewers per day, making it among one of the most-visited Russian-language news sites.

Some observers have linked Lenta.ru's problems to the fact that last year its owner, Afisha-Rambler, merged with SUP Media, a group controlled by Kremlin-friendly tycoon Alexander Mamut. Gazeta.ru, another news site controlled by Mamut, has also toned down its critical coverage after its editor-in-chief Mikhail Kotov resigned last March.

Azar said that after the merger, Lenta.ru's journalists started speculating that the Kremlin could "take care" of the outlet. Timchenko expressed a different opinion, saying that pressure on the news outlet had "continued non-stop" but was not connected with the ownership change.

Azar also said that the current crackdown on Lenta.ru was linked to its independent coverage of Russia's takeover of Crimea.

"Now independent journalists are believed to be enemies, 'the fifth column'," he said.

The situation around Lenta.ru has been compared by some observers to difficulties being experienced by Ekho Moskvy radio.

Last month, Yekaterina Pavlova, a former deputy head of the pro-Kremlin Voice of Russia radio station, was appointed chief executive of Ekho Moskvy in what some analysts saw as a move to eliminate its critical coverage of the authorities.

Ekho Moskvy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov told the Colta.ru news site earlier this month that the chief executive could exert pressure on the station by using financial tools, for instance by cutting its budget.

He also said that former Press and Mass Communications Minister Mikhail Lesin, who became head of state-affiliated Gazprom Media, which is part owner of the radio station, last year, had started expressing "hostility" toward him.

Venediktov's position had been seen as precarious by some, but on Friday he was confirmed as editor-in-chief by the board of directors in an annual procedure.

//Far-Reaching Measures

Dozhd television, the country's most prominent independent channel, has also found itself in dire straits in recent months.

All major cable operators dropped Dozhd earlier this year after the channel was lambasted by pro-Kremlin lawmakers for a poll related to World War II. The channel said it would hold talks with cable providers on resuming cooperation but no results have been achieved so far.

Dozhd chief executive Natalya Sindeyeva said last week that the channel would not survive longer than two more months if the situation did not change.

Amid speculation that the crackdown on Lenta.ru., Dozhd and Ekho Moskvy was linked to the crisis in Ukraine, Kommersant Publishing House decided to shut down its publication in the country, Kommersant Ukraina, on Thursday.

Critics have accused the Kremlin of gradually bringing Kommersant Publishing House, which prints one of the country's best-known newspapers and is owned by Kremlin-friendly tycoon Alisher Usmanov, under its control since 2011.

In December 2011, Maxim Kovalsky, editor-in-chief of the Kommersant Vlast magazine, was fired after critical coverage of a parliamentary election and the publication of a picture featuring a ballot with an expletive addressed to President Vladimir Putin written on it. In May 2012, Kommersant CEO Demyan Kudryavtsev also stepped down, while in October 2013 publishing house president Dmitry Sergeyev was replaced by Vladimir Zhelonkin, who had previously managed media outlets for the Orthodox Church and Defense Ministry.

Kommersant FM, the publishing house's radio station, has also been accused of becoming less independent since its editor-in-chief, Alexei Vorobyov, resigned last March.

The transformation of the media industry has not been limited to opposition-leaning outlets.

Argumenty i Fakty, Russia's most popular weekly newspaper, was bought by the Moscow government earlier this month. Though the newspaper had been pro-Kremlin even before the purchase, some observers speculated that the deal would strengthen the government's hold on the outlet.

The editorial policy of another Kremlin-aligned outlet, the state-owned RIA Novosti news agency, is expected to undergo a major change after aggressively pro-Putin television anchor Dmitry Kiselyov became its head in December and announced that it should become an agency with an ideology rather than a neutral one. The outlet has since seen an exodus of employees who do not agree with the new policy.

Observers have said that few independent outlets remain in Russia after the Kremlin's latest moves. These include Novaya Gazeta and The New Times, two publications with strong opposition links that have consistently experienced financial problems and accused the authorities of pressuring them.

Azar, the former Lenta.ru journalist, said that independent news site Slon.ru could be the next target of government pressure, and that RBC, a media conglomerate controlled by tycoon Mikhail Prokhorov, was not safe from the crackdown either.

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