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# Reflections on Putin and the Media

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**Abstract:** A political scientist investigates the extent to which, under Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin consolidated control over the Russian media. Conceptually, a contrast is drawn between the Soviet and post-Soviet systems of media control. Data-bases are used to illuminate imbalances of television coverage of presidential candidates and public officials as well as the evolution of popular distrust of the media. Comparisons are drawn with President Alberto Fujimori's defunct regime in Peru and speculation is offered as to the fragility of the Kremlin's control over the media.

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"**K**nife—Munich—Putin." Such were the answers to a series of questions posed by Alexander Char, a guest on the Russian television show "Phenomenon," who claimed he could plant details of a murder mystery in the minds of his audience. Any telepathic powers notwithstanding, Char had clearly not anticipated that the name of the Russian prime minister would be placed in such awkward company, and now the show's host was onstage, calling for an assistant to erase the last entry from the white board on display to millions of viewers. "They're telling me we need to change the name," he proclaimed. "Everyone is nervous." Yet "Putin," having apparently been written with a permanent marker, could not be erased. In the end, Char suggested that he had only been trying to prompt the protagonist's first name, and "Vladimir" was appended to the list. "Knife—Munich—Putin—Vladimir": it was a dubious solution to the problem.

This incident was widely reported last fall as an example of the climate of fear that Vladimir Putin has instilled in the Russian media.<sup>2</sup> Under

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<sup>2</sup>See, for example, *Moscow Times* (September 15, 2008).

Putin, it is understood, the assertive (if frequently corrupt) coverage that characterized the Yel'tsin years has given way to docile and flattering treatment of the Kremlin on the air and in the press. The advocacy group Freedom House reported in 2009 that "the Kremlin rel[ie]d on Soviet-style media management," with control exerted through a "vast state media empire," and the advocacy group once again rated the Russian media as "not free" (Freedom House, 2009).

Yet the incident is also revealing for what it says about the nature and extent of Kremlin control of the media. For while the Kremlin has shown great interest in directing what is reported on the evening news, outside of that realm it has largely granted a free hand to television executives to draw viewers any way they can. Counter to the characterization by Freedom House cited above, this is not the Soviet model: it is impossible to imagine "Knife—Munich—Brezhnev."<sup>3</sup> Rather, it is a system of media control that permits and makes allowances for other forms of information and entertainment.

Putin consolidated rule over the media on the cheap. Rather than controlling all sources of information, he restricted his attention to the "commanding heights" of the media industry—national television most especially—and has mostly given these outlets the right to determine non-news programming. Instead of attempting to own all the media he does control, he has often relied on surrogates and economic pressure to keep editors and journalists in line. And in recognition of his incomplete control, he has tolerated more diversity of coverage and programming than is generally understood, even permitting his successor as Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, to overshadow him on the evening news.

It is a system suited to Russia's authoritarian (not totalitarian) and capitalist (not socialist) present. At the same time, it is a more fragile form of control than that which existed in the Soviet era. If and when a political crisis erupts in Russia, the Kremlin may find that the media are less firmly under its command than it might have hoped.

## THE COMMANDING HEIGHTS

In an interview with NBC news in July 2006, Putin defended his country's record on media freedom, arguing that with more than 3,500 radio and television companies and in excess of 40,000 print outlets, the Kremlin "could not control them all even if we wanted to."<sup>4</sup> In his premise, Putin is almost certainly correct. An important lesson of communism is that state control is easier when the number of firms is small. Realizing this, the communist governments that took power after the war in capitalist Eastern Europe not only nationalized but merged numerous small enterprises to

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<sup>3</sup>On the goals and methods of media control in the late Soviet era, see Remington (1989).

<sup>4</sup>Transcript available at [www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2006/07/12/1443\\_type82916\\_108525.shtml](http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2006/07/12/1443_type82916_108525.shtml).

reduce the logistical demands of state planning (e.g., Kornai, 1992, ch. 17). Nothing of similar scope has been attempted in postcommunist Russia, although some consolidation in the media sector has been encouraged.

