Kremlin Media Wars

Censorship and Control Since the Invasion of Ukraine

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The history of Russian media regulation

Strategic communication and information environment transformation from the Kursk submarine disaster to the Crocus City terror attack

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The history of Russian media and internet regulation could fill many volumes. Depending on the author's perspective, this kind of historical chronicle could focus on legislative initiatives, changes in the media ownership structures, technical measures to increase control, or repression of journalists. In addition, the history of the regulation of the Russian media space continues to be written every day. The task of this chapter is not to outline a particular chronology of events related to the restriction of the Russian media space, but to propose a vector describing the transformation of this system. A description of historical episodes helps to illustrate the logic of transformation in accordance with the proposed trajectory. It is important to define at the outset the basic concepts for this discussion. First of all, regulation is a continuous effort to shape the media ecosystem in a way that serves the political interest of the ruling elite. The main characteristic of an authoritarian environment is the absence of real political competition. The main risk for such an environment is a crisis of legitimacy of the authoritarian leader and his political course. Hence, the purpose of regulation is to maintain the status quo according to which there are no political alternatives to the existing regime, to provide symbolic support for decisions made by the authorities, and to protect the legitimacy of the authoritarian leader regardless of changing socio-political circumstances.

This chapter suggests that the main task of regulation is to ensure the effectiveness of strategic communication as a strategy for maintaining authoritarian stability. While in a liberal political environment the effectiveness of such communication depends primarily on the ability to interact with target audiences in a competitive media environment, in an authoritarian environment the effectiveness of strategic communication depends not only on the message but also on the degree of control over the environment in which it is disseminated. The goal of regulation is to create an information environment in which the authorities will have the most favourable conditions for achieving

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their political goals through communication. In this chapter, we consider two examples of strategic communication – crisis communication, the purpose of which is primarily to control the mechanisms of blame attribution in a crisis situation; and propaganda, the purpose of which is to provide symbolic support for decisions made by the authorities that are potentially fraught with the growth of protest moods and social tension. This chapter highlights how even the most advanced practices of information manipulation, as seen, for instance, as a part of computational propaganda (Wooley and Howard 2016), cannot be efficient enough to protect authoritarian stability without an advanced level of control over the information environment within a bounded media system.

It is also important to define the object of regulation. When speaking of media regulation, we are talking primarily about control and restriction of the freedoms of journalistic organizations or/and of those who produce content with news value. In a broader understanding of the media, any content, including music and movies, is also a form of media production that may fall within the scope of the regulator's interests. However, even in the case of traditional media such as newspapers and television, the internet has become a major system of production, distribution and circulation. In a situation of convergence of traditional and new media, the separation of media regulation from internet regulation is artificial, as these essentially create a single information ecosystem.

This chapter is structured in the following way. First, it describes the trajectory of development of the Russian media system to offer a context for historical analysis. Second, we describe the conceptual framework that can explain the transformation of Russian media regulation. This framework distinguishes between two forms of strategic communication – crisis communication and propaganda. It therefore discusses the evolution of regulation in the context of crisis situations including human-made disasters, natural disasters, and terror attacks. It also addresses the role of regulation in the context of significant political decisions, such as the decision on a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The trajectories of media systems transformation: from open to closed

Often, authoritarian media systems are treated as relatively similar systems with an advanced level of regulation, including different forms of censorship and repression of those who try to challenge state-sponsored framing and narratives. While the tools and practices used for totalitarian control may look similar in different authoritarian contexts, the ways in which media systems are transformed to reach the point of advanced regulation by states may substantially differ.

This argument can be illustrated by a comparison of internet regulation in China and in Russia. While these countries are often mentioned together as

examples of an advanced form of information regulation, the way in which regulation operates in the two countries is significantly different. In the case of China, regulation and advanced forms of control were a part of the initial architecture of the information system – the Chinese internet developed under tight control by the government. The capacity to develop an isolated information ecosystem from an early stage of the rise of the World Wide Web was supported by the size of the Chinese market, which allowed to develop a variety of sustainable businesses with a lot of space to grow locally. In the case of Russia, an information ecosystem including the media and the internet developed as a relatively free and competitive system following the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. The Russian internet (known as Runet) could be considered an alternative cultural and media space that gave rise to a broad range of independent projects (Asmolov and Kolozaridi 2017). Runet played a significant role in various forms of social and political mobilization, including independent forms of bottom-up disaster response and protest-related mobilization directed against the Kremlin. However, starting from 2000 when Vladimir Putin became the president of Russia, the Russian media and online space found themselves subject to increasing efforts to take them under control. This way, the Chinese system developed from the early stages as a closed system with a high degree of internal control and in strict isolation from the external environment. On the contrary, the Russian internet initially developed as an open system.

