

Mapping Russian Media Network: Media's Role in Russian Foreign Policy and Decision-making

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Ken E. Gause, Director
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Abstract

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has used media as an important instrument and lever of influence. The role of media in promoting Russian foreign policy and exerting the influence of President Vladimir Putin has become increasingly visible since the conflict in Ukraine and other domestic and international confrontations began. CNA has undertaken an effort to map the Russian media environment and examine Russian decision-making as it relates to the media. This report provides an overview of the role that the media plays in Russian foreign policy. Specifically, we examine Russia's media environment, Russia's decision-making related to media and messaging, including the drivers and boundaries of that decision-making. We evaluate the role of Vladimir Putin and his inner circle, and finally, we examine the role that Russia's media and messaging plays in external influence. In addition, we highlight that while media is a key instrument of influence, culture, politics, and business are also important in broader Russian influence efforts abroad. Furthermore, this report outlines the way that decision-making and messaging is carried out by Vladimir Putin and his closest advisors through a series of scenarios that range from crisis to steady state. Finally, we provide overarching takeaways for policy makers and the international community to consider in understanding Russia's media environment and Russian decision-making in the media.

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Executive Summary

Throughout the Soviet era and into the present-day, media has played an important role in Russian foreign policy. In recent years, particularly since the Ukraine conflict, Russia's use of media as a key lever of broader influence campaigns has gained notoriety domestically and internationally. Today, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his key advisors, often referred to as his "inner circle," use media to disseminate key messages about Russia's foreign policy agenda, discredit Western institutions and foundational elements of Western democracy, reduce social cohesion, and promote Russia's role in the international system. To better understand these dynamics, CNA has initiated a study that maps Russia's media network and the decision-making process of President Putin and his advisors.

CNA gathered data using Russian and English language sources, reviewed primary messaging from the Kremlin, and evaluated the role that media plays in Russian foreign policy. We supplemented our research with semi-structured conversations with subject matter experts on Russian decision-making in the media sphere. After validating our insights with subject matter experts, we developed overarching key takeaways to help policy makers better understand the role that media plays in Russian foreign policy and decision-making.

Key Insights and Takeaways

Television is the most popular source of information for Russian citizens, followed by the internet, radio, and print media. The Russian government directly controls and operates state media and exercises considerable influence over private media through both formal and informal means while seeking greater control over media with larger audiences. Russia's rich business elite, commonly referred to as "oligarchs," owns most of Russia's media. Our assessment highlights that President Putin has links to most media-owning oligarchs.

President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle view domestic and international media as key instruments in promoting Russian state interests. Russia's media has three primary functions in contributing to Russian foreign policy: **mobilizing and sustaining domestic political support for its foreign and security policies; presenting official perspectives and policies to foreign audiences; and influencing foreign audiences through disinformation and propaganda.**

The Presidential Administration plays a central role in aligning Russia’s media strategy and messaging with the Kremlin’s foreign policy objectives on a day-to-day basis. Putin selectively exercises personal leadership, known as “manual control” or *ручное управление*, when Russia’s political system, his personal legitimacy, or Russia’s national security are at stake. Putin also often personally delivers key messages, something that can attract considerable domestic attention as well as large international audiences extending well beyond those accessible solely through Russia’s state-controlled external media. Surrounding President Putin is his inner circle of key advisers whom we classify as messengers, strategists, bureaucrats, and owners. A detailed map of President Putin and his media “inner circle” can be found on page 32.

In addition to mapping out Russia’s internal media network and decision-making processes in the media, we developed a baseline assessment of Russia’s external influence. In addition to media, other key levers of influence are culture and society, business, and politics. In analyzing Russia’s broader external influence, we explored Russian media decision-making and messaging in four recent historical cases involving crisis, armed conflict, gray zone, and steady-state. We reached the following conclusions:

- Vladimir Putin is likely to exercise “manual control” of Russia’s messaging in high-stakes crisis situations; conversely, if Putin is unavailable, this may complicate Russia’s decision-making, including on messaging
- In armed conflict or gray zone operations, Putin is likely to exercise “manual control” over messaging only at key decision points, when he broadly defines tone and content for subordinates
- Most of the time, Putin’s relevant top aides manage Russia’s day-to-day media/messaging activities, even during armed conflict
- Putin’s involvement and visibility appears correlated to how high the stakes are for Russia in any given situation, with Putin playing more of a leading role in the gray zone conflict in Ukraine, for example, than in political interference in Montenegro
- Moscow’s refusals to acknowledge some of its covert and overt conduct may have aims other than deception, such as preserving freedom of action, winning leverage through ambiguity, or allowing its adversaries to save face.

More broadly, we highlight the following key takeaways to consider in order to understand the connections between Russia’s foreign policy and its messaging and decision-making.

1. **Media is a key tool and will continue to play a significant role in Russian foreign policy.** Through state and independent media, Putin plays a central role in delivering the Kremlin's message and shaping its domestic and global media strategy. The Presidential Administration and Putin's inner circle play a coordinating role in aligning Russian foreign policy and messaging and also implement key media influence decisions on Putin's behalf.
2. **Since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Russia's government has significantly tightened its control over external messaging.** Russia's leadership seeks closer alignment between messaging and policy so that state external media will more directly support national policy objectives.
3. **Putin plays a central role in decision-making and messaging in the media.** Putin is a highly experienced statesman and leader whose exercise of *manual control* and personal presentation of messages is critical to Russian foreign and domestic policy. While his inner circle and the Presidential Administration implement key media strategies and often carry out the message, the system is designed around having Putin at its center and any eventual transition in Russia could have important implications for Russia's media decision-making and messaging.
4. **Putin and his inner circle have direct and indirect control or influence over Russia's media.** The Russian government directly controls state media and directly and indirectly influences private media. The Presidential Administration is the most important formal institution in managing Russia's media and messaging.
5. **While media is a critical element of influence, Putin and his administration also have power in the cultural, society, business, and political spheres in target countries.** Thus media are ultimately only one instrument, albeit quite an important one, in a much larger toolkit designed to exert influence externally.

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Glossary

AfD	Alternative for Germany
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
ESN	A media company owned by Grigoriy Berezkin
EU	European Union
GHM	Gazprom Media Holding
ICQ Messenger	A messaging application developed in Russia
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti
MH-17	Malaysia Airlines Flight 17
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NMG	National Media Group
NTV	A popular TV channel in Russia
ONEXIM	An investment group owned by Mikhail Prokhorov
ORT	Previous name of Channel One TV channel
PR	Public Relations
RBK	Russian Business Consulting. Publishes a popular print newspaper and a news website
RIA Novosti	Previously Russia's international news agency
RT	Russia-government funded international news TV channel

RTR	Russian Television and Radio
SUP	A media company owned by Alexander Mamut
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
VGTRK	All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company

Introduction

The Soviet Union and now Russia have each seen media as an important instrument of influence both domestically and internationally. Russia's external media have become increasingly visible and important in recent years as Moscow has expanded its investment in these tools and focused its efforts on Europe and the United States. Today, Russian president Vladimir Putin and his inner circle use Russian media internally and externally to disseminate key messages about Russia's foreign policy agenda, to discredit Western institutions and foundational elements of Western democracy, to reduce internal social cohesion within select countries, and to promote Russia's role in the international system.

CNA initiated this study that maps Russia's internal and external media networks. This paper summarizes findings from the first phase of this study, which examines Russian decision-making in the media; the role that Putin and his inner circle play in influencing the media and communicating key messages central to Russian foreign policy; media ownership and ties to Putin, the Presidential Administration, and Putin's close advisors; and the Russian media's role in broader external influence campaigns across a spectrum of conflict scenarios.

Analytical Approach

To conduct this study on Russia's decision-making in the media, Russia's media network, and the extent of this network's internal and external influence, we used the following analytical methodology:

1. We gathered data using Russian-and English-language sources, reviewed primary messaging from the Kremlin, and examined the role that media plays in Russian foreign policy. We validated our data using journals, USG policy documents, academic publications, and information on Russian media in Russian and in English. For information related to Putin's inner circle, we drew primarily on resources from the Agency for Political and Economic Communications, which develops an annual list of the most influential

individuals in Moscow.¹ We focused on individuals with a publicly evident relationship to media organizations, media policy, or government messaging.

2. Where possible, we held semi-structured conversations with subject matter experts external to CNA on the media's role in Russia's foreign policy and the role that President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle play in the media. These conversations validated our baseline analysis and increased our confidence in our insights and assessments.
3. We developed overarching takeaways on the role that various media play in Russian foreign policy, decision-making in the media space (including the role of President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle), and the Russian media network.

Organization of this Paper

This report is organized in six broad sections. First, we map out Russia's media network. This includes popular media consumption in Russia, traces of media ownership, and possible connections between Putin, Russian oligarchs, businesses, and media entities. Second, we examine Russia's decision-making in the media, including its drivers and boundaries. Third, we examine the role that President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle play in media decision-making and in shaping the media landscape in Russian foreign policy. Fourth, we assess the role that the media play in Russia's broader external influence strategy. In addition, we highlight Russian decision-making and messaging through four distinct past and future scenarios along the spectrum of conflict from crisis to steady state. Fifth and finally, we highlight overarching takeaways about Russia's media networks, decision-making, and internal and external strategy.

¹Agency for Political and Economic Communications, "Research Methodology," http://www.apecom.ru/projects/item.php?SECTION_ID=100&ELEMENT_ID=3332; Stephen White, *Understanding Russian Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, page 223.

Russia's Media Environment

Before assessing Russian decision-making on media and messaging matters, it is helpful to understand Russia's media environment. Most importantly, it is valuable to understand the way that Russians use broadcast, print, and online media; the balance between state and private ownership of Russia's domestic media; and the connections between private media owners and the Russian government, especially President Vladimir Putin.

Russia's Broadcast, Print, and Online Media

Television is the most important source of information for Russian consumers. The average daily reach of television among urban dwellers is 71 percent.² The second most popular media sources are online news and social media, which 33 percent and 27 percent of Russians turn to, respectively. Online news consumption is increasing and correlates with increasing internet penetration in Russia, which stood at 62 percent in 2015³. At the same time, the numbers of Russians who receive news from radio and print media are declining; they stood at 22 percent and 19 percent, respectively, in 2016.⁴

Given the diverse nature of the media in Russia, we focused on Russia's most popular media, presented in Figure 1:⁵

- Television: The most watched daily news (top 10) and weekly news roundups (top 10)

² "Media Environment Guide: Russia - September 2016."

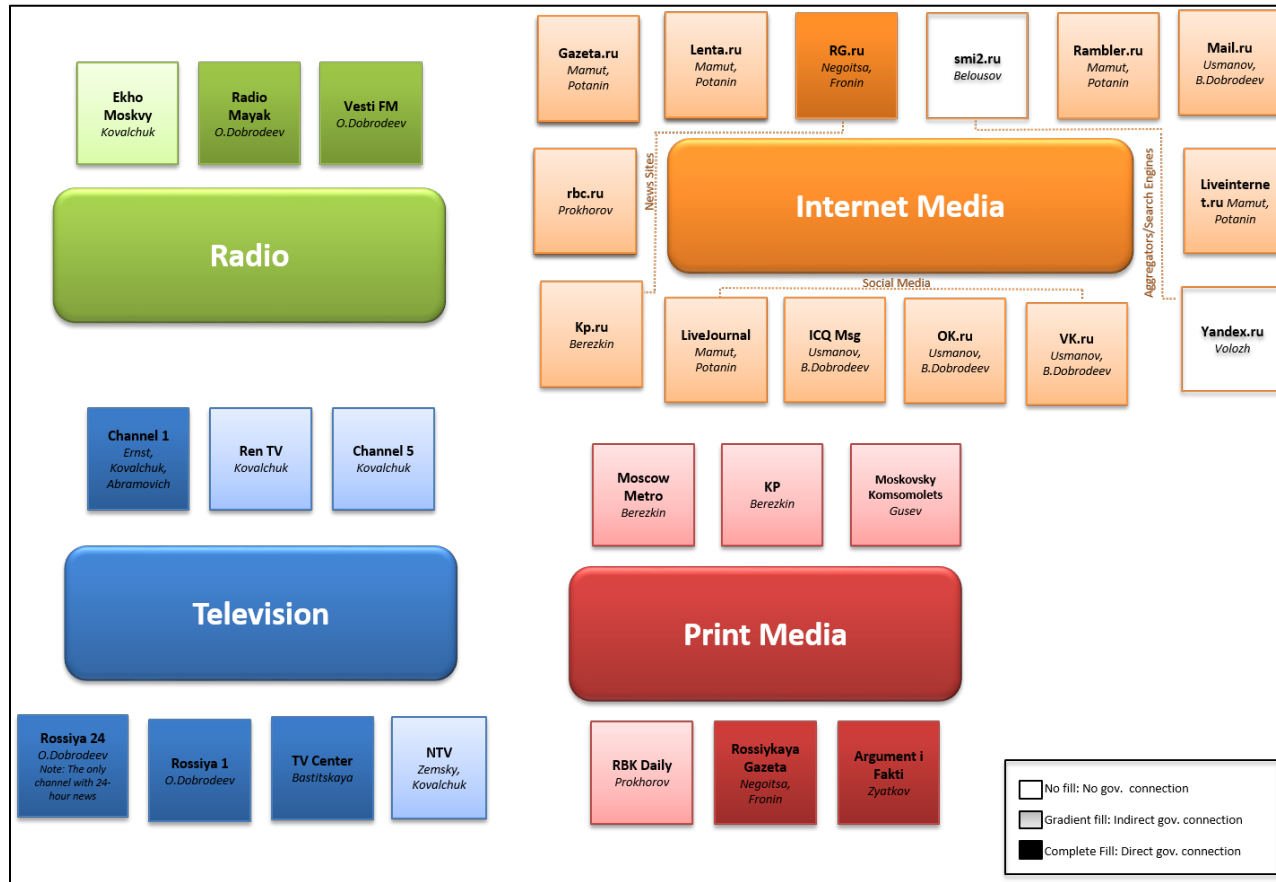
³ Gemius, "Audience Results for Selected Eastern Europe Countries," 2010-2015.

⁴ "Media Environment Guide: Russia - September 2016."

⁵ The list excluded the media with irrelevant content for our research, such as websites and newspapers on sports, health, online shopping, etc., and contains the ones that carry news, news roundups, and analysis of current affairs.

- Online media: The most visited websites (top 20) and most visited online news websites (top 10)
- Radio: The three most popular radio channels that carry news and current event analysis
- Print media: The most popular daily and weekly newspapers (top 20)

Figure 1. Popular media consumption in Russia by modality



Source: CNA. Data compiled using Alexa Website Traffic Statistics and the Media Environment Guide on Russia (2016). Please note owners and editors are listed below each media outlet

Television

Today, television is the most pervasive medium for the distribution of news and information in Russia. Russia's state statistics service reported in 2014 that 97.6 percent of people had access to a television. In 2015, according to TNS, urban Russians watched four hours and six minutes of television a day.⁶ The two most popular television channels for daily news and news roundups are the state-owned Channel One (formerly known as ORT, for Russian Public Television) and Rossiya 1 (formerly known as RTR, for Russian Television and Radio).⁷ Their viewership is around 37 percent each. The third most popular channel is NTV, which is owned by Gazprom Media Holding (GMH). Approximately 13 percent of Russians view this channel. News and current affairs reports on these three channels, and on the remaining four channels presented in Figure 2, have been consistently pro-Kremlin.⁸

Ellen Mickiewicz, an American expert on Russian media, discerned in her recent research that Russia's wealthy and educated elites have lower trust in TV than the average Russia. Members of the elite social class generally attempt to corroborate information they receive from national TV channels by looking to Western online resources, though even for those with resources this validation can impose a burden. This indicates a limited ability of the Russian elite to question Russian TV. In contrast, trust in television by average Russians ebbs and flows a small amount, but overall remains steadily high among everyday Russians. According to Figure 3, trust in television media has been increasing since 2012 and has recently held steady at around 60 percent (those who trust media fully and mostly). Nevertheless, according to extensive focus group research Mickiewicz conducted inside Russia, Russian television viewers also "work hard" to process information from Russia's media and are "skeptical"—but not "cynical"—about what they hear.⁹ This research suggests that Russian viewers "have what might be called a graduated approach to the definition of "fact" and are more ready to accept discrete pieces of information, such as numbers, rather than analysis or conclusions.¹⁰ Russian television viewers are "equipped with a larger tool box of instruments for processing news" than the average American, using knowledge of a station and its owners to decipher

⁶ "Media Environment Guide: Russia - September 2016."

