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17. Governance through a crisis: media regulation in nondemocratic systems

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter argues that media regulation and internet governance in nondemocratic systems should be approached as a form of autocratic adaptability and autocratic resilience in a fast-paced information environment. Regulation in such environments should be seen in the context of the political survival of autocratic regimes. First, in a nondemocratic regime the government does not rely on cycles of democratic elections, but on its capacity to control public opinion, eliminate criticism and prevent the rise of alternative political forces. Second, autocratic regimes are particularly concerned with their sovereignty, namely, their position as supreme political authority that has absolute power to govern the population.

Media has always created tension with sovereignty and potentially challenged the loyalty of citizens to a central authority (Price, 2002). The development of global information networks and the shift from a space of places to a space of flows (Castells, 1999) have made it harder to protect the status of the sovereign as the highest point of authority and has contributed to autocratic fragility. The development of a new type of information ecosystem has given rise to a new set of non-state actors and diminished the importance of physical territory as the space that enables control of the public within specific socio-political boundaries. In that light, different forms of media regulation, including regulation of traditional media and internet regulation, seek to offer state actors new defensive mechanisms against the erosion of power and traditional authority.

The new information environment, however, also means that traditional forms of control and regulation that rely solely on violence, intimidation and repression lose their efficiency to achieve autocratic goals. Therefore, regulation should be seen, not as a traditional form of restriction of the free flow of information, but as an adaptation to the new information environment. As pointed out by Gunitsky (2015), 'autocrats have proven to be remarkably adaptive and resilient in the face of new challenges' (p. 50) and, therefore, 'the pace of autocratic adaptation' is likely to accelerate (p. 50). In that sense, the purpose of regulation is to 'prolong the durability of non-democratic states while bolstering their popular legitimacy' (Gunitsky, 2015, p. 49); moreover, the new forms of digital authoritarianism focus on 'reshaping the power balance between democracies and autocracies' (Polyakova & Messerole, 2019, p. 2).

This chapter seeks to achieve several goals. First, it maps the aims of media regulation in nondemocratic systems. Second, it distinguishes between different types of nondemocratic media systems that require different approaches to regulation. Specifically, it addresses China as a case where the initial design of the ecosystem relied on an architecture of control, and Russia, where the state has tried to introduce different regulatory tools and practices into a system that was designed to promote a free flow of information. Thirdly, the chapter looks deeper into the Russian case to examine how a multidimensional model of regulation has

been used to transform an open competitive media system into a closed one. The last part of this chapter suggests that an adaptive mode of regulation can be implemented mainly through crisis situations, which create both a need for, and a window of opportunity to introduce, new restrictive measures.

THE LOGIC OF AUTHORITARIAN MEDIA REGULATION IN A COMPETITIVE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Political regimes differ depending on the factors that either restrict or support political competition. That includes the role of political institutions, the status of political opposition and the level of electoral uncertainty (Gelman, 2014; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Zimmerman, 2014). In authoritarian states, a leader and political elites use the political system to protect their power and diminish the risk of unintended changes in the structure of political control. In contrast, in democracies, the system is designed to allow the citizens to elect leaders and limit their power. The regulation of media occurs both in democratic and authoritarian environments. The principal difference between them is related to the goals and the logic that drives the development of regulative policies. Therefore, analysis of media regulation requires an initial mapping of the drivers of the regulatory efforts in nondemocratic environments. Price (2002) describes the actors that shape regulation policies as 'large-scale competitors for power, in a shuffle for allegiances, [that] use the regulation of communication to organize a cartel of imagery and identity among themselves' (Price, 2002, pp. 31–32). The autocratic leader should make sure that the media do not allow 'new and dissenting cultural and political voices' (Price, 2002, p. 29). The capacity of the authoritarian state to sustain the loyalty of citizens is, however, challenged by global communication networks and new information technologies that breach the sovereign boundaries of the state.

