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THE EMPIRE OF LIE: MEDIA-CONTROL AS A PILLAR OF PUTIN'S AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

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Abstract. In this article, the author examines the system of media-control in Russia built under Putin from the beginning of 2000s. It has helped consolidating and maintaining his authoritarian rule inside the country over years. It can also be claimed that the system of media control created within Russia had also an impact on Russia's foreign policy, and the Kremlin attempted to export it within the territory of the former Soviet Union. The key media outlets in Russia are controlled directly by the State or Putin's close allies -members of the so-called *sistema*. It creates the illusion of plurality and alternative thoughts, however, all of them are steered from one place – the Kremlin. Nevertheless, this system is strongly Putin-oriented and serves his interests; it will not cease to exist after his resignation. Its infrastructure, with a high degree of probability, will serve his successor too. Thus, the author asserts, the state of play could be changed only by destroying the informal system of power itself.

Key words: Russia's foreign policy, control, system, Putin, soft power, media outlets, power, influence.

Introduction. Russia under Putin showed a stunning metamorphosis: from a semi-democracy after Yeltsin rule to a fascist regime (Snyder, 2022). Despite the change of formal attributes of power, in the strict Weberian sense, the informal structure mostly remains the same.

There are a couple of ways to describe the nature of Russia under Putin. In his book *'Mafia State: How One Reporter Became An Enemy Of The Brutal New Russia'* (2011), British journalist Luke Harding asserts that Russia is a mafia state where government and organized crime are fused (Harding, L., 2012). The term 'mafia state' was coined by Aleksandr Litvinenko, former employee of the Russian Federal Security Services (FSB), prominent critic of Putin's regime who was killed presumably on his order (Luhn, A., Harding, L., 2016). In her turn, Alena Ledeneva, Professor of Politics and Society at the University College London, views Russian governance structure as a network, the system (*sistema*), emphasising its dependence on unwritten rules and reliance on informal practices (Ledeneva, 2011: 39). *Sistema* is hard to access; it exists through personal contacts and, as a result, leaves no trace or record (Ledeneva, 2011: 40). Its power rests upon principles of suspended punishment, compromise, mutual responsibility (*krugovaya poruka*), and the sustained vulnerability of individuals (Ledeneva, 2011: 41).

In her book *'Can Russia Modernise? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance'* (2013) Alena Ledeneva defines *sistema* as a networked 'extension' of power concentrated on the top and channelled by networks. The latter are clustered around centres of power and recruit with caution (Ledeneva, 2013: 36). As a result, Putin's *sistema* could be examined through such 'ideal' types of power network as 'inner circle' of friends (sharing life); 'useful friends' (sharing leisure); 'core contacts' (sharing career); and 'mediated contacts' (sharing affiliation) (Ledeneva, 2013: 54). The latter category is important for Putin's presidency. It is used for ownership control over media in Russia. As Ledeneva put it, its name is not a coincidence, because Putin has been referred to as a 'media President' (*mediinyi*). 'Media and the Internet are crucial for Putin's 'managed democracy', media campaigns and media rule,' she says (Ledeneva, 2013: 81).

In her article *'Internet control through ownership: the case of Russia'* (2016), Swedish researcher Carolina Vendil Pallin asserts that the increasing control through the ownership of networks

becomes less visible and less obtrusive when it takes place within the sistema. ‘People who are part of the sistema institute control through ownership of Russian resources by buying a company, by an owner being recruited to the network, or by activating the sistema to deliver upon requests from Putin’s network,’ she says (Pallin, 2016: 3). Formally media outlets in Russia are owned by different subjects creating an illusion of plurality and a free market. However, they are all linked to one source.

Putin’s power network could also be viewed through the prism of ‘*Politburo*’, ‘*Kremlin towers*’ and the ‘*Planets*’ models. According to Russian political scientist Nikolay Petrov, the first model suggested by Evgenii Minchenko describes the main shareholders and managers of the system participating in the development of key decisions as in the Soviet times. The second one is the model of stable business-political clans suggested by Vladimir Pribylovsky. Its name derives from the Russian aphorism that ‘the Kremlin has many towers’ indicating heterogeneity of power. Thus, the last one depicts the elites through their relation to Putin -the center of the entire system. That model was suggested by Evgenii Gontmakher (Lipman, Petrova, 2012: 499).