⁷ "Information on viewers for Dec 19-25," TNS, 2016. <http://tns-global.ru/services/media/media-audience/tv/national-and-regional/audience/>

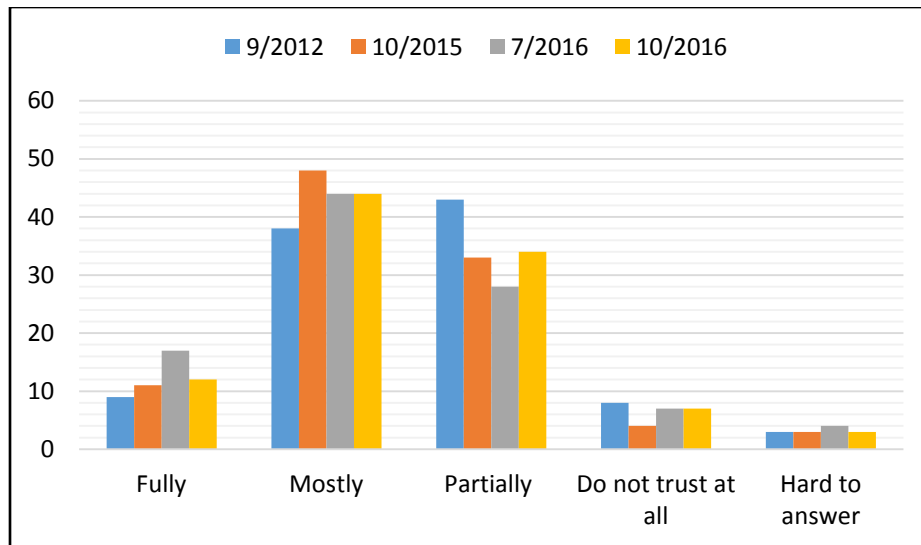
⁸ "Media Environment Guide: Russia - September 2016."

⁹ Ellen Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 104.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

messages.¹¹ As a result, “strategy from the top” can at times produce “results contrary to those that were intended.”¹² Because of this skepticism surrounding the news media, Russia’s growing appetite for political talk shows presents the ideal tool with which to manage ‘knowledge’ and ‘public opinion’ because the talk shows appear more “authentic” in expressing individual views than traditional news media and reporting.¹³

Figure 2. Trust in popular television



Source: Levada Center, “Доверие СМИ и цензура,” November 18, 2016, <http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/18/doverie-smi-i-tsenzura/>.

Internet media

Vladimir Putin reportedly distrusts online media because of the Internet’s origins in the United States and the West. For Putin, the Internet is a “CIA project” in which

¹¹ Ibid., p. 41.

¹² Ibid., p. 177.

¹³ Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin’s Russia: Remote Control*, Routledge, 2009, p. 90.

social media allows foreign and domestic operatives to mobilize support in Russia and subvert Russian society through covert means.¹⁴

Nevertheless, internet usage in Russia is growing at a rapid annual rate of 10 percent per year.¹⁵ The latest survey by Russia's Public Opinion Foundation (a state polling agency) found that 80.5 percent of adults use the internet at least once per month and that 83 percent of internet users are online every day.¹⁶ Of those internet users 18-24 year olds use social media for news while other demographic age groups rely on news websites rather than blogs or social media for news and daily information.¹⁷

Among the most popular internet sites Russians turn to for information is independent search engine and news aggregator Yandex, with 53 million monthly visitors.¹⁸ Mail.ru, the most widely used email service, is next in popularity, with 50 million users. Its owner, Alisher Usmanov, also owns the two most popular social media networks *Vkontakte* ("In Contact") and *Odnoklassniki* ("Classmates").¹⁹ Figure 3 (below) visualizes the level of trust Russian users feel about information gleaned online; interestingly, trust in the internet has been increasing, but so has distrust. Growing distrust could be accounted for numerous online news resources, which are unauthoritative and sometimes give contradicting information.²⁰ In October 2016, a total of 37 percent of Russians surveyed trusted online news "fully" or "mostly" while 46 percent trusted it "partially" or "not at all."

¹⁴ Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin, Operative in the Kremlin*. Brooking Institution Press, 2015, p. 349.

¹⁵ "Media Environment Guide: Russia - September 2016."

¹⁶ Ibid.

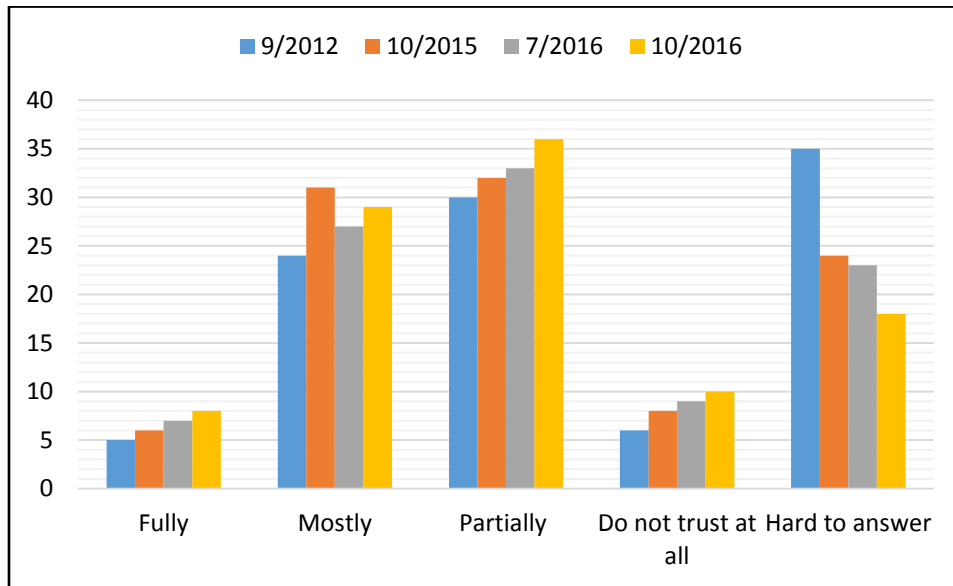
¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Web Index, November 2016, TNS. <http://mediascope.net/services/media/media-audience/internet/description/>

¹⁹ "Map of Russian Media Business," RBK, 2013. Available from http://www.compromat.ru/page_24749.htm

²⁰ "Опрос: Россияне больше верят ТВ, а не интернету," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, May 3, 2017. <https://rg.ru/2017/05/03/oprs-rossiiane-bolshe-veriat-tv-a-ne-internetu.html>

Figure 3. Trust in online news



Source: Levada Center, “Доверие СМИ и цензура,” November 18, 2016.

Radio

The most popular radio stations in Russia are commercial music stations. The most popular stations that broadcast news and news roundups are state media agency VGTRK’s Radio Mayak, Vesti FM, and Yuri Kovalchuk’s *Ekho Moskvy* (Echo of Moscow), which is unique among radio stations due to its relative editorial independence. *Ekho Moskvy* is the only high-quality and popular radio station that broadcasts criticism of the current establishment.²¹

Print media

Only six of the 20 most read newspapers in Russia carry news on current affairs.²² Among those six, the quality of newspapers differs significantly; only two newspapers—the official government paper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and the privately owned liberal *RBK Daily*—can be called serious publications that carry quality news and analysis. The rest of the newspapers named in Figure 2 are predominately filled

²¹ “Media Environment Guide: Russia - September 2016.”

²² Anna Arutunyan, *The Media in Russia*. McGraw-Hill, 2009.

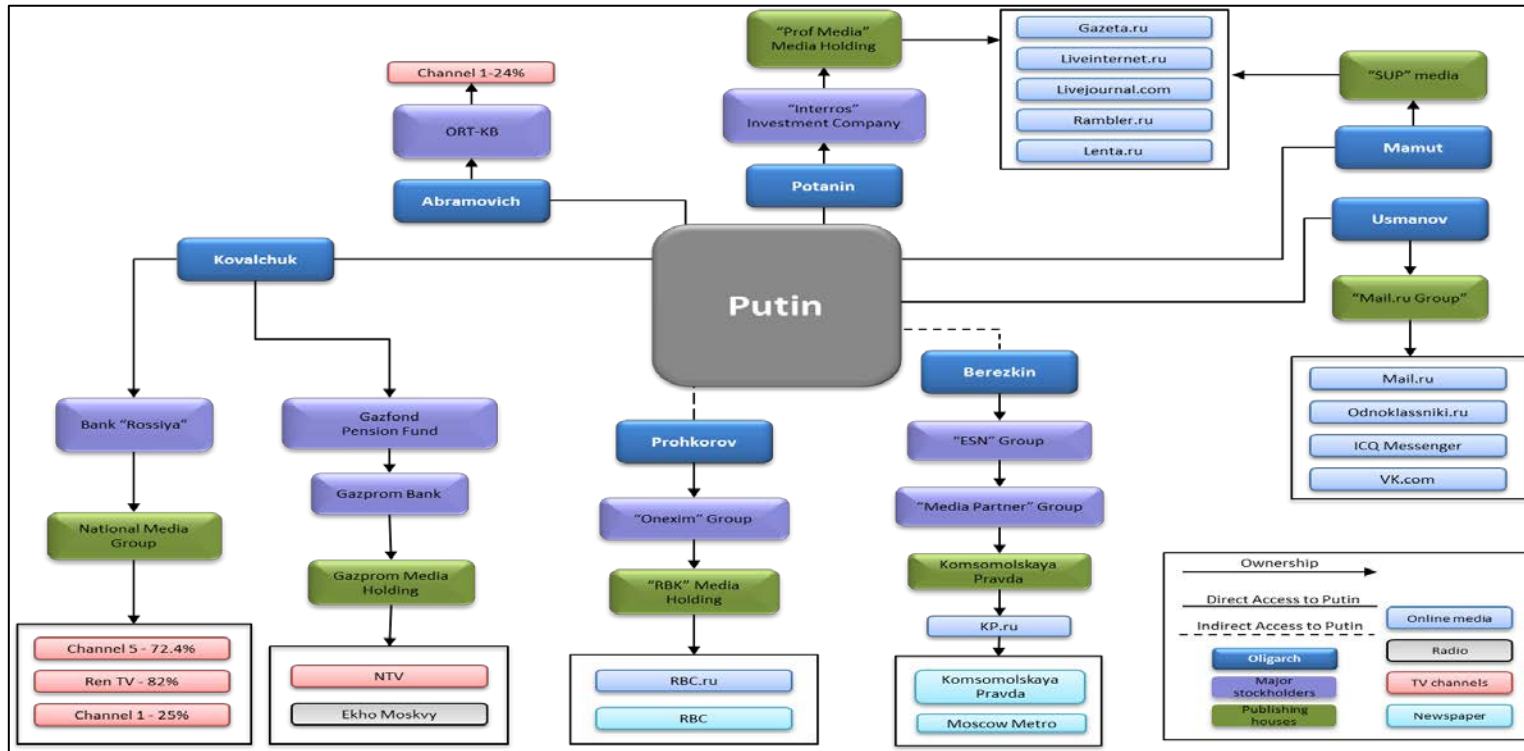
with entertainment and attention-grabbing headlines with little news or analysis.²³ Still, some smaller Moscow-based papers are quite serious, such as *Kommersant* and *Vedomosti*, the latter of which was published jointly with Dow Jones and Pearson (publisher of the *Financial Times*) until changes in Russia's media laws took effect in 2015.

Ownership of Popular Media in Russia

We divide Russia's media into two categories: state owned and privately owned. In assessing privately owned media, we have attempted to define any connection between owners or majority stakeholders and President Vladimir Putin. While the Russian government directly controls and operates state media, it is also able to exercise considerable influence over private media through formal and informal channels of control. Figure 4 depicts media ownership in Russia.

²³ Anna Arutunyan, *The Media in Russia*. McGraw-Hill, 2009.

Figure 4. Oligarchs and their media holdings



Source: CNA

Oligarchs with direct access to Putin are involved in politics; these individuals appear in the Agency for Political and Economic Communications Report and were corroborated through comparison with a number of CNA published Kremlin decision-making models. Agency for Political and Economic Communications, "Research Methodology," http://www.apecom.ru/projects/item.php?SECTION_ID=100&ELEMENT_ID=3332

We advise caution with respect to private media ownership, particularly with regard to the two largest private media holdings, Gazprom Media Holding (GMH) and National Media Group (NMG), because the holdings and ownership of these organizations are complex and extremely difficult to discern with a high level of confidence. In Russia, the government and big business interests are intertwined and murkiness around ownership is normal. For example, Gazprom Media once fully belonged to the state-controlled energy giant Gazprom, but is now controlled by Gazprombank, whose main shareholders are Gazprom and Gazprom's pension fund Gazfond. Many reports suggest that Yuriy Kovalchuk, one of Russia's richest oligarchs, controls Gazfond.²⁴ . Despite these circumstances, we were able to identify the individuals behind the most popular media outlets in Russia.

Analyzing the mass media according to which outlets are state-owned and which are privately owned reveals that the state largely controls television and radio, while online and print media are predominantly under private control. In past years the government owned nearly all of the media in Russian,—the recent split in the domains of control is likely due to the fact that the state controls the infrastructure related to television and radio broadcasting while internet and print media require little physical infrastructure thus can be easily obfuscated through private and corporate holdings.²⁵ Moreover, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the new Russian state rapidly abandoned its financial support for Soviet-era newspapers, forcing these former state enterprises to find private sponsors or perish. Likewise, state television stations lost government support and found private investors during the 1990s; however, President Putin swiftly re-established state control over television after his election in 2000.

The internet, as a relatively recent phenomenon, is mainly dominated by the private sector. Only one online news source in our sample of the 14 most popular news web sites is government owned: *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, rg.ru, the main government newspaper. The most visited internet resource in Russia, Yandex.ru, with 53 million visitors a month, is one of two search engines and news aggregators owned by Arkady Volozh, who does not appear to have any relations with the Kremlin. After Putin criticized him in 2014 for being too vulnerable to foreign influence, Volozh stepped down from Russian Yandex but stayed on as the CEO of Yandex's Dutch parent company.²⁶ The remaining internet resources are privately owned by three oligarchs: Vladimir Potanin, Alexandr Mamut, and Alisher Usmanov.

²⁴ "Media Environment Guide: Russia - September 2016."

²⁵ Gregory Simons, *Russia Crisis Management Communications and Media Management under Putin*, Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University, January 2005.

²⁶ "Media Environment Guide: Russia - September 2016."

Throughout the years, print media has shifted from state ownership towards private ownership, but print media's significance as an information resource relative to other mediums has declined the most. Only two out of six newspapers are government-owned—the main state newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and the Moscow City government-owned *Argumenti i Fakti*. *Moscow Metro*, which is Russia's leading free newspaper, and the pro-Kremlin tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* both have connections to businessman Grigoriy Berezkin.²⁷ Similarly, the moderately liberal business daily *RBK* is owned by liberal businessman and former presidential candidate, Mikhail Prokhorov.

Vladimir Putin and Russia's Media Owners

Privately-owned media in Russia is dominated by the country's rich business elite, commonly referred to as "oligarchs." In our sample of the most popular media, ownership by oligarchs is prominent in online and print media. Oligarchs first entered the media scene in the mid-1990s, when most media outlets were facing difficult economic circumstances and oligarchs could afford to pour enormous investments into the industry. Media was seen as a powerful tool for fighting domestic political and policy battles.²⁸ However, the original investors in Russian media are not necessarily the same oligarchs that dominate the media scene today. In fact, two prominent media tycoons of that time—Valdimir Gusinsky (who owned NTV) and Boris Berezovsky (who owned 49 percent of Channel 1)—were forced to sell their media assets, as their channels carried increasingly anti-Putin themes during the 2000 election. Both men were eventually forced out of the country.²⁹ The oligarchs of today include cautious carry-overs from the mid-1990s as well as today's nouveau riche willing to play by the rules of Putin's inner circle.

Our assessment highlights that Putin has links to most media-owning oligarchs today, as depicted in Figure 6. Though many pretend to be apolitical, in order to maintain their major-revenue generating business assets in Russia, most of these individuals must treat President Putin and his inner circle favorably.³⁰ According to our research, there are five oligarchs who, along with the government, are the main entities controlling media in Russia. These are Vladimir Potanin and Alisher

²⁷ "Grigory Berezkin," Bloomberg, <https://www.bloomberg.com/profiles/people/1992289-grigory-berezkin>

²⁸ Anna Arutunyan, *The Media in Russia*. McGraw-Hill, 2009, page 43.

²⁹ Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: From Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War*, Viking, 2015, page 7.

³⁰ Anna Arutunyan, *The Media in Russia*. McGraw-Hill, 2009, page 33.