The concept of sovereignty is linked to a 'distinction between the domesticated interior and the anarchical exterior of the sovereign state' (Coyer & Higgott, 2020, p. 16). The role of media is ambivalent in that context. On the one hand, media can be used to support the symbolic construction of the distinction between internal order and external chaos. On the other hand, media can play a key role in breaching the boundaries between the interior and exterior. While 'the relationship between media and borders is always in transition', state actors face the need to design 'new boundary technologies that will allow some continuing control over internal information space' (Price, 2002, p. 29). This requires an advanced form of innovation that not only permits the restriction of alternative voices but also ensures the dominant role of state-sponsored media.

Citizens' loyalty and sovereignty can be considered issues of concern both in democratic and non-democratic environments. Political leaders in any system are interested in having control over the media to improve their capacity to construct political spectacle (Edelman, 1988). Authoritarian leadership, however, is particularly fragile due to its lack of electoral legitimacy and its reliance on control of the media as an essential factor for survival. Different forms of consultative (Truex, 2017) and participatory (Owen, 2020) authoritarianism may create a semblance of democratic participation to support the legitimacy of the regime. However, these forms of political participation – and elections, specifically – can take place only if media control prevents challenges to the legitimacy of these elections through an expo-

sure of the real scale of the fraud to a broad audience. Therefore, media regulation is essential to protect the legitimacy of the leadership in an authoritarian context.

The role of media regulation is particularly important due to the emergence of a new type of authoritarian leadership. Guriev and Treisman (2015) offer the concept of 'spin dictators' to show how nondemocratic leaders develop new media strategies 'to convince the public that they are doing a good job' (p. 15). Guriev and Treisman (2015) argue that 'incompetent leaders can survive by manipulating the information environment so long as economic shocks are not too large' (p. 39), while effective control over media diminishes the need for violent repression. The rise of 'spin dictators', relies on a combination of propaganda, censorship and co-optation (Guriev & Treisman, 2022). In this light, sophisticated methods of media regulation have become a fundamental element in the management of autocracies in the new information environment. Moreover, dictators may allow some degree of free media to support the symbolic construction of fake democracy and use the media to monitor the efficiency of local authorities in big countries. The spins, however, are fragile in face of independent media. Therefore, spin dictators are unable to master media presence and survive politically in a media environment with true open competition. In that light, the tolerance of free media may come to an end once the autocrats decide that the free media have started to challenge the loyalty of the public. Once their control over media becomes less efficient, we often see the return of the politics of fear and violent repression.

The concept of networked authoritarianism as a state in which 'an authoritarian regime embraces and adjusts to the inevitable changes brought by digital communications' (MacKinnon, 2011, p. 33) highlights that the survival of autocrats requires new forms of innovation. Digital authoritarianism can be seen as a regime that relies on digital innovation to restrict political competition and protect the existing structure of political control. Accordingly, the goals of media regulation should be seen in the context of new forms of authoritarianism that harness the affordances of digital technologies to achieve its political goals. The discussion so far has allowed us to identify several goals of media regulation in nondemocratic systems:

- Reinforcing sovereignty and national identity to diminish threats to the loyalty of citizens to the leader;
- Control over the attribution of blame and putting the leader beyond the circle of responsibility to allow 'spin dictators' to flourish and protect their legitimacy;
- Preventing independent mobilization, including the construction of causes that may potentially trigger mobilization and the role of media to support and facilitate mobilization to address these goals;
- Enabling the construction of the semblance of free elections and protecting the legitimacy of elections;
- Ensuring media monopoly and isolation from external sources, alternative voices and competitive counter-frames to increase the efficiency of state-sponsored propaganda.

The way these goals can be achieved, however, depends on the architecture of the media ecosystem and the history of its development. The next section highlights that distinguishing between two types of ecosystem is essential for the analysis of media regulation in nondemocratic systems.

TWO TYPES OF NONDEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS OF REGULATION

The two nondemocratic systems that are often discussed next to each other in the literature about media regulation are China and Russia. One country is the largest in terms of the size of its population, while the other is the largest in terms of its territory. The Democracy Index (The Economist, 2022) distinguishes between full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian states. Both Russia and China are classified as authoritarian states. Discussion regarding media and internet regulation often compares China and Russia as two cases of strict state-sponsored governance (Flonk, 2021). Specifically, the concept of Russian internet sovereignty is often linked to what is called 'the Great Firewall of China' (Griffiths, 2021). However, this apparent similarity is incomplete. It is essential to draw a conceptual distinction between these two cases in a discussion about media and, specifically, internet regulation in nondemocratic systems (Howells & Henry, 2021).

