



# **Muzzling the Media: The Return of Censorship in the Commonwealth of Independent States**

*Christopher Walker*

## **Overview**

Only a decade and a half since the end of the Cold War, freedom of the press for millions of people across the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has come nearly full circle.

The media landscape across most of today's CIS in some aspects differs from that of the Soviet era, but in important ways is imposing a no less repressive news media environment. Gone is all encompassing ideological state media control. Russia – and most of the countries on its periphery – today features modern methods of information control that effectively shuts off the majority of people in these lands from news and information of political consequence.

This contemporary form of censorship is achieved through a mix of state-enabled oligarchic control, broadcast monopolies of presidential “families,” judicial persecution and subtle and overt forms of intimidation. The Internet is a principal alternative and challenger to media hegemony in the CIS. Despite the best efforts of the authorities, some degree of independent reporting persists in authoritarian CIS states due to the commitment of enterprising and courageous journalists, as well as the possibilities offered by new technologies. Bloggers and other new media practitioners continue to push the boundaries of 21<sup>st</sup> century journalism. But while the Internet remains relatively free in Russia and a number of other post-Soviet countries, it is fast becoming a target of greater interest for new regulatory intervention by the authorities.

Unlike during the Soviet era, some intrepid journalists now manage to report independently. Absent the rule of law and meaningful legal protections, however, the CIS is today one of the world's most dangerous places for journalists. Reporters willing to investigate issues such as political and corporate corruption are confronted by powerful vested interests striving to muzzle news professionals. Intimidation, physical violence, and even murder of reporters and editors have become commonplace. Journalists in virtually every CIS country have been victims of contract killings or otherwise met death under suspicious circumstances.

This brutal, efficiently repressive 21<sup>st</sup>-century media environment is made possible by a reconsolidated authoritarian model that has anchored itself from Belarus on the European Union's eastern border to Kazakhstan on China's western frontier. To ensure regime security and shield from public view rampant official corruption and rent seeking, post-Soviet authorities seek to limit scrutiny of their decisions and activities by silencing the independent press.

Russia has seen the most precipitous decline in recent years. Today, all of the major national television channels (Channel One, RTR, and NTV), from which most Russians get their news and information, have come under state control and are effectively censored. Control of national television news broadcasting is, however, only one piece of a broad and comprehensive campaign to bring independent media under the sway of the authorities.

Press freedom's trajectory in the CIS was not always so dire. In the period immediately preceding the Soviet collapse and in its immediate aftermath, the emergence of a nascent, independent press suggested a durable and institutionalized Fourth Estate might materialize. The Soviet era's waning days saw the exertion from below of significant pressure for greater freedom of expression and a diverse and independent reporting of news. In the former satellite countries of Central Europe – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia – and the Baltic states, censorship was cast aside and a free press rose from the ashes of the Soviet system. For the 12 non-Baltic former Soviet republics, however, the promise of the opening in the late 1980s and early 1990s was short-lived.

The repressive media landscape in the CIS is illuminated by findings from *Freedom of the Press*, Freedom House's annual survey of global media independence. The survey's most recent findings show that ten of the 12 post-Soviet states are ranked "Not Free," indicating that these countries do not provide the basic guarantees and protections in the legal, political, and economic spheres to enable open and independent journalism.

Of particular concern is the sharp downward decline in many CIS countries in the last several years. Authoritarian regimes have implemented an increasingly brutal response to home-grown and foreign journalists who take an independent line, especially since the first "color" revolution, in Georgia, in 2003. During this time, four major press freedom trends have emerged.

- First, authoritarian regimes have intensified mass media control, with television serving as the favored tool in regime security efforts.

- Second, legislative screws have been tightened across the region to exert further control on the media and impede independent reporting. In countries such as Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, restrictive laws have been adopted in the last three years to further curb media freedom.

- The third part of the broader crackdown pattern is increasing attention on international media, especially international broadcasting. The Russian authorities, for instance, have focused on the broadcasts of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*. Since 2005, the Kremlin has undertaken a systematic intimidation campaign whereby *RFE/RL*'s partners – Russian radio stations that rebroadcast their

programs as part of their own formats – have been audited and subjected to harassment. Similar efforts to obstruct international broadcasting have been undertaken in other CIS countries, including Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

- The fourth element of the most recent phase of the press freedom crackdown has been refocused attention on the print media. The priority medium for post-Soviet authoritarian regimes to control typically has been television, which reaches the largest audiences and continues to exert the most influence in shaping views. Nevertheless, in the last several years independent newspapers have been in the crosshairs of authoritarian governments, with Russia taking a leading role. The recent attention paid by the Kremlin and other post-Soviet authorities to assert further control over newspapers may simply be a part of the broader press freedom crackdown or could be a recognition by authoritarian leadership that, in the Internet age, politically consequential content produced by newspapers finds its way to much larger audiences via the Web, and therefore poses a greater threat.