Usmanov, who have substantial investments in metallurgy; Alexander Mamut, who is a banker and investor; Yuriy Kovalchuk, who is in the banking and insurance sectors; and Roman Abramovich's, whose major investments are in metals and oil.

The owner of GMH and NMG, Kovalchuk, is the single largest holder of private media in Russia. GMH itself consists of more than 200 companies that include printing, television broadcasting, radio broadcasting, cinematography, advertising, PR, and online activities.³¹ These two media holdings have assets in the four most popular TV channels: Channel 5, Ren TV, NTV, and Channel 1 (25% ownership).

However, Alisher Usmanov's Mail.ru Group media empire rivals Kovalchuk's. His media holding owns the top two social media networks: *Odnoklassniki* and *Vkontakte*.³² He also owns a large email service, mail.ru, and a messaging application, ICQ Messenger. Potanin and Mamut have co-owned major online media assets since 2013, when they merged their "ProfMedia" and "SUP" media holdings. They own the popular blogging sites Livejournal and Liveinternet, and the popular news websites Lenta.ru and Gazeta.ru.

Analyzing ownership by the type of media indicates that the private television broadcasting industry is mainly dominated by Kovalchuk and, on a much smaller scale, by Abramovich, while internet media are dominated by Usmanov, Potanin, and Mamut. In 2016, the law restricting foreign ownership of media in Russia, capped at 20 percent, benefitted Kremlin proxies who stepped in to fill the gap once foreign media were forced out.³³ The media empires of Yuriy Kovalchuk and Alisher Usmanov were the two main beneficiaries of this law.³⁴

Although Putin has direct access to these oligarchs, there is no evidence that they discuss the editorial line of the media outlets they control. The Presidential Administration monitors, influences, and at times directs private media but generally permits editors to manage content within formal and informal boundaries.³⁵ Private media can and do run articles criticizing the policies of the cabinet, ministers,

³¹ Y.V.Markina, "The Formation of Modern Russian Media Holdings," *Nauchniye Vedomosti*, Issue 26 (209), 2015.

³² "Media Environment Guide: Russia - September 2016."

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Formal boundaries are legal prohibitions, such as restrictions on reporting about terrorism and extremism (including sympathy for anti-Soviet groups that collaborated with Nazi Germany, like some Ukrainian or Baltic nationalist forces) as well as so-called "gay propaganda." Informal boundaries relate to coverage of Putin and well as ad hoc informal guidance on timely topics. Explicit and implicit boundaries facilitate self-censorship.

regional governors, and even Prime Minister Medvedev, but are much more circumspect in criticizing Putin personally.³⁶ For example, Mikhail Prokhorov's RBK recently reported on parliamentary calls for Medvedev to respond to public corruption charges against him by the activist Alexey Navalny.³⁷ This reflects jockeying for influence similar to that of the 1990s, with the important distinction that media do not challenge Putin's continued rule.³⁸

Figure 6 also indicates that not all media oligarchs have a visible or direct connection to Putin. Our research found that Grigoriy Berezkin, the CEO of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Moscow Metro*, only has access to Putin via Vladimir Yakunin, Putin's neighbor in a dacha (country home) community and the CEO of Russian Railways.³⁹ Mikhail Prokhorov, who owns the liberal *RBK* newspaper, ran against Putin in the presidential elections of 2012, but was reportedly picked by Putin himself to give some legitimacy and "real competition" to the elections.⁴⁰ The owner and the editor-in-chief of *Moskovsky Komsomolets* newspaper, Pavel Gusev, is a member of the Committee on Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, an advisory panel to the president—a body that probably does not meet with Putin often and therefore has only indirect relations to him.⁴¹ Two privately owned media outlets, Yandex.ru and smi2.ru, also do not appear to have direct relations to Putin.⁴²

³⁶ Dimitri K. Simes and Paul J. Saunders, "The Kremlin Beggars to Differ," *The National Interest*, November-December 2009.

³⁷ "Several Russian Parliament Members Want Premier to Answer Corruption Allegations," The original source is an article by Vladimir Dergachev, Yevgeniya Kuznetsova, Vera Kholmogorova, and Mariya Makutina, "Do Not Hide Under Wing. Why Dmitry Medvedev Is Being Criticized in State Duma and Federation Council." The article refers both to opposition charges of corruption against Medvedev and criticism of his failure to respond adequately by pro-government parliamentarians.

³⁸ Even this was possible for a time during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, when some hoped that Putin would not return to the Kremlin.

³⁹ Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin, Operative in the Kremlin*, Brookings Institution Press, 2015, p. 67.

⁴⁰ "The Man Who Cared Too Little," *Meduza*, May 20, 2016. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2016/05/20/the-man-who-cared-too-little>

⁴¹ "Members," Совет при Президенте Российской Федерации по развитию гражданского общества и правам человека, <http://president-sovet.ru/members/constitution/read/48/>

⁴² LinkedIn profile of Yuri Belousov. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yurii-belousov-54680924>

Russia's Decision-Making in Media and Messaging

To understand Russia's decision-making in external media and messaging, we have assessed Moscow's objectives and the processes through which Russia's government turns those objectives into policy. We did this by examining four key components of Russia's media/messaging decision-making environment:

- The role of Russia's media and messaging in its foreign policy
- Russia's media/messaging strategy and objectives
- The drivers and boundaries in formulating media/messaging policy
- The institutions and individuals that make policy.

After reviewing each of these elements—especially the institutions and individuals at the center of Russia's media/messaging decision-making processes—we evaluate existing models of Russia's decision-making and propose our own model. For further examination of traditional Russian decision-making models and their application to media influence, please see Appendix A.

Media, Messaging, and Russia's Foreign Policy

Russia's leaders see domestic and international media as key instruments of policy, both domestically and internationally.⁴³ Within the country, this reflects the leadership's desire to perpetuate the existing authoritarian political system. Outside Russia, Russian officials argue, Moscow must compete with Western media in order

⁴³ For example, see "News conference of Vladimir Putin," December 19, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19859>, accessed March 13, 2017. In this instance, Putin said, "There should be patriotically minded people at the head of state information resources, people who uphold the interests of the Russian Federation."

to achieve national foreign policy goals.⁴⁴ Perhaps because the international audience for Russian media is limited relative to that of U.S. and Western media, Moscow has increasingly pursued this competition through asymmetric means that are less easily available to democratic governments.

In foreign policy, Russia's media have three principal objectives:

- Mobilizing and sustaining domestic political support for the leadership and its foreign and security policies, primarily through state-controlled or state-influenced Russian-language domestic media.⁴⁵
- Presenting official perspectives and policies to foreign audiences, primarily through state-controlled foreign-language international media.⁴⁶
- Where possible, influencing foreign audiences, including through disinformation, manipulation, and other malign means. Russia exercises this influence both through state-controlled international media, and indirectly through non-Russian media that unwittingly disseminate disinformation and propaganda, including individuals sharing materials via social media platforms. President Putin and others justify this by citing what they see as similar Western conduct.⁴⁷

Russia's Media and Messaging Strategy

Russia's external media and messaging strategy is subordinate to Russia's overall foreign policy strategy; messaging is one (albeit inseparable) element in Russia's broader efforts to achieve its international aims. Nevertheless, messaging may have

⁴⁴ "Meeting of Russian Federation ambassadors and permanent envoys," June 30, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52298>, accessed March 13, 2017. Putin: "We must put up strong resistance to the Western media's information monopoly, including by using all available methods to support Russian media outlets operating abroad."

⁴⁵ Some argue that public support for Putin's foreign policy is less important as such than as a lever for Putin in maintaining his dominance within Russia's elites. See Tina Burrett, *Television and Presidential Power in Putin's Russia*, Routledge, 2013, p. 216.

⁴⁶ Russian-language domestic media are, of course, also available to Russian speakers in other countries, especially neighboring countries, and thus can contribute to this as well.

⁴⁷ For example, see Mr. Putin's assertion that corruption charges in the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* are U.S. directed because Goldman Sachs is a shareholder in the paper's parent company. "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," April 14, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51716>, accessed March 11, 2017.

greater or lesser weight as a component of strategy and policy in proportion to the Russian interests at stake in a given situation, the tools and resources available to the Russian government in pursuing its objectives, and the strengths and weaknesses of Moscow's adversary or adversaries, which may make messaging more or less useful both strategically and in specific circumstances.

Russia publicly defines its national interests, foreign policy objectives, and national security strategy in formal documents such as the "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" (2016) and President Putin's decree "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation" (2015).⁴⁸ These and other official statements of Russian foreign policy emphasize Russia's aim to become "a center of influence in today's world" as well as Moscow's perceptions that the international system is becoming increasingly "multipolar"—with multiple competing powers rather than a single dominant power—and that the United States and NATO are increasingly dangerous to Russia's national security due to their continued expansion eastward and their disregard for Russia's interests and perspectives. Russia's national security strategy states that Russia's efforts to conduct "independent foreign and domestic policies" produce "opposition on the part of the United States and its allies, seeking to maintain their dominance in world affairs" leading to "political, economic, military and information pressure" on Russia. Nevertheless, Russia's policy documents define Moscow's goals as fundamentally defensive and identify security and stability to allow for continued domestic development as a top aim.

Within this framework, Russia's Foreign Policy Concept describes efforts "to bolster the standing of Russian mass media and communication tools in the global information space and convey Russia's perspective on international processes to a wider international community" as one of 11 "main objectives" of Russia's foreign policy. This reflects Moscow's steadily increasing attention to its ability to expose international audiences to key messages and, where needed, to refute or simply undermine U.S., Western, or other conflicting messages.

We have identified three specific efforts through which Moscow's media/messaging and broader malign influence pose challenges to U.S. objectives in Europe:

- Efforts to discredit Western institutions

⁴⁸ The Foreign Policy Concept is available in English via the Russian Foreign Ministry, at http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248, accessed April 22, 2017. Putin's decree outlining Russia's national security strategy is available in Russian through the Kremlin website, at <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201512310038.pdf>, accessed April 22, 2017.

- Efforts to undermine the internal social cohesion of Western nations
- Efforts to discredit the Western liberal order.

In all three areas, Russia's media seek to contest Western media narratives directly with Russian narratives and/or by presenting myriad alternatives. We will give further attention to these challenges in considering how Russia might employ its media and messaging capabilities in the future.

Drivers and Boundaries

Objectives and strategies give broad direction to Russia's policy. Institutions, processes, and individuals provide structure to Russia's decision-making processes by selecting among competing options. Drivers and boundaries shape the content of those options and move decision-makers toward their ultimate choices. As a result, understanding Russia's media decision-making requires understanding not only the processes that produce media policy, but also Moscow's drivers and constraints.

The principal driver—and boundary—in Russia's decision-making on external media and messaging is Russia's foreign and national security policy. After all, Moscow's policies clearly drive its messaging rather than the reverse. Russia's messaging provides insight into Moscow's likely drivers. From this perspective, some important drivers⁴⁹ for Russia's foreign policy messaging include the following:

- Russia's great power status, including its military might, and Russia's prerogatives as a great power
- Vladimir Putin's continued leadership and competence (primarily for Russia's domestic audience)
- Moscow's view of neighboring countries as strategically important to its national security and, in some cases, its economic development
- U.S./Western policies as threats to Russian national security
- U.S./Western policies, including the use of force and democracy promotion, as threats to global stability

⁴⁹ We identified these drivers through extensive review of Russia's formal foundational foreign policy and national security documents as well as statements by President Vladimir Putin and other key messengers on foreign policy matters.

- International law and a multipolar international system as constraints on U.S./Western freedom of action
- Political, social, and cultural traditions as sources of stability and security rather than as impediments to progress.⁵⁰

Russia's foreign and national security policy decisions act as boundaries on its messaging in that messaging aims to support policy and, as a result, should not contradict policy or its objectives. However, Moscow also faces obvious practical constraints as well as some limitations in its messaging. Importantly, boundaries on messaging are not prohibitions or restrictions on messaging, but rather indistinct lines that Russia cannot cross without incurring costs.⁵¹ Some obvious constraints include the following:

- Messages should not provoke hostility, mistrust, or other responses that undermine their effectiveness
- Messages should avoid creating expectations that Russia cannot satisfy its audience, weakening Russia's credibility
- Where possible, messages should remain consistent across time, unless changing circumstances allow new messages

Some other limitations on Russia's messaging include:

- Western audiences place limited trust in Russia's messages, especially official messages in government-controlled media⁵²

⁵⁰ Putin has articulated this explicitly: "We know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilization in every nation for thousands of years: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity. Of course, this is a conservative position. But speaking in the words of Nikolai Berdyaev, the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state." See "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," December 12, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>, accessed April 17, 2017.

⁵¹ In practice, Russia appears to have crossed some of these boundaries and to have incurred costs in doing so.

⁵² While little polling exists measuring Western attitudes toward Russian media, very few among Western publics express trust in Vladimir Putin. However, trust in Putin varies between segments of Russian population and in countries in Russian periphery. We believe that trust in Putin is acceptable as a rough proxy for trust in Russia's official messaging. See "Little

- Russia’s domestic audience is highly sensitive to official messaging and is very sophisticated and discriminating in its use of domestic media⁵³
- Russian-language messages are much less accessible internationally than English-language messages.⁵⁴

Institutional Framework

The Russian government uses a broad range of institutions and practices to control Russia’s media space and to exert influence outside the country.

The Presidential Administration, appointed by and directly subordinate to Putin, has a central role in aligning Russia’s media strategy and messaging with its foreign policy objectives. First, it is the Presidential Administration rather than the cabinet of ministers – subordinate to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev – that determines Russian foreign policy, and Russian media policy and practice. Under Russia’s constitution, the president “shall govern the foreign policy of the Russian Federation” and “shall be the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.”⁵⁵ As an instrument of Russian foreign policy, Russia’s international media fall within the Kremlin’s purview. For practical political reasons, the Presidential Administration likewise manages Russia’s domestic media.

Senior Presidential Administration officials have appropriate experience for the task of coordinating Russia’s media policy with its foreign policy. For example, Alexei Gromov, first deputy chief of staff of the Presidential Administration (with responsibility for media affairs) and Dmitry Peskov, deputy chief of staff of the

Confidence in Putin,” Pew Research Center, August 26, 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/08/05/russia-putin-held-in-low-regard-around-the-world/russia-image-03/>.

⁵³ Ellen Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 41.

⁵⁴ According to a leading statistical resource, approximately 1.9 billion people speak English as a first or second language worldwide. Less than one-quarter of this number, approximately 440 million, speak Russian as a first or second language. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266808/the-most-spoken-languages-worldwide/>, accessed April 20, 2017. English-language media are available not only in English-speaking nations (e.g., the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), but also in non-Western countries where other languages are predominant, such as India, Pakistan, and Hong Kong. Of course, English is also more widely used among global political and economic elites. Russian is spoken principally within Russia, in the former Soviet Union states, and in some former Soviet client states.

⁵⁵ The Constitution of the Russian Federation, <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-05.htm>, accessed March 11, 2017.

Presidential Administration and presidential spokesman, are former career diplomats. First Deputy Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko (responsible for online domestic media) is a former prime minister with significant political experience. Presidential Aide Yuri Ushakov (who serves as President Putin's foreign policy advisor) is also a career diplomat and a past ambassador to the United States.⁵⁶

CNA's analysis suggests that the Presidential Administration has three broad functions in managing Russia's media policy and shaping the country's overall media environment:

- Defining official messages and influencing private media coverage
- Allocating resources (both formally and informally)
- Establishing and enforcing boundaries.

The Presidential Administration directs the activities of state-controlled media organizations and influences private media through regular conference calls and meetings. According to former state television journalists cited in the Russian press, what began as weekly Friday briefings for top editors evolved into daily morning and evening conference calls.⁵⁷ At the weekly meetings, officials reportedly distributed "a centimeter-thick pile" of documents "in which everything was laid out: how, what, and who should be invited for an expert opinion."⁵⁸

The Presidential Administration also uses one-on-one meetings and telephone calls to influence media organizations. A Western journalist who worked as a public relations advisor to the Russian government described one such encounter when he was visiting Gromov: "I was once drinking tea in his office when the head of Russian state television walked in. Gromov introduced me briefly to him, then waved him through to his back office, asking him to pour himself a drink and wait. This was the regular weekly pep-talk, where Gromov talked through the agenda for the coming period and made sure coverage would be 'correct.'⁵⁹ In another case, an editor and anchor at a state-owned television news channel disclosed that Presidential

⁵⁶ For official biographies, see "Major Staff and Key Officials" on the Kremlin's website at <http://en.kremlin.ru/structure/administration/members>, accessed March 11, 2017.