In the case of China, regulation was a fundamental part of the design of the information infrastructure due to the nature of the political system. A high degree of internet sovereignty and the Great Firewall of China were present from the very beginning of the development of the internet and embedded in the structure of new information systems. The trajectory of development of the Chinese media system demonstrates an increasing degree of openness that is carefully managed by the state (King et al., 2013; Repnikova, 2017). This trajectory of system development follows the logic of autocratic adaptability when the state is ready to manifest some flexibility to adapt to new information reality. For instance, the central government in Beijing may allow some degree of criticism against local authorities on social networks and in the media (Cai, 2019; Chen et al., 2016).

The trajectory of development of the Russian information and media system has moved in the opposite direction. The history of the Russian media system is a history of an open system that has gradually transformed into a closed one. The Russian internet (Runet) started its development as a free space – to some extent even less regulated than the Western internet (Konradova & Schmidt, 2014; Soldatov & Borogan, 2015). The end of the 1990s, when the internet started to be available to the Russian public, can be considered the most liberal period in the modern history of Russia. It was also a time of the development of a competitive media environment when the media were controlled by different actors and had the freedom to be critical of the government.

The trajectory of development of the Russian internet can be viewed as a change in the dominant internet imaginaries (Mansell, 2012) with different views of the role of regulation and a change in the type of elites that shape the implementation of the imaginaries of media system governance (Asmolov & Kolozaridi, 2017). In the case of the Russian internet, the internet as an alternative socio-political space without any substantial state control can be thought of as the base layer of Runet's development. One of the most recent layers, internet sovereignty, can be considered a state-sponsored internet imaginary that relies on the projection of territoriality projected into cyberspace (Kukkola & Ristolainen, 2018). This projection relies on three elements: the delineation of digital borders, the protection of these borders and the establishment of cross-border control.

The internet sovereignty imaginary is a relatively late development in the history of the Russian media system. Subsequently, more tightly controlled layers unable to totally replace the existing structure were built on top of it, creating contradictions between the different layers. That is why understanding the logic of Russian media regulation can profitably draw on

the notion of 'superposition', taken from geology (Asmolov, 2021). This is the idea that 'the oldest layer is at the base and that the layers are progressively younger with ascending order in the sequence' (Britannica, n.d.). A continuous conflict between different logics is the defining feature of the Runet, though the tightly controlled top layers now put increasing pressure on the older, unregulated foundation.

Unlike in the case of China, in the case of the Russian media system, tight state-sponsored regulation has not been embedded in the structure of new information infrastructures. However, while the case of the Chinese media system presents a continuous history of strict regulation with a gradual and partial relief of restrictions, the trajectory of the development of the Russian media system has moved in the opposite direction. The Russian media system can be considered a relatively liberal space that has gradually been transformed into one of the most regulated and restricted information spaces. The modern history of Russian regulation started with the state focusing on traditional media and then shifting attention towards new media and social networks. Furthermore, over the years, the distinction between the regulation of traditional media and internet regulation has become more problematic due to the convergence of traditional and new media.

The differences between the two ecosystems of media governance that come to light when we compare Russia with China are important for the analysis of nondemocratic system regulation. It is more challenging to transform an open system into a closed one than to keep a closed system closed. That is why the structure of Russian media regulation is fundamentally different from the Chinese. It needs to be seen in the context of the dramatic history of the development of Russian media space over the last twenty-five years, a history full of clashes between different imaginaries and contradictions between different media logics. The following section explores how the need to develop an efficient system of media control has been addressed by the Kremlin and analyses how regulation may transform an open media space into a closed one.