Although the media landscape across most of the Commonwealth of Independent States differs from that of the Soviet era, in important ways it is imposing a no less repressive news environment.

## Introduction

Winston Churchill's historic speech in March 1946 painted the indelibly stark image of an "iron curtain" descending across the European continent and set a clear marker for assessing global political developments in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Churchill's remarks six decades ago<sup>1</sup> helped put into context a world that was evolving in distinctly different directions.

On the far side of the iron curtain a closed and repressive system of governance was rapidly taking hold, in which dissent was ruthlessly suppressed, economic life rigidly managed by communist authorities, and media used exclusively as an instrument of the state. This all encompassing effort to control ideas, commerce, and media was a defining feature of the Soviet system. It took seven decades for the fatally flawed Soviet experiment to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions in an economic and political meltdown that ended the Cold War and brought the promise of freer and more open systems to tens of millions of formerly captive peoples. Hopes ran high that these openings would enable all of the fundamental freedoms to emerge and flourish, including freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

In fact, in the period immediately preceding the Soviet collapse and in its immediate aftermath, the flowering of open expression and a nascent independent press suggested a durable and institutionalized Fourth Estate might materialize. The Soviet era's waning days saw the exertion from below of significant pressure for greater freedom of expression and a diverse and independent reporting of news. In the former satellite countries of Central Europe – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Baltic states – censorship was cast aside

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill's speech was titled "Sinews of Peace" and was delivered on March 5, 1946, at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri.

and a free press rose from the ashes of the Soviet system. For the 12 former Soviet republics, however, the promise of the opening in the late 1980s and early 1990s was short-lived.

Only a decade and a half since the end of the Cold War, freedom of the press for millions of people across the CIS has come nearly full circle. For now, there seems little hope that the rights succinctly enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will be enjoyed in these countries anytime soon.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on findings from *Freedom of the Press*, Freedom House's annual survey of global media independence, this essay traces the press freedom environment through key points on the post-Soviet timeline, looking at the media situation in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, the period from the mid 1990s to the early 2000s when the "color" revolutions occurred, and then from the post-color revolution period to the present, where an authoritarian resurgence has consolidated media control.

## The Return of Censorship

The media landscape across most of the former Soviet Union in some aspects differs from that of the Soviet era, but in important ways is imposing a no less repressive news media environment. Gone is the smothering, all encompassing ideological control across wide swaths of Europe and Eurasia. A more geographically circumscribed area – Russia and most of the countries on its periphery – confronts modern methods of information control that effectively shuts off the majority of people in these lands from news and information of political consequence. Today, methods for dominating news media are different, based

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<sup>2</sup> "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

on state-enabled oligarchic control, broadcast monopolies of presidential “families,” and mass media manipulation to create a veneer of democratic practice without its substance.

Unlike during the Soviet era, some intrepid journalists now manage to report independently. However, absent the rule of law and meaningful legal protections, the former Soviet Union is today one of the world’s most dangerous places for journalists. Reporters willing to investigate issues such as political and corporate corruption are confronted by powerful vested interests striving to muzzle news professionals. Intimidation, physical violence, and even murder of reporters and editors have become commonplace. Journalists in virtually every former Soviet country have been victims of contract killings or otherwise met death under suspicious circumstances.

Russia, for example, has been a deadly place for journalists in both the Yeltsin and Putin eras. Since President Vladimir Putin assumed office seven years ago, at least two-dozen journalists have been killed, including the notable cases of Paul Klebnikov, editor of *Forbes Russia*, who was shot nine times with a semiautomatic weapon on the street outside his Moscow office in July 2004; Anna Politkovskaya, an investigative journalist who wrote for *Novaya Gazeta*, and was executed in the elevator of her apartment building in October 2006; and Ivan Safronov, a defense correspondent for the *Kommersant* newspaper, who in very unclear circumstances plunged to his death from his apartment building in Moscow in March 2007. Rarely are serious investigations pursued or perpetrators brought to justice. Impunity is the standard.