The history of the Russian media regulation, similarly, is one of a transformation of an open system into a closed one. Therefore, we need to explore regulation in the context of this transition. The analysis needs to recognize that taking an open system under control and transforming it into a closed one is more challenging than keeping under control a system that was initially designed as a closed one. This type of transformation requires a multidimensional approach drawing on a diversity of practices beyond using traditional forms of censorship and relying on technologies of surveillance. Moreover, while regulation may have evident success, some fundamental elements of information systems that were laid down at the beginning of development cannot be removed without the collapse of the entire system. In such a case, the system subject to regulation continues to include internal contradictions between the basic layers of the system that can be linked to earlier phases of its development and later layers of the system that have been introduced during state-sponsored efforts to take it under control (Asmolov 2021).

One of the key concepts related to the transformation of an open system into a closed one is the notion of sovereignty. The argument that traditional forms of sovereignty seen in the offline space should also be seen in cyberspace suggests a need to recreate physical borders in the online environment (Kukkola and Ristolainen 2018). These borders are essential to distinguish the system and to prevent external flows of innovation and information from having an impact on it. The imposition of boundaries also in this way enables the mitigation of external impact, while focusing on increasing the level of

control within the internal system based on a variety of technological, legal, economic, and political measures.

Conceptual framework: regulation from the crisis communication and propaganda perspective

According to Price (2002), there is an increasing tension between the media and information technologies and sovereignty as the capacity to control information flows to ensure the loyalty of citizens. A broad literature offers discussion of how authoritarian regimes use information technologies to maintain political stability despite the potential risks related to the development of these technologies (MacKinnon 2011). Guriev and Treisman (2015, p. 39) argue that 'incompetent leaders can survive by manipulating the information environment so long as economic shocks are not too large,' while effective control over the media diminishes the need for violent repression.

However, there is a need to identify the moments when authoritarian leaders are particularly vulnerable in the face of risks related to the role of information technologies. This chapter argues that there are two moments that should be considered as high-risk situations requiring the attention in particular of those interested in following the development of an information system from an open to a closed one. First, there are crisis situations, including natural and human-made disasters as well as terror attacks. Crisis situations may play an ambivalent role: a crisis can potentially challenge the governance and control of an authoritarian state by leading to the attribution of blame to leaders. But a crisis can also be used to justify the need for stricter measures and new forms of regulation (Agamben 2005). Non-democratic systems aim to take control of the opportunity offered by a crisis by transforming it from a source of threat to a source of legitimacy for new regulation. Second, there are relatively unpredictable and significant policy decisions that may have a substantial impact on the quality of people's lives. These decisions may lead, even within an authoritarian system, to challenges related to the popularity and legitimacy of leaders.

Addressing the first type of situation requires effective crisis communication to take control of the attribution of blame and to protect the leader from being identified as responsible for the crisis (Coombs 2010). Addressing the second type of situation requires propaganda that can convince the population that these decisions are necessary. Both crisis communication[1] and propaganda can be considered as authoritarian forms of strategic communication and as 'communicating purposefully to advance the organization's mission' (Hallahan et al. 2007). In an authoritarian environment, one of the main tasks of crisis communication is to build a distance between the leader and the crisis. One of the central elements in the communication strategy of Vladimir Putin since he became president of Russia in 2000 has been putting him beyond the circle of responsibility in the case of any policy challenges or crisis situations. The Russian media often show the president

summoning ministers and other Russian officials in order to criticize them for wrong decisions and policies. The performative nature of this type of interaction highlights how the media is used to control the attribution of blame. As a part of this performance, the president speaks on behalf of the people as a person who defends them from incompetent bureaucrats, while concealing the fact that he is actually at the top of the pyramid of Russian governance.

Crisis situations, however, may potentially challenge efforts to locate the president beyond responsibility and to diminish control over blame attribution. One of the ways to address this challenge is by concealing the existence of the crisis. This can be seen in political environments with a high degree of isolation from the global environment.[2] In the new information environment, concealing a significant crisis is almost impossible. Therefore, the purpose of authoritarian crisis communication is first to diminish the scale of the crisis (e.g., by concealing the real number of casualties), second to highlight how 'everything is under control,' and third to identify the range of those considered as guilty in such a way as to divert any political risk from the person at the top of the political pyramid. One also needs to have control over the environment where the communication takes place, to prevent competition with alternative framings of the crisis. Accordingly, regulation can be seen as a mechanism seeking to take control over the attribution of blame at the most vulnerable moments for the leader.