Still, Putin's argument must be put into the proper context. For his purposes, complete control of the media is unnecessary. Putin is no democrat, but neither is he a totalitarian dictator along the lines of Stalin or Mao. He is in the autocratic "mainstream," willing to do what it takes to hold onto power but not interested in fundamentally changing society.<sup>5</sup> For that, it was sufficient to seize the commanding heights of the media industry. First and foremost, this meant controlling the three national television networks that provide most Russians with news about their country and the rest of the world: Rossiya, Channel One, and NTV. In their ability to penetrate Russian society, all other media pale in comparison.<sup>6</sup>

Putin came of political age during the 1990s, when television was used as a weapon in the struggle for power and money.<sup>7</sup> The anti-Gorbachev putsch of 1991 foundered in part on the failure of the plotters to establish monopoly control of the airwaves.<sup>8</sup> In 1996, the television media circled their wagons around Boris Yel'tsin to prevent a return to power by the Communists. During the "bankers' war" of 1997, media under the control of "oligarchs" Boris Berezovskiy and Vladimir Gusinskiy attacked the government in retaliation for awarding shares in telecommunications holding Svyazinvest to a rival. Finally, in 1999, the presidential fortunes of former prime minister Evgenii Primakov were scuppered through a series of malicious television reports, and in the parliamentary elections that year and the presidential election the next, voters appear to have responded strongly to the messages provided by the broadcast networks (White, Oates, and McAllister, 2005; Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya, 2009).

Under Putin, the once-lively national television media became mouthpieces for the Kremlin. Top officials from the three national television networks meet at the Kremlin every Friday to discuss the previous week's and next week's news coverage (*Russian Newsweek*, August 4, 2008). Not every story is directed from above, of course: journalists and editors who understand their station's editorial policy can act with some autonomy. Yet there is a high degree of coordination, undoubtedly made easier by the small number of relevant players.

Below the commanding heights, Kremlin control is less complete. At the Russian News Service radio network, journalists were told that 50 percent of reports on Russia must be positive (*The New York Times*, April 22, 2007), but political commentators regularly excoriate the Kremlin on the radio station Ekho Moskvyy. The opinion page disappeared at *Kommersant*,

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<sup>5</sup>This distinction parallels Ronald Wintrobe's (1990) comparison of "tinpot" and "totalitarian" dictators. See also Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, the figures on media consumption given in White and McAllister (2006).

<sup>7</sup>Two superb accounts of this period are Mickiewicz (1999) and Oates (2006).

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Bonnell and Freidin (1993).

one of Russia's two main business dailies, but columnists routinely criticize Kremlin policy and occasionally Russia's leaders in the newspaper *Vedomosti*, a joint venture of the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*. And on the national television networks, nearly any non-news programming is fair game, an environment that led to the embarrassing "Knife—Munich—Putin" episode.

Finally, there is the Internet, now available to a quarter of all Russians.<sup>9</sup> When the European University in St. Petersburg was shut down in early 2008 on the questionable pretense of fire-safety violations—the real cause seems to have been a university-sponsored program to train election monitors—news spread through a thriving blogosphere. Petitions were circulated; some university faculty posted their version of events online. It is difficult to determine whether local and federal officials felt pressured by these actions, but in the end all outstanding fire-safety violations were declared resolved and the university was reopened.<sup>10</sup>

The Federal Security Service apparently monitors some electronic mail (Freedom House, 2008), and I have heard stories about interventions with video content providers, asking that they make certain clips harder to find. But nothing approaching the "Great Firewall of China" has been implemented in Russia, and it would probably be difficult to do so quickly. For now, alternative sources of information are available to those with the interest and resources to seek them out.

## OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL

In seizing the commanding heights, Putin acquired or reasserted state ownership of key parts of the media sector. This is especially true of television, where news coverage is today dominated by three national networks owned either directly by the state or by state-owned Gazprom. The first of these—*Rossiya* [Russia]—never left state control, even during the chaotic 1990s. In contrast, Channel One was majority-owned by the state during the Yel'tsin era but under the actual control of oligarch Boris Berezovskiy. That state of affairs ended after the sinking of the submarine *Kursk*, when coverage on Berezovskiy's network—then known as ORT—depicted the president as callous and out of touch. As recounted by David Hoffman, Putin met with Berezovskiy shortly after the crisis. "I am going to run ORT," Putin is said to have told Berezovskiy. "I personally am going to run ORT" (Hoffman, 2002, pp. 487–489). Shortly thereafter, Berezovskiy sold his minority stake in the network and left the country for exile in the United Kingdom.