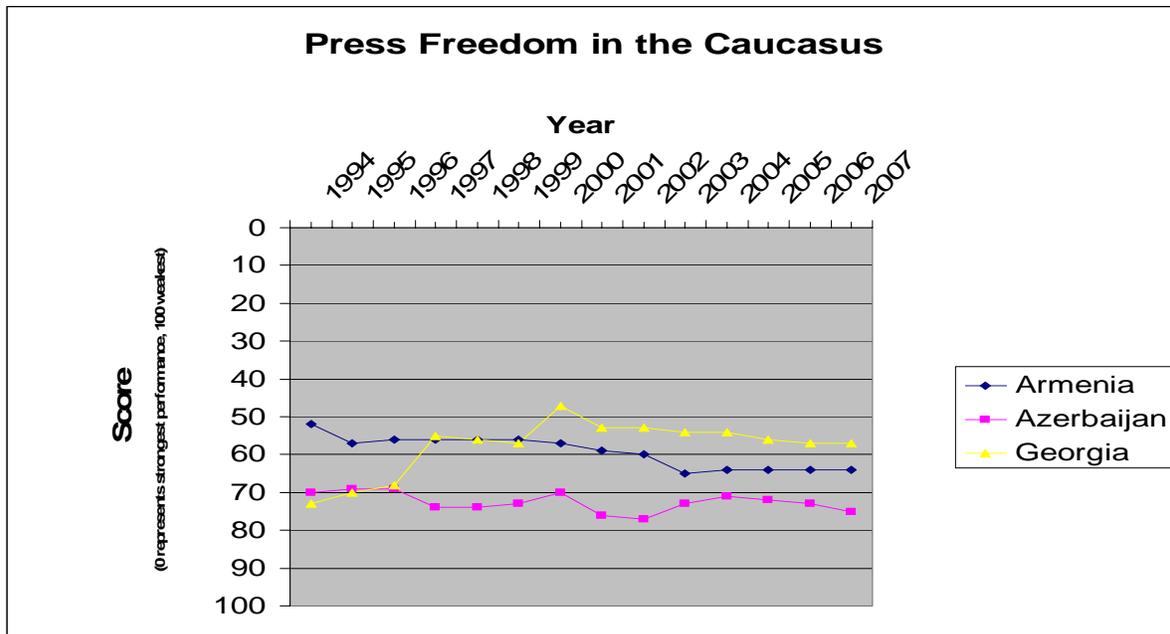
This brutal, efficiently repressive 21<sup>st</sup>-century media environment is made possible by a reconsolidated authoritarian model that has anchored itself from Belarus on the European Union’s eastern frontier all the

way to Kazakhstan on China’s western flank. To ensure regime security and shield from public view rent seeking and rampant official corruption, post-Soviet authorities seek to limit scrutiny of their decisions and activities by silencing the independent press.

This modern variant of media management is a far more sophisticated, distant cousin of the raw and overweening institutional media control of the Soviet era. The stodgy, Soviet era broadcasting diet has in large measure been cast aside. With the exception of remaining retrograde former Soviet regimes such as those in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the stiff, grey, Cold War-era newsreaders who parroted official bulletins and spewed turgid party propaganda have vanished from the news. Today, modern media fare, rich in entertainment, and news programming often of high technical quality and production values are staples, especially in Russia. While the contemporary media menu in Russia offers a wide assortment of entertainment options, it for the most part excludes alternative views and analysis on news and public affairs, particularly where it counts most, on national television broadcasts, from which most citizens continue to get their information. Russian media also plays an important role in influencing perceptions in neighboring countries. Russian language broadcasting delivers the Kremlin spin on regional and world events to millions of Russian speakers in countries on Russia’s periphery.

The Internet is a principal alternative and challenger to media hegemony in the former Soviet Union. But while the Internet remains relatively free in Russia and a number of other post-Soviet countries, it is fast becoming a target of greater interest for new regulatory intervention by the authorities.

The repressive media landscape in the CIS is illuminated by findings from *Freedom of the Press*. The Russian authorities are not alone in forging a media environment that filters out critical voices and views,



resulting in media systems that lack freedom. The survey’s most recent findings show that ten of the 12 post-Soviet states are ranked “Not Free,” indicating that these countries do not provide the basic guarantees and protections in the legal, political, and economic spheres to enable open and independent journalism.

The only two that enjoy Partly Free status, Georgia and Ukraine, have experienced recent political upheaval and democratic opening. Of the 10 Not Free countries, none is moving in the direction of more freedom and most have a decidedly downward trajectory. Of the 195 countries examined in the survey, three of the 10 worst press freedom abusers – Belarus, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – are found in the CIS. By contrast, today all of the countries of Central Europe and the Baltic states, which themselves needed to overcome a decades-long legacy of Soviet media culture and control, are assessed as Free in *Freedom of the Press*. Although they contend with challenges and imperfections that media in democratic systems invariably face, the news media from the Czech Republic to Estonia have achieved pluralistic and competitive news environments.

Some of this success can be attributed to economics. The Central European countries, now members of the European Union and NATO, have achieved solid levels of economic growth, developed diverse economies, and feature a range of political and economic voices in the media mix. But if economic wherewithal were the key determinant of levels of press freedom, then Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Russia, which too have enjoyed considerable economic growth in recent years, should likewise be enjoying increased press freedom. Yet they are not. The pathologies associated with the “resource curse” in these resource-based economies could explain their poor performance, but this phenomenon would not then explain, for example, resource-poor but economically vibrant Armenia’s consistently lackluster performance on press freedom.

History might provide some guide. Prior to the Second World War, the Central European states enjoyed a free press tradition that the republics of the former Soviet Union did not. Nevertheless, press freedom’s steep plunge in the CIS into the depths of the Not Free ranks suggests something more profound is at work in this part of the world. The authorities have

undertaken an orchestrated effort to arrogate to themselves greater control of media infrastructure and to limit public space for ideas and debate. The coercive and systematic reassertion of media control has strangled, at least for the time being, the nascent, independent journalism that surfaced briefly in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse.

