

# The Last Gasp of Empire: Russia's Attempts to Control the Media in the Former Soviet Republics

By David Satter

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He is the author of three books and the director of a documentary film. His first book was *Age of Delirium: the Decline and Fall of the Soviet Union*, which was published in 1996. He made a documentary film, *Age of Delirium*, based on this book, which received the 2013 Van Gogh Grand Jury Award at the Amsterdam Film Festival. Satter has written two other books about Russia, *Darkness at Dawn: the Rise of the Russian Criminal State* (2003) and *It Was a Long Time Ago and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Past* (2011). His books have been translated into Russian, Estonian, Latvian, Czech, Portuguese, and Vietnamese.

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# Executive Summary

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The independence of the former Soviet republics has been a bitter pill for Russian President Vladimir Putin to swallow. This was made clear in dramatic fashion in late 2013, when under pressure from the Kremlin, Ukraine backed away from an agreement with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Moscow, sparking citizen demonstrations in Kyiv.

The Russian regime is also finding ways to increase its influence on the news media in the independent states. The objective appears to be to manipulate their media environments in order to promote dependence on Russia and distrust of the West and to help Russia to pursue its political and commercial objectives—such as persuading former Soviet republics to adhere to the Eurasian Customs Union or promoting opposition to the United States and NATO.

The push by Russia to influence the media among its near neighbors not only marks an important thrust of Russian foreign policy, it also poses a major challenge to the international media development community, which over the past two decades has spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to help build sustainable and independent media institutions in the former Soviet space. That work is now at risk. Russia's growing success in extending its influence through the media creates a complex and at times hostile environment for anyone who is trying to support independent media and the free flow of information, ideas, and opinions.

The purpose of this paper is to look at a selection of the post-Soviet countries where Russia is focusing its external media efforts. It examines some of the tools and methods that Russia has used and the effectiveness of those efforts. While the new propaganda drive has been more successful in some countries than others, the evidence suggests that this effort will be a growing challenge for supporters of independent media.

The 14 former non-Russian Soviet republics can be broken down into four groups—Baltic, Slavic, South Caucasian, and Central Asian—each with its own special characteristics:

- **The Baltic republics** are Westernized members of NATO. They do not depend on the Russian media for information, but the media space is vulnerable to manipulation by Russian interests that slant news coverage and plant disinformation. The most important institution that promotes Russian interests in the Baltics is the First Baltic Channel (PBK), a Russian-owned, Russian-language television network that is viewed by more than 4 million people. PBK is not a heavy handed propaganda station. It strives to appear objective and provides high quality



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cultural programming. But it brings the Russian view on the news to viewers who would not otherwise be exposed to or receptive to it.

- In the **Slavic republics**, Belarus and Moldova are open to Russian influence in part because of cultural affinity with Russia and in part because of the low prestige of the national television networks. In the case of Belarus, Russia has used the Russian media to put pressure on its dictatorial leader, Alexander Lukashenko, but generally maintains a friendly attitude toward its most reliable ally. The media in Ukraine is not subject to direct Russian control, but the oligarchs who run the Ukrainian media and have ties to the regime are as wary of the West as their Russian counterparts. Accordingly, Russian advisors have played an important role in engineering the centralization of control over the Ukrainian press.
- In the **South Caucasus republics**, Russian influence is greatest in Armenia, where there is an unspoken agreement not to criticize Russia or its policies on state television. Russia's influence is far less pronounced in the other two South Caucasian republics, Georgia and Azerbaijan. In Georgia, there is deep resentment over the support by Russia of the two breakaway regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In Azerbaijan, oil wealth has made possible a degree of independence from Russia, and the population is increasingly oriented toward the Turkish media.
- It is in the **Central Asian republics** where Russian attempts to control the information space have met with the greatest success. The Russian media is highly regarded in Kyrgyzstan and in 2010 a Russian media attack on the Kyrgyz president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, touched off a series of events that led to his removal. In both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the coverage of international news and the interpretation of world events is regarded as the province of the Russian media with the result that their citizens largely see the world through Russian eyes.

The result of Russia's policies is that there is propaganda pressure nearly everywhere in the former Soviet republics, and this pressure, which is sometimes subtle and sometimes direct, stands as a barrier to a democratic future and an ethical and professional press.

The media development community needs to give thought to ways to counter Russian efforts to influence the information space in the post-Soviet republics. Ultimately, this requires support for foreign broadcasting, for the

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enabling institutions that ensure media independence, and for high quality journalism, including investigative journalism in the former Soviet republics. The support can take various forms. While financial support to journalistic organs that are run as commercial enterprises is impractical, foreign investors may be able to play a role by buying or taking stakes in media organizations, helping them to invest in better equipment and methods for building financial independence. Training programs for journalists and media managers in the former Soviet Union, while no panacea, can help acquaint them with well-tested practices. It will also require the media development community to collaborate more closely with broader development and foreign policy efforts to support democratic institutions.



# Introduction

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For most of the 2000s, the Russian economy grew at a rate of 7 percent a year, creating a substantial middle class and lifting millions out of poverty. Russia's dramatic economic progress gave it new standing in the international arena. Russia, however, did not become more liked and trusted as a result. According to an August 2011 Gallup Poll, more people worldwide disapproved of the Russian regime than approved of it. The figures were 27 percent approval as against 31 percent that disapproved, while 33 percent of the respondents said that they did not know or refused to answer.<sup>1</sup>

During Vladimir Putin's first term as president, 2000-2004, Russia did not make a major effort to affect the way it was perceived. Beginning in 2005 with the launch of the Russia Today cable television station, however, Russia has turned increasing attention to public diplomacy or "soft power."

The use of soft power is not, of course, restricted to Russia. The political scientist Joseph Nye has defined soft power as the "the ability to get what you want through attraction." In its Western variant, it is almost always used to highlight the attractive aspects of Western democratic systems. It focuses generally on long term attitudes and is deployed to promote the core values that underpin society in the West.

In Russia, soft power is increasingly being used, but its application is different. Its main purpose is to support specific Russian foreign policy objectives. In its use of distortion, veiled threats, and corrupt connections, Russian soft power is a form of pressure, less onerous than direct military pressure but a form of manipulation nonetheless.