THE RUSSIAN CASE: HOW TO MAKE AN OPEN MEDIA SYSTEM INTO A CLOSED ONE[1]

In 1999 Vladimir Putin was appointed prime minister by the first president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin. Following Yeltsin's resignation on the eve of the new millennium, Putin became president. He inherited from Yeltsin a relatively free media system. On the one hand, this media pluralism was an outcome of the ownership structure, in which different TV channels came under the control of different oligarchs, who used media ownership to promote given political interests. On the other hand, Russian media relied on a new generation of brave and talented journalists who were not afraid to criticize the leaders. In addition, Putin inherited a dynamically developing Runet that offered a new space to alternative media and became an increasingly participatory domain, which gave rise to a new generation of bloggers and activists. In that sense, Putin faced both a powerful Fourth and Fifth Estate (Dutton, 2009) that had the potential to threaten his political legitimacy and give an opportunity to his political rivals.

It was not possible to take control of this media system simply by following the Chinese model, namely, by introducing more restrictive forms of regulation including technological solutions for censorship and the filtering of content. Moreover, any radical changes in the management of the media and information space might have met with substantial opposition

and led to political protest. Therefore, taking control of an unregulated media system required a sophisticated multidimensional approach that relied on multiple forms of regulation, including a combination of restrictive and proactive governance (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Kerr, 2018).

The restrictive policies included legal initiatives that enabled new forms of censorship and technical initiatives that seek to filter and block information that is considered prohibited by the state. The proactive measures include bringing under control independent media organizations and digital platforms to dominate the media market, create and promote state-sponsored content, develop tools for state-sponsored mobilization of users and shape a digital ecosystem that gives overall priority to frames and voices that are affiliated with the authorities.

In the case of Russia, new legislation played a central role in shaping the regulatory environment (Nocetti, 2015). This included new laws that deem specific forms of content prohibited (e.g. so-called 'LGBT propaganda' or 'extremism') and gave the authority to block content and prosecute those seen as responsible for the creation and proliferation of this content. Most of the categories offer a broad scope for interpretation, giving unlimited powers to the Ministry of Communication, police and prosecutors. New laws also focused on the prohibition of different types of fake news, while the definition of 'fake' is also an outcome of interpretation by the authorities.

An additional set of laws was aimed at shaping the information ecosystem, thereby simplifying the filtering and blocking of specific types of content, as well as putting legal pressure on foreign internet companies (Bronnikova & Zaytseva, 2021) and content providers. The infamous Yarovaya Law, which was approved in 2016, offered a list of requirements for data localization from telecom companies. A major part of the Russian Internet Sovereignty Bill (approved in 2019) was dedicated to a modification of the infrastructure of the Russian Internet and assigning the state budget to sponsor a 'new market of black boxes' for internet control (Ermoshina et al., 2022). The new infrastructure should allow the potential capacity of the Russian internet to function as an isolated system, disconnected from the global internet network. An additional set of legal initiatives were used to label media, journalists and bloggers as 'foreign agents'. This legislation challenged the legitimacy of these actors and limited their financial sustainability.

In addition, the capacity to introduce and implement new forms of regulation depends on the institutional environment. In the case of Russia, a system of checks and balances that should allow one branch of the state to control the others is absent. Vice versa, parliament follows directives from the presidential administration. Accordingly, members of parliament often seek to satisfy the demand for new regulations and constantly introduce new ideas for tightening the regulatory environment. Furthermore, since the Russian court system cannot be considered independent either, judges' decisions usually confirm the argument of the prosecutors.

Overall, the restrictive nature of the system of Russian media regulation conveys a general message that almost anyone can be prosecuted for almost anything due to the unlimited scope for interpretation of the restrictive laws and the alignment between all bodies of the government. In addition, some specific legal cases can be considered symbolic acts of intimidation and instigation of self-censorship (Soldatov, 2014, online). For instance, in 2022, Ivan Safronov, a journalist on the Kommersant newspaper who covered security-related topics, was accused of treason and sentenced to 22 years in jail.