### **The End of the Soviet Union and the Ephemera of Press Freedom**

Mikhail Gorbachev's embrace of *glasnost* in the mid-1980s led to openings with vast and historic implications. *Glasnost*, which literally translates as "openness," did not produce freedom of speech and free media; it instead launched a process that loosened the smothering control of the Soviet system. From the time Gorbachev introduced this policy until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, journalists pushed then-strict boundaries imposed on expression. Gorbachev, for his part, encouraged papers to publish criticism of the authorities and to continue a reevaluation of the Stalinist period in order to spur a change in policy direction.

Years later, the salutary impact of the forces unleashed by *glasnost* was apparent. In the post-Soviet period – nearly ten years after Gorbachev's emergence on the political scene – half of the former Soviet republics had achieved Partly Free status in *Freedom of the Press*, indicating an increasing degree of openness in the media sector. While this progress on press freedom was unconsolidated, it was impressive, given decades of Soviet repression in settings with no real history of an open and free press. To be sure, this opening did not represent a fully free and mature media sector. It was, however, a period that saw unprecedented

media freedoms and journalistic courage by newsmen and women who had been accustomed to observing limits rather than testing them.

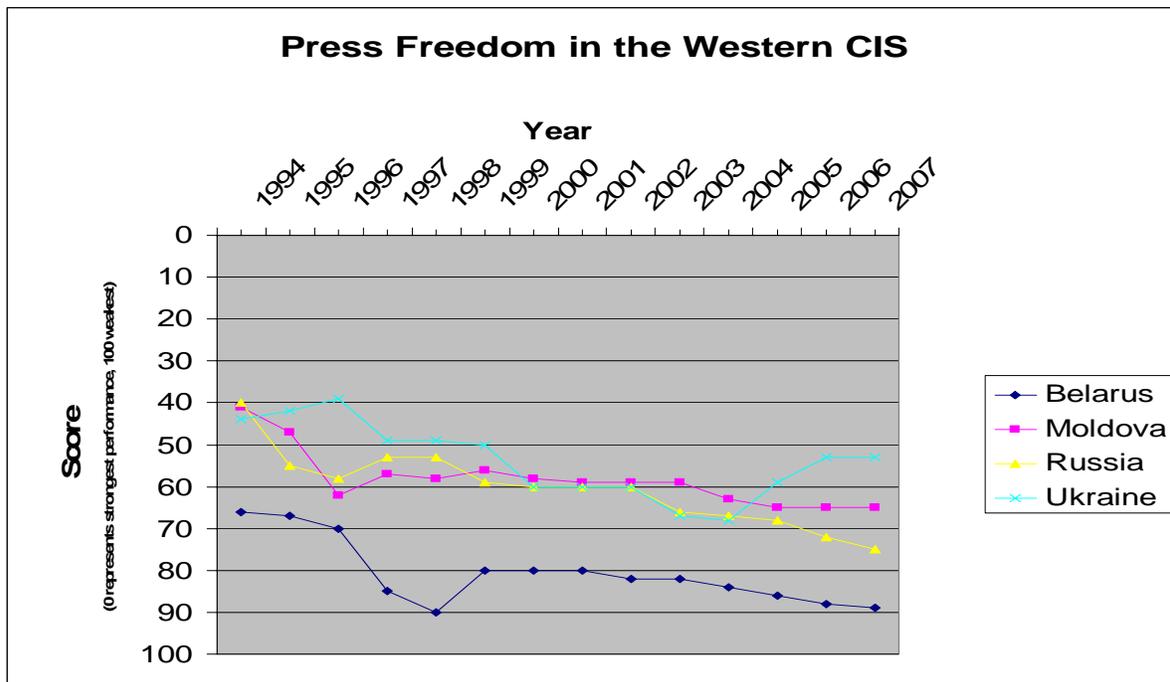
The same period also saw fierce resistance to the nascent press openings. By early 1991, communist hardliners were seeking to reassert control over a news media that had already established some autonomy and influence. The desire of the republics within the Soviet Union to pull away and declare independence was a source of tension between conservatives and reformers, a dynamic that had serious implications for the embryonic independent press.

While the contemporary media menu in Russia offers an assortment of entertainment options, it excludes alternative views and analysis on news and public affairs on national television broadcasts, from which most citizens continue to get their information.

An early test for media freedom was the independence movements in the Baltic countries. As part of a crackdown ordered by the authorities in Moscow, Soviet special interior ministry forces in January 1991 attacked and occupied the television broadcast facility in Vilnius, killing fourteen people and wounding several hundred others. A week after the attack in Vilnius, Soviet troops

attacked the Latvian Interior Ministry in Riga, killing five people, among them members of Juris Podnieks' film crew. Pre-*glasnost* reporting would have offered only carefully crafted, officially controlled characterizations of such events.