⁵⁷ "Russia: Former, Current Federal TV Employees Tell How Kremlin Orders Shape Anti-Ukraine Propaganda."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Angus Roxburgh, *Strongman Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*. I.B.Tauris, 2012, page 91.

Administration officials called editors seeking to block certain news reports.⁶⁰ While officials tend to present these calls as requests rather than directives, they leave little leeway for state media executives, whose careers depend upon satisfying Presidential Administration officials.

The Presidential Administration likewise plays a central role in allocating resources to both state and private media organizations. Formal resource allocation occurs through provision of federal government funds in Russia's federal budget process. Presidential Administration officials play a decisive role here and in wider institutional decision-making. For example, Gromov was reportedly behind President Putin's 2013 decree establishing the *Rossiia Segodnya* holding, which now manages much of Russia's internationally oriented state media, and subordinating Russia's formerly independent international news agency RIA-Novosti to *Rossiia Segodnya*'s chief editor.⁶¹ These decisions can be contentious – in this case, Gromov and Peskov appear to have differed over RIA-Novosti's integration into *Rossiia Segodnya*, with Gromov advocating for the move for quite some time before eventually overcoming opposition from Peskov, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, and some Medvedev subordinates.⁶²

In addition to its formal channels of influence, the Presidential Administration can encourage large state-owned companies and Russian oligarchs to direct advertising toward or away from particular broadcast, print, and online media.⁶³

The Presidential Administration's final instrument is its ability to establish and enforce boundaries for media reporting by rewarding or punishing media organizations or editors, reporters, and commentators. Extreme sanctions in rare cases—such as closing a media organization or forcing criminal prosecution or dismissal of individual journalists—encourage others to censor themselves. Whether true or not, past allegations that the Kremlin has ordered journalists killed are an even more powerful deterrent. Milder tools in applying pressure—particularly useful

⁶⁰ Statements during the panel discussion “Media and State in Russia” at the Center for the National Interest, October 27, 2016. In this specific case, officials reportedly sought to block an inaccurate news story related to the conflict in Ukraine.

⁶¹ “Why We Need Rossiia Segodnya,” Moscow Forbes Russia Online, December 10, 2013.

⁶² Ibid.; Petr Tverdov, “Moscow's Voice Abroad Will Sound More Conservative; Kremlin Consolidating Elite Around Traditional Values and Russia's National Interests,” *Moscow Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online* in Russian, December 10, 2013.

⁶³ Former RIA-Novosti editor Svetlana Mironyuk has publicly described advertising revenue as an element of the Kremlin's control over Russia's media. Jill Dougherty, “How the Media Became One of Putin's Most Powerful Weapons,” *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/how-the-media-became-putins-most-powerful-weapon/391062/>, accessed March 13, 2017.

in dealing with private media—include raiding offices, conducting tax inspections, and passing laws or imposing regulations that constrict space for private media.⁶⁴

Russia's Security Council is highly visible in Russia's domestic media environment, but does not appear to have an ongoing role in coordinating media policy or messaging. Russia's government construes the Security Council's role broadly, including international security as well as "economic security," "counterterrorism," "defense-industrial security," "state and social security" and "information security."⁶⁵ However, the Security Council seems ill equipped in the media space, in that its membership does not include key officials who oversee state media organizations or with extensive operational experience in messaging and public relations.⁶⁶

Instead, the Security Council's most important role is to deliver and validate important messages domestically. For example, Russian domestic media often report on Security Council meetings during international crises or in announcing important foreign policy and national security decisions. In crisis situations, these reports are intended to show that President Vladimir Putin and senior officials are attentive to Russia's national security and national interests.⁶⁷ At times, the Russian government also uses televised reports of Security Council meetings to announce or explain shifts in policy; in those cases, the reports are intended to demonstrate a judicious decision-making process that simultaneously highlights President Putin's leadership and communicates his subordinates' loyal support.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Jill Dougherty, "How the Media Became One of Putin's Most Powerful Weapons," *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2015. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/how-the-media-became-putins-most-powerful-weapon/391062/?utm_source=eb

⁶⁵ See the Security Council's website, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/docs/>, for these categories, accessed March 12, 2017. Russia's formal Doctrine on Information Security includes "providing the Russian and international community with reliable information on the State policy of the Russian Federation and its official position on socially significant events in Russia and in the world." See http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/information/DIB_engl/, accessed March 12, 2017.

⁶⁶ For the composition of Russia's Security Council, see its website at <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/council/composition/>. Note that Russia's Security Council has "permanent" members, who attend every meeting, and regular members, who attend as needed.

⁶⁷ See Channel 1's coverage of the Security Council meeting following Turkey's downing of a Russian jet, "Владимир Путин обсудил с членами Совбеза РФ ситуацию в Сирии," November 27, 2015, http://www.1tv.ru/news/2015-11-27/6518-vladimir_putin_obsudil_s_chlenami_sovbeza_rf_situatsiyu_v_sirii, accessed March 14, 2017.

⁶⁸ For example, Channel 1's report on a Security Council meeting three weeks after Russia began airstrikes in Syria, "Президент провёл совещание с постоянными членами Совета Безопасности," October 23, 2015, <http://www.1tv.ru/news/2015-10-23/8760->

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense are primarily implementing agencies; their principals contribute to major foreign policy or national security decisions but do not make those decisions independently. For example, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense, and ministry spokespeople (including those of the General Staff) seem to have broad autonomy in their messaging so long as it remains within established parameters. Regardless of the appearance of latitude in certain bureaus, the Presidential Administration determines the overall tone of messaging at all times.

Several other ministries contribute to Russia's media policy, though largely in technical fields rather than in messaging. Most significant are the Ministry of Finance, which develops budget proposals and directly funds other agencies, including state media organizations; the Ministry of Telecommunications and Mass Communication, which regulates the media and telecommunications industries (including internet providers) and issues licenses; and the Ministry of Culture, which operates in a media "gray zone" including films, television entertainment, and documentaries. The Ministry of Culture subsidizes some of these productions. Last but by no means least, the Ministry of Justice can determine that media materials are "extremist" and ban them from further circulation.⁶⁹ This can incur considerable financial costs if it requires collecting and destroying printed works.⁷⁰

prezident_provyol_soveschanie_s_postoyannymi_chlenami_soveta_bezопасnosti, accessed March 14, 2017.

⁶⁹ "Изображение Путина с накрашенными губами признали экстремистским," *Meduza*, April 5, 2017, <https://meduza.io/news/2017/04/05/izobrazhenie-putina-s-nakrashennymi-gubami-priznali-ekstremistskim>

⁷⁰ For example, a Moscow municipal court ordered the privately-owned newspaper *Vedomosti* to destroy all printed editions including an article that claimed Igor Sechin, the head of the state oil firm Rosneft and a close Putin ally, was building himself a new luxury home outside Moscow. Sechin eschewed monetary damages in the suit. "Мосгорсуд признал законным требование к "Ведомостям" удалить статью о доме Сечина," *Interfax*, November 18, 2016, accessed April 24, 2017.

Vladimir Putin's Role in the Russian Media

Vladimir Putin's role in Russia's media decision-making appears consistent with his broader management style, something that he and Russian observers describe as “manual control” or ручное управление. Manual control is distinct from “automatic” control and refers to Putin's direct intervention, as necessary, to ensure implementation of state objectives. At times, the Kremlin has translated the Russian phrase into a gentler English-language form, “hands-on involvement.” Either way, the term reflects a lack of confidence that Russia's government bureaucracy will “automatically” deliver results without personal presidential leadership on priority matters.⁷¹ The concept of “manual control” has a long history in tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union; in the latter case, it typically referred to Politburo members' direct orders to lower-level officials in Moscow or distant regions. These directives bypassed multiple layers of subordinates in the formal chain-of-command—the system for “automatic” governance.⁷²

Putin's personalized version of manual control emerged relatively early in his tenure, as a direct consequence of his experiences governing Russia. In his case, it includes not only his direct engagement, but also his highly visible leadership; when he engages manual control, Russia's president is both taking personal charge and demonstrating that he is doing so. Indeed, at times the latter may be more significant than the former, especially for Russia's domestic audiences. Stinging media and

⁷¹ In Putin's first extensive statement about the concept, in 2007, he stated, “We are emerging from a serious systemic crisis, and are thus forced to do a lot in manual regime,” suggesting that after 15-20 years Russia would have “no need” for the “manual” approach. Putin compared his use of manual control to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's policy responses to the Depression (after which, he said, the U.S. government eventually reduced its role in the economy). “Ответы на вопросы журналистов после прямого теле- и радиоэфира («Прямая линия с Президентом России»),” <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24606>, accessed March 17, 2017.

⁷² “Интервью с В. П. Козловым,” Историческая Экспертиза (Moscow), 1/2015, p. 162. This is an interview with Professor Vladimir Kozlov, a historian and former director of Russia's State Archive Service/Federal Archive Agency, who describes how the Politburo exercised “manual control” during the Soviet period.

public criticism⁷³ of Putin following the August 2000 loss of the Oscar-II submarine *Kursk*—when he continued his vacation for a few days before returning to Moscow and then went on television to apologize—likely contributed to Putin’s determination to control domestic media in order to avoid similar future challenges to his leadership and authority. Domestic media coverage of a 2002 mass hostage-taking by Chechen militants and a subsequent assault by Russia’s security services drove home this lesson; Russian television broadcast images of scores of hostages reportedly killed by a sleeping gas used in the effort to free them from the theater in which they had been held prisoner.

Since manual control requires Putin’s personal engagement and Putin has limited capacity to provide continuous personal direction on media and messaging due to his many other responsibilities, Russia’s president applies manual control selectively. He relies upon key aides in the Presidential Administration to manage most day-to-day media and messaging affairs. With this in mind, understanding when and how he employs manual control in the media sphere is central to assessing his decision-making role in this area.

According to our analysis, Putin applies manual control when one or more of the following are at stake:

- **His control of the political system**, e.g., in combating internal political challenges from Russia’s governors and oligarchs in the early 2000s (including attacks in oligarch-owned private media) and in winning re-election thereafter
- **His political legitimacy**, e.g., in managing core economic issues and in responding to protests such as the 2009 strikes in Pikalevo, after which he publicly humiliated aluminum magnate Oleg Deripaska, or the 2011 post-election demonstrations
- **His conception of Russia’s national security and vital national interests**, e.g., dealing with domestic terrorism, responding to Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution and 2013-14 Maidan protests, managing the 2008 Georgia war,⁷⁴ and directing Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

⁷³ Michael Wines, “Bereft Russia Hears Putin’s Mea Culpa on Sub Accident,” August 24, 2000, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/24/world/bereft-russia-hears-putin-s-mea-culpa-on-sub-accident.html>, accessed March 18, 2017.

⁷⁴ The Georgia war is a more complex case, in that Putin was prime minister, not president, at the time, and did not have formal constitutional oversight of Russia’s military or foreign policy. Still, he rapidly traveled from the Beijing Olympics to southern Russia to assert his role.

Media and messaging are essential in each of these three areas; indeed, Russian and Western observers generally agree that Putin moved rapidly to consolidate state control of Russia's media following his election in 2000 precisely to establish his authority and enhance his legitimacy.

Nevertheless, because he cannot exert continuous manual control of a single issue over an extended period of time without sacrificing control in other areas, the Russian president's application of this approach is usually time-limited and concentrated in crisis periods or at key decision points. Once he has made fundamental decisions and established clear parameters for policy, Putin's subordinates generally implement his policies under his supervision rather than at his direction. For example, the Russian president was much more deeply engaged in Ukraine policy during the initial weeks of the conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region, following the MH-17 being shot down, and during the Minsk talks with Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, as well as at other isolated points in the conflict, rather than in day-to-day operational decision-making over a three-year period. We include a brief assessment of Putin's "manual control" of messaging during the early months of the Ukraine conflict, and separately during the MH-17 crisis, in the case study section of this report.

Vladimir Putin's Role as a Messenger

Vladimir Putin's role as a messenger is no less significant than his role as a decision-maker. Having served as president or prime minister of Russia since 1999, he is highly experienced in working with both Russian and international media and often uses this experience to Russia's advantage.

Most obviously, serving as Moscow's principal messenger on key issues allows Mr. Putin to control and calibrate his message personally. Putin is thus able to define not only the content but also the style and tone of Russia's messaging. He can be blunt or elliptical, threatening or accommodating, biting sarcasm, indifferent, dismissive, humorous, reflective, or angry—and these are only a few of the styles in his repertoire.

Putin's personal delivery of important messages also leverages his domestic and international visibility to maximize media coverage. By choosing the right tone and language, the Russian president can attract even greater attention to his statements. He has become quite experienced in doing so and often uses dramatic language for effect, precisely to generate broad media coverage, particularly internationally. One of his most widely cited statements is his 1999 vow to "waste them in the toilets,"

referring to Moscow's pursuit of Chechen terrorists.⁷⁵ At the same time, as is true for any other government, external audiences—whether Western officials, media or publics, or other targeted groups—likely assign greater weight to Putin's presidential statements than to comments by official spokespeople or even government ministers.

Putin's personal statements can also disseminate official positions widely and rapidly within Russia's media system. This can be particularly important in crises, when presenting a presidential message may be much simpler than seeking to coordinate messaging with multiple government agencies and media outlets.

Understandably, Putin's messages draw particular attention inside Russia and do not necessarily require official pressure to receive wide coverage. For example, during Russia's 2004 presidential campaign, Russian television executives publicly stated that "showing President Putin is very good for our ratings." This led one Western scholar to argue that not only Kremlin influence but also commercial motives may lead to wide coverage of Putin in Russia.⁷⁶ However, Putin's "draw" as a television presence may be diminishing; according to polling by Russia's state-owned polling agency, public interest in Putin's annual Address to the Federal Assembly declined by one-third between 2007 and 2013.⁷⁷ That decline coincided with economic stagnation and declining living standards that Russia experienced during these periods.⁷⁸

Russia's president uses a variety of formats to convey priority messages. The most formal are his annual addresses to the Russian parliament. These are increasingly ritualistic and serve a function similar to an American president's State of the Union Addresses, internally signaling executive priorities while reassuring disparate domestic constituencies. Other formal presentations, such as remarks to the Munich Security Conference or to St. Petersburg's International Economic Forum, focus on international audiences. Putin's regular addresses to the Valdai International

⁷⁵ Jill Dougherty, "Moscow's Version of Political Stability," CNN, October 15, 1999, <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/views/y/1999/10/dougherty.russia.oct15/>, accessed April 1, 2017. Translations vary. Putin was a relatively new prime minister under President Boris Yeltsin when he made this statement.

⁷⁶ Burrett, *Television and Presidential Power in Putin's Russia*, p. 160.

⁷⁷ "Less than third of Russians interested in Putin's annual address - poll," Moscow VTsIOM in Russian, December 23, 2013. Of course, Medvedev was president and gave this address from 2008 to 2011, so the comparison is between the end of Putin's first two four-year terms as president and the beginning of his subsequent third term.

⁷⁸ "Deconstructing Putin's Approval Ratings: One Thousand Casualties For Every Point," *Forbes*, June 8, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulroderickgregory/2015/06/08/deconstructing-putins-approval-ratings-one-thousand-casualties-for-every-point/#1c20763d4c3f>

Discussion Club—an annual conference aimed largely but not exclusively at Western experts and opinion leaders— also serve to present his foreign policy thinking to international observers.⁷⁹

Less formal, though no less carefully planned, are Putin’s annual “Direct Line” appearances, during which he responds to questions from both ordinary citizens and Russian (and foreign) journalists on live television. Major annual news conferences likewise allow him to address specific domestic or international concerns head-on.⁸⁰ Putin can also use impromptu or off-the-cuff remarks to great effect, such as his notorious promise to “waste” terrorists or his more recent 2009 televised demand that metals magnate Oleg Deripaska return a pen that Deripaska had borrowed to sign documents promising back pay to protesting workers. This rapidly became one of the most widely available videos of Putin online.⁸¹ The peremptory demand simultaneously demonstrated Putin’s power, humiliated the billionaire, and channeled popular anger at Russia’s oligarchs over their perceived (and often real) theft from ordinary citizens.

Putin’s Inner Circle

Our assessment highlights that while Putin uses “manual control” and is in charge of developing important messages, he also relies on key individuals in his inner circle to disseminate them and implement an overarching media strategy.⁸² These individuals interpret Putin’s statements as they relate to media, prepare policy documents that guide media, and intervene when necessary. Putin has various inner circles depending on which issues he is addressing. Through our analysis, we established who resides in his media inner circle—i.e., the group of people he most greatly trusts to manage media issues. The inner circle consists of members of his administration

⁷⁹ Notably, these have evolved from off-the-record question-and-answer sessions with approximately 40-50 participants into major televised speeches.