For Russia's leaders, soft power can be deployed through Russian-supported NGOs that use accusations of fascism to discredit political opponents or by ethnic Russians who demonstrate in support of Russia's foreign policy goals. Russia's most important instrument of influence, however, is the media. In terms of worldwide impact, its most effective media organ is the cable television station, Russia Today (RT) which claims to be able to reach 630 million people in more than 100 countries.

Russia Today was founded as an around-the-clock English language station, but it now also broadcasts in Spanish and Arabic and will soon begin broadcasting in French. Although formally independent, it is financed from the Russian government budget. Since 2005, when the station was founded, the government has increased its budget tenfold from \$30 million to more than \$300 million today. Its official mission is to "reflect the Russian position on important international questions" and inform its audience about "events in Russia."<sup>2</sup> The creation of the new station was initiated by Mikhail Lesin, the former minister of the press, and Alexei Gromov, the

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press secretary to Putin. Lesin campaigned for the creation of the station as early as 2001 stating, “We should propagandize ourselves. Otherwise, we’re going to look like bears. How much is it possible to deceive Americans about the state of affairs in Russia? It’s necessary to speak the truth.”<sup>3</sup>

The chief editor of Russia Today, Margaret Simonian, has run the station since it was founded. She was appointed to the post of chief editor at the age of 26, having previously been a member of the Kremlin press pool for the Rossiya television station. She is reported to have close ties to Gromov.

The German newspaper, *Tagesspiegel*, has compared Russia Today with the export of energy products and military technology as among the most effective instruments of Russian foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to influencing the former Soviet republics, where the languages in which Russia Today broadcasts are not widely spoken and the population is familiar with both Russia and the Russian language, however, the network is of limited assistance. In these countries, Russia seeks instead to shape public opinion by planting stories in the local press and effective use of the state controlled Russian media.

The push in the former Soviet republics comes at a time when Russia is consolidating its international propaganda machine, closing down the RIA Novosti news service and launching a new service (also called Russia Today). The move was “ostensibly to promote its image abroad more effectively,” according to John Lough, associate fellow for the Russia and Eurasia program at Chatham House. “The Kremlin was unhappy with the agency’s ‘liberal’ coverage,” Lough wrote in an article posted on Chatham House’s website. (See <http://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/196226>.)

Russia attaches great importance to its relations with the former Soviet republics. The June 2000 Russian “Concept of Foreign Policy” called for “the formation of a good neighborly belt along the perimeter of Russia’s borders.” At passport control in Moscow’s Domodedovo Airport, one set of booths is reserved for Russian citizens and citizens of the “allied nation of Belarus.” Another is for the citizens of the former Soviet republics, excluding the Baltic republics and a final set of booths is for “citizens of foreign countries.” The implication is that the former Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic republics, are not really “foreign.”

Trying to influence the former Soviet republics is not a simple matter for Russia. Attitudes toward Russia differ sharply from one republic to the next. Whereas in Tajikistan 94 percent of the population approves of the Russian regime and only 2 percent disapproves, in Georgia only 6 percent of the population approves of the

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Russian leadership while 61 percent disapprove. Attitudes also differ depending on who is in power. In Ukraine, for example, Russian spin doctors played a key role in the Ukrainian media under former president Leonid Kuchma but were banned by former president Viktor Yushchenko. They have been reintroduced by the current president, Viktor Yanukovich.

The non-Russian former Soviet republics can be divided into four groups:

- **Baltic**—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia
- **South Caucasian**—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia
- **Central Asian**—Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan
- **Slavic**—Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova

In the Baltic republics, there is relatively little pro-Russian sentiment except among ethnic Russians. For this reason, Russian attempts to influence the media environment are often not overt but carried out with the help of control over key media assets such as the First Baltic Channel (PBK).

In the Slavic republics, the attitude toward Russia is broadly favorable. In Belarus and Moldova, Russia can rely on the influence of the Russian media, which is widely followed in those republics. In Ukraine, the media is controlled by local oligarchs but they have close ties to Moscow and share the concerns of Russian oligarchs about the moral and political influence of the West.

In the South Caucasus, the situation is different in each of the three republics. Russia's cultural influence in the region has diminished. In Armenia, Russia's role in guaranteeing Armenia's security assures that the local media is pro-Russian. In Georgia, which fought a war with Russia in 2008, the media is anti-Russian, and Russia has little ability to shape public opinion. In Azerbaijan, Russia's influence is weak because the country is increasingly reliant on Turkey for news and entertainment.

It is in Central Asia, where Russian influence is strongest and it is in those countries that have the greatest dependency on Russia that Moscow has shown the ability to use its influence to undermine governments and shape the course of events.

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Despite these different outcomes, the media strategy of Russia in all of the former Soviet republics is basically the same: to promote Russia's foreign policy objectives and discourage democratic developments in the former Soviet republics that would serve as an example of the benefits of democracy to the people in Russia itself.

The mechanism through which specific Russian media campaigns in the former Soviet republics are organized is not discussed publicly. But according to the reports of journalists in Moscow, Gromov meets regularly with the chief editors of the national Russian television stations and major publications and gives them political instructions from the Presidential Administration. Any media organization that ignores these instructions faces retaliation against the business interests of the owners.

In many instances, there is no need for direct instructions. Russian owners of media outlets in the former republics are generally well aware of the coverage that is expected from them.

Following is an examination of Russian efforts to shape the media environments in 10 of the 14 non-Russian former Soviet republics, with particular attention focused on one country from each of the four groups. The countries that have been left out are either relatively impervious to Russian influence because of the tight control over the media exercised by the authoritarian government (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) or strongly influenced by the Turkish media (Azerbaijan). The situation in Tajikistan is very similar to that of neighboring Kyrgyzstan, which is treated in depth.



# The Baltic Republics

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## Lithuania



On July 1, 2013, Lithuania took over the presidency of the European Union. This was the first time that a former Soviet republic had assumed this role. Under these conditions, Russia can no longer credibly threaten Lithuania militarily, but many Lithuanians feel they are still the target of a Russian information war.

The Lithuanian media is too small to attract the kind of investment from the West that might improve its quality. As a result, media outlets are generally owned by local businessmen who often treat their media properties as adjuncts to their business activities. Under these circumstances, the media becomes vulnerable to corruption, and it is widely believed by the Lithuanian public that many articles that appear in the Lithuanian press are paid for.