The second type of situation that may potentially increase the political vulnerability of authoritarian leaders can be seen in the case of unpopular decisions that require significant efforts to support their legitimacy. This type of legitimacy can be supported through advanced forms of propaganda (Baden n.d.). Excluding the possibility of alternative voices that may diminish the efficiency of propaganda to obtain compliant behaviour in the context of a specific event requires not only effective messaging but also an advanced form of control over the media system. Accordingly, regulation can be seen as a strategy to support the efficiency of propaganda in achieving political goals, particularly in a situation with a high level of political risk for the authoritarian ruler.

This chapter suggests that the history of Russian media regulation should be seen in the context of a response to significant political challenges requiring a reliance on crisis communication and propaganda to protect the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime. Accordingly, we can see the transition from an open media system to a closed one in the context of specific episodes that considerably increased political risk and the vulnerability of the Russian president, and accordingly were followed by the introduction of new and significant forms of regulation. This approach suggests that effective crisis communication and propaganda by authoritarian regimes can be achieved through a combination of strategic communication with the public and an increasing control over the information environment where this communication takes place.

Crises and a history of media regulation in the twenty-first century

Once President Putin came to power, he faced a situation where the political power of the Russian president was dependent on his capacity to get support from the oligarchs who controlled the media (Yablokov and Schimpfössl 2021).

On 12 August 2000, a nuclear-powered submarine, the Kursk, sank in the Barents Sea, killing all 188 seamen on board. Putin, who was on holiday when the tragedy occurred, was blamed for not responding in time to save at least part of the crew that survived initially. For instance, above a picture of Putin on its front page, the Kommersant newspaper ran the headline: 'Whose honour sank in the Barents Sea?' The authorities tried to shift the blame and argue that the explosion was caused by a NATO submarine. The lack of transparency evoked the Soviet approach to crisis situations. The most critical message was broadcast by the popular journalist Sergey Dorenko on Russian TV channel Perviy Kanal, owned by Boris Berezovsky. 'The main conclusion here is that the government doesn't respect us all. That's why it's lying,' said Dorenko. In response, Putin turned his fury towards the media, arguing that the owners of TV channels were trying to use the tragedy for political and economic ends. The president told members of the families of the Kursk seamen: 'There are people in television today who over the last ten years destroyed the army and the fleet where people are now dying… They stole money, they bought the media, and they're manipulating public opinion.' Putin concluded: 'Unfortunately we cannot order them [the media] to stop although that would be the right thing to do.'

The actual plan was not to tell journalists to stop but to take control of the media system in Russia. Sergey Dorenko was fired after his TV show was broadcast. This was followed by Putin's decision to take over the major Russian TV channels. First, Berezovsky was forced to transfer the shares of ORT (Perviy Kanal). The next victim in the Kremlin's pursuit of media owners was Vladimir Gusinsky, the major shareholder of the NTV channel. Some TV channels were put under the control of state-owned enterprises such as Gazprom. According to Lipman (2005, p. 320), 'Each act of "disloyalty" by the media served as additional proof of the need to keep television firmly under control, in the government's view, and the Kremlin has worked to tighten the constraints.' Control over TV allowed Putin to put himself beyond responsibility and frame himself as a person who represents Russian citizens in the face of ineffective and corrupt clerks.

The next cycle of regulation can be linked to a series of terror attacks. In 2002, terrorists attacked the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow. They took 850 hostages and demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya. Special forces used an unknown gas before storming the theatre. More than 100 hostages died during the siege, and most of the deaths were caused by the gas. Russian television broadcast the attack live. The media's framing of the attack was divided between those who solely blamed the terrorists and those who also assigned blame to the Russian leadership. In turn, some of the media

were criticized by the government for publishing interviews with terrorists and showing the bodies of hostages. Following the attack, the Kremlin argued that TV boosts its ratings with blood and introduced a Convention on Counter-Terrorism, which highlighted how terrorists seek to manipulate public opinion by relying on the media and laid down 'rules of conduct for journalists covering acts of terrorism' (Simons and Strovsky 2006).