⁸⁰ For example, shortly after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Putin sought to reassure Russians that the expense would not force reductions in social spending. “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,” April 17, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>, accessed April 1, 2017. In recent years, Putin’s Direct Line broadcast has occurred each April, with his Address to the Federal Assembly and the annual news conference each December.

⁸¹ Alexei Kuznetsov, “Putin Erupts in Struggling Russian Town,” June 8, 2009, CBS News, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/putin-erupts-in-struggling-russian-town/>, accessed April 1, 2017.

⁸² When we use the term “inner circle” in this paper, we refer to President Putin’s closest advisors and facilitators on media and messaging, whether in or out of government. This group overlaps with but is not identical to Putin’s inner circles in national security decision-making, domestic political affairs, or economic policy.

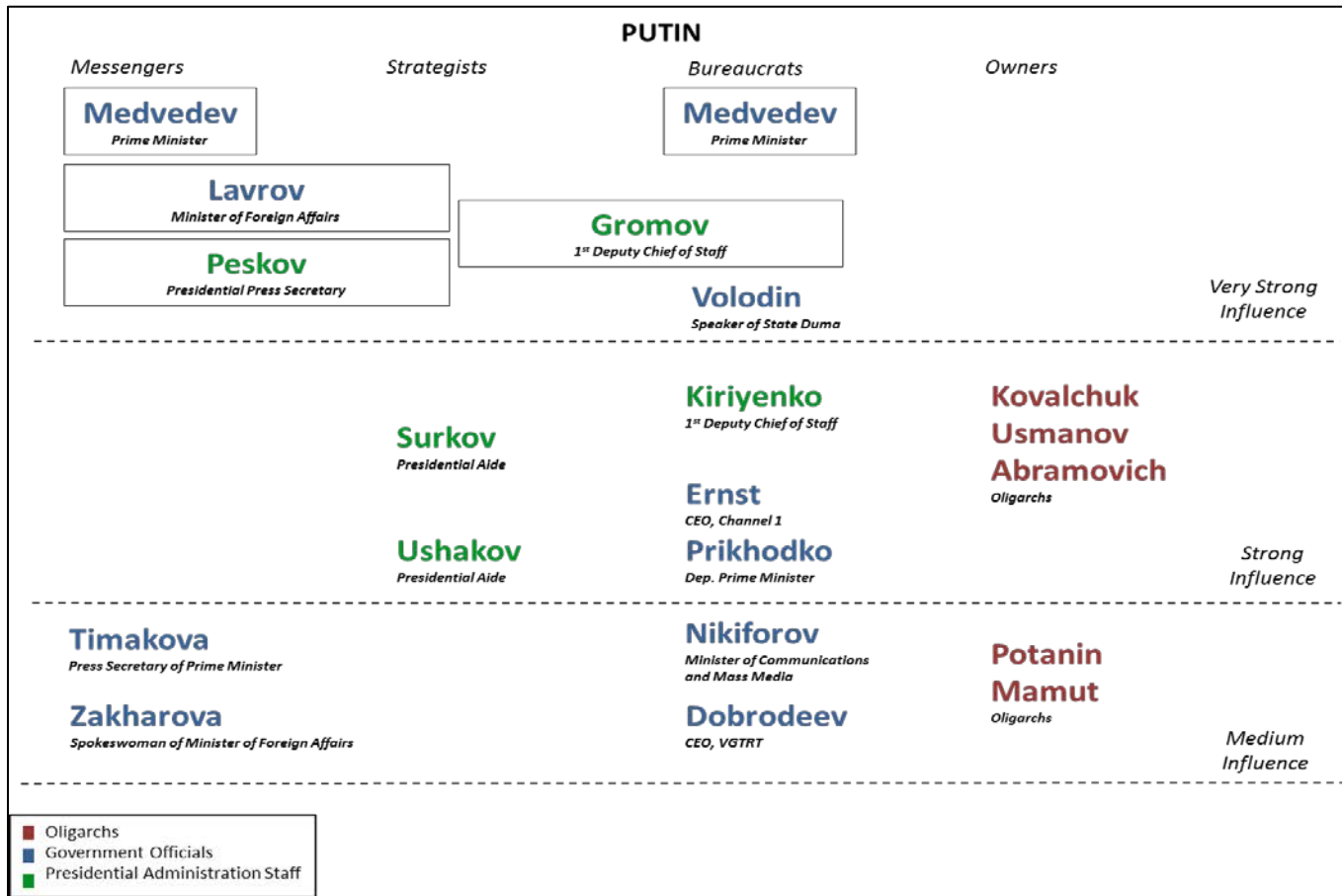
and government, CEOs of some government-owned media, and oligarchs (Russia's rich business elite) who own substantial media assets. They are described in Figure 7 and Table 1.

The figure and table describe Putin's media inner circle and key messengers and are divided into the following categories: *messengers, strategists, bureaucrats, and owners*. It is important to note that some individuals belong in more than one category— Dmitry Peskov, President Putin's press secretary, and Alexey Gromov, first deputy chief of staff, play dual roles, as does Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Also, while we identify the *primary* role(s) that each official plays, we acknowledge that they may also have a voice in other areas. Finally, not everyone in the president's media inner circle has the same level of access or influence. Depending on their stature, current and past roles, performance, and relationships with the Russian president, they would have differing degrees of access to Vladimir Putin and may have earned greater trust.

It is important to note that the involvement of the Russian government in controlling media messaging also depends on the size of the media audience. Media with a small audience can be relatively free in their coverage without much government interference, while media with a wide audience are under constant watch for their content.⁸³

⁸³ Statements during the panel discussion "Media and State in Russia" at the Center for the National Interest, October 27, 2016.

Figure 5. Individuals shaping Russia's media strategy



Source: CNA.

Table 1. Putin's inner circle

Messengers	Sergey Lavrov Dmitry Peskov Yuri Ushakov Natalia Timakova Dmitry Medvedev Maria Zakharova	Messengers are senior level government officials who interact with domestic and foreign media and diplomats to privately and publicly convey presidential and governmental messages.
Strategists	Sergey Lavrov Alexey Gromov Dmitry Peskov Vladislav Surkov Yuri Ushakov	Strategists are current members of Putin's administration and the government. Our research found that domestic and foreign media strategies are divided between Peskov and Gromov. ⁸⁴
Bureaucrats	Dmitry Medvedev Alexey Gromov Vyacheslav Volodin Sergey Kiriyenko Sergey Prikhodko Nikolay Nikiforov Konstantin Ernst Oleg Dobrodeev	Bureaucrats are tasked with formulating policy based on Putin's direction, and work to formalizing policy. Dmitry Medvedev, the previous president of Russia and current prime minister, is the highest-ranking bureaucrat in Putin's inner circle.
Private Media Owners	Yuri Kovalchuk Alisher Usmanov Roman Abramovich Vladimir Potanin Aleksandr Mamut	In this category, we list the largest owners of the private media who are also Russia's largest oligarchs heavily invested in metallurgy, oil, insurance, and banking sectors.

Source: CNA

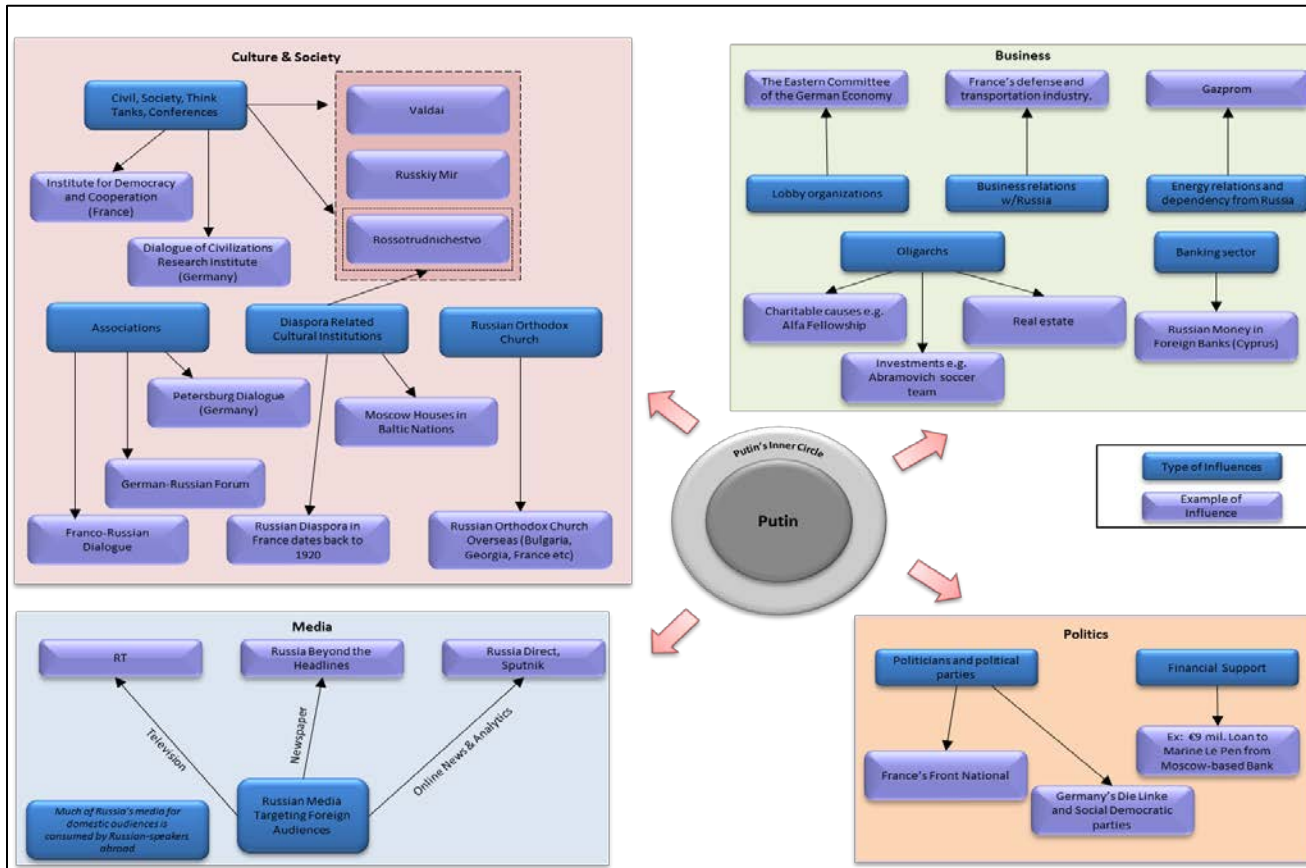
⁸⁴ Olga Romana, "Kremlin Wars. About How Courtier Clans Are Fighting, and What They Are Fighting For, and Who Remains Ahead of the Game (So Far)," *The New Times Online*, January 20, 2015.

Russia's Media and Messaging as Means of External Influence

The media is only one instrument of Russia's external influence. In this section, we first place Russia's external media within the context of its other various instruments of influence. Second, we test our assessment of Russian decision-making in the media against four distinct scenarios—crisis, armed conflict, gray zone, and steady state—and briefly study Russia's conduct in similar past circumstances. This allows us to better understand Russian decision-making in the media and the role that key individuals, including President Vladimir Putin, may play in future plausible scenarios.

Figure 6 highlights Russia's influence abroad.

Figure 6. Visual map of Russia's influence abroad



Source: CNA

Russia's External Influence

Russia's external influence is substantial and extends through most facets of society, including culture, religion, media and information, business, and politics. Russia uses hybrid methods of influence, including white, gray, and black influence operations around the world.⁸⁵ While we focus on key elements of influence, it is important to note that Russia's narrative is not limited to one mode of transmission—Russia uses most if not all aspects of civil society and public life to craft influence campaigns aimed at winning hearts and minds across Europe and elsewhere.

Table 2 visualizes the various modes of Russian influence in Europe, dividing influence into four broad categories: culture and society, media, business, and politics. Although we discuss these four areas of influence independently, we acknowledge that each supports and strengthens the other and none operates wholly independently from the others. Ultimately, Putin and his inner circle exercise powerful influence over Russia's messaging in each sphere. Table 2 details the modality of Russia's influence abroad and provides a high-level exemplar of its ability to influence foreign audiences and assert the Kremlin's foreign policy priorities.

⁸⁵ White operations are defined as "open" or transparently related directly to the Russian government. Gray operations are defined as those that the government can plausibly deny but demonstrate tangential or indirect relation to the Russian government. Black operations are defined as those conducted covertly or clandestinely by the Russian government to influence populations abroad.

Table 2. Modes of Russian influence abroad

Category		Example
Media	Russian state media	The Kremlin exerts influence through the media via indirect ownership of major media enterprises; this is accomplished through oligarchs and their vast and opaque corporate holdings of media organizations such as Rambler Co, Gazprom Media, and Mail.ru
	Russian private media	
	Manipulation of Independent Western Media	
Society	Social, Community & Cultural Institutions	The Franco-Russian Dialogue, the Petersburg Dialogues, and the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation all operate as nongovernmental events or organizations, despite the fact that each receives funding directly from the Kremlin.
	Think Tanks & Academia	
	Russian Orthodox Church	
Politics	Financial Support	The Kremlin has manipulated loopholes in British law to obfuscate financial contributions made to British political parties; these financial contributions are used to curry favor with political heavyweights and parties, and to shape party positions/platforms in the UK
	Policy Support	
	Narrative Validation	
Business	Energy & Gas	Russian state-owned companies and Putin-connected oligarchs expand constituencies favoring cooperation with Russia, and lobby through organizations such as the Eastern Committee of the German Economy. Corruption can be an additional avenue of influence in weaker legal systems.
	Real Estate	
	Sports	
	Lobbying	

Source: CNA

Media

The Russian government owns and operates media, such as Sputnik and RT, aimed at foreign audiences. These programs exert influence beyond former Soviet states because they sponsor programming and online content in a wide variety of languages targeted at local viewership and consumption habits.

Also, Russia is increasingly skilled at manipulating the algorithms that underlie popular Western social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter in order to promote its own narrative.⁸⁶ Russian communications professionals appear to have a sophisticated understanding of the echo chamber created by social media networks, which the Kremlin has employed to push fake news into communities where confirmation bias, distrust of the government, and fear can validate disinformation that would otherwise lack credibility.

Finally, the Kremlin exerts influence on Europe's Russian-speaking populations through Russia's government-controlled domestic media. These include media organizations such as Rambler Co., which controls important online properties; Gazprom Media, which has both traditional and online holdings; and Mail.ru, which is another online firm. Within Europe, the Russian language is most widely understood in the Baltic States, the Balkans, the Caucasus region, and Central Europe.

Culture and Society

Russia uses cultural influence in three ways: by leveraging Russian community or cultural institutions; through think tanks, academia, and institutes; and through the Russian Orthodox Church overseas. Moscow uses government agencies such as Rosstrudnichestvo and government-sponsored foundations such as *Russkiy Mir* (literally "Russian World"). These aim to promote Russian language and culture and to "consolidate Russians globally on the basis of their loyalty to the Kremlin."⁸⁷ The Russian government spends a considerable amount of time and money promoting its conception of a global "Russian world" encompassing not only ethnic Russians, but also Russian speakers, their families, and others whose cultural, familial, or business

⁸⁶ Robert Orttung, Elizabeth Nelson, and Anthony Livshen, *How Russia Today is Using YouTube*; *Washington Post*, March 23, 2015, accessed March 24, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/23/how-russia-today-is-using-youtube/?utm_term=.c5d680923f0c

⁸⁷ Vera Zakem, Paul Saunders, and Daniel Antoun, *Mobilizing Compatriots: Russia's Strategy, Tactics, and Influence in the former Soviet Union*, CNA Corporation, November 2015, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2015-U-011689-1Rev.pdf

connections to Russia make them Russia's *sootchestvenniki* or “compatriots.”⁸⁸ In addition to promoting community and cultural institutions, the Russian government uses associations, think tanks, and events to promote Russian foreign policy in European nations. For example, the Franco-Russian Dialogue and the Petersburg Dialogues operate as nongovernmental events or organizations despite the fact that each receives funding directly from the Kremlin.⁸⁹ Further, President Putin himself founded and continues to promote the “nongovernmental” Petersburg Dialogues. Both organizations encourage a deliberately pro-Kremlin worldview and advocate for Kremlin-friendly policies in many European capitals.⁹⁰

Additionally, Russia is adept in using the Russian Orthodox Church to institutionalize and affirm a wide-reaching Russian identity. The Church unifies Russians and compatriots living within Russia and abroad by promoting the idea of a greater ethno-cultural Russian state, and by working to build ties with compatriots across Europe. As of 2016, Paris was home to the largest Russian Orthodox Church in Europe—a visible reminder of the Kremlin's ability to flex its muscle in the face of a deeply secular French government.⁹¹ Further, religious teachings of the Church shore up the Kremlin's Eurosceptic worldview while framing Western liberal democracy as antithetical to Russian identity and security.⁹²

Business

Business is an important tool the Kremlin uses to influence countries across Europe; Kremlin-sponsored shareholders and executives alike own major Russian industries such as energy and gas through primary shareholdings, shell companies, and corporate subsidiary organizations.⁹³ One exemplar is the Russian gas and oil monopoly Gazprom. Gazprom has documented corporate holdings in many EU

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Alina Polyakova, Marlene Laruelle, Stefan Meister, and Neil Barnett, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*, the Atlantic Council, November 2016.

