

Disciplining the influential media in Russia

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Over the past month, the Kremlin has taken a number of steps against the RBC media holding. The internet portal, newspaper, monthly magazine and business TV channel which make up this group are among the few influential media outlets which publish materials inconvenient for the Kremlin, and the RBC portal is among the most frequently quoted websites in Russia. The oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov controlled a majority stake in the holding. In 2011 he was the leader of the government-controlled political party Right Cause (Pravoye Delo), and in 2012 he was the Kremlin-licensed candidate in the presidential election. Onexim Group – which is owned by Prokhorov – was searched in mid-April this year. Then an investigation was launched into the alleged embezzlement of funds at RBC, and articles suggesting that Prokhorov intended to sell his shares in RBC were published in the press which closely co-operate with the Kremlin. This pressure resulted in the key editors resigning on 13 May, and some of the journalists have left RBC as a result.

Commentary

- The measures taken against RBC were meant to serve as a punishment to the editors and Prokhorov himself for the publication of materials criticising President Putin's inner circle. The materials developed on the basis of the 'Panama Papers' leaks and the texts describing the business activity of Katerina Tikhonova (who is commonly believed to be Vladimir Putin's daughter) and her husband have been especially problematic from the Kremlin's perspective. Even though the government has taken care to foster an impression of pluralism in the Russian press, as a rule it reacts quite harshly to any materials criticising Putin's inner circle, and especially his family, as well as publications about the behind-the-scenes financial operations of the president's close aides. By making this preventive move against RBC and Mikhail Prokhorov's interests, the Kremlin has also reminded the other oligarchs who might display political ambition that the government can be criticised only within admissible limits ahead of the election to the State Duma scheduled for September 2016 and the presidential election due to be held in 2018.
- The greater part of the Russian press is controlled by the government or owned by oligarchs loyal to the government. Against this backdrop, RBC had a certain level of independence. Over the past few years, the government has eliminated or neutralised media outlets which criticised the government and had large audiences. The largest stations and titles have transformed into instruments for implementing the Kremlin's

information policy and programming social sentiments. The regulations limiting the level of foreign ownership of Russian media outlets to 20% (which come into force at the beginning of 2016) have made the media more susceptible to pressure from the government.

- The Kremlin has made attempts to maintain the illusion of the freedom of speech existing in Russia by not obstructing titles which are critical about the government but which have limited audiences. However, the media organisations which enjoy a certain degree of independence are facing increasing pressure from the government. In effect, they either introduce self-censorship or move their editorial staff abroad (one example of this is the Meduza portal created in Latvia by former journalists of Lenta.ru).