In September 2004, a school in the town of Beslan, North Ossetia, was occupied by a group of Chechen terrorists. Three days after the beginning of the siege, the school was stormed by the security forces. The crisis ended with the death of 333 people, including 186 children. During the siege, the authorities made efforts to lower the official figure for the number of hostages taken, and the Kremlin also circulated guidelines for media coverage of the attack, demanding that TV channels avoid mentioning President Putin. According to Simons and Strovsky (2006, p. 207), 'By removing Putin's name from the news it could conceivably be easier to pass the blame onto someone else.' Despite this pressure, the print media continued to criticize the government (Snetkov 2007). For instance, on the second day of the siege, Moskovskiy Komsomolets printed the headline: 'Both terrorist and security forces should be held responsible for the terror attacks.' Two days after the beginning of the crisis, the Izvestia newspaper published a special edition, which included dramatic photos of child hostages and challenged the official data on casualties. The editor-in-chief of the newspaper, Raf Shakirov, was forced to resign following the release of this edition. According to Kommersant, Izvestia's editor-in-chief removal was 'a deliberate signal from the Kremlin to journalists and elites that the administration has got its hands on the print media.'

In 2010, western Russia faced unprecedented wildfires. The increasingly popular social media played a major role in the crisis. On the one hand, bloggers questioned the efficiency of the state response and blamed the government for the crisis. On the other hand, digital platforms were used to support bottom-up mobilization of the Russian public to respond to the crisis. The Kremlin was concerned not only with the role of social media in the attribution of blame (Bertrand 2012) but also with the increasing role played by digital platforms in supporting independent mobilization (Wijermars 2021). It was then that state-sponsored regulation started to be concerned not only with control over media coverage but also with control over mobilization. The regulatory bodies relied not only on the new legislation restricting independent mobilization (e.g., a new law on volunteering) but also on new forms of state-sponsored innovation that aimed to take control of the mobilization of users (Asmolov 2022). However, a massive acceleration in internet regulation can be linked to the internal political crisis that followed Putin's 2012 return to power as president. Before his official comeback, the Russian government faced the most massive political protests seen in the history of Putin's Russia. These protests questioned the legitimacy of the Russian Duma elections. Social networks, crowdsourcing platforms, and media

websites played a double role. On the one hand, they were employed to detect electoral fraud. On the other hand, they were used to mobilize the crowd and to coordinate protests against the rigging of elections (White and McAllister 2014). The Russian authorities argued that the country was facing its own version of the Arab Spring, with social media being used by Western powers to challenge political stability in Russia. Klyueva (2016, p. 4661) argues that the events of winter 2011–2012 were a 'turning point' in the development of the Kremlin's approach towards internet regulation: '[T]he successes of the protest movement initiated a government crackdown on the Russian Internet and social media.' Following the elections, a significant increase in internet regulation could be observed. In addition to new legislation (e.g., laws on defamation and a restriction on foreign investment in the media), several influential online media projects were brought under state control through changes in their ownership structure (e.g., the popular news websites Gazeta.ru and Lenta.ru). The state also began to support a new form of participatory regulation via groups of 'cyber guards' who search for prohibited content online and report it to the authorities. The combination of entertainment with aggressive political shows became the leading structure of the broadcast programming of Russian TV. At the same time, growing control over most print media and TV, as well as online media, brought about a gradual decline in the impact of independent media on public opinion.

The next crisis that needs to be considered in the context of the development of Russian regulation is the first phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. These events made evident how important it was for the Kremlin to have full control over how the crisis was framed for the Russian public. This could be seen particularly in the role played by the Russian media in attributing blame for the downing of Flight MH-17 (Golovchenko et al. 2018). The crisis was also used to construct a threat in a way that justified the need for new forms of regulation. For instance, Western sanctions against Russia were described as a threat to Russian sovereignty, and particularly to the Russian internet. The National Security Council suggested that Russia could be disconnected from the global internet by Western countries. Several new laws, including a data localization law, sought to 'Protect the stability and security of Runet.'

The major transformation of Russia's media and digital space, which can be considered the final phase in the transition from an open system to a closed one, can be linked to Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The full-scale invasion of a neighbouring country can be considered a dramatic and unexpected decision even in the context of the Russian authoritarian political system. This decision could potentially increase political risks related to a decline in the popularity of the Russian leader, particularly due to a broad range of follow-up impacts of the invasion on the everyday life of Russian citizens including their ability to travel internationally and to use a broad range of services available to a global audience. Significant propaganda efforts were required to explain the necessity of the aggression and to

