

Press freedom: Putin's right to curb?

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POLIS caused a stir last night as Russia Today's [Darya Pushkova](#) and Novosti's Pavel Andreev set out to defend Putin's handling of the media.

Most importantly, Pavel told us, increased state control of the media is exactly what most Russians want: Putin's approval ratings are consistently at 80% and above. Increased state control, Pavel argued, was also absolutely necessary to wrestle control of the media from the oligarchs who ran it in the 1990s. In media content too, increased state control was essential to curb growing sensationalism, for – with Anna Politkovskaya the exception – it is sensation not truth that guides most investigative journalists. A sensationalist media is something that we all worry about: just look at [Paxman's recent comments about the BBC](#).

Darya also asked the packed audience to think for a moment about the Western media. Stories about Russia, she says are 'photoshopped': feed them one line about a Russian Air Force long range sortie and suddenly it's the [new Cold War](#). We're only harping on about freedom of expression in Russia, Darya said, because of our own fears and prejudices. Back in the 1990s, when we in the west wanted Russia to be a democratising power, we didn't even notice killings of journalists like [Dmitry Kholodov](#).

These were statements that didn't impress OSCE's Freedom of the Media Representative [Miklos Haraszti](#). How can you really defend the media when pluralism is almost entirely restricted to the internet, new [extremism laws](#) enter in to force to curb media freedom, and peacetime killing of journalists is at a all-time global high?

[Edward Lucas](#) agreed: the 1990s media may have been messy but at least "you could see on the TV people holding the government to account", something you won't see now. Putin, Edward told us, works on the 80:20 principle. To control all media would be taking it too far, so instead he settles for the majority and for the media that matters: TV. And it's not just content but funding that is targeted. The Editor of still independent [Novaya Gazeta](#) told Edward just last week that everyone who advertises with his paper now gets the phonecall telling them to steer clear.

Alongside the Putin-bashing, Russia-bashing and Western media-bashing, some serious points emerged. Freedom of expression is clearly under threat in Russia. But is press freedom really the panacea to Russia's woes? In a 'transitional' country, is freedom of expression the right benchmark; the best measure of media success? And are we in the west really in a position to judge? POLIS will produce a working paper to look at all of this in more detail and – as always – we'd love to hear your thoughts.

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