According to these models, all media outlets belong to one group or another in Putin’s entourage, the most notorious and stable of which is *siloviki*. They position themselves differently, as instruments of inner political struggle. However, they function within the interests of the central authorities and their own to preserve the existing status quo and total control over the information field. The collapse of this system could lead to the collapse of the State, as it happened to the Soviet Union before.

In their work ‘*Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*’ (2022), Russian economist Sergei Guriev and American political scientist Daniel Treisman argue that modern dictatorships rely on soft forms of control (spin) rather than hard ones (fear). According to the authors, it is a distinct, internally consistent approach, the key elements of which are manipulating the media, engineering popularity, faking democracy, limiting public violence, and opening up to the world (Guriev, Treisman, 2022:13). So contemporary autocrats such as Putin spare no resources to control the media because they help to cement their power presenting themselves as competent leaders. In order to fulfill this goal some sort of press freedom could exist because restrictions that are too blatant can backfire (Guriev, Treisman, 2022: 16).

In his book ‘*The Invention of Russia: From Gorbachev’s Freedom to Putin’s War*’ (2015), Arkady Ostrovsky, British journalist of a Russian dissent, argues that in Russia whoever controls the media also controls the country. That is why Vladimir Putin, who became the President of Russia with the help of TV, took control over it as soon as possible.

“It has been the main tool of his power, his magic wand that substituted a TV picture for reality. As Putin’s friend Silvio Berlusconi once said: ‘What is not on TV does not exist.’ Putin took it further: things that did not exist could be turned into reality by the power of television. This alchemical power was displayed vividly both in the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine,” the author asserts (Ostrovsky, 2015:26).

American political scientist Joseph Nye defined soft power as the ability to influence others by attraction rather than by coercion or payment (Nye, 2022). In his article ‘*Soft Power*’ (1990), he stated that “when one country gets other countries to want what it wants-might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants” (Nye, 1990: 166). According to him, soft power comes primarily from three sources: its culture; its political values; and its policies. No doubt, as Joanna Szostek states, in international relations the mass media are closely associated with the concept of “soft power”. The term has been incorporated into Russian foreign policy. It is believed that favorable foreign media coverage can facilitate their foreign policy success (Szostek, 2014: 463). Thus, the media is a perfect tool not only to cement its influence at home but to expand it abroad.

The goals of this article are to draft history of acquiring control over media in Russia, describe the main media-holdings that control key media outlets and their relation to Putin, and to reflect on future prospects of their development.

The findings of the study. From the 2000s, Russia has been developing a special system of controlling the media. The state maintains a dominant position in the sphere with the main television channels and news agencies in its hands. The rest are controlled by Putin's close allies which creates the illusion of plurality and alternative thoughts (guided democracy). However, everyone is obliged to follow the same instructions as to what to highlight and what to avoid that are issued by the Kremlin (*temniki* which are secret instructions by the state officials on how to cover events). They are typically organized in the holdings – companies that possess more than one media asset. It is actually yet another manifestation of state capitalism in Russia.

The destruction of independent media outlets in Russia by the Kremlin is well-documented. It should be noted that at the beginning of 2000s the two main TV-channels, namely NTV and ORT, belonged to Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky respectively. They used these media outlets in their political affairs. For example, using these TV-channels in 1996 scandal-ridden election campaign helped Boris Yeltsyn to topple his main rival – leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation Gennadii Ziuganov – and to keep his presidential post (Harding, 2013).

As the new president, Vladimir Putin understood perfectly well the power of the media in the formation of public opinion and preservation of his power. Thus, the Kremlin began an attack on media outlets that were not under control.