Media organizations—including important ones—may be sold to Russian-owned groups. In 2009, the Russian-owned Lithuanian bank Snoras took control of 34 percent of the Lietuvos Rytas media group which consists of *Lietuvos rytas*, the main daily newspaper, a television station, a news portal, and several other publications.

Although there is rarely proof of a corrupt relationship, the Lithuanian press is full of strange coincidences. On August 29, 2013, for example, the newspaper *Lietuvos žinios* (“Lithuanian News”) published an article about the production of shale gas in Poland. Lithuania receives all of its natural gas from Russia. But Lithuania has the same geology as Poland and is also capable of producing shale gas, which would help the country achieve energy self-sufficiency. The article began by describing the progress of Polish shale gas production. It then, however, went on to discuss the dangers of shale gas exploitation for the water supply and the environment. The owner of *Lietuvos žinios* is Achema, a fertilizer producer, and the largest consumer of natural gas in Lithuania. Achema receives natural gas at a sharp discount from the Russian gas monopoly, Gazprom. A similar discount is not enjoyed by any other Lithuanian producer.

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There is criticism of Russia in the Lithuanian press, but serious criticism can be dangerous. On June 1, 2013, the Lithuanian news portal, *Delfi.lt*, was hit by a massive cyber-attack after it printed an article alleging that Russian agents had engaged in vote buying during the Eurovision song contest. The appearance of the article prompted a threat of “radical action” contained in an e-mail to the editors if the article was not taken down. *Delfi.lt* then suffered a distributed denial of service (DDOS) attack in which its server was targeted with millions of bogus requests making its website inaccessible to the outside world.

In an interview with *The Economist*, Vytautas Businskas, the owner of Hostex, which is the internet service provider for *Delfi.lt* and other Lithuanian sites, said that “there were as many as 50 million requests for the server in a couple of minutes; the data flow was as big as six gigabits per second.”<sup>5</sup>

During Lithuania’s struggle for independence, the media was highly respected. Several newspapers had a circulation of 300,000 in a nation of 3 million. In 2003, polls indicated that 80 percent of the population still respected the media. Today, however, polls show that only 50 percent of Lithuanians have a high opinion of the media.

Russia influences the media environment in Lithuania with the help of the Russian language television station, First Baltic Channel (PBK), which is well financed and offers high quality cultural and entertainment programs as well as rebroadcasts of the news from Russia’s Channel One. In 2012, the total audience of PBK in the Baltics exceeded 4 million viewers.

The owners of PBK, whose main headquarters is in Riga, are the Russian businessmen Oleg Solodov and Alexei Plyasunov. In the 1990s, Solodov received the right to re-telecast the programs of Russia’s Channel One in the Baltics for his media company, the TEM ART group. Information about how Solodov obtained this business is not publicly available, but such a lucrative relationship with Russian state television is usually the result of high level connections. Solodov fled Latvia in the mid-1990s after being charged with defrauding investors in a finance company in Riga. He was later able to return and set up PBK and turn it into a media empire. Other stations also rebroadcast Russian television programs and video material. The cost of the Russian material is kept artificially low with the help of subsidies from the Russian government.

Russia has several advantages in influencing the media environment in Lithuania. PBK is well financed and can buy popular films that the financially strapped Lithuanian stations cannot afford. Its cultural programming is

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often excellent, and it invites leading political and entertainment figures as guests. Its rebroadcast of the news from Russia's Channel One is followed by a broadcast of the local news, which, although generally objective, has a negative slant, emphasizing Lithuania's economic problems and conflicts between the majority and the Russian speaking minority.

The influence of PBK is formidable, but the Russia-based Russian language television stations also have an impact. Cable packages include the Russian channels and Russian distributors have concluded agreements that assure that some U.S. cable channels—the Discovery Channel, for example—are available in Lithuania only in Russian. Lithuania is also among the more wired countries in the world and many Lithuanians watch Russian television channels over the Internet.

A survey in 2006 estimated that one-third of the population was still receiving Russian media, according to Nerijus Maliukevicius, a professor at Vilnius University and an expert on the Lithuanian media. Since 2006, the percentage has undoubtedly declined, but Maliukevicius estimated that it still amounts to 20 percent of the citizens of Lithuania.

In the years since Lithuania declared its independence and, in particular, since Lithuania joined NATO in 2004, Russia has sought to strengthen its ties with the Russian-speaking population and, on occasion, to depict it as in need of protection from what it says are the pro-fascist sympathies of the Lithuanian society and government.

The glossy journal, *Baltisky Mir* ("Baltic World"), which is published by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and distributed in the Baltic republics free of cost, has positioned itself as the defender in Lithuania of the Russian-speaking population. In an article on a neo-Nazi demonstration in Vilnius in the February 2011 issue entitled, "Lithuania for Lithuanians," the journal ran a photo of skinheads carrying a black banner with a swastika-like symbol, skull and crossbones, and Lithuanian flags. It said that the demonstrators reflected the aggressive mood in Lithuanian society that has been caused by "the inability of the authorities to resolve the problems inspired by the economic crisis." The article said that a social upheaval is a real possibility and added that "a social explosion would have been inevitable if a half a million citizens had not emigrated from the country in search of a better life."<sup>6</sup>

Specific Russian policies are actively advanced in Lithuania by the Russian site *regnum.ru*, and the Russian language newspaper *Litovskiy Kurier* ("Lithuanian Courier"), which circulates widely in Lithuania, but whose financing is not transparent.

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These publications have been instrumental in encouraging opposition to Lithuanian plans for energy independence. They have argued that the exploitation of shale gas, to which Russia is opposed, will ruin the environment. This has had an effect. When representatives of the Chevron Oil Company arrived in Lithuania to discuss a shale gas project, they were met with demonstrators, many of them carrying signs in Russian.

*Regnum.ru* and *Litovskiy Kurier* also campaigned to prevent the construction of a new nuclear power plant in Lithuania that was to have been built with the assistance of General Electric and Hitachi. They wrote about the ecological damage that would result from the construction and operation of a Lithuanian nuclear plant and said that Lithuania did not need its own nuclear power plant because a new power plant had just been opened in Kaliningrad and Belarus was building a plant near the border. Both plants are under the control of Rosatom, the Russian atomic energy agency. They were promoted by *regnum.ru* and PBK even before they were started.

In this instance, the campaign was a success. When an advisory referendum was held on the Lithuanian nuclear power plant project, 60 percent of those who participated were opposed. As a result, work on the plant, which was still in the planning stage, was suspended.

