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# Truth in the Time of Putinism

*Kremlin critics fear assassination and kangaroo courts.*

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By ROBERT ORTTUNG AND CHRISTOPHER WALKER

Four years ago this week, the Russian investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya was murdered execution-style in the elevator of her Moscow apartment building. The truth is an increasingly scarce commodity in Vladimir Putin's Russia, and Politkovskaya's murder showed that for those courageous enough to pursue it, the consequences can be deadly.

That lesson has been reinforced many times, including in the 2009 murder of Natalia Estemirova, an activist who had worked with Politkovskaya to document human rights abuses in Chechnya and other restive Russian regions. (In 2007, Estemirova was the first recipient of an award named in Politkovskaya's honor.)

Now the Russian authorities' campaign to silence critics has extended to Oleg Orlov, the leader of the human rights group, Memorial, for which Estemirova worked. Mr. Orlov faces serious criminal slander charges—and three years imprisonment if convicted—for implicating Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov in Estemirova's murder. While Mr. Kadyrov claims he had no ties to the killing, Mr. Orlov has said that he bears direct responsibility as the head of the republic. For that statement Mr. Orlov has already paid damages in civil court.

These intertwined cases are emblematic of Putin's Russia, in which Kremlin leaders and their allies have developed brutally effective methods for keeping consequential information from public view.

Controlling television is integral to the Kremlin's strategy. The three main television outlets—Channel One, Rossiya and NTV—coordinate their coverage with the Kremlin and omit what is deemed politically undesirable. Thus most people receive news that "bears little relationship to the reality in Russia and the world," Mr. Orlov told us.

Russian authorities have the power to make certain individuals invisible to national television audiences. In place of opposition figures, activists and social critics, public-affairs shows feature a reliable cast of government-approved pundits.

Some activists—such as opposition leader Boris Nemtsov and Lyudmila Alexeyeva, a Soviet-era dissident who still protests for human rights—are known to a degree because they rose to prominence before the Putin era began in 2000. But after years of being denied the oxygen of TV time, these internationally known figures now hold little sway with the Russian public. Meanwhile, younger activists have been unable to gain stature because they simply don't have

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access to the most widely watched shows.

Kremlin leaders focus on television because that's where most Russians get their news. But they have also chilled the relatively freer media of newspapers and radio.

Once highly regarded newspapers, such as Kommersant, have lost much of their bite since being bought by Kremlin-friendly magnates. And while Novaya Gazeta, the newspaper for which Politkovskaya worked, still conducts investigations into sensitive topics like elites' abuses of power, it has faced crippling libel charges, and its website has been subject to denial-of-service attacks. Meanwhile, the radio station Ekho Moskvy—which offers an alternative spectrum of opinions to three million Russians (out of 140 million)—works under constant threat of closure, since its new owners are close to Mr. Putin.

While Kremlin censorship is generally effective, there are some reasons to hope its effects may weaken. Increasing numbers of economically active Russians aged 30-50 no longer see watching TV as a profitable exercise. And while Russians have typically used the Internet for entertainment and social networking, small but growing audiences are turning to online media for alternative political news and analysis.

Kremlin control of the media is particularly relevant now, as parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled for December 2011 and March 2012, respectively. Mr. Putin reportedly wants to return to the presidency again, having served since 2008 as prime minister.

If history is a guide, the pre-election period will see even tighter control of information. The authorities have already ramped up the pressure on the country's most critical civic organizations, simultaneously raiding 40 of them last month, purportedly to investigate their compliance with laws regarding financial disclosure.

For his part, Mr. Orlov continues to confront Russia's court system, with his next appearance scheduled for Oct. 14. And he's having a predictably hard time marshalling support for his cause.

Mr. Orlov's case is not isolated but represents how the Kremlin silences dissent. It deserves the attention of the U.S. government and governments in Europe, which should call for fair and open proceedings. Because the Kremlin operates by keeping observers in the dark, it's the job of the West to shine light on cases like Mr. Orlov's.

Mr. Ortung is president of the Resource Security Institute. Mr. Walker is director of studies at Freedom House.

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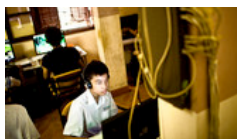
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