By early 1991, however, autonomous media outlets were able to report on the violent and controversial conflict in the Baltics. Dueling accounts of what transpired in Lithuania and Latvia emerged. Soviet-controlled media, first and foremost the State Television and Radio Committee, provided a portrayal of events from the Soviet military's point of view, alleging that locals triggered the bloodshed. These



claims were directly contradicted by eyewitness and foreign journalist accounts.

The unconstrained, non-official reporting on the violence in the Baltics elicited a reaction from Soviet hardliners as well as Gorbachev, who responded by suggesting the suspension of the liberal Law on Freedom of the Press adopted in 1990. The Soviet authorities also dispatched censors to muzzle independent reports on events in Vilnius and Riga, including those from news programs such as TSN (“Television News Service”) and Radio Russia, both of which had earned reputations for more open coverage. Following what amounted to the re-censoring of these programs, Tatyana Mitkova, a commentator for TSN, delivered the news in February 1991 by winking and nodding to the audience and letting her viewers know that she was permitted to present only the official version of events relating to the attack on the television broadcast facility in Vilnius.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jeff Sallot, “Censorship: In Moscow, the government is tightening controls on the media – and it is meeting considerable opposition”, *The Globe and Mail*, February 4, 1991.

These early episodes in the Baltics pitted the old habits of information control against the growing desire for independent, open reporting. This contest between journalistic values would play out over and over again in coming years. For independent news outlets, however, surviving in the post-Soviet economy was increasingly difficult. Meanwhile, powerful political and economic interests were reorganizing themselves in order to limit the development of an autonomous press.

### Resurgent Authoritarianism: The Beginning of the End of Press Freedom

By 1994, 6 of 12 countries in the former Soviet Union had risen to the Partly Free category in *Freedom of the Press*. Over the course of the next decade, this number would drop to one: Georgia. By 2004, 11 countries found themselves in the ranks of Not Free. Through a revitalized crackdown on press freedom, post-Soviet leadership managed to claw the media back under its control.

A stubborn authoritarian thread throughout the region was key to the reassertion of

media control. The middle 1990s saw authoritarian leaders, many of whom earned their *bona fides* during the Soviet period, consolidate power in most of the post-Soviet states. Belarus' Alexandr Lukashenka and Azerbaijan's Heidar Aliyev were among those who assumed leadership. Other leaders simply changed hats in 1991 to make the transition from chairman of the Supreme Soviet to president of a newly independent republic, as was the case throughout Central Asia. Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev, for instance, used this pathway to power and, over the course of the 1990s, oversaw the reining in of his country's independent press.

Shortly after coming to power in July 1994, President Alyksandr Lukashenka made it clear that tightening control of the Belarusian news media would be a priority. A host of presidential edicts consolidated authority over the press within the president's office. An August 1994 decree brought the state printing house in Minsk under the direct control of the presidential administration. Printing facilities elsewhere in the country had to receive the authorization of the presidential administration to conclude printing contracts with non-state media. In October 1995, a number of independent publications were denied the right to publish at the state printing house in Minsk. In order to continue publishing, those newspapers were then compelled to utilize printing facilities in Lithuania and transport back into Belarus for distribution.

In Kazakhstan, a steady monopolization of media was implemented. Dariga Nazarbayeva, the influential daughter of the president and one-time head of the state news agency, played a pivotal role in the effort to take control of that country's news media infrastructure. In Kazakhstan, as in a number of the former Soviet states, broadcast media has been taken into the hands of members of the presidential family or those with close ties to it. Meanwhile, the screws were tightened on journalists who

took an independent line. A campaign to silence critics who reported on official corruption caught in its web journalists such as Sergei Duvanov and Nuri Muftakh. Muftakh died at a time he was following allegations that Kazakhstan's president had secretly transferred large amounts of money to foreign banks. In November 2002, he was run over by a bus in what authorities regarded as an accident but what many speculate was a politically motivated assassination. Duvanov, who also wrote on political corruption and was following the "Kazakhgate" scandal, was found guilty of what many believed to be trumped up rape charges and sentenced to several years in prison in January 2003.

In Russia, "oligarchs" sought to establish their own media empires in order to exercise control over Russia's politics. Television became the medium of choice for intra-oligarchic battles and for politically influential billionaires to advance their own interests. Media in the public interest was marginalized.

Ukraine, which today features the region's freest media, hit its press freedom nadir in 2003. A spate of journalists' deaths and increasing pressure on independent news outlets characterized the preceding years. Georgi Gongadze, who co-founded the independent website *Ukrayinska Pravda*, was kidnapped and murdered in 2000. Under increasingly authoritarian President Leonid Kuchma, "temnyky" – theme directives from the president's office that instruct editors on news coverage – had become a regular feature of the editorial process. Such editorial theme directives continue to be standard operating procedure in authoritarian governments throughout the region; it was only in the aftermath of Ukraine's political breakthrough in the winter of 2004 that temnyky were purged from Ukraine's news media.