Taking NTV, which belonged to oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky (through the Media-Most media group founded in 1993) over under government control in 2001 was a classical one. After numerous hints to change the editorial policy of the channel, its owner was accused of fraud and detained in Butyrka. After that, he emigrated from Russia and sold the channel and other media assets to Gazprom. It is known that Alexey Miller, long-time head of Gazprom, is one of Putin's closest associates. Alfred Koh, former Deputy Prime Minister and Head of the Federal Agency for State Property Management, who later will join the opposition, negotiated with him the merger as a top manager of the state-owned gas monopolist at that time. However, later on, Putin allowed Gusinsky to earn money in Russia after he renounced his claims to the media assets taken from him. Russian TV channels, primarily those owned by Gazprom-Media, purchased TV series produced by his companies for millions of dollars. According to Project media calculations, since 2000, he could earn from \$172 million to \$529.4 million thanks to the agreement with the Kremlin (Proekt, 2019).

Yevgeny Kiselov, Viktor Shenderovich (the author of TV show *Kukly* (Russian for “Puppets”), aired by NTV; that satirical TV show was particularly irritating for the authorities), Vladimir Karamura are among those who worked in NTV in 1990s and in the beginning of 2000s. However, they left after the change of ownership.

Another iconic media asset of Vladimir Gusinsky was Ekho Moskvyy radio station. It was founded in 1990, and since that time, for more than three decades, it was a mouthpiece for the liberal Russian opposition. It is worth noting that it was closed after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Long-time editor-in-chief Aleksey Venediktov asserted that that decision was made by Sergey Kirienko, deputy head of AP for political issues (Venediktov, 2023).

However, ORT was and still is the most popular “button”. Owning ORT was crucial. Having ORT under control would mean having control over all the media. In turn, control over the media would mean control over the state.

Boris Berezovsky was the major shareholder of ORT, which later became One TV-Channel (Pervyi). He was one of the most influential oligarchs in the 1990s and a member of the “Family” (*semya*), inner circle of the former President Boris Yeltsyn. He got control over ORT in mid 90's and used it as the tool in his political struggle. The successful 1996 reelection campaign of Boris

Yeltsyn and the 2000 presidential campaign of Vladimir Putin are the most prominent examples of that struggle.

It so happened though that, soon after Putin became president, Berezovsky started playing against him using his key media asset. Some have said that the TV spot in the show of Sergey Dorenko, well-known Russian journalist of the 1990s, about the Kursk submarine disaster became the last straw. In that TV spot, Sergey Dorenko sharply criticized the authorities and personally Vladimir Putin for their inappropriate behavior during the rescue operation. He was immediately fired, and the Kremlin decided to take Pervyi under its control too (Meduza, 2019).

Berezovsky gave his share to his former younger partner Roman Abramovich and emigrated to the United Kingdom. Later on, Roman Abramovich who got on with Putin and became part of *sistema* transferred control over Pervyi TV channel to National Media Group owned by Yuriy Kovalchuk.

In the end of the day, the fate of these almighty oligarchs of the Yeltsin epoch was tragic. In 2013, Boris Berezovsky who experienced financial difficulties after the trial with Roman Abramovich committed suicide at his home in Ascot, Berkshire, UK (Cobain, 2014). In his turn, in the beginning of 2025, Vladimir Gusinskiy announced that he lost his business and was in debts (Agentstvo, 2025).

Regardless of the form of ownership – state or private – top management of the main channels ought to take part in a regular media planning (*letuchki*) which are held in the Presidential Administration. In different years, they were conducted by Aleksandr Voloshyn (former head of AP), Mihail Lesin (former Minister of the Press), and Aleksei Gromov, long-term first deputy head of the Presidential Administration responsible for media. As the current boss of Dmitri Peskov, he has been serving in the AP under Putin longer than any other person. Except for media people, the meetings are attended by officials as well, for example, representatives of press-services. They would also directly supervise (*nadzirat'*) the major Russian newspapers, such as Kommersant, RBK, Komsomolskaya Pravda etc. (Proekt, 2019).

Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 and all the subsequent events, especially confrontation with the West and Russia's War in Ukraine (2014 -), changed dramatically Russian media market beyond recognition.

However, this is not the topic of our article, it is worth noting that numerous repressive laws were passed. Firstly, we should mention Russian foreign agent law which has been amended many times since it was first enacted in 2012. This repressive document has been targeting the media – organizations and individuals – in the first place. All materials produced or disseminated by them as 'foreign agents' should be specifically labeled as follows: "This material (information) has been produced, disseminated, and/or directed by a foreign agent (full name), or pertains to the activities of a foreign agent (full name)". The Russian Ministry of Justice maintains a dedicated register, which is filled in a completely opaque manner (OVD-Info, 2024). It should also be mentioned that the laws criminalizing the spread of "fakes" and "discreditation" of the Russian armed forces were passed soon after the beginning of the full-scale Russia's invasion of to Ukraine in 2022.

Secondly, in 2014, soon after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas, Putin signed a law limiting foreign investors' maximum share in the country's media outlets to 20% (Luhn, 2014). Initially, the law was targeting "Vedomosti" newspaper and Forbes magazine, popular media outlets with a significant share of foreign capital that cover serious economic and socio-political topics (Zhegulev, 2015). However, the law affected a wide variety of publications and led to redistribution of the Russian media market and its further monopolization.

Thirdly, immediately after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, almost all independent Russian media including Rain TV-Channel (Dozhd), the Echo of Moscow (Ekho Moskvyy) Radio and Novaya Gazeta, Meduza have been banned, blocked and/or declared "foreign agents" or "undesirable organizations" (Voronov, 2019). Some of them have continued operating outside the country trying to reach out their liberal audience inside Russia via such digital-channels as YouTube.

In order to limit their influence, the Russian government practically blocked them (Current Time, 2024) at the end of 2024.

Thus, as of the beginning of 2025, almost all large national and regional media outlets in Russia belong to a few holdings that are under direct government control, indirect control through state-owned companies, or in private hands that are closely tied to Putin: for example, Yuriy Kovalchuk who is a member of the so-called dacha cooperative Ozero (Populyarnaya politika, 2024).

He is believed to be Putin's closest friend. Thus, his name could be found in the sanction lists of various countries. He is the main shareholder of the Bank of Russia. It is widely rumored that he was the one to convince Putin to start the war with Ukraine (Zhegulev, 2023). He is also a co-owner of National Media Group. It owns, among others, Pervyi TV-Channel, REN TV, 5 channel and Izvestia. It also has a share in the VK group. It was founded in 2008, and currently positions itself as the biggest private media holding in Russia (NMG). Alina Kabaeva, who is considered to be Putin's wife, is the head of the holding board of directors. This flags Putin's personal position and attitude towards the company's activities. There was time when Mikhail Lesin consulted Yurii Kovalchuk (Surganova, Zhokhova).

The history of getting Izvestia under control is very illustrative too. It was the official newspaper of the Soviet State, and the Supreme Council in particular, between 1917 and 1991. Due to severe economic conditions after the collapse of the Soviet Union it was privatised by Vladimir Potanin, multibillionaire. In 2005, Izvestia was sold to the Russian state energy company Gazprom. Finally, in 2011, Gazprom sold it to the National Media Group (Vinokour, 2022).

Gazprom-media positions itself as the biggest media-holding in Russia. It was founded in 1998. The main owner of Gazprom-media is Gazprombank. Putin personally makes the most important personnel appointments there. As was mentioned above, it is the owner of NTV TV channel. After the beginning of Putin's third presidential term in 2012 and especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Gazprom-media had been actively buying media-assets on the Russian market; including Friday (*Pyatnitsa*), 2x2, TV-3. In 2015, under Putin's order, Match TV was founded (Gazprom-Media Kholding). Tina Kandelaki became its first general producer. It has also been actively developing Rutube, video online-service whose significance has been growing after the ban of YouTube.