## Estonia



Like the other two Baltic republics, Estonia is also a target of Russian influence. Particularly significant is the role of PBK, which has a close relationship with the city of Tallinn, the capital. PBK has a contract with Tallinn worth 425,000 euros for the production and transmission of three shows: *Our Capital*, *Good Morning, Tallinn*, and *The Russian Question*.

The city of Tallinn is controlled by the Center Party, the most popular party among Russian minorities. Its leaders are frequent guests on PBK. In 2010, the Estonian secret service named the mayor of Tallinn, Center Party leader Edgar Savisaar, as a Russian agent. The reason was the discovery that he had asked the Kremlin for money to support his party.<sup>7</sup>

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The impression of a close tie between Moscow and the Estonian Center Party was reinforced in 2011 when the TV Center station in Moscow aired a positive film about Savisaar shortly before the parliamentary elections in Estonia. The station is owned by the Moscow city administration but can be viewed on cable in Estonia. The decision to show a propaganda film in Moscow about an Estonian politician on the eve of the Estonian elections was taken as proof that Russia was backing the Center Party and trying to interfere in the elections.

“The question of whether PBK supports the Estonian Centre Party is not interesting because it’s so obvious,” said Oleg Samorodnij, a former correspondent at *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, who recently published a book on Russian influence in Estonia. “I don’t believe that decisions are made by PBK Estonia and I don’t believe that decisions are made by BMA in Riga either. I think that decisions are being made in Moscow,” he said.<sup>8</sup>

At the Compatriots Regional Congress, a meeting of ethnic Russians from all three Baltic republics that took place in Riga in 2011, many Russian nationalists from Estonia complained that PBK was supporting the Center Party instead of the “authentic” Russian parties in Estonia. This complaint even was included in the resolution adopted by the congress but was later edited out of the final draft. The decision to leave the complaint out was made by the Russian embassy in Riga. This fact alone shows who has the final word in these matters.

## Latvia



Latvia is the Baltic republic with the highest percentage of ethnic Russians, and it is of particular interest to Russia strategically. Boris Karpichov, a former KGB agent now based in Britain, told *The Guardian* that Latvia’s geographical position made it an ideal venue for Russian espionage, smuggling, and money laundering. “Russia’s security services use Latvia like a trampoline, to send their people to Europe and the United States,” he said.<sup>9</sup> Latvia is also the republic where Russian attempts to exert influence through the media have had the most success.

In January PBK was the second most watched television station in Latvia, viewed only slightly less than the market

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leader, TV3. In 2011 the BMA media holding company had about 30 percent of Latvia's TV advertising market, or around 7 million euros. In 2010, its turnover in the Baltics was 15.6 million euros, with half of its earnings derived from Latvia.

PBK is a tough competitor for Latvia's national channels, in part, because it has certain built-in advantages. There is no need for it to invest in original programs. It gets 70 percent of its content from Russia's Channel One and REN networks. It also broadcasts over cable networks using a satellite and therefore does not pay for terrestrial telecasting, which costs the national channels over half a million Latvian lats a year (about \$975,000 U.S.).

Perhaps the most striking success of PBK was the election in 2009 of Nils Usakovs, the station's former news editor, as the mayor of Riga, the largest city in the Baltics. Before joining PBK, Usakovs was an ITAR-TASS Russian news agency correspondent in Latvia. He leads the Harmony Center, a five-party coalition that enjoys the support of the ethnic Russians of Riga, who make up half of the population. The world economic crisis hit Latvia particularly hard, and Usakovs was depicted by PBK prior to the elections as the savior of the Russian-speaking community. PBK gave exhaustive coverage to May 9, the NGO formed by Usakovs to support war veterans, and there were reports that PBK even agreed with him on the text of stories in advance.

Leonid Jakobson, an investigative journalist in Riga, published a set of e-mails that allegedly showed that the SVR, the Russian foreign intelligence agency, financed Usakovs' election. Last year, unknown assailants attacked Jakobson in the stairwell of his home, slashing his face with a knife. Meanwhile, Usakovs' party has signed a cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia party, deepening concerns that it is a proxy for Moscow's business and political interests. Several Latvian Russian language newspapers, *Vesti Segodnja*, *Chas*, and *Telegraf*, the largest Russian-language newspaper, are now owned by Russian billionaire and senator Andrei Molchanov and Eduard Yanakov, a former senator. Molchanov's stepfather was for many years the vice governor of St. Petersburg, where Putin got his start politically.

Nalaliya Vasilieva, the news producer for PBK, said that she has known Usakovs for 15 years and they sometimes call each other and talk things over. She said that PBK, as a private channel, is only interested in profits and they show whom they like and those whom they consider to be friends. She said that sufficient objectivity is maintained if they sometimes show other points of view as well.<sup>10</sup> "We are all friends," Usakovs added. He said that he does not control the coverage but simply "informs" the media.

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# The South Caucasus

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## Armenia



Armenia's leaders regard Russia as their protector and the guarantor of the country's security. Armenia's borders with Iran and Turkey are controlled by Russian troops. Armenia is the only country in the South Caucasus that did not ask Russian forces to leave after the fall of the Soviet Union.

In a poll taken by the Gallup Organization in 2011, three out of four persons in Armenia said that they approve of the track record of Russia's current leadership, making it the fifth most pro-Russian country in the world. The only countries where Russia is more popular are Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, and Uzbekistan.<sup>11</sup>

TV in Armenia is still largely government controlled. It as a rule does not cause any problem for Russia. The exceptions are two networks, Kentron and Yerkir Media, which are independent of the government. Kentron is owned by an Armenian oligarch and Yerkir Media by an opposition party,

the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. They criticize Russia on occasion. Armenian State TV will allow criticism of Russia only if it comes from members of the opposition. They, for example, can criticize Russia's policies in the Karabach conflict. If Russian representatives ask about such criticism, the Armenian leaders can describe it as a dissenting view. There is almost no criticism of Russia on state TV from members of the government.

Russian representatives make various goodwill gestures in Armenia that usually contain a touch of condescension. The Russian embassy, for example, congratulates Armenian schoolchildren on the first day of school, September 1, and uses the occasion to stress the friendly ties between Russians and Armenians. Why it is Russia's place to be congratulating Armenian children on going to school is not explained.