#### **Four Major Trends in the Media Crackdown**

Three “color” revolutions – the “Rose” variety in Georgia, “Orange” in Ukraine, and “Tulip” in Kyrgyzstan – triggered a fierce response from authoritarian governments, which turned to the media to deliver stricter “message control” as part of a broader regime security effort.

In the period since the first color revolution in Georgia in November 2003, autocratic regimes have implemented an increasingly brutal response to home-grown and foreign journalists who take an independent line. This trend is borne out in *Freedom of the Press* data since that time. In this period, nine of the 12 former Soviet states’ press freedom ratings have deteriorated: Uzbekistan, Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan have registered especially notable declines.

Four major press freedom trends have emerged in the post-color revolution period. First, authoritarian regimes have intensified mass media control, with television serving as the favored tool in regime security efforts. State controlled national television broadcasts have presented a barrage of claims designed to identify external threats and scapegoats for domestic ills. The 2006 *Freedom of the Press* report on Uzbekistan, for instance, cites the September 2005 trial of 15 men accused of involvement in the Andijon unrest, where “[Uzbek] prosecutors charged that the *British Broadcasting Corporation*, the *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* had advance knowledge that violence would break out in the city”. State-controlled media in Uzbekistan gave prominent coverage to these charges, which fit a broader pattern of fact-twisting and propagandizing. In the broader regional context, authoritarian governments have used state-controlled television to distort reporting and attack the legitimacy of political reform efforts in Ukraine and Georgia.

Legislative screws have been tightened across the region to exert further controls on the media and impede independent reporting. In Belarus, the autocratic government of Alyaksandr Lukashenka intensified its control over the country’s media. In 2005, among the measures taken by the Belarusian authorities was passage of broadly defined legislation that makes it a crime punishable by up to two years in jail to “discredit Belarus” in the eyes of international organizations and foreign governments. The same prison terms apply to those convicted of distributing “false information” about Belarus’ political, economic, social, or international situation.

In July 2006, President Putin signed a law that expanded the definition of extremist activity to include public slander of a government official related to his or her duties, using or threatening violence against a government official or his family, and publicly justifying or excusing terrorism. The definition of extremism in this new law is so broad that it allows the authorities to use unchecked power against its critics, including in the media. Also in 2006, Kazakh President Nazarbayev signed into law media legislation that increased government control over news media by imposing costly registration fees for journalists, expanding criteria for denying registration to media outlets and requiring news outlets to re-register in the event of a change of address.

The third part of the broader crackdown pattern is increasing attention on international media, especially international broadcasting. Not content to suppress and control domestic media, the Russian authorities, for instance, have focused on the broadcasts of the U.S. government-funded *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, whose radio programming has enjoyed dedicated listeners across Russia interested in an alternative voice. Since 2005, the Kremlin has orchestrated a systematic intimidation campaign whereby *RFE/RL*’s partners – Russian radio stations

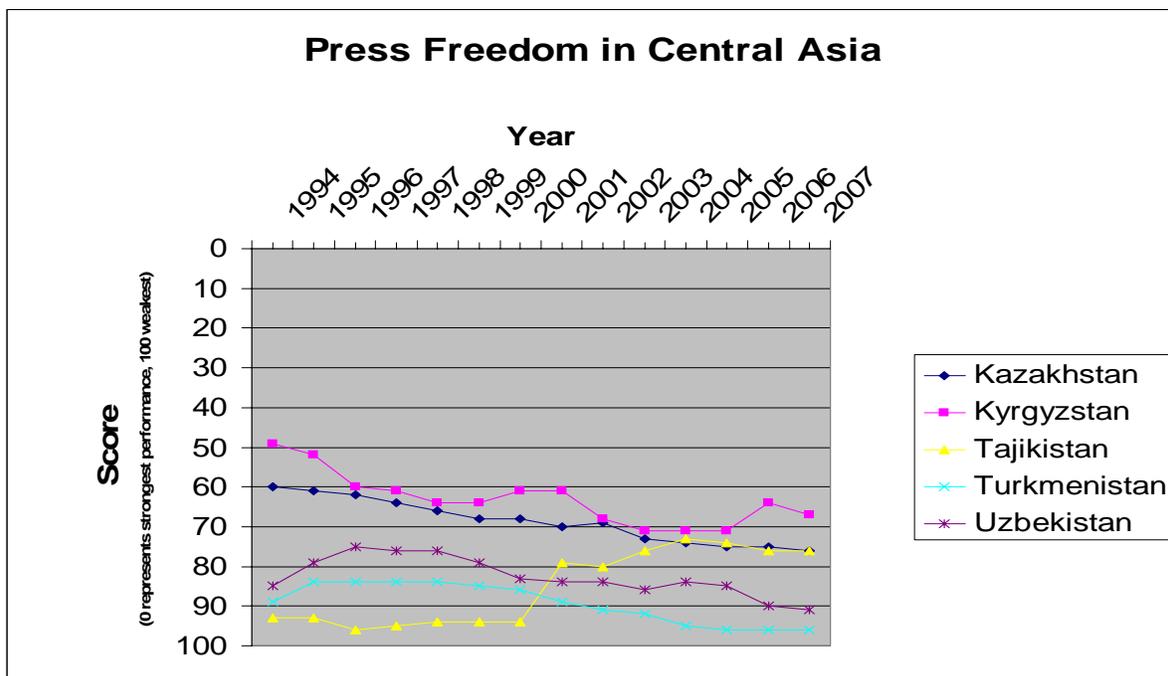
that rebroadcast their programs as part of their own formats – have been audited and subjected to harassment. While the precise number of *Radio Liberty* affiliates that have been driven off is unclear, apparently no more than 12 are now regularly broadcasting. Prior to the campaign to drive them from the airwaves, about 25 affiliates carried *Radio Liberty* programs. Similar efforts to obstruct international broadcasting have been undertaken in other countries, including Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