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<sup>9</sup>This is the proportion of those surveyed who use the Internet at least once a month (Public Opinion Foundation, [www.fom.ru/projects/23.html](http://www.fom.ru/projects/23.html)).

<sup>10</sup>For a full summary of events, see *Novoye Vremya* (March 24, 2008).

A similar fate befell NTV, the Yel'tsin-era startup that gained prominence for its aggressive reporting of the first Chechen war. Part of oligarch Vladimir Gusinskiy's Media-Most holding, NTV was sold under duress to Gazprom in early 2001. Like Berezovskiy, Gusinskiy left the country for exile abroad.<sup>11</sup> Today, Gazprom is in control of numerous media assets, with interests in television, radio, and publishing.

Yet the Kremlin has stopped short of owning outright every important media outlet in the country. Rather, plausible deniability about the extent of state control is maintained by encouraging Kremlin-friendly businessmen to invest in the media. In 2006, for example, the Russian business daily *Kommersant* was purchased by Alisher Usmanov, a billionaire born in Uzbekistan who is best known in the West as a major shareholder of the Arsenal Football Club.<sup>12</sup> Shortly after acquiring control, Usmanov replaced the paper's top management, which proceeded to shut down the paper's opinion page.

Economic and other pressure can also be brought to bear on media not owned by the state, though this is not always successful. Such tactics were on display in the case of Natalya Morar, an investigative journalist for the high-quality news magazine *Novoye Vremya*. After reporting in late 2007 on a Kremlin slush fund used to finance political parties (*Novoye Vremya*, December 10, 2007), Morar (a Moldovan citizen but permanent Russian resident at the time of the incident) was barred from entering the country (Lipman, 2009), and the magazine's advertisers disappeared overnight.<sup>13</sup> Still, the mother/son team that owns the magazine seems willing to subsidize its existence, and for now *Novoye Vremya* survives.

Finally, not every media outlet owned by the state toes the Kremlin line. Ekho Moskvy, by far the most assertive national broadcast media outlet, is in fact majority-owned by Gazprom. Its editorial independence is formally protected by a charter dating to the early 1990s that gives the station's journalists veto power over appointment of their chief editor. The station is also financially independent—indeed, it returns a profit to Gazprom—perhaps further reducing its vulnerability. And the Kremlin may actually value the window on the public that Ekho Moskvy provides; it is said that Russian president Medvedev reads transcripts of the station's broadcasts online.<sup>14</sup>

## KEEP THEM COMING BACK FOR MORE

The Kremlin is regularly lambasted for lopsided political coverage on Russia's three national television networks. Following the 2008 presidential

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<sup>11</sup>These events are chronicled in Lipman and McFaul (2005).

<sup>12</sup>For a profile, see *The Times* (August 30, 2007).

<sup>13</sup>Author's interview with Yevgeniya Albats, editor of *Novoye Vremya* and a commentator on the radio station Ekho Moskvy (July 2008).

<sup>14</sup>Author's interview with Yevgeniya Albats (July 2008).

elections, for example, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe issued a critical report that highlighted “a media environment ... not conducive to a truly democratic process.” Dmitry Medvedev, Putin’s chosen successor, “was omnipresent on TV.” This and other concerns led the Assembly to cast doubt on the fairness of the election.<sup>15</sup>

The bias is real: data from NewsLab Russia, a media monitoring project based at the University of Wisconsin, show that Medvedev received four minutes more coverage on the average evening news broadcast than the other three candidates combined.<sup>16</sup> There was a similar lopsidedness in coverage of the 2007 parliamentary elections, when the Kremlin-backed United Russia party received approximately half of all coverage devoted to any of eleven parties on the ballot (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2008). Certain individuals are not shown at all: “stop lists” maintained by the networks dictate who is never to receive airtime (*New York Times*, June 3, 2008).