⁹⁰ Natalya Kanevskaya, *How the Kremlin Wields Soft Power in France*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 24, 2014, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-soft-power-france/25433946.html>

⁹¹ Vera Zakem, Paul Saunders, and Daniel Antoun, *Mobilizing Compatriots: Russia's Strategy, Tactics, and Influence in the former Soviet Union*, CNA Corporation, November 2015. https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2015-U-011689-1Rev.pdf

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Reuter's Business News, “Russia's Gazprom Says Won't Share Its Europe-bound Gas Export Monopoly,” April 9, 2016, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-gazprom-exports-idUKKCN0X60HW>.

states; however, these holdings are “masked as offshore firms, complex joint ventures and subsidiaries registered in third-party countries” making confident attribution difficult⁹⁴. In addition to monopolizing oil and gas markets, Moscow oligarchs use their position to conceal wealth from sanctions through real estate,⁹⁵ to invest in sports teams,⁹⁶ and to lobby through organizations such as the Eastern Committee of the German Economy for favorable legislation or regulations.⁹⁷

Particularly in countries with weaker legal systems—including some former Soviet states, Balkan countries, and some new European Union members—Russia’s business connections can also include corrupt practices that create additional opportunities and channels for Russian influence. Russia’s ability to use corruption as an instrument is of course greatest where its state-owned companies are involved. Even when corruption is not a deliberate instrument, it can sway its beneficiaries to advocate or support policies that create new opportunities for enrichment or, conversely, to avoid disruption of existing arrangements.⁹⁸

Politics

The Kremlin’s influence in politics across Europe is primarily accomplished through its financial support of parties and politicians that favor closer relations with Moscow. These relationships are critically important because the support of persons and parties not overtly associated with the Kremlin legitimizes the Kremlin’s Eurosceptic narrative, and furthers the Kremlin’s policy agenda in capitals across Europe. The Kremlin has provided up to €9 million in financial support to the Front National in France in support of Marine Le Pen’s far-right bid for the French

⁹⁴ C. Boyden Gray. *Europe Should Tackle Gazprom Monopoly*, The European Institute, <https://www.europeaninstitute.org/index.php/43-european-affairs/winterspring-2009/30-europe-should-tackle-gazprom-monopoly>

⁹⁵ Stephen Moss. *Why are rich Russians so obsessed with buying up London property?*; the Guardian and the Rockefeller Foundation, May 9, 2014. Accessed March 15, 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/may/09/rich-russians-buying-london-property-real-estate>.

⁹⁶ Roman Abramovich, a well-known Kremlin oligarch, is the primary owner of the UK-based Chelsea Football Club.

⁹⁷ John Vinocur, “The Russia Lobby in Germany,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2014, accessed March 24, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303978304579473082453217614>.

⁹⁸ Vera Zakem, Paul Saunders, and Daniel Antoun, *Mobilizing Compatriots: Russia’s Strategy, Tactics, and Influence in the former Soviet Union*, CNA Corporation, November 2015, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2015-U-011689-1Rev.pdf

presidency.^{99,100} Moscow has cultivated relationships with mainstream *and* far right parties in Germany, such as the German Social Democrats, *Die Linke* and the Alternative for Germany (AfD), by exploiting the widespread cultural guilt that Germans felt after the Second World War; the Kremlin leverages historical grievances to support the idea that Germany owes Russia a political debt best paid in full through political support and policymaking that is friendly towards Moscow.¹⁰¹ Finally, the Kremlin has manipulated loopholes in British law to obfuscate financial contributions made to British political parties. These financial contributions are used to curry favor with political heavyweights and parties, to shape party positions/platforms in the UK, and to exert power through London's powerful financial markets.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Vivienne Walt, "Why France's Marine Le Pen is Doubling Down on Russia Support," *Time Magazine Online*, January 8, 2017. Accessed March 21, 2017, <http://time.com/4627780/russia-national-front-marine-le-pen-putin/>

¹⁰⁰ Alina Polyakova, Marlene Laruelle, Stefan Meister, and Neil Barnett, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*, the Atlantic Council, November 2016.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

Russia’s Potential Influence Efforts Abroad: Scenarios for the Future

This section illustrates how Russia’s media-decision-making system may operate in future scenarios based on the models, drivers, and boundaries developed through our analysis. The scenarios are plausible but hypothetical and reflect a range of situations including *crises*, *armed conflict*, *“gray zone” conflicts*, and a *steady-state option* based on today’s adversarial political competition. We briefly assess each scenario by systematically using a common format and a series of short tables (Table 3 - Table 10) to parameterize each scenario.

Crisis Scenario: MH-17

Table 3. Defining a crisis scenario

Definition	A crisis is an unexpected situation that, if not adequately addressed, could threaten the Russian leadership’s core interests in national security and/or regime survival or legitimacy
Description	During the course of provocative military operations in the Baltic Sea, U.S. and Russian military aircraft collide, killing American and Russian pilots. U.S. officials swiftly condemn Russian conduct, blame Moscow for the incident, and seek an international investigation and a public apology from Russia.

Source: CNA

Table 4. Parameters: crisis scenario

Drivers	Boundaries	Objectives
<p>Avoid escalation</p> <p>Avoid public concessions to U.S./West</p> <p>Avoid accepting responsibility</p>	<p>Limited time</p> <p>Avoid provoking the United States and/or NATO into military response</p> <p>Russian domestic and international media limited reach</p>	<p>Deter U.S./NATO</p> <p>Reassure Russian public of Russia's nuclear deterrent and military capabilities</p> <p>Create and/or enhance doubts about the course of events using disinformation or misinformation</p> <p>Shift blame to United States</p> <p>Undermine a unified NATO response by discrediting the United States and the alliance</p>

Source: CNA

Recent example

The July 2014 MH-17 crash and the November 2015 Turkish downing of a Russian jet may be the closest parallels to this scenario, though the former situation did not pose immediate military danger and the latter saw Moscow as the victim rather than as an aggressor or facilitator.

Following the MH-17 incident, Vladimir Putin made a highly unusual overnight public statement prior to a reported late-night meeting on economic policy at his Novo-Ogarevo residence outside Moscow, apparently aiming his message at Western audiences in earlier time zones.^{103, 104} Putin's security and foreign policy aides were not visible during his televised message and could not likely have met Putin that day

¹⁰³“Авиакатастрофа под Донецком стала личной трагедией для премьер-министра Малайзии,” July 18, 2014, Russia Channel 1, http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-18/37552-aviakatastrofa_pod_donetskom_stala_lichnoy_tragediey_dlya_premier_ministra_malayzii, accessed April 2, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Yuliya Latynina, "What Vladimir Putin Wanted To Tell the World in His Nighttime Address," in "Russian Commentary Examines Reasons for Putin's 'Unprecedented' TV Address on MH17, Moscow, *Novaya Gazeta Online* in Russian, 23 July 14, accessed April 2, 2017.

due to his early evening return, probably directly to Novo-Ogarevo, from a BRICS summit in Brazil.^{105, 106} The statement aired on television roughly six hours after air traffic control lost contact with MH-17 and probably about five hours after Putin's presidential aircraft touched down in Russia. Based on searches of the official Kremlin website, Putin called the prime minister of Malaysia, President Barack Obama, and German chancellor Angela Merkel in the evening. Media reports indicate that he also called several other world leaders prior to making the statement,¹⁰⁷ which both expressed his condolences and asserted "the state on whose territory this happened bears responsibility for this terrible tragedy."¹⁰⁸ Under the circumstances, Putin could have had several telephone conversations with top aides (including their reporting to him about the event) but almost certainly could not have conducted a meeting or a complex interagency process. Over time, Russia's media promoted increasingly elaborate theories to assert Ukraine's guilt and to absolve Moscow and Russian-backed separatist forces.

¹⁰⁵ "Авиакатастрофа под Донецком стала личной трагедией для премьер-министра Малайзии," July 18, 2014, Russia Channel 1, http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-18/37552-aviakatastrofa_pod_donetskom_stala_lichnoy_tragediey_dlya_premier_ministra_malayzii, accessed April 2, 2017.

¹⁰⁶ A report from RT indicates that Putin's plane was near Warsaw at 4:21 p.m. Moscow time and that he usually uses the Vnukovo airport southwest of Moscow. Commercial flights from Warsaw to Moscow take about two hours. Novo-Ogarevo is west of Moscow and fairly close to Vnukovo, particularly for Putin's motorcade. "Reports that Putin flew similar route as MH17, presidential airport says 'hasn't overflown Ukraine for long time'" RT, <https://www.rt.com/news/173672-malaysia-plane-crash-putin/>, accessed April 2, 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ "Совещание по экономике началось с минуты молчания в память о погибших в авиакатастрофе над территорией Украины," July 18, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46243>, accessed April 2, 2017.

Armed Conflict Scenario: Syria

Table 5. Defining an armed conflict

Definition	"Armed conflict" refers to acknowledged participation by Russian military or security forces in an interstate war or a civil conflict.
Description	Violent protests in Belarus lead to violent clashes between armed protesters and Belarus military forces in Minsk over a period of weeks. Moscow sends special forces to Minsk by air to assist in restoring order and moves internal security troops into the country to protect the Russia-Belarus border and to seize critical infrastructure as well as communications and transportation hubs.

Source: CNA

Table 6. Parameters: Armed conflict scenario

Drivers	Boundaries	Objectives
Prevent establishment of unfriendly government	Avoid provoking a troublesome U.S./NATO response	Deter Western Alliances
Deny success to a popular uprising in Belarus	Avoid deep or long-term Russian participation in a military/civil conflict in Belarus	Reassure the Russian public of Russia's nuclear deterrent and military capabilities
Maintain Belarus in a state of political/economic dependency on Russia	Increase U.S./Western skepticism toward the Lukashenko regime and toward Russian foreign policy conduct	Assert legality of Russia's intervention
		Undermine a unified NATO response by discrediting the United States and the alliance
		Delegitimize relevant Western institutions through misinformation and disinformation

Source: CNA

Recent example

A review of the first six months of Russia's intervention in Syria may be useful in considering Moscow's messaging in an armed conflict scenario.

Russia signed a military cooperation agreement with Syria to obtain access to basing facilities on August 26, 2015.¹⁰⁹ According to press reports, a Russian "expeditionary force" entered Syria within days following the agreement.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, in the coming weeks, RT reports cast doubt upon reports of a Russian military buildup.¹¹¹ When asked about this in a mid-September press event, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov merely described Russia's ongoing arms supplies and training to Syrian forces, acknowledged Russia's support for Syria against the Islamic State, and called for military-to-military dialogue between Moscow and Washington. He did not offer an explicit acknowledgment or denial.¹¹²

Moscow publicly revealed its force in Syria only after Vladimir Putin addressed the UN General Assembly and then met with President Barack Obama on September 28, 2015, apparently seeking U.S. and other international cooperation. Russia's Federation Council voted to approve military action on September 30; airstrikes followed rapidly. After Putin's initial statement on the attacks, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov were most visible in explaining Russia's conduct. Russia's president did not speak prominently on Syria until October 7, when he met Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, who briefed him on Russia's strikes and its cruise missiles launched from Russian naval vessels in the Caspian Sea. At the time, Putin emphasized Russia's capabilities, his desire for a political

¹⁰⁹ Importantly, however, the Russian government did not announce this agreement until January 2016, when a government website published page-by-page images of a signed copy. Michael Birnbaum, "The secret pact between Russia and Syria that gives Moscow carte blanche," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche/?utm_term=.b2c617c0b457, accessed April 10, 2017."

¹¹⁰ Alex Fishman, "Russian jets in Syrian skies," *ynetnews.com*, August 31, 2015, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4696268,00.html>, accessed April 10, 2017.

¹¹¹ September 1, September 7, September 11.

¹¹² "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statements and answers to questions at a joint news conference after talks with Mongolian Foreign Minister Lundeg Purevsuren, Moscow, September 11, 2015," http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/1744415, September 11, 2015, accessed April 11, 2017.

settlement involving the United States and other Western countries, and his openness to military cooperation with Washington.¹¹³

With the exception of the period immediately following Turkey’s downing of a Russian Su-24 in November, Putin was less visible in the months following Russia’s intervention, though he did appear in televised reports of Russian Security Council meetings and briefings with Russian military officials. In March 2016, Putin declared that Russia had “generally fulfilled” its military objectives and ordered “the main part” of Russia’s military forces to withdraw.¹¹⁴

Gray Zone Scenario: Estonia

Table 7. Defining a gray zone scenario

Definition	A gray zone conflict requires Russia’s unacknowledged involvement in interstate war or civil conflict, through Russia’s regular armed forces, Russian paramilitaries, and/or support for non-Russian militia forces.
Description	Following violent protests in Estonia, ethnic Russian activists seize government buildings in Narva. Estonian police forces surround the buildings and attempt to cut off supplies in order to starve out the protesters. Violence against police erupts in other Estonian cities in coordinated attacks against police buildings led by covert Russian special forces officers and volunteers from Russia’s “Night Wolves” motorcycle club.

Source: CNA

Recent example

Russia’s support for separatists in eastern Ukraine has been its most visible “gray zone” operation. The following paragraphs review the initial months of this conflict.

Vladimir Putin addressed Russia’s Federal Assembly—a joint session of the country’s two parliamentary chambers, the Federation Council and the State Duma—on March 18, 2014, to announce submission of draft legislation to annex Crimea. Putin signed the law on March 21. Large-scale protests in Donetsk began the following day, escalating there and expanding to other cities over a two-week period. On April 6,

¹¹³ “Meeting with Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu,” October 7, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50458>, accessed April 8, 2017.

¹¹⁴ “Meeting with Sergey Lavrov and Sergey Shoigu,” March 14, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51511>, accessed April 8, 2017.

2016, protesters seized government buildings in Donetsk, calling for a referendum on unification with Russia. By April 14, protesters held buildings in 10 cities.¹¹⁵ On April 17, Putin conducted his annual “Direct Line” press conference, during which he answered questions from journalists and ordinary Russians. Putin used the occasion to outline his view of the events that led to Crimea’s annexation and the protests in eastern Ukraine as well as his position on how to resolve the crisis.¹¹⁶

Following reports that Ukrainian troops attacked separatists at Sloviansk on April 24—Ukraine’s first use of force against them—Putin declared the Kiev authorities illegitimate and warned that the move “will undoubtedly lead to consequences for the people who make such decisions, including repercussions in relations between our states.”¹¹⁷ This was perhaps the most important day for the future of the conflict, in that Russia’s Security Council reportedly met and decided against an invasion of eastern Ukraine.¹¹⁸ The same day, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced Russian military exercises along the Russian-Ukrainian border, presumably following the Security Council session.¹¹⁹

In early May, Putin called on the separatists to postpone a referendum on secession from Ukraine.¹²⁰ In mid May, he ordered Russian troops back from the border following the completion of Russia’s exercises.¹²¹ Putin described the move as intended to “create favorable conditions for the upcoming Ukraine presidential election” and “to put an end to speculations” about the exercises, presumably referring to speculation that Moscow might invade.¹²² In late June 2014, Putin stated that “Russia will certainly support” newly elected Ukrainian President Petro

¹¹⁵“Protestors Seize Building in Tenth Eastern City,” The Ukraine Crisis Timeline, Center for Strategic and International Studies, <http://ukraine.csis.org/east1.htm#55>, accessed April 8, 2017.

¹¹⁶ “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,” April 17, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>, accessed April 11, 2017.

¹¹⁷ “Media Forum of Independent Local and Regional Media,” April 24, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20858>, accessed April 9, 2017.