The Kremlin has also sought to rein in domestic radio. The Russian News Service, Russia’s largest independent radio network, is required by station management to work under a “50 percent rule” to ensure that at least half of all reporting by the network on Russia is “positive.” This editorial guidance was put in place after new, Kremlin-friendly ownership took over the network and in early 2007 brought in new management from state-run Channel One. In May 2007, eight journalists who worked at the radio network resigned in protest of editorial direction that amounted to censorship.

The fourth element of the most recent phase of the press freedom crackdown has been

refocused attention on the print media. The priority medium for post-Soviet authoritarian regimes to control has been television, which reaches the largest audiences and continues to exert the most influence in shaping views. Newspapers typically suffer from the unfriendly post-Soviet economic landscape and confront a range of bureaucratic and legal obstacles, including politicized tax inspections and frequent use of libel laws. Newspapers have tended to have small print runs and therefore have not captured the intensive attention of the authorities in the way broadcast media have. Nevertheless, the last several years have seen renewed interest in taking control of independent newspapers, with Russia taking the lead.

Gazprom-Media, an arm of the state-controlled gas behemoth, has acquired control of a number of previously independent news outlets and either closed their doors or drained them of independent reporting. While as early as 2001 Gazprom took control of *Segodnya*, the flagship paper of Vladimir Gusinsky’s Media-Most group, more recent takeovers have included the June 2005 acquisition of *Izvestia* by Gazprom-Media. *Izvestia*, which had been



recognized for sound and balanced coverage, has since joined the growing ranks of Kremlin-friendly news outlets. Other major dailies have come into the hands of government-friendly financial groups. The Kremlin recently orchestrated ownership takeovers at a number of newspapers, including *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, which have functioned as alternative information lifelines to small but influential audiences in the country. The purchase of *Kommersant* in September 2006 by metals magnate Alisher Usmanov, a Kremlin-connected businessman, was another blow for the independent print media. *Kommersant* has been the most visible Russian newspaper to take a critical view of the country's politics.

The recent attention paid by the Kremlin and other post-Soviet authorities to assert further control over newspapers may simply be a part of the broader press freedom crackdown. It may be, however, a recognition by authoritarian leadership that in the Internet age politically consequential content produced by newspapers finds its way to much larger audiences via the Web, and therefore poses a greater threat.

### **The Internet and New Media: Permeating the Curtain?**

The emergence of new technologies and media has afforded new opportunities for greater freedom of expression and for an independent press in the CIS that can evade official control.

Soviet era controls meant that virtually all means of disseminating information were state controlled. Photocopying machines and typewriters, for example, were a tightly restricted privilege that needed to be registered with the authorities. And of course infrastructure for mass media dissemination – printing presses, newspaper distribution channels and broadcast facilities – were all under the control of the state. In comparison, the Internet's diffuse structure

opens the door to finding and sharing information in ways that were impossible during the Cold War.

Most rulers in the former Soviet countries view the Internet as a threat. Opposition websites or those otherwise of political consequence are often subject to interference. In Belarus and Tajikistan, just to take two examples, the authorities have taken measures to curb access to the Internet, especially during election cycles. In Belarus, in advance of that country's presidential election in March 2006, the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka used a range of measures, many of them subtle, to disrupt Internet and cell-phone access in the run up to election day.

A comprehensive report by the OpenNet Initiative assessed Internet openness in Belarus in the period leading up to the election and found that a number of opposition and politically sensitive websites were inoperative. The report did not find "evidence of systematic and comprehensive interference" with the Internet. The analysis suggested that any of the authorities' measures were "fairly subtle, causing disruptions to access, but never completely turning off the alternative information tap."