Occasionally, however, tensions break through the surface of the ostensible amity.

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An incident that led to a rare outburst of anti-Russian sentiment involved an Armenian man who was arrested after his truck was involved in a fatal accident near Moscow on July 13. Eighteen people died when the truck driven by Hryachya Harutunyan collided with a bus near the town of Podolsk. Harutunyan was one of dozens of survivors who were taken to a hospital. Police then took him from the hospital to court where Russian television showed him unshaven and wearing a woman's housecoat as charges of causing death by dangerous driving were read out.

In its coverage, Channel One in Russia repeatedly stressed Harutunyan's ethnicity and said that he "mumbled" during his court appearance. In Armenia, this coverage was interpreted as a reflection of racist attitudes in Russia. Yerkir Media condemned Russia for the incident and about 20 Armenian journalists wrote to their colleagues in the Russian Union of Journalists to complain of prejudicial coverage.

The Russian embassy in Yerevan responded to the protests by criticizing the protestors. It expressed regret at what it said was the misuse of a sad event to whip up anti-Russian sentiment. "We consider it completely unacceptable," the statement said, "to use a great human tragedy for political ends and to undermine Russian-Armenian relations. Mercenary, politicized comments are unacceptable."

Armenians do not get Russian news directly. None of the Russian channels is rebroadcast. The Russian language Mir channel, the cooperative station of the Commonwealth of Independent States, is the only Russian language station that is available on television in Armenia. The other channels are available on cable or satellite. In general, those Armenians who subscribe to the Russian channels, however, do so in order to watch the movies and entertainment shows. As a result, the Russian news media does not have significant independent influence.

The media organs in Armenia that are the most likely to be critical of Russia are the newspapers. They sometimes run sharply anti-Russian editorials. It is frequently argued in the Armenian press that Russia has no real concern for Armenia but is simply pursuing its interests. There is also criticism of the recent warming in relations between Russia and Turkey and speculation as to why Russia considers this necessary. But there are also pro-Russian articles in the papers. Some people in Armenia genuinely support Russian policies, but it is widely believed that many of the pro-Russian materials are paid for.

Armenians are strongly influenced by the broadcasts of the Armenian Service of Radio Liberty which has between 11 and 15 percent of the radio audience in the country. Although Armenians are pro-Russian, they are not anti-American, in part because many Armenians have relatives living in or have visited the United States.

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The popularity of the Radio Liberty Armenian Service has led Russia to begin radio broadcasts on the Voice of Russia in Armenian. The beginning of the Voice of Russia Armenian Service was widely regarded in Armenia as a counter measure. The Voice of Russia Armenian programs began shortly before the February 2013 presidential elections in Armenia for six hours a day. In general, the Voice of Russia covers the same stories as Radio Liberty and tries to give objective coverage. Many listeners of the Voice of Russia think they are listening to an Armenian station. But the situation changes when the Voice of Russia deals with an issue affecting Russia.

When a Voice of Russia reporter interviews an Armenian official on a Russian-related issue, for example, he invariably tries to get the official to acknowledge Armenia's debt to Russia. The interviewer asks questions such as, how can we stop the onslaught of Iran and Turkey? And what do you think about Armenians working in Russia and sending money back to Armenia? These are not just questions but, in their way, also commentaries.

## Georgia



Georgia arguably has had the worst relations with Russia of any of the former Soviet republics. Since the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., it is the only republic to have been the victim of a Russian invasion.

In general, under President Mikheil Saakashvili, Russian influence was almost non-existent. The exceptions were commercial interests. One minister forbade people to speak Russian in his office. Ordinary people were reluctant to speak Russian in public. After Bidzina Ivanishvili was elected prime minister in 2012, the attitude softened.

Georgians do not accept the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia but many retain some affection for Russian culture and memories of a shared life during the existence of the Soviet Union. Many Georgians watched Russian television before the 2008 war, and Soviet films were popular. After the war, it was still possible to receive Russian stations with a satellite dish. Since Ivanishvili was elected, however, three distributors of cable networks, Aeti TV, Silk TV, and Kavkaz TV, have been including Russians channels.

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A year after the change in Georgia's government, Russia has little influence in Georgia. There are no diplomatic relations; Switzerland is representing Russia's interests. Georgians are welcoming to Russian tourists and some Russian performers attract a large crowd, particularly if they are known from Soviet times. But Russia has little impact on Georgian opinion and is unlikely to have any as long as Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain occupied.



# Central Asia

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## Kyrgyzstan



Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest and, as measured by Transparency International, most corrupt countries in the world, but it is of strategic importance. It is home to the Manas Air Base through which U.S. forces in Afghanistan are supplied. The presence of the base and the location of Kyrgyzstan at the intersection of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, China, and Tajikistan have inspired Russian efforts to exert control.

According to Teymur Sariev, the former Kyrgyz finance minister, the vast majority of Kyrgyz continue to regard Russia as their country's strategic partner.<sup>12</sup> Many also remember the Soviet Union positively. In February 2012, the newly elected president Almazbek Atambaev said, repeating an earlier statement by Putin, "Anyone who wants to return to the Soviet Union is crazy and anyone who doesn't has no heart."<sup>13</sup>

Russia dominates the information space in Kyrgyzstan. The Russian media is much more highly regarded than the Kyrgyz media. According to Mars Sariev, an independent Kyrgyz political observer, "The mentality is that information from Moscow is information from the capital. Local television is yellow and not reliable. At the same time, everyone reads [the Russian newspapers] *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Kommersant*."<sup>14</sup>

International news, in particular, is monopolized by the Russian media. The local Kyrgyz television stations and newspapers, which do not have their own correspondents, use what is presented by the Russian media. People in Kyrgyzstan can see two Kazakh television channels, KTK and Khabar on cable. The Kazakh media had correspondents in Iraq and Afghanistan and are covering what is happening in Russia. But Kazakhstan has close ties to Russia and the Kazakh media is subject to censorship and self-censorship. Because some Kyrgyz watch the Kazakh television channels, there is Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan through Kazakhstan.

There are also journalists in Kyrgyzstan, some of them Russian citizens, who are widely believed to represent the interests of Russia in the country. They are outspoken in accusing the United States of using the Manas base to transport narcotics and of trying to sabotage ties between Kyrgyzstan and Russia.