¹¹⁸ Mikhail Barabanov, “Viewing the Action in Ukraine from the Kremlin’s Windows,” *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, Eds. Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov, Minneapolis: East View Press, 2015, p. 194. Notably, the Kremlin website does not report that a Security Council meeting took place on this day. This demonstrates that while the Kremlin discloses many Security Council meetings, it does not reveal every meeting.

¹¹⁹ “Russia orders exercises after Ukraine moves on separatists,” BBC, April 24, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27138300>, accessed April 9, 2017.

¹²⁰ “Putin calls for end to Kiev’s military op, postponing referendum in E. Ukraine,” RT, May 7, 2014, <https://www.rt.com/news/157404-putin-ukraine-crisis-kiev/>, accessed April 10, 2017.

¹²¹ “Russia appeals for an immediate end of use of force in southeast Ukraine,” May 19, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/21035>, accessed April 10, 2017.

¹²² “Replies to journalists’ questions following a visit to China,” May 21, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/21064>, accessed April 10, 2017.

Poroshenko's cease-fire while also calling for dialogue "to find solutions that will be acceptable to all sides."¹²³

Approximately one month later, the MH-17 incident took place, leading to stronger U.S. and Western sanctions. Within about a week of the sanctions, there was a new Russian military buildup along Ukraine's border.¹²⁴ At about the same time, Moscow imposed counter-sanctions, primarily directed at European agricultural exports to Russia. Putin hinted at the sanctions in a televised conversation with a regional governor who had previously served as agriculture minister¹²⁵; the following day, the Kremlin website published the text of his decree ordering the measures.¹²⁶ Days later, Russia dispatched a "humanitarian convoy" to eastern Ukraine. Putin did not comment publicly on the convoy, which appeared to provoke anxiety among Western media surrounding Moscow's support for the rebels.¹²⁷ The first Minsk meeting between Putin, Poroshenko, and European leaders took place in late August. Putin's public statement following the meeting was generally positive and supportive of the peace process.¹²⁸

¹²³ "Response to a journalist's question about the peace plan in Ukraine," June 22, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/45955>, accessed April 10, 2017.

¹²⁴ Nick Paton Walsh, Laura Smith-Spark, and Tom Cohen, "Russian troop increases at Ukraine border raise concerns," CNN, August 6, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/05/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/>, accessed April 10, 2017.

¹²⁵ "Working Meeting with Acting Governor of Voronezh Region Alexei Gordeyev," August 5, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46398>, accessed April 10, 2017.

¹²⁶ "Указ о применении отдельных специальных экономических мер в целях обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации," August 6, 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46404>, accessed April 10, 2017.

¹²⁷ The Kremlin released short summaries of Putin's conversations with world leaders in which he referred to the convoy. Foreign Minister Lavrov addressed technical arrangements for the convoy's transit into Ukraine in a press conference. "Answers to media questions by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Sochi, 12 August 2014," http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/ua/-/asset_publisher/ktnOZLTvbbS3/content/id/674506, accessed April 10, 2017.

¹²⁸ "Answers to journalists' questions following working visit to Belarus," August 27, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46495>, accessed April 11, 2017. Interestingly, the Kremlin described the trip as a "working visit to Belarus" rather than as meetings with Poroshenko and Western leaders.

Steady State Scenario: Sweden

Table 8. Defining steady state scenario

Definition	The steady state posits continuing Russian efforts to shape its security environment in Europe through domestic political interference in Western and neighboring countries and continuing adversarial competition with the United States.
Description	Russia seeks to interfere in the forthcoming election campaign in Sweden.

Source: CNA

Table 9. Parameters: steady state scenario

Drivers	Boundaries	Objectives
Discredit democratic values in Europe	Avoid provoking a hostile response by the European Union or NATO	Cultivate public support for right-wing and/or left-wing parties open to engagement with Russia
Undermine political/social unity in Sweden		Undermine public support for governing coalition, including through attacks on refugee policy
Discredit Western Institutions	Avoid provoking a hostile response by Sweden	Undermine social cohesion

Source: CNA

Recent example

Two instances in which Russia supposedly attempted to block Montenegro's efforts to join NATO illustrate Russia's "steady state" political competition with the United States and the West.

As the government of Montenegro prepared for a December 2015 meeting with NATO foreign ministers to begin accession talks, pro-Russian activists with the right-wing New Serbian Democratic Party reportedly organized street protests in

Podgorica, Montenegro's capital.¹²⁹ Several months later, in April 2016, a senior-level delegation from Vladimir Putin's United Russia party visited Montenegro. The goal was to improve Russian-Montenegrin relations, which had soured after Montenegro endorsed sanctions on Russia over its annexation of Crimea.¹³⁰ The delegation met with pro-Russian parties, religious leaders, NGOs, business associations, media, and Russian diaspora figures.¹³¹ As Montenegro's leadership continued its pro-NATO course, Russia appears to have launched a more dramatic plan. As Montenegro approached parliamentary elections in October 2016, authorities reportedly uncovered a Russia-linked plot to assassinate the then pro-Western prime minister, Milo Dukanovic, and replace him with a pro-Russian leader in order to steer the country away from NATO membership.¹³² Current prime minister and former intelligence chief Dusko Markovic recently renewed allegations that Russia supported political forces in Montenegro opposing NATO by illegally distributing funds. He also contends that Russia's security services communicated with the Orthodox church, non-governmental organizations, and media outlets to sow anti-Western sentiments prior to the election. However, he referred to the assassination plot as "possible" rather than "confirmed."¹³³

In June 2016, Putin mildly criticized Montenegro's possible NATO accession during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, asking, "Who is threatening Montenegro?" and complaining that "our position is being totally ignored."¹³⁴ The remark and a subsequent comment expressing hope that Montenegro would pursue a "balanced" foreign policy are Putin's only public comments on Montenegro's NATO

¹²⁹ Charles Recknagel, "Pro-Russian Parties Seek to Derail Montenegro's NATO Bid," RFE/RL November 28, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/montenegro-opposition-protests-natobid/27395329.html>.

¹³⁰ Dusica Tomovic, "Putin's Party to Foster Ties with Montenegro," BIRN, April 11, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/putin-s-party-offers-closer-ties-to-montenegro-04-08-2016>.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Simon Shuster, "Q&A: Duško Marković, the Prime Minister Stuck Between Putin and Trump in the Balkans," *Time*, February 16, 2017, <http://time.com/4673038/dusko-markovic-montenegro-russia-nato/>; "Montenegro Releases Names of Suspected Russian Assassins," *Moscow Times*, November 18, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/montenegro-releases-names-of-russians-suspected-in-assassination-attempt-56211>

¹³³ Simon Shuster, "Q&A: Duško Marković, the Prime Minister Stuck Between Putin and Trump in the Balkans," *Time*, February 16, 2017, <http://time.com/4673038/dusko-markovic-montenegro-russia-nato/>.

¹³⁴ "Plenary Session of St. Petersburg International Economic Forum," June 17, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178>, accessed April 22, 2017.

membership reported on the Kremlin website in 2016 or 2017.¹³⁵ Putin remained silent on the matter as Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and Russia's Foreign Ministry denied involvement whatsoever in any assassination plot.¹³⁶

Instead, Russia's Foreign Ministry and particularly Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova most actively presented Moscow's public messages regarding Montenegro and defended Russia from charges of involvement in the protests. In reviewing official statements on the Foreign Ministry's website, CNA determined that Zakharova addressed the country's prospective NATO membership and the charges against Moscow more than twice as often as Lavrov and in much greater depth. More narrowly, Zakharova was almost solely responsible for responding to allegations of Russian interference; Lavrov's remarks focused overwhelmingly on Montenegro's relations with NATO.¹³⁷ State media outlets generally supported Peskov's and the Foreign Ministry's denials of interference in the alleged coup/assassination by stressing the difference between the actions of pro-Russian forces within Montenegro and the conduct of Russia's government.¹³⁸ Notably, however, Russia's overall messaging reflected Putin's broad two-part message that Moscow opposed Montenegro's NATO membership but—implicit in his few and mild references to the matter—would not make the issue a major priority in Russia's relations with either NATO or post-membership Montenegro.

Key Observations from Our Case Studies

Following the destruction of flight MH-17, Vladimir Putin appears to have responded swiftly and personally to the crisis despite limited time to consult with key officials and aides, suggesting that he made key decisions himself following informal consultations rather than formal processes. Putin's initial responses were simple and straightforward; over time, other officials and media presented more complex and detailed messages conveying similar themes. Russia's domestic and internationally oriented media rapidly adopted these messages.

¹³⁵ CNA searched the Kremlin site in Russian and English. The reference to a "balanced" policy is in "Presentation of foreign ambassadors' letters of credence," November 9, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53223>, accessed April 22, 2017.

¹³⁶ "Russia-Montenegro: Kremlin Denies Involvement in Podgorica Coup Plot," November 15, 2016.

¹³⁷ CNA reviewed press releases, press briefings, interviews, formal remarks and other public statements on the ministry's website—in English and in Russian—from January 1, 2016, to April 21, 2017.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

In Syria, Russia did not publicly announce its intent to use military force in advance. Indeed, Putin did not comment on Russia's deployments and, for a time, Foreign Minister Lavrov denied that Moscow was taking any steps beyond continuing its past support for President Assad. Considering that Putin and other top officials would quite likely have assessed that U.S. and Western officials, as well as governments in the region, were aware of the movements of aircraft and personnel, Russia's leaders may have intended to use their lack of acknowledgment and explanation for this conduct to generate uncertainty and therefore additional leverage.

Only after Putin outlined Russia's desire to work with others—including the United States (notwithstanding his complaints about the past U.S. approach)—at the United Nations and then failed to win former President Barack Obama's agreement to cooperate, did Russian forces begin their airstrikes. With this in mind, RT's unconvincing initial denials of new deployments to the region could have allowed Moscow to adjust its course without losing face—or explicitly pressuring the United States—had Washington agreed to a joint effort. In fact, both Putin and Lavrov regularly offered what they may have considered “off-ramps” to the United States in the form of periodic expressions of interest in dialogue and cooperation both before and after Russia began its military operations. This highlights Moscow's political objectives in its use of force in Syria—namely, to establish military cooperation between Russia and the United States as a pathway to a broader political settlement of the civil war there on terms attractive to the Kremlin. Because Russia's goals were ultimately political, Russia's leaders closely synchronized messaging with their other activities.

Putin was visible and appeared to be in firm control of Russia's messaging at the outset of the attacks and at other key points, e.g., in assessing Russia's military performance a week later and praising the military's technical capabilities (following its employment of sea-launched cruise missiles) and in proclaiming that Russia had “succeeded” in March 2016. However, setting aside the crisis surrounding Turkey's downing of a Russian Su-24 in November 2015, Putin was not too visible in external Syria-related messaging as routine operations progressed during the first several months of the Russian air campaign. During that time, media reports covering Putin's leadership of Russian Security Council meetings reached domestic audiences but not international viewers. These reports reinforce the idea that he closely supervised the ongoing operations as a way to reassure Russia's population and highlight his leadership.

Vladimir Putin had a broadly similar role in the first months of Russia's “gray zone” involvement in Ukraine. He delivered key messages at the time of Russia's annexation of Crimea. However, he was less visible over the following month, as protests expanded across eastern Ukraine—a period when Russian leaders were likely assessing conditions there and evaluating options. He then used his Direct Line broadcast to reassure Russia's population about the conflict, to advance Russia's

narrative surrounding events in Ukraine among international audiences, and to call for a peaceful political settlement favorable to the protesters. Putin remained visible as Ukraine opted for a military response to seizures of government buildings and threatened unspecified consequences for Ukraine in its bilateral relations with Russia. Key subordinates such as Defense Minister Shoigu’s announcement of major military exercises on April 24 hinted at what the consequences could be.

The fact that Putin was Russia’s messenger at key points in the opening months of the Ukraine conflict—Crimea’s annexation, the escalating protests in the Donbas, Ukraine’s forceful response, the MH-17 crisis (treated separately above), Russia’s counter-sanctions against the European Union, and the initial Minsk talks—drew attention to his silence at other times. As a result, Putin’s lower profile as a massive convoy of supply trucks approached the Ukrainian border appeared calculated to fuel speculation surrounding Russia’s aims in order to illustrate Moscow’s ability to supply rebel forces in Ukraine. Putin’s visible engagement and personal messaging in turn highlight that Russian objectives were fundamentally political rather than military. Indeed, in some respects Putin appeared more deeply engaged in the opening months of the gray zone conflict in Ukraine—a political contest in which Moscow had vital national interests at stake but opted against open war—than in the early months of the armed conflict in Syria.

Unlike in the MH-17 crisis, Russia’s intervention in Syria, and Moscow’s covert support for Ukraine’s rebels, Vladimir Putin was largely invisible as Russia sought to discourage or perhaps even prevent Montenegro from completing the NATO membership process. While Putin and other Russian officials clearly opposed Montenegro’s accession to the alliance, there is scant evidence that Kremlin leaders saw the process as a fundamental threat to Russia’s national security (in contrast to the Russian government’s view of NATO membership for Ukraine). Moscow officials probably recognized that once NATO and Montenegro agreed on a Membership Action Plan in 2009, Russia had limited options in preventing the plan’s consummation. Thus the tone of Russia’s messaging, particularly from Putin and Lavrov, generally reflected a resentful recognition of reality. Absent a desire to create a major international crisis over Montenegro, Moscow appears to have sought an information and influence campaign with concomitantly low probability of success. Putin and other senior leaders likely had only limited roles in this approach and left most messaging to subordinates.

Our analysis highlights the following conclusions from the four case studies:

- Vladimir Putin is likely to exercise “manual control” of Russia’s messaging in high-stakes crisis situations; conversely, if Putin is unavailable, this may complicate Russia’s decision-making, including on messaging

- In armed conflict or gray zone operations, Putin is likely to exercise “manual control” over messaging only at key decision points, when he broadly defines tone and content for subordinates
- Most of the time, Putin’s relevant top aides manage Russia’s day-to-day media/messaging activities, even during armed conflict
- Putin’s involvement and visibility appear correlated to Russia’s stakes in a given situation, with a much greater Putin role in the gray zone conflict in Ukraine than in political interference in Montenegro
- Moscow’s refusals to acknowledge some of its covert and overt conduct may have aims other than deception, such as preserving freedom of action, winning leverage through ambiguity, or allowing its adversaries to save face.

Overarching Takeaways

Looking holistically at Russia's decision-making and influence in the media internally and externally, we highlight the following key takeaways to consider in order to understand the connections between Russia's foreign policy and its messaging and decision-making.

1. **Media is a key tool and will continue to play a significant role in Russian foreign policy.** Through state and independent media, Putin plays a central role in delivering the message and shaping the domestic and global media strategy. The Presidential Administration and Putin's inner circle play a coordinating role in aligning Russian foreign policy and messaging and also implement key media influence decisions on Putin's behalf.
2. **Since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Russia's government has significantly tightened its control over external messaging.** Russia's leadership appears to seek closer alignment between messaging and policy so that state external media will more directly support national policy objectives.
3. **Putin plays a central role in decision-making and messaging in the media.** Putin is a highly experienced statesman and leader whose exercise of *manual control* and personal presentation of messages is critical to Russian foreign and domestic policy. While his inner circle and the Presidential Administration implement key media strategies and often carry out the message, the system is designed around having Putin at its center and any eventual transition in Russia could have important implications for Russia's media decision-making and messaging.
4. **Putin and his inner circle have direct and indirect control or influence over Russia's media.** The Russian government directly controls state media and directly and indirectly influences private media. The Presidential Administration appears most important in managing Russia's media and messaging.
5. **While media is a critical element of influence, Putin and his administration have influence over culture, society, business, and political spheres in targeted countries.** Thus media are ultimately one element, albeit quite an important one, in a wider portfolio of external instruments.

Conclusion

This report maps Russia's media network and the unique dynamics of Russia's decision making in this environment. This includes the role that Russian President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle play in implementing a media and influence strategy. As we highlight in this report, while Russia's overarching objective is to discredit Western institutions and foundational elements of Western democracy, Russia's influence in the media in Russia and in the near abroad is highly tailored, and varies based on internal and external geopolitical dynamics of a particular conflict.

While we examine broad elements of influence, a comprehensive assessment of Russia's external elements of influence worldwide is warranted in order to understand how Russia applies its decision making calculus in the media worldwide.

Appendix A: Models of Decision-Making in Russian Media and Messaging

CNA has examined four models that seek to explain and integrate Putin's preeminent but constrained role,¹³⁹ on the one hand, and Russia's particular mix of formal and informal processes, on the other. They are *the Politburo 2.0 model*, *the Kremlin Towers model*, *the Planetary model*, and *the Corporate model*.