The OpenNet Initiative report, published in April 2006, added that "Belarus' regime has both the will and capability to clamp down on Internet openness, and that its capacities to do so are more pervasive and subtle than outright filtering and blocking." The analysis went on to say that the "openness of the Internet in Belarus is likely to come under increasing threat both from pending legislation that promises to legalize more active state monitoring, content regulation and blocking of the Net, as well as from increased pressures for self-censorship."

In Tajikistan, the authorities shut down five opposition websites one month in advance of presidential elections held in November 2006. Access to these websites was blocked by order of the Tajik

Communications Ministry. Tajik officials said the decision was taken “to filter and block access to websites aimed at disrupting the state policy via information resources, and create all conditions for harmonious development of the republic’s information infrastructure.” In Kazakhstan, the Internet is developing but the authorities devote considerable attention and resources to blocking opposition websites and articles critical of the country’s president and his family. Website content is frequently subject to civil and criminal libel suits.

Meanwhile, other governments, including in Azerbaijan, are viewing the Internet more benignly and generally not interfering or otherwise disrupting its development and use. The authorities in Azerbaijan use economic, legal, and political interference to prevent traditional media from operating freely and independently, however. There are increasing exceptions to the generally hands off approach to the Internet. In 2006, the Azeri authorities blocked the web-site *www.tinsohbeti.com*, which offers satirical opposition views often critical of the Azerbaijani authorities. While the website is hosted abroad, access to it in Azerbaijan was blocked a number of times in 2006. More recently, *www.susmayag.biz* (“Let’s Not Keep Silence”), an opposition web-site, was blocked in January 2007, after the site launched a signature collection campaign to protest a government decision to significantly increase prices for energy and utilities. One of the site’s founders, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, was sentenced to 12 days in prison for sending SMS messages calling on citizens to protest the authorities’ utilities price hike.

In Russia, the Internet remains relatively free and provides information on a wide range of issues. However, elections scheduled for 2007 and 2008 have triggered more intense attention from the authorities, including a number of proposed legislative and regulatory initiatives to extend control over the Internet. In March 2007, President Vladimir Putin issued a presidential decree

to set up a new agency to supervise both mass media and the Internet, which has increased concerns that more comprehensive Internet controls may be on the horizon.

Ukraine is perhaps the best example of a country where the Internet is free to add significant information on political affairs and spur public discussion. New technologies were pivotal in the events of late 2004, when thousands of demonstrators coordinated their activities and took to the streets of Kyiv to contest the November 2004 election results. Mobile phone text messaging was critical to this effort. “Smart mobbing” – bulk text messaging to gather people at a specified location – has also been used to organize demonstrations in other post-Soviet countries, including Belarus.

Despite the authorities’ best efforts to control it, the Internet and other new media set today’s CIS apart from its Cold War ancestor. Blogs are enabling and stimulating debate and discussion, and domestic and foreign news websites offer an alternative to state-controlled or influenced news outlets. However, while the Internet holds further promise and connectivity is growing at an impressive rate, it remains a medium through which only a small fraction of news is obtained. As Internet use grows, it will become critically important to safeguard its integrity from increasingly frequent interventions from authorities intent on controlling it.

### **Media in the Commonwealth of Independent States: Back to the Future?**

In 2002, a comprehensive report assessing needs for international journalism found that repressive trends were undoing progress in transition countries, threatening the development of a free press and jeopardizing gains supported by international media assistance.

The report, “The Media Missionaries: American Support for International Journalism,” found that in “much of the former U.S.S.R, the millions of dollars spent (in international assistance to support independent journalism) have not yet produced a viable independent media sector. Politicians or oligarchs have taken over much of what was developed, diverting the media’s mission from public to private ends.” In the years since the report was published, the media environment in most of the former Soviet republics has significantly worsened, posing further challenges and raising new questions about how to effectively support media freedom in countries behind the new information curtain.

Despite the best efforts of the authorities, some degree of independent reporting persists due to the commitment of enterprising and courageous journalists as well as the possibilities offered by new technologies. Bloggers and other new media practitioners continue to push the boundaries of 21<sup>st</sup> century journalism.

Interestingly, neither the leadership in Russia nor other post-Soviet authoritarian regimes makes the argument, at least publicly, that Not Free media is desirable—a testament to the fact that a free press is now recognized as an international norm. By and large, the public line offered by the region’s autocrats is that they already have free media, even if official repressive actions belie these words.

But the reality is that the denial of a wide range of views and critical voices is ensuring a political dead end for these societies. Without access to independent information and debate, citizens cannot accurately judge the performance of their leaders. Absent an independent media that is a societal watchdog and enables other essential institutions such as the judiciary, parliament and civil society to serve their roles in balancing executive power, there is no ameliorating, self-correcting mechanism

that post-Soviet systems need as desperately as did their Soviet-era predecessors. In post-Soviet states that suffer from ill-conceived policies, entrenched corruption, and unaccountable governance, the denial of the free press’ indispensable role in allowing critical scrutiny is bound to consign these countries to an undemocratic future.

*Christopher Walker is Director of Studies at Freedom House.*