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“The U.S. military is not visible,” said Tilek Isaev, an independent Kyrgyz journalist and political observer, “but one gets the impression from some of the reporting in the press that they are everywhere and are trying to start a war in Kyrgyzstan so that the base can continue its existence.”<sup>15</sup> Russian newspapers such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Moskovsky Komsomolets* include supplements about Kyrgyzstan that are written by Kyrgyz journalists where these accusations are repeated.

The Russian and Kyrgyz press gave particular attention to the case of Alexander Ivanov, a Kyrgyz citizen, who was shot to death in 2006 by a U.S. Air Force security forces serviceman while undergoing a security check at the entry to the Manas Base. A spokesman for the base said that the U.S. serviceman opened fire after Ivanov, a fuel truck driver, brandished a knife.

They have also repeated accusations that planes from the base are dumping fuel and that this is causing skin conditions and other illnesses and killing crops. A military spokesman answered these charges by saying that on the very rare occasions when U.S. aircraft have jettisoned fuel, it was done at such high altitudes that it did not jeopardize human health or crops.

Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan is greatly reinforced by the dominance of the Russian language. Almost all information is in Russian. Very little is published in Kyrgyz and what there is in Kyrgyz is generally translated from Russian. “Everyone is accustomed to this,” said Isaev, “and the country has become closed on itself and content with getting what it needs from Russia.”

The most powerful medium in Kyrgyzstan from either country is Russian television. More than 10 Russian TV channels are available in Bishkek directly from Russia. Russian channels can be received throughout Central Asia, but the region’s other governments place restrictions on quality or attempt to block them on terrestrial and cable TV. In Turkmenistan, for example, they are available by satellite only, but they are still widely watched.

In Kyrgyzstan, the Russian channels are treated as national channels. Kyrgyz watch Russian films and rely on the Russian media for news and entertainment. They are familiar with Russian political figures.

The most striking example of the power of Russian television in Kyrgyzstan was the role that it played in the overthrow of the former president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In 2008, Kyrgyzstan faced an energy crisis and food shortages. Bakiyev appealed for help to Russia, which was uncooperative. At that point it is believed by local political observers that Bakiyev offered to end the U.S. presence at the Manas air base if he was paid. In early

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2009, with its financial crisis worsening, Kyrgyzstan secured an aid package from Russia that included \$150 million in grants, \$300 million in loans, and \$1.7 billion in credits. Manas was not mentioned, but the Russian media said that, as a quid pro quo, the Kremlin expected action on the base. As soon as the agreement was signed, however, Bakiyev began to negotiate with the United States. The \$450 million in support from Russia arrived in late March. In July 2009, Bakiyev signed a new lease for Manas with the United States.

It is generally believed that Bakiyev's behavior led to a decision in Moscow to destabilize his regime. Beginning in January 2010, the principal Russian channels—Channel One (ORT), RTR, and NTV—broadcast almost daily reports describing the corruption of Bakiyev and of his family. On March 23, ORT aired a detailed attack on the Bakiyev regime, accusing it of nepotism, cronyism, and massive corruption. It highlighted the role of Bakiyev's son, Maxim, who was accused of stealing Russian credits and said that the Bakiyev regime was "enmeshed in family ties and corruption."<sup>16</sup> The Russian broadcasts had an enormous effect. Kyrgyz viewers at first were puzzled by the level of attention to Kyrgyzstan. They then decided that Russia intended to get rid of Bakiyev and the Bakiyev regime's days were numbered.

At the same time, Russia imposed a tax on fuel exports to Kyrgyzstan that led to an immediate rise in gasoline prices and a deterioration of living standards. The Russian actions came amid growing anger over the corruption of the Bakiyev family. The price increases touched off rioting that quickly escalated into a full scale revolt that was joined by many of Bakiyev's former associates. After ordering security forces to open fire on demonstrators outside of government headquarters, Bakiyev fled the country.

Following the removal of Bakiyev, Kyrgyzstan was ruled by a provisional government headed by Rosa Otumbaeva. In an interview with the RIA Novosti Russian news agency, she called on strengthening "spiritual ties with Russia" in all fields, including education. "We've seen how other countries live. We prefer permanent ties with Russia. Russia is Europe for us," she said.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, Russia continued to use the media to influence the political situation in Kyrgyzstan. The government made plans for a new constitution that would introduce a parliamentary system in order to avoid the abuses of Bakiyev, which were associated with one-man rule. Russia, however, opposed a parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan because of the precedent it would set for Russia.

The author of the new constitution was Omurbek Tekebayev, the acting deputy chairman of the provisional

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government and a person widely seen as being anathema to the Kremlin because of his pro-Western views.

In January 2011, a video of Tekebayev having sex with a young woman was shown on Russia's NTV channel. The announcer said that the woman in the video was an employee of the Ministry of Finance who had been forced to take part by Tekebayev. It added that Tekebayev "aspires to become the president of Kyrgyzstan." The video had the desired effect. Tekebayev's Ata Meken party barely managed to enter parliament and did not join the ruling coalition.

## Kazakhstan



Kazakhstan has the highest per capita income in Central Asia, and it has the largest ethnic Russian minority, 23.7 percent. For these reasons, Russia is extremely eager to maintain its influence in the country.

As in Kyrgyzstan, the role of the Russian media in Kazakhstan is important. According to a 2010 report by the Kazakhstan Press Club, 88 percent of the Kazakh

audience watches Russian television. Kazakh language outlets account for only 6 percent of the media outlets in Kazakhstan. Of 2,700 periodicals cited in the report, only 453 were in Kazakh whereas 2,303 were in Russian.

To be sure, the government is increasing its support for Kazakh language media organizations. The Kazakh language content in the state media is more than 70 percent.<sup>18</sup>

The majority of the country's media organizations do not have their own staff reporters or even free lancers abroad. Editors in Kazakhstan routinely treat events that take place abroad as a low priority and take their material from the Russian media.

Yerzhan Karabekov, a staff member of the Kazakh Service of Radio Liberty, said that Russia is generally supportive of the Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbaev. During the election campaigns, he said, the Russian media cooperates with him actively, providing favorable coverage.