Nonetheless, Russian television demonstrates some sensitivity in how it crafts messages to avoid alienating viewers. Unadulterated propaganda is generally ineffective: viewers understand that they are being fed the party line, and they therefore fall back on whatever they were predisposed to believe.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, enough real information is provided to keep viewers guessing about the line between fact and fiction. This can be especially effective when high-quality information is scarce, as with the 2008 war in Georgia, when Russian viewers were treated to a mix of images of genuine suffering by South Ossetians and apparently inflated casualty counts.<sup>18</sup>

The tendency to skew news reports toward what citizens believe *should* be the case may help to explain a striking regularity, as illustrated in Figure 1: ever since his inauguration as Russia’s president in May 2008, Dmitry Medvedev has received systematically more news coverage than Vladimir Putin. Although Putin may have had a monopoly on real power, at least in the immediate post-election period, Russian viewers are accustomed to seeing the president attend summits, host foreign dignitaries, deliver instructions to subordinates, and deliver the New Year’s Eve address. Were Putin to have visibly usurped these roles, it might have demonstrated too starkly the true state of affairs.<sup>19</sup>

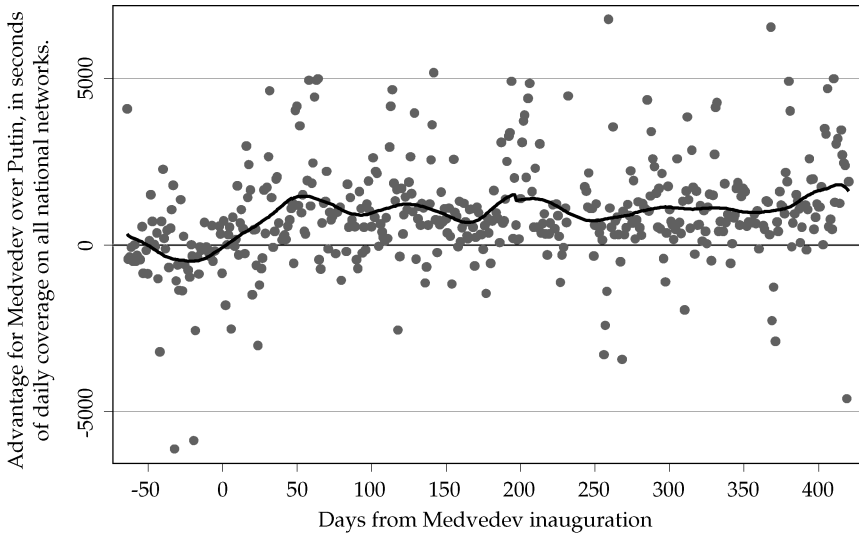
<sup>15</sup>Report available at <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc08/EDOC11536.pdf>; see also the report issued by the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations ([www.cjes.ru/bulletin/files/auth/2008/auth\\_rus\\_en\\_9.doc](http://www.cjes.ru/bulletin/files/auth/2008/auth_rus_en_9.doc)).

<sup>16</sup>Author’s calculations using data from NewsLab Russia, an online digital archive of Russian television news available at [www.creeca.wisc.edu/newslabeurasia/newslab\\_russia.html](http://www.creeca.wisc.edu/newslabeurasia/newslab_russia.html).

<sup>17</sup>For evidence that Russian viewers filter news reports through the perceived biases of television networks, see Mickiewicz (2008).

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, *Moscow Times* (August 18, 2008).

<sup>19</sup>In this sense, contemporary Russian television follows Soviet custom in its emphasis on the formal status of those who are covered. As Mickiewicz (1999, p. 54) notes: “Unbridled competition for coverage of Politburo members was held in check by rules relating to status. Members of the ruling Politburo were to be covered in full ...”

