

*Special Issue: ‘Russia’s Media Aristocracy: Evolution of Media Elites
from Perestroika to Putin’s Post-Crimean Russia’*

Introducing Russia’s Media Aristocracy

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Abstract

This collection of articles deals with the history and the current state of Russia’s media elite. It defines three groups of media elites; owners of media outlets, media managers and prominent journalists. All those groups are under pressure of being agreeable to the Kremlin and pleasing their audiences with their products and output. The Kremlin’s tightened control over the media forced some media professionals out, losing their jobs or emigrating. The majority, however, have kept their positions. They are reasonably well networked and integrated into the political system and successfully employ strategies partly inherited from Soviet times. The collection of articles provides insights into the inner working of Russian media, delivering a nuanced understanding of media control, censorship and self-censorship.

Keywords: Russian media, elites, adekvatnost, Russian politics, economic sanctions, Internet, self-censorship, censorship, journalists, media managers, Kremlin

In late September 2016 the Russian daily newspaper *Kommersant* announced Oleg Dobrodeev as one of the potential candidates for the position of deputy head of the Presidential Administration, a highly influential position in Russia’s political hierarchy.

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Dobrodeev is the godfather of post-Soviet television. In 1993, he set up Russia's first independent television channel *NTV*, which he left in 2000 to head the state media holding *VGTRK*. That this gossip about Dobrodeev emerged is symbolic: it shows the extent to which the political and media elites in Putin's Russia have become intertwined.

The post-Soviet Russian media elites provide a particularly rich topic along which to study the evolution of elites and the role of media in semi-authoritarian states. Media elites in our understanding comprise roughly three groups; first, owners of sizeable media businesses; second, media managers and editors-in-chief; and, third, renounced journalists prominent enough to act as opinion makers, and sometimes even influential enough to push the Kremlin's media agenda. Individuals belonging to these groups thus fluctuate between the outer fringes of the power elite and its inner circles.

Many of the actors analyzed in this special issue are part of informal networks. Through them they gain status in society and take influence on decision-making processes. This shorthand for 'system of governance' – often called *sistema*, as does most famously the political sociologist Alena Ledeneva – keeps its members privileged and safe and, at the same time, under control. Three of the five articles in this special issue analyze, among other things, how media managers and owners have preserved, and partly expanded, their power through influential networks.

The main focus of this special issue is to explore what strategies post-Soviet media managers and journalists have employed to become – and remain – successful. How have these strategies evolved and how did the biographies of those influential in the media develop over time, from the late Soviet period, through the 1990s to today? What has triggered the rise of new groups within Russia's media elite and what the fall of others? What strategies have regime-critical journalists developed to survive professionally (and occasionally also physically)?

The media scholar Des Freedman suggests paying special attention to how the

various players in the field of media power interact and how they relate to other elites.³ Intra-elite interaction between media, politics and business has been traditionally intense in post-Soviet Russia. Already in the late perestroika period high-profile journalists and politicians worked closely together, mingled socially and provided each other mutual support, with liberally-minded journalists playing an important role in the break-up of the Soviet Union. However, subsequently many of them were quickly reintegrated into the new power structures, which emerged during the early 1990s. Their rapid absorption was facilitated by a combination of two principal influences; the pursuit of individual career interests and increasing institutional pressure, first exercised by media tycoons – such as by the oligarchs Vladimir Gusinskii and Boris Berezovskii – and then by the state. Moreover, the transitional character of post-Soviet Russian society meant for the media community that the shadow of Soviet management practices have not disappeared easily.

In their article Gatov et al. show that many elements of management practices dominant in the Soviet media not only persisted well into the new Russia but were skillfully developed further. Initially, it was media managers who were professionally raised in Soviet times who transferred old management styles into newly established media. More surprisingly, younger media managers have played no less a part in reproducing Soviet-style practices. There is a striking similarity between the relationship between the Kremlin and its media bosses in the Soviet Union (where rewards were offered through *nomenklatura* membership) and these relationships today (where rewards are offered in form of money and influence).

³ Des Freedman, *The Contradictions of Media Power* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); see also Freedman, *Media Moguls and Elite Power: PERC Paper Series* (London: Goldsmith's University, 2015): 2.