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Nonetheless, there are occasional tensions, often arising from Kazakh sensitivity to criticism. Yermukhamet Ertisbaev, Nazarbaev's political adviser, accused the Russian media of using its reporting on disorders in Zhanaozen in December 2011 in which at least 14 persons were killed to distract attention from Russia's own internal problems.<sup>19</sup>

Kazakh senators also took offense at the television station Rossiya 24 for a program in which the parliament of Kazakhstan was criticized for ineffectiveness. A Kazakh senator, Adil Akhmetov, suggested that the best way to assure favorable coverage from Rossiya 24 was through bribes.

He said that Kazakhstan placed advertising on Euronews and in various Azeri information media so it made sense to do the same with the big Russian television stations. "I think they also love money," Akhmetov said. "Let them praise us better."<sup>20</sup>

The occasional tensions over press coverage have been accompanied by attempts to minimize gradually the role of the Russian media in Kazakhstan. The Kazakh language is being converted to the Latin alphabet, specifically to reduce Russia's overwhelming cultural domination.

Dauren Banamuratov, the leader of the Bolashak public movement, said in March 2013 that the switch to the Latin alphabet will strengthen the country's national interests in the media environment. "It is a necessary step," he said. "We have a common media environment with Russia but, as a citizen of Kazakhstan, I am strongly opposed to it. Kazakhstan's media environment is completely swamped by Russian media. This is detrimental to the country's national interests."<sup>21</sup>

# The Slavic Republics

## Ukraine



Of the former Soviet republics, none is as important to Russia as Ukraine. Not only is Ukraine the most populous of the non-Russian republics and the most industrially developed, it is also home to 8.3 million ethnic Russians, more than 17 percent of the population. Russian-Ukrainian relations have a troubled historical background. Most Russians find it difficult to conceive of a Russia without Ukraine. Kiev was the first Russian capital, Russian tsars were buried there, and St.

Sophia's in Kyiv was the first Russian cathedral. Many Russians believe that an independent Ukraine cuts Russia off from its own history.

The Russian language was dominant in Ukraine, but in the years since the fall of the Soviet Union the use of Ukrainian has been officially promoted. It is now the language of 67 percent of the population, with Russian spoken by 24 percent. Other languages, including Hungarian and Polish, are spoken by 9 percent of the population.

In dealing with Ukraine, Russia stresses that the two countries have a shared identity and common destiny while nonetheless emphasizing Russian cultural and political superiority. This position is reinforced by the Russian Orthodox Church. The new Patriarch, Kirill I, has stated, "the core of the Russian World today is Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia and ... regardless of state divisions, of certain discords in politics, we spiritually and I would like to emphasize again spiritually, continue to be one people and the majority of us are children of the Russian Orthodox Church."<sup>22</sup>

As part of its effort to promote a closer relationship with Russia, the Kremlin seeks to convince Ukrainians that the West sees Ukraine as a *cordon sanitaire*, implying that the West's interest in Ukraine is strictly utilitarian. A persistent theme is that the West is intent on interference in post-Soviet countries and the Orange Revolution was a Western plot orchestrated by the Western intelligence services.

Against this background, Russia tries to shape the media environment in Ukraine through the Internet and television.

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Ukrainians are effectively divided into a small group that receives its information from the Internet and a much larger group that gets its news from television. The Russian authorities exert influence through the Internet by sponsoring pro-Russian bloggers and websites designed to promote Russian foreign policy goals and ideas critical of liberal democracy. Most effective are the web sites, *regnum.ru* and *novy region.ru*, which, although privately owned, have close ties to the Kremlin. Ukrainian journalists sympathetic to Russian positions often rely upon these two resources, while “pro-Ukrainian” journalists avoid them.

The Russian language is still the principal means of accessing global culture in Ukraine, and this helps Russia to exert influence, particularly in global affairs. Several Russian-based websites, such as *inosmi.ru* and *inopressa.ru* translate articles from the world press into Russian and are popular in Ukraine. Where the EU and NATO are concerned, however, these sites may present a subtly altered version of the original. One example was the use of the phrase “NATO operations in Iraq” although the military operation in Iraq was conducted outside the NATO framework. This had the effect of undermining support for NATO membership in Ukraine.

In general, however, Russia does not do well on the Internet, where Ukrainian subscribers and Russian subscribers often battle each other with the latter spending their time countering Russian official propaganda. This is not critical from the point of view of the regime because, according to Sergii Leshchenko, an investigative and political reporter with the online newsletter *Ukrainska Pravda*, the voters who support Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich don’t follow the Internet. “As a result,” Leshchenko said, “criticism there does not threaten his rule.”<sup>23</sup>

A more important influence on Ukrainian public opinion is television. This is established by media and advertising analysis and is treated as a given by Ukrainian politicians. The Russian authorities seek to influence Ukrainian television watchers through the Russian media, which is carried by cable networks, and indirectly by aiding Yanukovich in his efforts to control Ukrainian television.

Through the cable networks, Russians can view iconic Soviet era films and the products of Russian mass culture, in particular war films, soap operas, and spy and detective stories. All of this is popular in Ukraine, particularly in the Russian-speaking regions, and conveys a sense that Russia and Ukraine are still one nation.

The news programs on Russian television, which are tightly controlled by the Putin regime, are also influential. They have been credited with, among other things, leading many Ukrainians to support the Russian position in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Polls found that 60.5 percent of the population regarded Georgia’s actions as

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illegal despite the fact that the Ukrainian government of then-president Viktor Yushchenko was giving Georgia its strong support.

In addition to the direct influence on Ukraine exerted by Russian media outlets, the Russian authorities have had a role in the content and practices of the Ukrainian media. President Yanukovich sought to bring all of the major Ukrainian television channels under his control. The project was overseen by Igor Shuvalov, a Russian deputy prime minister and political technologist who has been facilitating Russian control of the Ukrainian media for the last 13 years.

Shuvalov first appeared in Ukraine as a political technologist in 1999, when he assisted in the successful presidential reelection campaign of Leonid Kuchma. He later was one of the creators of the system of secret instructions (*temnyky*) sent to television stations advising them of what they should cover and what they should ignore. Taras Kuzio, writing in the Jamestown Foundation's *Eurasia Daily Monitor* in July 2004, pointed out the paradox of Russian citizens helping to censor the Ukrainian media with the help of *temnyky*. Censorship is illegal in Ukraine and by allowing Russia to interfere in Ukraine's media through censorship instructions, Kuchma also violated the constitution's 2003 law on national security.<sup>24</sup>

With the election of Yushchenko in 2004, the influence of Russian spin doctors over the Ukrainian media came to a halt. It was resumed after the election of 2010 with the help of Shuvalov.