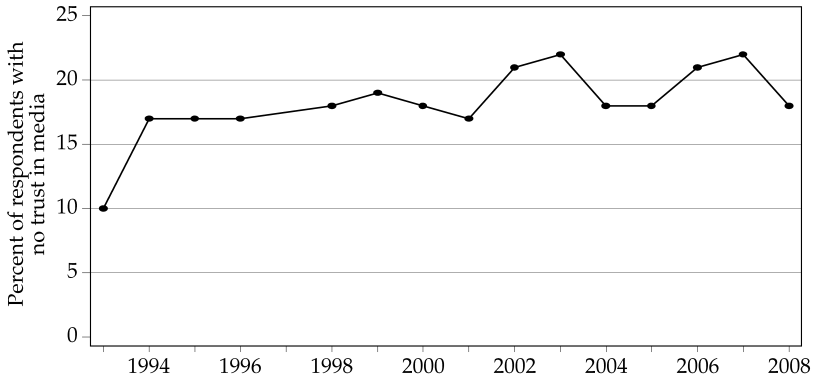


**Fig 1.** Comparison of Russian television news coverage of Medvedev and Putin, March 3, 2008 to June 30, 2009. Each dot represents one day's coverage on Rossiya, Channel One, and NTV; the line represents a locally weighted regression. *Source:* Daily figures published in *Kommersant*; no data reported for the New Year's holiday period. Not included in figure: November 5, 2008 (Medvedev's state-of-the-nation address), December 4, 2008 (Putin's televised Q&A session), and April 6, 2009 (Putin's address to the Duma); see text for details.

The strategy of mixing fact and fiction is reminiscent of the Soviet practice of maintaining credibility *vis-à-vis* *foreign* audiences by selectively publishing disinformation in major media outlets (Axelrod and Zimmerman, 1981). What is arguably novel about the post-Soviet case is the concern with domestic audiences. To varying degrees, cable and satellite television, the Internet, and modern life all compete for the public's time and increase the number of events with which individuals are at least vaguely familiar. Russian citizens are therefore more likely to change the channel or simply turn off the television if they are dissatisfied with what is broadcast. This was demonstrated in dramatic fashion after the Gazprom takeover of NTV in early 2001. With the change in editorial policy and departure of many of the network's veteran journalists, NTV's market share dropped from 17.9 percent in 2000 to 12.6 percent in 2001.<sup>20</sup>

Russia's television executives must therefore be more responsive to popular taste than their Soviet predecessors if viewers are to be anywhere near the television set when the news comes on. Swan Lake no longer cuts it. Today, audiences tune in to "Fabrika Zvyezd," the Russian version of "American Idol," and then stay for the news. This approach is especially

<sup>20</sup>Data from advertising marketer Video International.



**Fig 2.** The evolution of distrust in the media. *Source:* Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoye mneniye 2008* [www.levada.ru/sborniki.html].

effective on Rossiya and Channel One, which generally have access to better entertainment offerings than does rival NTV, and which for historical reasons broadcast their main evening news program in the middle of prime time. NTV compensates by packing more of its news broadcast with sensationalist stories and “infotainment.”<sup>21</sup>

## PUTIN’S ACHILLES’ HEEL?

On the surface, Putin’s media strategy has been remarkably successful. Although the assertion of control hurt his reputation abroad, and may have permanently alienated some of the liberals who initially backed Putin’s presidency, the long-term damage among domestic audiences appears to be limited. As Figure 2 illustrates, the percentage of Russians who fully distrust the media is perhaps up slightly from the 1990s, but not markedly so. Putin’s struggle with the media magnates is forgotten or ignored: by 2006, 35 percent of Russians did not remember the NTV affair, and 38 percent claimed to remember but were largely indifferent to its outcome.<sup>22</sup> Notwithstanding the change in ownership and management of Russia’s networks, television continues to dominate the information landscape. Consumption of the print media has dropped precipitously in recent years, more than offsetting the slow growth in Internet use.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>On average, only 40 percent of broadcast time on NTV’s main evening news program is devoted to politics, the government, the economy, or foreign affairs, versus 48 percent on Channel One and 51 percent on Rossiya (author’s calculations using data from NewsLab Russia).