From 2012 onwards, during Putin's third term, Russia's regime has gained clear authoritarian features. So much so that today control of the media through loyal media elites is a crucial cornerstone of Putin's political regime. Putin's return to the Kremlin in May 2012 went along with yet another significant restructuring of Russia's media; the landscape of Russian media came to be almost exclusively the domain of loyal media professionals ready to toe the line of their bosses. The few dissent voices critical of the regime's media policy who kept working for Kremlin-loyal media outlets went on an internal migration to the confines of programmes devoted to culture and history, thus leaving political news to more ambitious media professionals. A small number of journalists found shelter in the few remaining oppositional media outlets.

Some of the well-known liberally-minded journalists left the country for good. Many moved to Ukraine in hope to preserve their careers, or simply to stay safe. As recent events have shown some of these attempts were in vain. Two of the journalists Darya Malyutina interviewed for her research died in Kyiv; one was murdered, the other one (allegedly) committed suicide. For many other Russian journalists, however, emigration to Ukraine proved a wise decision, even though the fact that the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine imposed great pressure on them – as Russians – in an environment of increased suspicion and hostility. What has come in handy for them to succeed nevertheless is their long experience in terms of how to navigate journalistic independence and political loyalty.

This ability to credibly play by the rules without limiting one's professional creativity (something we have called *adekvatnost'*) is crucial for journalists and media managers alike. Some of the media managers we interviewed, as presented in the second article of this issue (Schimpfössl & Yablokov), have shown exceptional flexibility. They are highly capable of 'correctly' navigating permanently changing political environments. In many cases, this experience goes back several decades. Some media managers have led their

media outlets from the first years of post-Soviet Russia, others even from the late Soviet period, weathering the most radical changes from the Soviet communist system, the Yeltsin years turbulences, through to Putin's growing authoritarianism.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the military operation in Eastern Ukraine have signified a major turning point in the regime's evolution. Many observers of Russian media have noted that state-aligned channels quickly evolved into a propaganda machine, whilst among Western observers and journalists Russian television and Russian journalists began to be perceived as a serious security threat. The economic sanctions imposed by the US and the EU were meant to undermine the legitimacy of Putin's cronies by putting additional constraints on Russia's economy. Instead, as Ilya Kiriya demonstrates, the sanctions have had an adverse effect to what the Western governments intended to achieve; they have empowered the state-aligned media players in the market to gain control of previously independent companies and thus further boost their influence and increase their profits and undermine the survival of the few non-Kremlin-loyal media in Russia.

What makes the media sector particularly interesting is its specific position in between interaction between society, power structures and other elite groups as well as new technologies that force all players to stay alert and adapt. Gregory Asmolov and Polina Kolozaridi trace the making and shaping of Russia's Internet leaders in the last two decades. The authors see the Internet in Russia (known as RuNet) as a social construction which illustrates the power relations between various political actors. According to Asmolov and Kolozaridi, the evolution of Russia's Internet elites went through five stages since the late Soviet period. Enthusiastic scientists, while still under Soviet control, set up RuNet (stage 1). This paved the way for a rapidly growing Internet landscape in the 1990s (stage 2). In the 2000s, RuNet provided a platform for alternative media to prosper, attracting active civic participation (stage 3), which in the 2010s further

developed into a tool to organize offline civic mobilization (stage 4). After Putin's return to the Kremlin RuNet came under complete state control (stage 5).

This special issue cannot by any means cover all aspects of the phenomenon of post-Soviet media elites. Amidst the increased attention to the impact the Russian media have on the global political agenda – via the alleged cyber hacks of the US government institutions or *RT's* coverage of domestic politics in the Western democratic states – it is especially crucial to further explore the inner workings of the Russian media. Their present-day problems, especially the media's evolution into a propaganda tool, go far beyond the constraints the Putin regime exercises. On the one hand, the media's limitations are far more complex and historically more deeply rooted. On the other hand, the media professionals' potential, diversity and, in some cases, civic consciousness are far greater than often assumed. Moreover, media do not exist in isolation. As much as the Kremlin's objective is to maintain legitimacy and control through media, as much the media elite is under pressure to be seen as acceptable, interesting and legitimate by their audiences. As such, an analysis of Russia's media elite's features can also shed light on, and give hints at, how Russia will be developing in a post-Putin age.