ensure the support of the Russian public. The efficiency of propaganda in addressing this challenge required a further degree of control over the information system to make sure that independent sources of information were not able to challenge the dominant state-sponsored narrative. This could be achieved only through new forms both of isolation of the information system from the external environment and of intimidation of those who tried to challenge propagandistic narratives internally. As a part of the isolation efforts, the Russian authorities declared Meta and Twitter to be extremist organizations, and Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter were blocked in Russia. Those who tried to criticize the authorities from within the system faced a new law whereby anyone who 'distributes fakes about the Russian military' faces up to 15 years in prison. Any Russian media considered relatively independent was not only blocked but also forced to close down due to intimidation and being denied the capacity to cover the war (using the word 'war' was prohibited as well). Most independent journalists had to flee the country. Despite these unprecedented efforts, Russian propaganda still faced several crises. The first was due to a decision to conduct a partial mobilization of Russian military reservists in September 2022. The second was due to a series of military and symbolic defeats that included the sinking of the Russian military flagship Moskva on 14 April 2022, the explosion of the Crimea bridge on 8 October 2022, and a Kremlin drone attack on 3 May 2023. One of the most significant challenges was created by the retreat of the Russian military from the city of Kherson on 11 November 2022, which forced a switch in the mode of Russian strategic communication from propaganda to crisis communication, while there was an attempt simultaneously to shift the blame for the defeat from the political leadership and to maintain the legitimacy of the war. Accordingly, the propaganda identified three groups who could be considered as responsible for the crisis: those who had weakened the army in the 1990s; the 'cadres on the ground' who had been unreliable in carrying out the tasks assigned and, more importantly, misleading their superiors, and 'those who spread panic' by being overly critical of the conduct of the military operation.

On 22 March 2024, just a few days after the presidential election in Russia, the Crocus City Hall, a major musical venue in a Moscow suburb, was attacked by a group of terrorists shortly before the start of a concert by a popular Russian band. According to the official data, 145 people were killed and more than 500 injured. Despite the advanced level of media regulation, social media platforms were full of criticism of the response of the police, the special forces, and the emergency services. In addition, the degree of potential reputational risk was increased by reports in the international media that Russia had been warned about the attack by Western intelligence services. However, the Russian president made an effort to distance himself from the crisis, and the Russian authorities tried to divert the attribution of blame in accordance with political interests. Although the ISIS Salafi jihadist group (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) claimed responsibility for the attack,

Russian authorities argued that Ukraine was somehow involved. The Russian president and the heads of the security services suggested that terrorists had tried to flee into Ukraine and that 'the Ukrainian side' had 'opened a window' for them to cross the border. According to Meduza, Russian state-funded media were instructed by Putin's administration to highlight possible 'traces' of Ukrainian involvement.[3] The attack on Crocus City Hall demonstrates how media regulation in Russia has reached the stage where strategic communication by the government is able to frame a terrorist attack according to the needs of propaganda, while at the same time addressing the needs of crisis-communication management. The Kremlin's policy in response to this attack can be seen as a case both of shifting blame and of justification for the continuation of war against Ukraine.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that the history of Russian media and internet regulation should be considered a dynamic process of autocratic adaptability seeking to ensure the political survival of a non-democratic regime in a constantly changing information environment. The capacity of autocratic leaders to rely on efficient strategic communication is continuously challenged by global communication networks and new forms of digital innovation that breach the sovereign boundaries of the state. In this light, to ensure that strategic communication can achieve its goals, these autocrats seek not only to advance the way they communicate their messages but also to gain further control over the environment where these messages are communicated. This transformation of the media environment can be seen in the context of the tension between open and closed information systems.

This analysis of the transformation of the Russian information system from an open to a closed one, however, also raises the question of whether regulation may reach a point of complete isolation when the system becomes fully closed. On the one hand, we see that the new forms of digital innovation do not allow a point of full control over the information system to be reached. For instance, satellite internet may challenge new forms of internet sovereignty. On the other hand, new crises may challenge the legitimacy of autocrats even within an information environment under an advanced form of control. In addition, one may argue that autocracies may be interested in leaving a limited degree of intentional openness to achieve their political interests. For instance, the absence of a ban on Telegram allows it to be used for propaganda within and beyond Russia. However, this intentional openness can also increase the political vulnerability of an authoritarian system in a situation of significant crisis. In this light, the development of the Russian media ecosystem cannot be considered only as a linear trajectory from openness to closedness. Each successive crisis can lead either to a further increase in control over the system, or to a significant disruption that may change the trajectory of the system's development.

Notes

1 Crisis communication is a response to an unexpected negative event that may lead to reputational damage for those who may be perceived as responsible for the crisis (Sellnow and Seeger 2013).
2 For instance, this type of solution could be seen in the USSR's response to the Chernobyl disaster in 1986.
3 https://meduza.io/en/news/2024/03/23/kremlin-tells-pro-government-media-to-emphasize-possible-traces-of-ukrainian-involvement-in-reporting-on-moscow-terrorist-attack.

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