In brief, Yevgeny Minchenko's Politburo 2.0 model posits a collective decision-making system under Putin similar to the late Soviet system.¹⁴⁰ In this model, officials and a few oligarchs make up informal functional policy groups subordinate to the Russian president in key areas: power (military and security officials), political (officials such as Alexey Gromov and Dmitry Peskov), business (primarily oligarchs), and technical (non-political officials who primarily implement policy, including economic officials and the Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov). Some individuals are full members while others are "candidate members," recalling the two-tiered structure of the Soviet Politburo. While Putin is more than the first-among-equals, the most consequential decisions require a degree of support from the full group both to launch and to implement. The Politburo 2.0 model is more precise in identifying who is inside the

¹³⁹ Asked whether he had ever argued with Russia's president, Putin's Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, "Everyone who works with him can voice his viewpoint and he always listens. He says: 'Explain it to me. Please, I am ready.' But it is hard to raise objections to him because he is always very strong in making his arguments. In the end it turns out he knows more about a subject than you do." "Putin Press Secretary Interviewed," available through Olga Beshley, "It Does Happen That Vladimir Putin Is Displeased With My Work," President's Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov About What Can and Cannot Be Done In The Kremlin," Moscow, *The New Times Online* in Russian, November 25, 2013.

¹⁴⁰ The Politburo, literally "political bureau" was the top-most body within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It provided strategic direction to the Central Committee, regional and local party committees, and the Soviet government. After Nikita Khrushchev's ouster in 1964, the general secretary of the Communist Party (the post held by Stalin and then Khrushchev) was somewhat weaker (though still pre-eminent among Soviet leaders) and the Politburo introduced a system of collective decision-making to avoid prior excesses.

decision-making system and who is not than in explaining how Russia's leaders make decisions.

The Kremlin Towers model assigns individuals to political-business "clans" (analogous to towers and smaller turrets along the Kremlin walls) rather than functional areas, highlighting informal relationships among key officials and business leaders rather than formal decision-making structures. Models of this type generally portray Putin as an arbiter or a balancer among competing factions, such as former St. Petersburg "chekists" (former KGB operatives, whether in government or in the private sector, such as Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin), St. Petersburg economists (such as former deputy prime minister Alexey Kudrin), or the group surrounding Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyenin.

The Planetary model emphasizes each individual's position relative to Vladimir Putin, around whom officials and business leaders orbit like planets around a sun. Some are closer, and more influential, while others are further away. The Planetary model allows for movement between orbits and for temporary alignment among the planets (meaning among individuals within the Russian elite). Those in the innermost orbit contribute to a collective decision-making system that Putin leads. The next orbit includes individuals with regular access to Russia's president, some input into his thinking, and the ability to request assistance or support. Loyal subordinates populate the outermost orbit. They do not have ongoing relationships with Putin and accordingly do not have meaningful job security.

Nikolai Petrov's Corporate model explores Putin's role in decision-making and relates it to that of other key officials and oligarchs. The Corporate model describes Putin as a majority shareholder and CEO who makes most key management decisions but may require super-majority support for important strategic decisions. Other major shareholders, such as Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Rosneft head Igor Sechin, have voices in these strategic decisions—as "board members"—as well as management responsibility for specific issues. Managers who are not significant shareholders—such as government ministers with technical responsibilities—do not have important parts in decision-making. The Corporate model is perhaps most useful in logically incorporating oligarchs without formal government positions into the decision-making structure and in separating officials with meaningful policy roles from those with predominantly bureaucratic roles.

In practice, Russia's decision-making system likely includes elements of each of these four models. However, in our judgment, the Politburo 2.0 model is the most useful, in that it captures Putin's predominance, an enduring system of collective decision-making on critical issues, and the delegation of certain responsibilities to specific individuals in functional areas. We find that a modified version of the Politburo 2.0 model that incorporates competition among rival factions (the focus of the Kremlin Towers model) is most accurate in portraying Russia's decision-making system. In our view, the Corporate model is functionally similar to the Politburo 2.0 model,

differing primarily in its conceptual framing and visual-spatial representation rather than in predicted outputs. The Planetary model is overly Putin-centric and fails to capture the influence that others may have in the decision-making process.

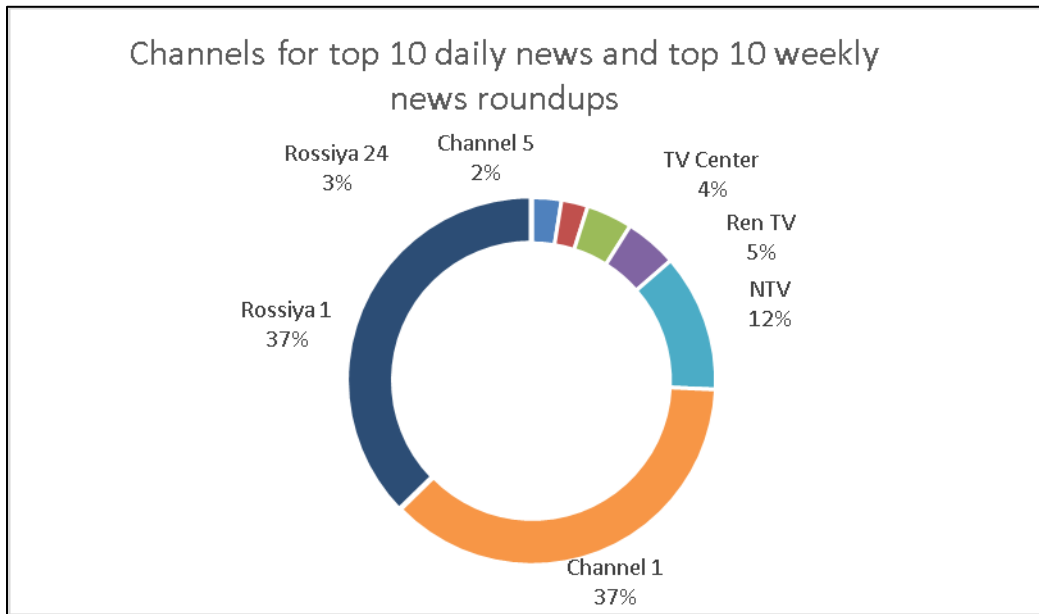
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Appendix B: Russia's Most Popular Media

Television

Russia's 10 most popular daily news programs and 10 most popular weekly news roundups are broadcast by seven channels: Channel 1, Rossiya 1, NTV, TV Center, Ren TV, Rossiya 24, and Channel 5. Figure 9 shows those channels according to viewership percentage.

Figure 7. Most popular TV channels

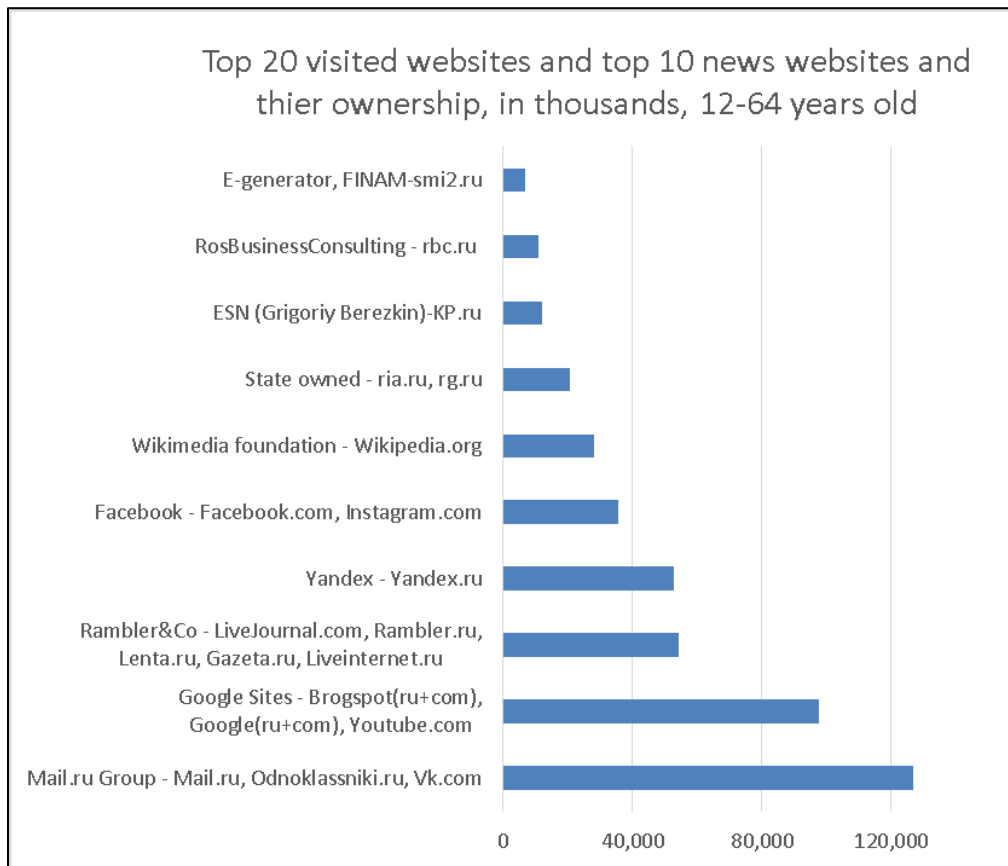


Source: *Information on viewers for December 19-25, 2016*. TNS <http://tns-global.ru/services/media/media-audience/tv/national-and-regional/audience/>.

Websites

The oligarch-owned Mail.ru Group has three popular projects: mail.ru email service, social media *Odnoklassniki*, and *Vkontakte*. In aggregate, these services are the most popular websites, with more than 120 million visitors a month. The next most popular Russia-owned online media, also owned by oligarchs, are the four websites owned by Rambler: two blogging websites, LiveJournal.com and LiveInternet.ru: and news websites lenta.ru and gazeta.ru.

Figure 8. Most popular websites



Source: *Web Index*, November 2016, TNS. <http://mediascope.net/services/media/media-audience/internet/description/> and *Gemius*, January 2015.

Note: Six websites—aliexpress.com, avito.ru, kinopoisk.ru, gismeteo.ru, kinogo.ru, and gosuslugi.ru— are in the top 20 most visited websites but are excluded from the chart and further analysis due to the irrelevance of their content for news and commentary on domestic or foreign affairs.

Radio

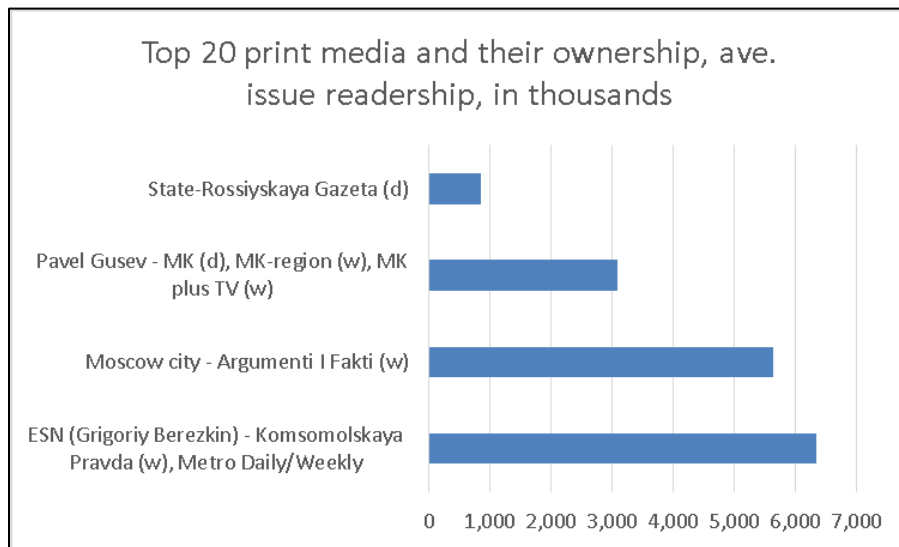
The most popular radio stations are commercial music stations *Yevropa Plyus*, *Avtoradio*, *Russkoye Radio*, *Dorozhnoye Radio*, *Retro FM*, and *Radio Shanson*. Only three of the stations—*Dorozhnoye Radio*, *Avtoradio* and *Radio Shanson*—broadcast short news reports, while the rest are non-stop music stations.

Three radio stations that have substantial news reports and analysis of domestic and foreign affairs are *Ekho Moskvyy*, *Rario Mayak*, and *Vesti FM*.

Print media

Three newspapers affiliated with Grigoriy Berezkin, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Metro Daily*, and *Metro Weekly*, have the highest average readership, at about 6 million. All newspapers except state-owned *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, are tabloid newspapers with little analysis of current affairs.

Figure 9. Most popular print media



Source: *National Readership Survey, March-July 2016, TNS; Open Source Media.*

Note 1: d = daily newspaper; w = weekly newspaper.

Note 2: The following newspapers are in the top 20 print papers, but excluded from the chart and further analysis due to the irrelevance of their content for news and commentary on domestic or foreign affairs: *Teleprogramma, 777, Moya Semya, 1000-sekretov, Avtoveryu, Lechabnie Pisma, Argumenti I Fakti (AiF)-Zdorovye, AiF na Dache, Narodniy Sovet, and Sport Express.*

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Appendix C: Key Individuals

Abramovich, Roman - Russian oligarch, has investments in metallurgy and owns around 24 percent of Russian's most popular TV channel, Channel One.

Berezkin, Grigoriy - Russian oligarch who leads ESN Group and is closely associated with the state railway company, Russian Railways. He owns print and online tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and free daily and weekly Metro newspaper.

Belousov, Sergey - Chairman of online news aggregator, smi2.ru.

Dobrodeev, Oleg - CEO of VGTRK (National State Television and Radio Company), the main state media corporation.

Ernst, Konstantin - CEO of Russia's most popular TV station, Channel One.

Gromov, Aleksey - Worked for the presidential press service during 1996-2000 and was Putin's press secretary during 2000-2008. At the moment, one of two first deputies of the Presidential Administration, and, along with Dmitry Peskov, is the most influential government official in Russia's media scene.

Gusev, Pavel - Editor in chief and believed to be the owner of *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* tabloid. Also a member of the Presidential Committee on the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights.

Kiriyenko, Sergey - One of two first deputies of the Presidential Administration since 2016. He ran Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation before his current post and was briefly prime minister during Boris Yeltsin's presidency.

Klimenko, German - Russian president's internet adviser since December 2015.

Kovalchuks, Yuriy - Russian oligarch who has investments in the banking and insurance sector and is believed to own Gazprom Media Holding (GMH) and National Media Group (NMG), two largest media corporations of Russia.

Lavrov, Sergey - Career diplomat and the minister of foreign affairs since 2004.

Mamut, Aleksandr - Russian oligarch who has investments in banking sector. Co-owns, with Vladimir Potanin, a major online media asset, Rambler&Co.

Medvedev, Dmitriy – Former president of Russia, currently the prime minister, with the most latitude on domestic and social policies as well as the country’s economy and finances.

Nikiforov, Nikolay – Minister of communications and mass media.

Peskov, Dmitry – Putin's press secretary, who is increasingly playing a greater role in guiding the media. He and Aleksey Gromov are the most influential government officials in Russia’s media scene.

Potanin, Vladimir – Russian oligarch who has investments in metallurgy. Co-owns, with Aleksandr Mamut, a major online media asset, Rambler&Co.

Prihodko, Sergey – Deputy prime minister, who used to be Putin’s foreign affairs aide for most of the 2000s.

Prokhorov, Mikhail – Russian oligarch, who is a president of a private investment group “ONEXIM,” which owns rbc.ru.

Surkov, Vladislav – Served as a communications director for Russia’s most popular TV channel, Channel One, during 1998-1999. He came to the Presidential Administration in 1999 as an assistant to the head of Presidential Administration. He has been a presidential aide since 2013.

Timakova, Natalia – Press advisor for Dmitry Medvedev during his election campaign and currently his spokesperson.

Usmanov, Alisher – Russian oligarch who has investments in metallurgy. He owns Mail.ru Group, which in turn owns the popular Mail.ru email service and social media websites *Vkontakte* and *Odnoklassniki*.

Ushakov, Yuriy – Putin’s foreign policy aide, and Russia’s ambassador to the United States during 1998-2008.

Volodin, Vyacheslav – Current speaker of the State Duma (Russian parliament).

Volozh, Arkady – Founder and the largest individual shareholder of Yandex, Russia's most popular search engine. After being criticized by Putin for being subject to foreign influence, he left the post of the CEO of Russian Yandex and stayed on as the CEO of Yandex’s Dutch parent company.

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