<sup>22</sup>Data from Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoye mneniye 2006*, available at www.levada.ru/sborniki.html.

<sup>23</sup>In 2003, 14 percent of Russians never read newspapers. By 2008, that figure had risen to 37 percent. Data from Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoye mneniye 2008*, available at www.levada.ru/sborniki.html.



Still, Russians are not fools. Throughout the evolution of public opinion on the second Chechen war (support having given way to opposition), the overwhelming majority of Russians have said that they somewhat or fully distrust media reporting on Chechnya. Although hesitant to assign blame for poor reporting to the government—in 2007, only 27 percent of those surveyed agreed that the authorities were repressing independent media<sup>24</sup>—Russians seem to have a realistic view of what they can learn from the news. Both in 2000 and 2007, approximately half of those surveyed said it was possible to “extract” (*izvolech'*) useful and objective information from televised reports; very few agreed that television news provided a “full and objective picture” of current events.<sup>25</sup> Putin has not convinced Russians that everything they see on television is true. He has simply persuaded them, for now, to keep watching.

To understand the potential implications of Putin's media strategy, it is useful to recall the rule and fall of Peru's Alberto Fujimori.<sup>26</sup> Like Putin, Fujimori used the wealth and power at his disposal to emasculate much of the country's media. Also like Putin, however, he stopped short of imposing a uniform system of state ownership and censorship. As documented by the economists John McMillan and Pablo Zoido, Fujimori relied instead on his secret police chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, to induce compliance through the bribery and blackmail of Peru's most important media owners. Smaller outlets were deemed not worth the effort. “What do I care about [the newspaper] *El Comercio*? They have an 80,000 print run,” Montesinos declared on videotape. “What worries me is Channel 4” (McMillan and Zoido, 2004, p. 84).

On the face of it, Fujimori's approach was reasonable. So long as he had the support of most Peruvians, he could ignore a few pesky newspaper-reading intellectuals. Moreover, seizing actual ownership of the media was costly and unnecessary: there were denunciations at home and abroad after Fujimori stripped Channel 2's owner of his citizenship and thus his right to own the station.

Yet in the end, it was the media that brought down Fujimori. Channel N, the one private television station that Montesinos did not bribe, acquired and repeatedly played a videotape that showed the secret police chief bribing an opposition congressman. Other stations soon followed suit. Fujimori was forced to flee the country.

In principle, the “minimalist” system of media control used by authoritarian leaders like Putin and Fujimori can work indefinitely, but it is vulnerable to shocks. Control of only the commanding heights leaves room for information to circulate at lower altitudes, threatening the regime's carefully calibrated message. In Fujimori's case, those stations that had

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<sup>24</sup>Indeed, some Russians may view state censorship as a corrective to the abuses of the 1990s; see, for example, Tennison (2010).

<sup>25</sup>All figures in this paragraph from the Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie 2007*, available at [www.levada.ru/sborniki.html](http://www.levada.ru/sborniki.html).

<sup>26</sup>The material in this and the following paragraphs draws on McMillan and Zoido (2004).

been part of Montesinos's network risked losing credibility and audiences if they simply ignored the reports running on Channel N.

Using surrogates and economic pressure to induce compliance is also risky. Businessmen who eagerly displayed their fealty to Putin by buying and taming unruly media would have no hesitation to shift course if they detected a change in the political currents. Among Russia's economic elite, there is no personal loyalty, only opportunism and fear.

Finally, Putin may have increased his political vulnerability by giving media executives a free hand to draw audiences for non-news programs as they see fit, subject only to the constraint that they not criticize the regime. News broadcasts that convey an image of diligence and competence among Russia's leaders are not reinforced by any strong ideological message in other programming.

Putin's popularity and influence have proved remarkably durable, surviving even the formal transfer of power to Dmitriy Medvedev and an economic crisis that has played out on Putin's watch. Yet sooner or later he may face a challenge to his authority, whether from within or outside the regime. One response may be to ratchet up control of the media. But it is difficult to engender wholesale change in institutions overnight—it took several years to create the system now in place. Putin may find himself wishing that he had established firmer control of the media when he had the chance.

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