The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Report No Evil

Russia witnessed mass anti-corruption protests on Sunday, but you'd never know it, if you only followed the state media.

By Alexey Kovalev

March 27, 2017



Not something you would've seen this Sunday if you were only watching Russian state TV **AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko**

If you were anywhere near central Moscow this Sunday, you likely witnessed something impressive and significant. All of downtown was on lockdown, with thousands of law enforcement officers in full riot gear. The streets and city squares were packed with people sporadically chanting and being dragged away to police vans.

Tens of thousands of people across Russia, inspired by an investigation into Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's alleged corruption, were protesting across the country. In Moscow alone, a thousand people were arrested.

It was a remarkable day of civic struggle and headline news, but not if you were tuned exclusively to Russia's state-run media.

Many noticed that Russia's nationwide protests on Sunday — rallies that took place in urban centers, like Moscow, and in areas considered Putin's traditional stronghold, like the Dagestani capital Makhachkala — were conspicuously absent from state television and even newswires.

Embed:

> Absolutely nothing of note is happening in central Moscow today, state media report. Move on folks, nothing to see here. pic.twitter.com/NDT3SlJJzq
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) 26 марта 2017 г.

This silence contrasts starkly with how the Russian media reported on even larger demonstrations in late 2011 and 2012, when protests caught the Kremlin off guard and reportedly infuriated Vladimir Putin and his inner circle, who had completely failed to anticipate and preempt the movement.

The coverage of those protests was either neutral and professional, like the work by state news agency RIA Novosti (later disbanded and integrated into the more loyalist Rossiya Segodnya), or slanted and critical of the opposition, like reports on the state-run TV channels.

Say what you will about the coverage back then, but it was there.

The same couldn't be said about Russia's mainstream news outlets this Sunday. At the height of the Moscow protest, when police started dragging people away by the hundred, the top story on RIA's new website read: "Freedom-Loving Cow in U.S. Escapes Cops in a Dramatic Chase."

Embed:

> Central Moscow on lockdown, thousands of riot cops, helicopters. Top news on national newswire: 'U.S.cow escapes cops in a dramatic chase'. pic.twitter.com/bAdzgy0Eoo
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) 26 марта 2017 г.

Even Russia's Sunday TV shows — hosted by the nation's most popular pundits — failed to mention the protests. There was even silence from Dmitry Kiselyov, whose flagship program,

“News of the Week,” is often edited on the fly, to add new content before the show is done airing in all Russia’s 11 time zones.

In fact, Kiselyov did say on air that “corruption is rampant and people are demoralized,” but he was talking about Ukraine, which Russian television typically covers in far greater detail than any domestic matter.

Embed:

> "And now back to Ukraine", says propagandist in chief Kiselyov, 45 minutes into his flagship news show. No mention of Russian protests. pic.twitter.com/eD7v64kDD1
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) 26 марта 2017 г.

Much of Russia’s Web-based media didn’t fare much better on Sunday. Later in the day, when the protests became too large to ignore, RIA Novosti’s website begrudgingly acknowledged the simple fact that mass demonstrations were underway (“Opposition Activists Arrested At Illegal Demonstration”), burying the news at the bottom of its home page (top news: “Two Russian Football Fans Beaten in Belgrade”), without once mentioning the reason for the demonstrations.

More disturbing was the behavior of Yandex-Novosti, the country’s largest national news aggregator. Yandex, a private company, has long been under pressure from Russian authorities looking for ways to suppress unwanted coverage and promote pro-Kremlin stories.

On Sunday, Yandex’s local news feed for Moscow prominently featured trivialities such as weather reports warning of a cold spell and promotions for the city’s “Spring Festival.” On the national level, protests were overshadowed by news like Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin’s op-ed in The Guardian and Russia’s reaction to Kiev banning its Eurovision contestant.

Related article: Your Next Moscow Uber Ride Could Include Some Expensive Teleportation

It’s no secret that the Russian authorities are able to manipulate Yandex’s news feed, without resorting to outright censorship. The mayor’s office of Moscow, for example, is known to have registered dozens of obscure, almost identical, media outlets — all to bombard Yandex with small stories about city projects, just to keep the news (and the mayor’s agenda) trending on Yandex.Novosti.

In a press release this Monday, trying to clear its name, Yandex said it aggregates the news automatically, using algorithms, and the company vaguely accused the government of trying to manipulate its system.

Today, there are also more straightforward ways to shape Yandex.Novosti. Government ministries and other state agencies recently gained the right to register as news outlets, meaning the government can pump stories openly and directly into Yandex's aggregator.

This quirk led to what was probably the strangest Yandex.Novosti blip on Sunday, when dozens of "media" websites with names like "Dagestan's Ministry of Sports" started churning out breaking news with the headline "Makhachkala Refuses to Join Anti-Corruption Protests."

Embed:

> 156 people arrested at anti-corruption protests in Makhachala today.
> Makhachkala! Dagestan! Putin got 92.8% there in 2012!
>
> — max seddon (@maxseddon) 26 марта 2017 г.

Embed:

> А вот так Яндекс нам демонстрирует своё нововведение - министерства и ведомства могут в Я-Новостях регистрироваться как СМИ.
> pic.twitter.com/nTovgwD23n
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) 27 марта 2017 г.

Translation: And this is how Yandex is unveiling its latest feature: government offices can register as news outlets on Yandex.Novosti

This appears to have been a clumsy attempt to suppress reports about the demonstrations that did indeed take place in Dagestan's capital on Sunday.

Ironically, these phony headlines were some of the only coverage in which Russia's state media explicitly mentioned the reason for the demonstrations at all. Other outlets, such as the news agencies RIA and TASS, carefully tiptoed around the corruption allegations against Prime Minister Medvedev, even when quoting state officials.

The official comments that did appear in news reports were predictable: Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the West of "double standards" in policing, while State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin resorted to some familiar whataboutism, pointing out that police brutality against protesters is rampant in the West.

Again, nobody in the state media would say what the demonstrations were actually about.

Embed:

> State media finally break awkward silence, blame arrested for "provocation", 0 mentions of why and what is actually happening.
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) 26 марта 2017 г.

As Russian television's two biggest networks, Channel One and Rossiya, continued to ignore the elephant in the room (instead airing bulletins about heavy snowfall in Moscow, trouble in Ukraine, and a fatal avalanche in Japan), Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said rather unconvincingly that the Kremlin doesn't set editorial policy for Russian national television.

"They show what they consider to be important and significant," Peskov told reporters.

On Monday, Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader whose investigation into Dmitry Medvedev fueled the nationwide protests, went to trial for disturbing the peace and resisting a police officer. A judge fined him 20,000 rubles (about $350) and sentenced him to 15 days in jail.

During the hearing, Navalny confronted a state TV camera crew in the courtroom.

"Why didn't you cover the protests yesterday?" he asked.

"We're small people," they responded with refreshing honesty. The answer's meaning was clear: decisions about what to cover are above their pay grade.

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