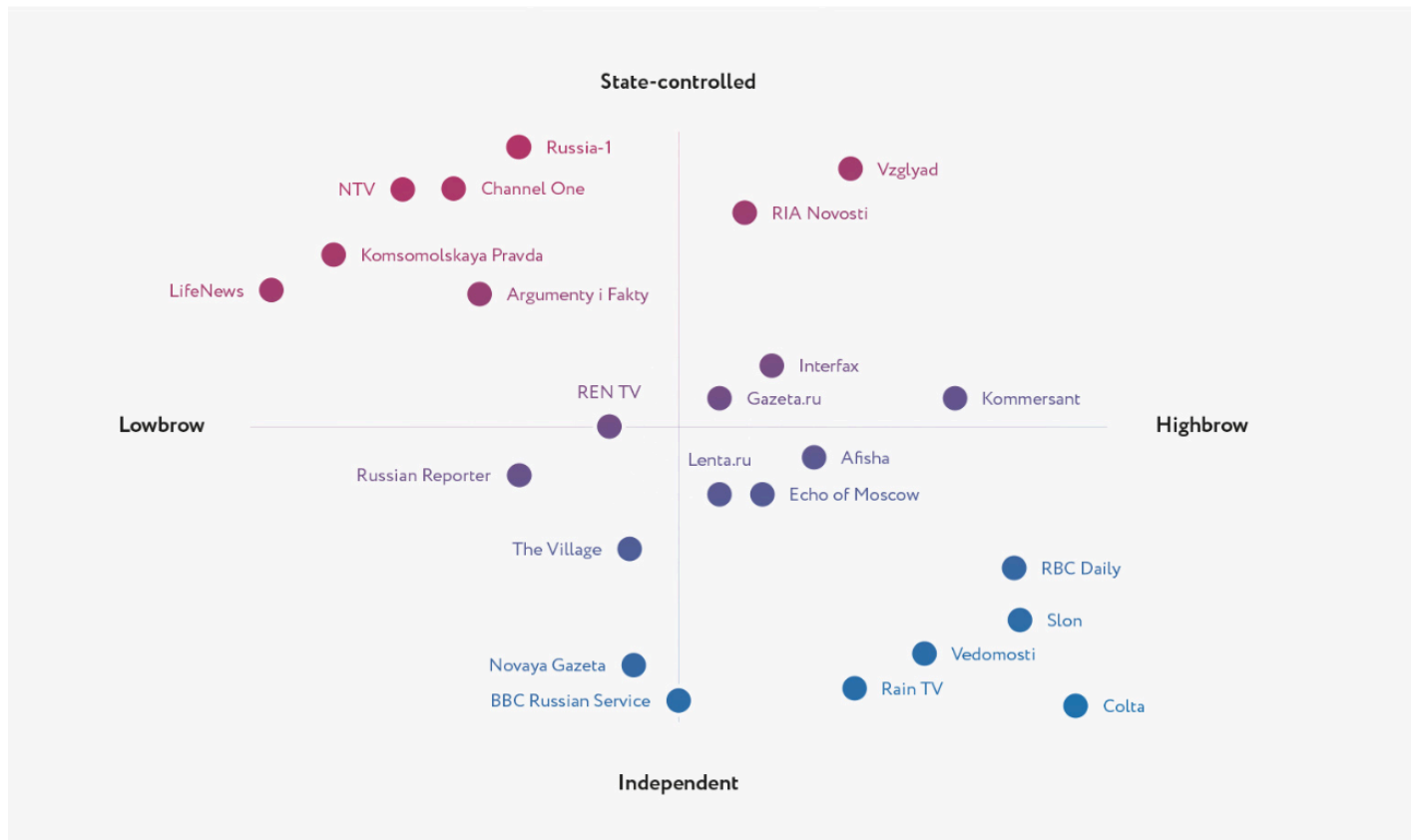


How Russia's media pluralism was eroded under Vladimir Putin

Maryam Omid describes a mapping of the Russian media landscape in 2014.



The opening ceremony of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics was widely considered to be a spectacular affair, even if the staged potted history omitted more than a few unsavoury moments from Russia's past. Just as telling was the response to a technical glitch. When one of five glowing snowflakes failed to transform into an Olympic ring, the live footage broadcast across Russia was substituted with a recording from a rehearsal in which everything went according to plan. Although an arguably minor incident, the cover-up was indicative of an intensifying clampdown on Russian media.