However, regulations do not rely solely on the gradual development of restrictive powers. Since the first year of Putin's presidency, the Kremlin has made significant efforts to make

sure that economic control over traditional and new media is transferred from independent actors to media holdings that are either sponsored directly by the government or controlled by oligarchs loyal to the Russian president (Pallin, 2017). During Putin's first presidential term, the Kremlin mainly focused on taking control of TV channels that were owned by independent oligarchs.

Most of the efforts to change the structure of ownership in digital space began to be seen in 2012, at the start of Putin's third presidential term. For instance, Pavel Durov, founder and CEO of Vkontakte (vk.com), the most popular Russian social network, was forced to sell his shares and leave Russia following a conflict with the Russian security services. Later, Vkontakte joined the Mail.ru Group, one of the largest digital holdings in the Russian market, controlled at that time by billionaire Alisher Usmanov. Most of the independent online Russian media, including Gazeta.ru and Lenta.ru, were also taken over by state-backed owners, who replaced the media organizations' own editorial teams.

The Russian digital space was dominated by three digital ecosystems: one was created by Mail.ru group (which in 2021 was renamed VK following Vkontakte); the second was developed by Sberbank, the largest Russian bank; and the third was linked to Yandex, the leading Russian search engine. Yandex, founded at the end of the 1990s, when Runet could be considered an unregulated space, tried to defend its independence. However, these efforts had limited success in the face of increasing pressure from the Kremlin. One of the major reasons for this increasing pressure was the news aggregator Yandex news, which played a key role in shaping the Russian daily media agenda and gave a place to news from independent media. Eventually, the Russian authorities increased their stake in control over Yandex and forced the platform to change its algorithms to prioritize state-sponsored news (Daucé & Loveluck, 2021). This case highlights that the development of algorithmic control, namely, the capacity to control the algorithms that shape the availability and visibility of content, is an essential element in the governance of media in nondemocratic systems.

An additional proactive form of governance is the creation of state-sponsored alternatives to Western platforms. For instance, RuTube should have replaced YouTube, which has remained one of the most popular video hosting platforms in Russia. The Russian authorities were also continuously concerned with the popularity of Wikipedia and tried to develop a Russian alternative. The most successful Russian alternatives to Western platforms, however, were to prove those that had been developed earlier by independent founders and were then taken under state control, such as the VK. Proactive governance also relies on the idea that the Russian internet should offer favourable conditions for state-sponsored content. It should also create less favourable conditions for non-Russian content. This could be achieved, for instance, by slowing down access to non-Russian platforms, e.g. Twitter. Special effort was also made to support various forms of participatory and computational propaganda to encourage the generation and proliferation of state-sponsored content (Sanovich et al., 2018). The platform ecosystems managed by Sberbank and Mail.ru group supported the convergence of traditional and new media and increased the presence of state-sponsored TV content in the digital domain.

Proactive forms of regulation also rely on the development of state-sponsored platforms to facilitate people's participation and mobilization. For instance, the Moscow local authority created the portal 'Active citizen', which was used to engage Muscovites in making decisions about urban policies, though independent media investigations showed that the website was mainly used to generate what was actually only an appearance of public support for local

government (Schlaufer, 2021). Such tools seek to re-channel independent mobilization to state-sponsored channels and create a semblance of participation.

To sum up, regulation relies on the integration of traditional forms of political repression and economic power with innovative solutions that seek to increase the scale of control over the media through the application of advanced technological solutions that either increase the visibility of pro-state content or/and limit the visibility of alternative media. In addition, innovation is used to bring participation and mobilization under state control and mitigate the risk of bottom-up horizontal forms of mobilization.

In the case of Russia, we can see several layers of regulation – regulation of content, regulation of users, regulation of ownership, regulation through the shaping of the institutional environment and regulation through control over participation. Overall, the increasing role of the state in the management of digital ecosystems and the focus of the Russian digital sovereignty bill on the technological governance of digital networks highlights that regulation in nondemocratic systems is particularly concerned with digital infrastructure (Musiani, 2022; Sivetc, 2021); accordingly, algorithmic governance and the governance of infrastructure gradually become the fundamental layer of control. That said, since the initial infrastructure of digital networks was shaped by reliance on horizontal logic marked by an absence of centralized management, the implementation of infrastructural changes to redesign the system and embed an architecture of control remains a challenge for the Russian authorities.