Kommersant Publishing House is yet another major privately owned media holding. From 1999 to 2006, it actually belonged to disgraced oligarch Boris Berezovsky and his partner Badri Patarkatsishvili. In 2006, they sold it to Alisher Usmanov. It publishes the Kommersant newspaper as well as other influential papers. He was put on the sanctions list after Russia's full-scale invasion. Usmanov rejected the allegations that he had bought it in the interests of the authorities.

All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) runs Rossiya, Rossiya24 and other TV channels (VGTRK). Oleg Dobrodeev is its long-term general director. Former head of NTV TV-company under disgraced oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky, he accepted Putin's proposal and took the helm of the state TV company with the largest coverage in the country. It was him who turned Russian TV into what it looks like today (Taroshchina, 2024).

Rossiia segodnia is another state-owned media holding. (RIA novosti, Sputnik, Ukraina.ru etc.). It originates from Sovinformburo founded in 1941. In its modern form, it was founded in 2013 (Rossiia segodnya). Dmitry Kiselyov, who threatened that Russia can turn the US to radioactive ash (Kelly, 2014), is the head of the said organization. Margarita Simonyan is its chief editor as well as of other state-controlled broadcaster RT (non-commercial organization TV Novosti, legal entity behind the propagandist TV channel RT). They are both on various sanctions list as Kremlin mouthpieces.

It is worth mentioning Grigory Berezkin's (Russian multimillioner, owner of ESN holding) media assets. He owns Komsomolskaya pravda, which is allegedly Putin's favorite newspaper, and RBK. The latter was sold to him in 2017 by Mikhail Prokhorov, billionaire and the former candidate President of the Russian Federation in 2011. The deal was purely political as the Kremlin was dissatisfied with

the coverage of public protests against corruption after the publication of Don't Call Him Dimon (On vam ne Dimon) film by Alexey Navalny team.

After the beginning of the Russian invasion, the businessman found himself in the EU, UK, and other countries' sanction lists as "Putin henchman". However, later he successfully managed to challenge that decision in the European Court of Justice because officials of the European Commission could not prove confirm his affiliation with Putin (Goryashko, 2023).

In recent years, another large media holding emerged on Russian media landscape – Patriot (RIA FAN, "Narodnye Novosti, Nevskie Novosti, Ekonomika Segodnya, and many others). It was associated with Evgeny Prigozhin, Russian oligarch and war criminal. After a failed rebellion against Russia's military leadership, it was dissolved. The Internet troll-factory that promoted Russia's interests on the Internet and interfered in the US elections was close to it too (Tsentr "Dosye", 2023).

Main all-national media-holdings in Russia, 2025

Name	Main assets	Ownership
Gazprom-Media Holding	NTV, TNT	semi-state
National Media Group	Pervyi TV-Channel, REN TV, 5 channel, Izvestia	private
VGTRK	Rossiya, Rossiya 24	state
Rossiya segodnia	RIA novosti, Sputnik, Ukraina.ru	state

Conclusions. In 2000, Putin started his rule having established control over Russian television. His attack on the freedom of speech in Russia began when he forced Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, being among biggest Russian tycoons of that time, to leave the country and to sell their media-assets. It ended up being what it is now – a propaganda machine which serves imperial ambitions of the Russian ruler. Russian key media outlets are controlled directly by the state or Putin's close allies, members of the so-called sistema. It creates the illusion of plurality and alternative thoughts, however, all of them are steered from one place, the Kremlin. It has helped consolidating and maintaining his authoritarian rule inside the country over years. It can also be claimed that the system of media control created within Russia had also an impact on Russia's foreign policy and the Kremlin attempted to export it within the territory of the former Soviet Union. Nevertheless, this system is strongly Putin-oriented and serves his interests; it will not cease to exist after his resignation. Its infrastructure, with a high degree of probability, will serve his successor too. Thus, the state of play could be changed only by destroying the informal system of power itself and power control mechanisms. This cannot be done overnight because of the sustainability of informal structures and inertia of the system. Any changes will not happen without serious upheavals. Therefore, they will need some personal courage from new charismatic leaders who are still about to appear on the forefront of Russian history.

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