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Waging a Proxy War on Russian Journalism

By Alexey Eremenko

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Much has been said since 2014 about Russia's proxy war in Ukraine, where Russian troops and equipment are often reported and even sometimes captured, but with official Moscow staunchly denying involvement. However, this is not the only proxy war that the Kremlin is — or appears to be — waging; there are other campaigns, some of which are longer and more effective, simply because they are less noticeable.

One particular target is the Russian media. "The links of the goddamn chain" became a short-lived meme in the Russian journalistic community during the opposition protests of 2011-13, used to explain an odd string of reshuffles and closures at a handful of prominent outlets popular with the protesters. But like most memes, it was based on anecdotal evidence and pointed out the dots without connecting them — while the chain was still being forged.

In an article for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford, published last week, I make an attempt to connect the dots on the Russian media market, arguing that there is in fact an ongoing campaign against independent-minded publications in Russia, clearly

benefiting the Kremlin but never traced back to it directly — a hands-off approach that has, indeed, much in common with what critics say about Russian military involvement in Ukraine.

Until recently, the Russian media existed in an odd dual state not surprising, perhaps, for a country with a double-headed eagle for an emblem. On the one hand, President Vladimir Putin kicked off his reign back in 2000 by subduing all major television channels and turning them into publicity vehicles for the Kremlin. But on the other hand, a robust "second tier" of websites, newspapers and magazines thrived in the shadow of the state media giants, offering a wide spectrum of stances and opinions, as well as plenty of criticism — ignored because it was never enough to sway an election.

But then the inevitable happened: The "second-tier" media became an electoral factor during the last election cycle in 2011-12, largely due to explosive growth of the Internet in Russia. During the opposition protests of the time, the biggest since 1993, publications such as Lenta.ru and the respected Kommersant daily gave voice to the concerns of the angry educated urbanites who rallied — unsuccessfully — against Putin's return to the Kremlin and the corrupt, inefficient bureaucracy that he was associated with.

Unsurprisingly, the president was not pleased — and then came the backlash.

My research shows that out of the 10 most popular media outlets that offered a critical or at least independent outlook at the start of the protests, seven have come under attack since 2011 (Lenta.ru, Kommersant, Vedomosti, Dozhd TV, Gazeta.ru, Ekho Moskvy and RIA Novosti). Another six publications with smaller audiences, but well-established reputations, were also hit (Bolshoi Gorod, the Nedelya news program at Ren-TV, Rosbalt.ru, Grani.ru, Ej.ru and Kasparov.ru).

One prominent clampdown tactic was forced editor change (six publications). In all cases, the editorial reshuffles were conducted by the publications' owners — either prominent businessmen, who, as the Khodorkovsky case showed, are utterly dependent on the government's goodwill, or the state, directly or through state media holdings applying pressure to publications striving for impartiality instead of sycophancy (RIA Novosti, Marianna Maximovskaya's Nedelya show at the Gazprom-owned Ren-TV). Little or no explanation was offered in all cases — the reshuffles and closures just happened. If pressed, owners denied political motives.

The second tactic was direct governmental crackdowns (seven publications), which were conducted in an intricate fashion. There was — is — no unified form for state meddling: It can be direct bans, license withdrawal, denial of distribution or ownership change. But what all those cases have in common is the reasoning, which, unlike in the first case, is direct and vocal — all publications in this group were accused of moral transgressions.

This includes extremism, profanity, pro-Western affiliation (Vedomosti) or, most notoriously, crimes against history, as with Dozhd TV, accused of smearing the memory of World War II veterans by asking a question about the Siege of Leningrad that the veterans have themselves been asking for a long time.

State involvement does not equal Kremlin involvement here. Moral allegations are always put

forward by nominally independent lawmakers and activists, or lesser state agencies such as the media watchdog Roskomnadzor. The presidential administration was always able to distance itself from these actors, despite their obvious dependence on the Kremlin.

Also, in no case was political censorship directly mentioned by the perpetrators — but it happened nevertheless. A case study comparing coverage by Lenta.ru, which received a pro-Kremlin editor and staff last year, and Riga-based Meduza, founded by former Lenta journalists, showed that the pro-Kremlin team axed the publication's previously extensive coverage of human rights in Russia, an evergreen and dismal topic (down from 6 to 1 percent of all content after the reshuffle, while at 12 percent at Meduza as of spring 2015) and greatly boosted its focus on Putin, who now enjoys much more positive coverage from Lenta than ever before, according to sentiment analysis of monthlong coverage samples.

Putin is now the second-most popular headline keyword at Lenta.ru, but he did not make the top 10 of keywords at either the old Lenta or Meduza.

Not everyone has been affected so far: Five prominent independent and/or critical-minded outlets dodged large-scale harassment. Key reasons for slipping under the radar appear to be primarily economic coverage (RBC, Forbes Russia), lack of original content (NEWSru.com) or small size coupled with strong reputation (Meduza, Novaya Gazeta), which makes the cost-benefit balance of a crackdown just not worth it.

Also, while authoritarian practice worldwide offers a wide range of tools for press clampdowns, not all of them are used in Russia. Two of the most prominent absentees are economic pressure and direct violence. While no clear-cut explanation exists, it may be argued that the former would have negative economic consequences if applied on a large scale, sending the press market into uproar and scaring off big advertisers, many of them global corporations.

The latter, meanwhile, is just too damaging for the government's reputation — the Kremlin or its affiliates are already blamed for every instance of political violence in Russia regardless of their actual involvement or endorsement thereof.

The Kremlin is also active in counter-propaganda, taking on independent publications with pro-government media outlets, but those either cannot match the opposition rivals on audience (Vz.ru, Odnako.org), or, even if successful like LifeNews and the Izvestia newspaper, fail to reach the opposition audience, which simply ignores them, unless it is to ridicule them on Facebook.

All of this combines into a campaign where the Kremlin is never, or rarely, implicated directly, but emerges as the main beneficiary of a long string of incidents that, miraculously, only happen to its critics. One problem here is that the campaign is still ongoing — Forbes Russia had to change ownership due to new restrictive legislation this month, and RBC boasts a warning from Roskomnadzor and saw a journalist arrested in July on highly dubious charges.

But the Russian "proxy media war" has implications far beyond any domestic publications, however high-quality and popular. A hands-off approach to censorship, where state harassment is outsourced to governmental clients and hangers-on, and disguised as business

disputes or defense of the morals, is a highly efficient suppression tool in an age of what is already dubbed "informational dictatorships." It simply does less reputational damage than, for example, China's notorious head-on banning and bludgeoning.

The Russian proxy war works so well that Putin's colleagues across the world would be fools not to take a page out of his book. That is, unless new steps are made to protect the ever-vulnerable media from the increasingly intricate meddling by leaders who prefer silence to dialogue.

Alexey Eremenko is a Reuters fellow and former correspondent for The Moscow Times.

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