The many editorial reshuffles, dismissals and closures has resulted in a dramatically reconfigured media landscape — a confusing state of affairs even for the keenest of Russia watchers. To make sense of it all, in April 2014, the team at The Calvert Journal, an online publication dedicated to contemporary Russian culture, created a map of Russia's principal media players to understand better their allegiances and where they fall on the political spectrum. The [Media Compass](#) was the result of hours of discussion between team members, several of whom had worked for Russia

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<http://freespeechdebate.com>

media such as RIA Novosti. We selected the most influential media organisations and situated them on a graph, with the x-axis moving from lowbrow to highbrow and the y-axis running from state-controlled to independent. Past coverage of political events was taken into consideration. Once completed, the compass was sent to several other Russian journalists for feedback.

Although the positioning of each entity is entirely subjective, the compass also offers a more objective summary of each organisation including circulation figures. What emerged was unexpected: a much more nuanced picture of Russian media than we had anticipated and than that presented in the West — a picture that reflects the complex wider political landscape. To be sure, the editorial team at a newspaper may strive to be impartial but what does it matter if that newspaper is owned by a Kremlin ally who can dismiss staff at any time? This after all was the experience of staff at Russian news website Lenta.ru. In March, [Galina Timchenko, the website's editor-in-chief, was removed from her post](#) by Alexander Mamut, the oligarch who owns British bookshop chain Waterstone's and who has close ties to the Kremlin. Timchenko was ostensibly fired for "extremism" after Lenta.ru published an interview with a far-right Ukrainian nationalist; she was replaced by Alexei Goreslavsky, the head of a pro-Kremlin website. Her dismissal led to the mass resignation of more than 70 journalists from Lenta.ru, some of whom have since joined Timchenko on a new [Russian-language media project, Meduza](#), based not in Russia this time but in Latvia in the hope of evading censors.

Timchenko's removal was not an isolated event. The turning point came in December 2013 when a surprise decree on the [Kremlin website announced that state-owned media outlet RIA Novosti would be replaced](#) by news agency Rossia Segodnya (Russia Today but not RT). The announcement was a blow to the staff at RIA Novosti, which, despite being state-backed, had earned a reputation for its balanced coverage. To make matters worse, RIA Novosti's head was replaced by Dmitry Kiselev, an ultra-conservative TV presenter who is well-known for his homophobic views: in April 2012, he announced that gay people should be banned from donating blood or sperm and that their hearts should be burnt rather than used in transplants.

It was downhill from there. A month after RIA Novosti was disbanded, [TV Rain, one of the few independent news organisations in Russia, faced closure](#) after cable operators pulled the plug on the channel, a move that was described by the opposition as politically motivated. The decision followed a controversial online poll asking Russians whether Leningrad (now St Petersburg) should have been surrendered to the Nazis in World War Two to save lives. Then came Moscow's annexation of Crimea in spring 2014, and in its wake a crackdown on the media. A number of resignations followed, including that of prominent [journalist Pavel Sheremet who stepped down from his post at public television channel OTR](#) in protest against the Russian government's foreign policy. Writing on his Facebook page, Sheremet accused the Kremlin of "hounding journalists who talk about events in Ukraine and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict in a way that differs from the Kremlin's unfettered propaganda".

Add to this a series of laws passed in 2014, which threatened to further choke press freedom. First

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<http://freespeechdebate.com>

came the mass media law, which makes the posting of false information, expletives and extremist materials a criminal offence. [Under the law, which came into force on 1 August 2014](#), blogs with more than 3,000 unique visitors a day are also considered mass media and must register with media watchdog Roskomnadzor. Then, in September, [the Russian parliament passed a law banning foreign investors from holding more than a 20% stake in the country's media organisations](#). The law was not to come into force until 2016 but would affect a slew of publications including business daily Vedomosti, newspapers The Moscow Times and The St Petersburg Times and the Russian versions of Esquire, GQ, Cosmopolitan, Vogue, Forbes and National Geographic.

In November 2014, [it was reported that Rossia Segodnya planned to open bureaus in 19 capitals](#) around the world as part of efforts to expand Russia's global reach. What all these moves ultimately point to is the ratcheting up of the information war with the west. Russian media organisations — and the vast majority of Russians — view western media as highly biased, an opinion not entirely without justification. Take the coverage of the Crimea crisis as an example. [Writing in The Guardian](#), Tony Brenton pointed out that the British tabloid The Sun declared that it was “Putin's Missile” that brought down the Malaysia Airlines MH17 flight was published before there was any evidence. True objectivity may be impossible in the media, which is why access to a variety of sources of information is crucial. Sadly, in Russia, such variety has been shrinking by the day.

Maryam Omid was features editor of *The Calvert Journal* and online editor of *Free Speech Debate*. You can follow her on Twitter at [@maryam_omidi](#).

Published on: November 17, 2014