The principal television stations belong to four commercial groups, each of which works with the Yanukovich government. One group consists of the popular Inter channel, which is supervised by Shuvalov, and half a dozen minor channels. Since January 2013, it has belonged to the oligarchs Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Lyovochkin, the head of the presidential administration. Another group is in the hands of Rinat Akhmetov, the president's right-hand man, widely considered the richest person in Ukraine, and the chief sponsor of the ruling Party of the Regions. Two other media groups belong to ex-president Kuchma's son-in-law, Victor Pinchuk, and the Dnepropetrovsk oligarch Ihor Kolomoysky. Television is not the owners' main business and interest. They have accepted their roles in the media, according to Leshchenko, as the price of government support in areas like the privatization of energy and metallurgy.

Russia benefits from this arrangement because Yanukovich is orienting Ukraine toward Russia after the pro-Western Yushchenko presidency. Symptomatic of the tacit cooperation has been the appearance on

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Ukrainian television of a large number of jointly produced television programs that celebrate Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood. Russian participants dominate these programs both numerically and linguistically.

Russia, however, does not control the Ukrainian media. The oligarchical groups in the country have their own interests and conflicts, and media coverage in the country is a reflection of those interactions rather than pressure from outside.

Nonetheless, the Ukrainian media may veer in a pro-Russian and anti-Western direction as Yanukovich clings to power, bringing him increasingly into conflict with the West.

## Belarus



Russia dominates Belarus, and that domination is seen in Russia as confirmation of Russia's status as a regional superpower. Russian control over Belarus extends Russia's security zone and gives Russia strategic depth in the event of any future conflict with NATO.

Since the fall of the USSR, Belarus has also been at the core of the integration processes in the post-Soviet area. It cofounded the Union State of Belarus and Russia, the most advanced regional integration project so far. In Belarus, the media space is now dominated by Russian media companies. Three Russian television channels: Channel One (formerly ORT), Rossiya (formerly RTR) and NTV are available in Belarus and tend to be more popular than the Belarusian channels.

Due to its strategic importance to Russia, Belarus can count on Russian support. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is the guarantor of Minsk's pro-Russian foreign policy, and for that reason the coverage of him is generally favorable. There have, however, been periods in which Lukashenko has fallen out with the Kremlin resulting in campaigns against him on Russian TV.

On July 4, 2010, Russia's NTV broadcast a documentary titled *Kretniy Batka*, ("Godfather"), which presented a series of allegations that for years have been made against Lukashenko by the Belarusian opposition, including

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suggestions that he ordered the murders of several of his political opponents. On a number of occasions, Russian news bulletins and current affairs programs also aired comments made by Belarusian opposition politicians who have no access to official media in Belarus.<sup>25</sup>

Criticism on Russian television is invariably used as a means of putting pressure on him. The NTV documentary was broadcast after Lukashenko resisted Russian efforts to gain control of Beltranzgaz, the Belarus gas pipeline system. Russia acquired total ownership in 2011.

Such broadcasts serve as a signal of Russia's determination to achieve its objectives in Belarus, but they do not have much impact. All of the Russian programs shown in Belarus are rebroadcast after a one-hour delay, which allows Minsk to censor and replace any material critical of Belarus or its government. The original programs are available only to people who look for them online, and those are usually already critical of the regime.

As of late 2013, relations between the Kremlin and Lukashenko were good, and this was reflected in favorable coverage of Lukashenko on Russian television. Russia opposes the sanctions imposed on the Belarusian political and business elite by the United States and the European Union and, in this way, saves Belarus from international isolation.

## Moldova



Russia is pushing the idea of an “Eastern vector” of development for Moldova, a small republic located between Ukraine and Romania. As in other small former Soviet states, the information space is dominated by the Russian media. Moldova has four state frequencies which broadcast three television channels, of which two are foreign—a Russian channel and a Romanian channel.

Although Moldova's official language is Romanian, Russian dominates in many aspects of daily life and entertainment, for example, cinemas, night clubs and shopping malls, which gives Russian television an advantage. Moldovans also tend to have confidence in the Russian media by a wide margin. A 2008 survey showed that 67.7 percent of Moldovans had confidence in the Russian television channels. According to the Estonian International Centre for Defense Studies, “the Kremlin does not have to do anything special to influence

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Moldovans because they are already loyal subscribers to the Russian media and any Russian propaganda that it carries."<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, unlike Ukraine, Moldova has signed an agreement affirming its intention to sign on to a free-trade agreement with the European Union.

Moldova's Public National Broadcasting Company, Teleradio Moldova is neither popular nor well regarded in Moldova, which leaves the field open to the foreign stations. One result of this is confusion. In 2008, at the time of the Russo-Georgian war, 20 percent of the respondents in a Eurasia Foundation survey of perceptions about Moldova's European integration process said that Russia was to blame and 32 percent said it was Georgia, while 10 percent blamed the United States, which was not a party to the conflict.

# Conclusion

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In the years since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to expand its influence in the former Soviet states, which it frequently refers to as the “near abroad.” This effort has not always been successful. It has, however, been relentless.

The Russian authorities are familiar with the countries of the former Soviet Union, and their efforts are tailored to the specific circumstances. Their methods range from discreet or even furtive in the Baltic republics to overt and, on occasion, shameless in the case of the Central Asian republics, where the good will towards Russia and the contents of the Russian media translate into a high level of trust.

The success of Russian media efforts is hard to measure independently. Russia uses the media in the former Soviet states to promote its foreign policy objectives of the moment, whether the prevention of energy self-sufficiency for its neighbors or their adhesion to the Eurasian Customs Union. In those situations where Russia’s goals are achieved, for example, the recent decision of Armenia to join the Eurasian Customs Union or the decision of Ukraine to reject moves toward a closer association with the European Union, it is likely that this media pressure played a part.

Under any circumstances, Russia has contributed to the propagation in the former Soviet republics of a distorted picture of the world that is intended to turn the population against the West. This poses a major challenge to the international media development community, which now needs to find new and more creative ways to help build sustainable and independent media institutions in the former Soviet space. While Russia’s growing successes in extending its influence through the media creates a complex and at times hostile environment for this work, it is now more important than ever that the international media community devise a response that is more effective and sustained than previous efforts have been.



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