



## **Commentary**

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### **WHY THE KREMLIN LOVES FOREIGN NEWS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin watching RT Argentina

BY MAXIM TRUDOLYUBOV

The foreign policy agenda is again dominating Russia's airways. There was a period during this past summer when the Kremlin seemed to have started redirecting its media policies toward covering domestic issues. But somehow that did not work out.

"Television does not know how to talk about domestic issues.... Things discussed on television and the kinds of subjects that grip audiences online often have nothing in common. The Kremlin is thinking of bringing these two realities closer together," the RBC Daily said, quoting an unnamed Kremlin source last April. It is amazing how political managers who themselves were responsible for the state-run television forgetting how to cover domestic news talked about it as if it were some natural occurrence. And they did suddenly remember how to do it: the media agenda did change during the summer, but the experiment did not last. Russian television "lives" abroad. Most of the stories these days are again international, some of them indisputably top news, some less obviously so. The mass shooting in Las Vegas, the referendum in Catalonia that was marred by clashes with the Spanish police, and Monarch Airlines going into administration in the UK were the top items on Russia's Channel One in the early evening this Monday. Understanding the latter two stories would help cast light on the reasons why Russian state-run media devote so much time and effort to foreign coverage. Why the Monarch Airlines story has been featured prominently on Russian television is easy to explain. Russia had just recently suffered the collapse of a private airline, VIM Avia, that left up to 80,000 tourists stranded at various destinations throughout the world. The airline's predicament is not an isolated event. To report about it responsibly would mean putting it in the context of other bankruptcies, which have become increasingly common recently.

Two major banks, Otkritie and B&N Bank, just went under in September; VIM Avia and Hospitality Planet, a fast food chain, are now joining them. Private banks, manufacturing companies, retail outlets, hotels, and restaurant chains in Russia are going out of business at a frightening pace.

Bankruptcies may be a sign of growing pains, of creative destruction, as it were, but it does not look like it this time. "During previous crises, new firms used to be created to replace those closing down; not so this time," the economist Georgy Ostapkovich told Vedomosti daily recently. "It's happening across all sectors.

More firms are going than are coming to replace them, with a ratio of 35 percent. And it is not a lack of funding that most entrepreneurs are citing. The general feeling of uncertainty is to blame, half of them say. They don't understand what's going on in the Russian economy."

Reporting all these stories in context would call for a serious conversation about the state of Russia's economy, the impact of the West's sanctions, and the efficacy of Moscow's economic policies. But comparing the collapse of a Russian airline to the collapse of Monarch Airlines, a British firm, is an altogether different story. It tells us that running a business is risky and bad things may happen everywhere, even in Britain, the quintessential capitalist country. Thus, telling the sorry tale of Monarch Airlines, a company most Russians have never heard of, serves the purpose of saying that everywhere is just like Russia.

The story of the Catalan referendum is even more fundamental in sending a similar message. Discussing domestic regional separatism in Russia may be considered a crime, but any international story involving a regional population's struggle for independence from an oppressive or not so oppressive national capital is fair game for Russia's state-run television.

The Scottish referendum of 2014 was all over the Russian news. It was the year when Moscow went into Ukraine and annexed Crimea. The legitimacy of the annexation was based on a referendum hastily organized and conducted under the watch of the "little green men," the Russian troops wearing no insignia, already present on the peninsula. It is likely that in the event of a properly organized plebiscite, the Crimeans would have supported a course for independence or even agreed to join the Russian Federation. Or not. We will never know now.

The lack of time for proper campaigning (effectively less than two weeks), the organization of a referendum with the troops present, the voting being boycotted by an important minority, the Crimean Tatars, and a number of other issues do not allow calling the referendum a binding expression of the will of the Crimean people. A UN General Assembly resolution was later adopted that declared the referendum invalid and affirmed Ukraine's territorial integrity.

The referendum on Scottish independence, which took place that same year, was a godsend. It allowed Moscow's media managers to create a context for the Crimean referendum that would not have otherwise existed. Audiences were invited to delve into Scotland's complicated relationship with England over the centuries and have an enlightened discussion of nations' right to self-determination. And, of course, "citizens' journalism," well organized by Russian media managers, worked wonders on social networks.

Since then I have come to realize that romanticized accounts of distant as well as current events can be used to create attractive stories that feed a political agenda to unwitting audiences, while young activists gripped by a historic moment in the life of their country may be paid bloggers taking shifts in a St. Petersburg office. The Catalan story only confirms the narrative of separatism being increasingly common in the decadent West. Russian political managers can exploit the theme for ages; they know how to do it well. But it is hard to imagine that this is what they themselves need during the presidential election coming up next spring. The incumbent, who is expected to announce his candidacy soon, will have to talk about Russia's domestic economy, its schools and hospitals. And Russian TV producers well trained to cover Scotland and Catalonia will have to take a crash course in covering

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