

RUSSIA SOFT POWER PRESENTATION FOR CEEC  
Notes by VOA Russian Service Managing Editor Irina Van Dusen

I wish VOA Russian had the same opportunity to reach audiences and to distribute our content in Russia as RT (formerly known as Russia Today) and other soft-power Russian media outlets in the U.S. If we could be on TV 24/7, we would; if we could be on FM radio, we would. Unfortunately, we are not – so we do what we can to fulfill our mission and the VOA Charter-mandated obligation to provide high quality journalism and responsible discussions of all aspects of American society and values, by opening a window into American life, thought and institutions.

Now, the question might be – why can't we be on TV, FM radio and in leading Russian newspapers in the same way as RT is, or *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* – a Russian government newspaper, which through its project called “Russia Beyond the Headlines” is publishing its monthly supplements in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, etc.?

Of course, it takes a lot of money to be able to exercise soft power effectively – and it looks like the Russian government is taking this task seriously by investing heavily in their media presence in the U.S. and globally. This is obvious to anyone who watches RT. And, according to a [study](#) released Monday, July 16, 2012, by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, Russia Today, along with Fox News, has become the leading source of popular news videos on Google-owned YouTube.

But besides money, there is another reason that VOA Russian is not distributing content through Russian TV, FM radio and newspapers: the situation with media freedom in Russia, which continues to be very restricted – and I might even say getting worse. Following are a few comments on this topic:

According to the latest report by Freedom House, Russia is ranked 172 out of 197 in press freedom, and its status is "Not Free." Regarding Internet and digital media use, Freedom House identified Russia as a “country at risk” due to mounting encroachments on key spheres of online activity. According to Amnesty International, journalists working in traditional media outlets across the former Soviet Union face harassment, attacks, unfair imprisonment or even death just for doing their job.

On July 24, 2012, *The Moscow Times* published an article called “*Media Landscape Shifts with Putin's Return*,” in which the author quotes Pavel Sheremet, a freelance reporter, who recently left Kommersant TV after three years: “In the current political environment, it is very tough to withstand pressure to close risky, money-losing outlets (project Kommersant TV was closed by the Kommersant holding company in June). Experts point out that there are troubling signs that the state is exerting new pressure on media outlets. Even the budget for state-owned media will be slashed by five percent.” (Government spokeswoman Natalya Timakova confirmed this last week.)

So it seems that despite budget cuts, as the article points out, not all state media organizations need to be thrifty. RT is planning to open a huge new studio on the eastern outskirts of Moscow

by the end of the year, according to the channel's editor Margarita Simonyan (on her blog). RT spokeswoman Alina Mikhaleva confirmed by email that the channel's entire staff will eventually move to the new studio.

Most recent developments have seen the Russian government tightening its grip on the free flow of information and activities of non-governmental organizations. I am talking about the new laws – blacklisting certain Internet sites, the defamation law, the NGOs as “foreign agents” law. It has been proposed to include international broadcasters into the “foreign agents” law as well.

As a result, we can see that while expanding its own soft power, Russia is trying to prevent people from exercising their soft power in Russia itself.

So being barred from TV and radio, VOA Russian went digital. We operate a robust multimedia website, through which we work on enhancing Russians' understanding of American policies, politics and culture. We offer web-based discussion and dialogue and multimedia presentation of timely, trustworthy news, information and analysis of the U.S.-Russian relationship, as well as global events relevant to Russia.

VOA Russian reaches and engages its audience through multiple digital distribution channels and platforms, including mobile, apps and social networks such as YouTube, Twitter (with more than 40,000 followers), Facebook, VKontakte and other Russian social networks.

Continuous review of existing research has shown steady growth in the use of social media by Russian audiences. ComScore Video Metrix reported in February 2012 that there were already more online video viewers in Russia than in any other European country.

So in response to these trends, in February 2012, VOA Russian launched a new social media-based web/TV news program called "*Podelis*" (Russian for "Share"). *Podelis* employs social media to engage its audience and crowd source its content. This engagement and content form the backbone of a program that discusses news that is "trending" in the online landscape. *Podelis* aims to connect with an audience that is mobile, frequently online and on social media sites, wants to know the latest news, and thrives on the recognition of their peers.

Also, about a month ago, we started doing live interactives with probably the only remaining Russian independent web/TV channel “Dozhd.” Our first interactive was on the Magnitsky bill.

VOA's Russian Service contributes to in-depth coverage of issues important to the United States, explaining U.S. policies and institutions, countering distortions and misperceptions about the United States, and providing access to and proximity to key decision-makers at the White House, the State Department and the U.S. Congress.

On Russian domestic issues, VOA Russian adds context to events, tying in global and American perspectives and offering a wide spectrum of opinion, while serving as a forum for audiences to interact on bilateral issues, the state of human rights, the rule of law, and other relevant topics.

Our website and social media properties are visited by millions of Russians, engaged in direct dialogue with their peers and our journalists about content that is not often found in government controlled media. Our website traffic doubled last year; thousands visitors engaged with our expert bloggers and we recorded almost 10 million video views on our website and popular YouTube channel.

However, in view of what we just talked about, it will take additional recourses and access routes to reach Russian population to match Russia's efforts at exercising soft power in the US.