The case of Russia highlights that, to understand how regulation works in a nondemocratic state, particularly in the case of a state undertaking a transformation from an open media system into a closed one, requires something more than simply an account of the various restrictive and proactive measures. The additional factor that needs to be taken into consideration is the timing and the context of the introduction and implementation of the new forms of control. The Russian case suggests that the legitimacy of each package of new regulations can be linked to a crisis situation. The next section demonstrates the link between media regulation and a crisis situation in nondemocratic states.

CRISIS-LED MEDIA GOVERNANCE IN THE CASE OF RUSSIA

Crisis situations play an ambivalent role. On the one hand, a crisis can potentially challenge the governance and the control of an authoritarian state. It may lead to the attribution of blame toward leaders and protests against the authorities. On the other hand, a crisis can be used to justify the need for stricter measures and new forms of regulation. As noted by Agamben (2005), a crisis creates a state of exception that suspends traditional rule and offers a window of opportunity for new repression. As such, a crisis can also be a point of transformation towards what can be considered as the new normal following the end of the crisis. Nondemocratic systems aim to take control of the opportunity offered by crisis by transforming it from a source of threat to a source of legitimacy for new regulation.

According to Lipman (2005), the first president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, 'did not interfere with the free press, even if at times it caused him serious trouble' (p. 321). Once President Putin came to power, the impact of crisis situations on regulations started to move in the opposite direction. Since the beginning of his first term, Russia faced several significant crisis situations, including the sinking of a nuclear submarine, Kursk, in 2000 and a series of terror attacks including the seizure of the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow in 2002 and a hostage

crisis in the school in Beslan in 2004. Each crisis can be linked to a new wave of media regulation that included changing ownership of major TV channels to put it under the control of state-owned enterprises, firing chief-editors and journalists, as well as introducing new rules for the Russian media (Simmons & Strovsky, 2006). These decisions were driven by critical coverage of the crisis management by the president. According to Lipman (2005), 'each act of "disloyalty" by the media served as additional proof of the need to keep television firmly under control, in the government's view, and the Kremlin has worked to tighten the constraints' (p. 320).

Lipman (2005) concludes that 'National television has become a tool for maintaining Putin's popularity and the political dominance of his administration' (p. 320). Control over TV has allowed Putin to put himself beyond responsibility. The TV news started not only to cover Putin favourably but also to show him as a person who on an everyday basis publicly reprimands officials, including governors and ministers, for wrongdoing. In this way, Putin masterfully used his control over TV not only to shift the blame but also to frame himself as a person who represents Russian citizens in the face of ineffective and corrupted clerks.

Natural disasters, including unprecedented wildfires in 2010, forced the authorities to pay more attention to social media. On the one hand, social media users and bloggers questioned the efficiency of the state response and blamed the government for the crisis. On the other hand, digital platforms were used to support independent bottom-up mobilization of the Russian public to respond to the crisis. It was then that state-sponsored regulation started to be concerned not only with control over media coverage but also with control over mobilization (Asmolov, 2015). This trend continued during COVID-19 (Musiani et al., 2021), where the digital volunteering ecosystem that arose around the pandemic relied mainly on state-sponsored digital platforms while independent initiatives were heavily restricted (Asmolov, 2020). The pandemic was also used to introduce new forms of surveillance and new legal initiatives that addressed any unofficial data about the crisis as 'fake news'.

An additional crisis that needs to be considered is the first phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the downing of the MH-17 (Golovchenko et al, 2018). The crisis was used to construct a threat in a way that justified the need for new forms of regulation. For instance, Western sanctions against Russia were described as a threat to Russian sovereignty, and particularly to the stability of the Russian internet. This was when the Russian authorities started to seriously consider the implementation of internet sovereignty as a concept that sought to defend the Russian internet from external threats.

The major transformation of Russia's media and digital space that can be considered the final phase in the transition from an open system to a closed one can be linked to Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. All forms of regulation were implemented to ensure the dominance of state-sponsored propaganda that justified the invasion and eliminated any voice that criticized the Russian government. According to a new law, anyone who 'distributes fakes about the Russian military' faces up to 15 years in prison. The Russian authorities declared Meta and Twitter to be extremist organizations. Accordingly, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter were blocked in Russia. Any Russian media that was considered relatively independent were not only blocked but also forced to close down due to intimidation and a lack of capacity to cover the war (using the word 'war' was prohibited as well). Most of the independent journalists who had remained in Russia before the war had to flee the country.

According to the Russian chief prosecutor Igor Krasnov, by August 2022, the Russian authorities had removed or blocked around 138,000 internet platforms.

This scale of regulation was unimaginable before the Russian invasion. Accordingly, the major political success of the Russian authorities had an internal nature. The war was used to create a 'state of exception' that allowed Russia to be transformed into a 'disconnective society' (Asmolov, 2022). The construction of a disconnective society is a strategy for the survival of a political regime that cannot maintain itself in the competitive conditions of a globally networked society. The combination of maximum isolation from the outside and effective propaganda inside can help preserve the internal legitimacy of the leader. The main characteristic of a disconnective society is the rupture of any ties with what is considered a zone outside the boundaries of the socio-political system designated by the authorities. Different forms of regulation can be seen as the elements of disconnective power. However, the state cannot fully implement its disconnective project without a crisis that justifies full-scale disconnection. In that light, regulation as a policy that seeks to achieve a maximal state of disconnection through the transformation of an open system into a closed one can be considered as a crisis-led form of governance in nondemocratic systems.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has identified several key features of media regulation in nondemocratic systems. First, media regulation needs to be considered a dynamic process of autocratic adaptability that seeks to ensure the political survival of a nondemocratic regime in a constantly changing information environment. Second, the chapter distinguished between media systems that were initially designed as closed ones and systems that were initially open but were gradually transformed into closed ones due to the political transition from a democratic to a nondemocratic mode of governance. The analysis of media regulation in Russia allowed us to consider the case of the second type in which the increasing scope of regulation seeks to transform an open system into a closed one.

The Russian case illustrated that this type of transformation requires a complex multilayered form of regulation that develops over time in several dimensions. The analysis also demonstrated that the development of regulation should be considered in the context of the factors that enable the state to introduce new forms of governance and shape the legitimacy of these new policies. The analysis of the Russian case suggests that crisis situations can be considered both as a trigger and as an opportunity to introduce new forms of regulation. Therefore, media regulation in nondemocratic systems can be considered a crisis-led form of governance. That said, the analysis of the transformation of Russia from an open to a disconnective society also raises the question of whether regulation may reach a point of complete isolation when the system becomes fully closed, and whether that type of state is possible even theoretically. While regulation relies on innovation to restrict information flows, new forms of innovation are constantly introduced to bypass these regulations (Ermoshina & Musiani, 2017).

While this chapter has focused mainly on an analysis of the Russian case, it offers a conceptual framework with which to consider media regulation in any nondemocratic system. Viewing regulation as a process that shapes the state of the media system between the poles of openness and closedness offers a comparative framework that distinguishes between different authoritarian countries based on historical context. In that sense, though every case is differ-

ent, it is possible to observe common properties that shape how nondemocratic states seek to adapt to the new challenges to their sovereignty in a continuously challenging information environment to protect internal political stability. This framework is also viable specifically to consider the dynamic development of the Chinese system of media and internet regulation, and examine if it either moves in the opposite direction from closedness to openness, or maintains a certain degree of closedness based on a continuous innovation related to proactive and restrictive modes of regulation. The chapter also highlights the need to focus not only on different layers of regulation but the context that either allows or restricts opportunities to introduce new policies that seek to limit the flow of information and the voices that challenge authoritarian leaders. Further empirical research in the context of other states is needed to confirm the value of the framework presented in this chapter.

NOTE

1.   The discussion in the following two sections is based on both desk research/documentary evidence, and on the author's original fieldwork in areas related to internet regulation and crisis communication in Russia.

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