

Reporting Against the Odds: The Struggle to Keep Russia's Independent Journalism Alive

Article by Anna Litvinenko

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Alongside its military offensive, the Kremlin's war in Ukraine also relies on distorted narratives, disinformation, and censorship. As a result, the Russian state is waging an information war at home and abroad. We spoke to Anna Litvinenko, an expert on the Russian media space, about the current state of independent media in the country and how journalists, both in Russia and in exile, are persisting in their efforts to hold Vladimir Putin's government to account.

Green European Journal: Despite the mounting tensions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine came as a shock to much of the West and its media. Was this the case also in Russia?

Anna Litvinenko: It was very unexpected for the public in Russia as well. And even for experts. Political scientists and analysts working to predict Putin's next moves were still arguing at the end of February that nothing was going to happen. They believed that he was simply using threats against Ukraine to try to negotiate a better deal for himself. The only kind of war they could have imagined was a spectacle designed for TV audiences. And this belief was held until the very last moment. Even the liberal intellectuals who are usually very critical of Putin did not believe that there would be an attack.

With the wisdom of hindsight, we can find some clues, such as the staged meeting of Putin's security council, which show us that at that time there were people who knew what was going to happen. There seemed to be huge preparations in military camps for this invasion, and many people knew about it in the Kremlin. But this information was kept from the people outside.

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How has the invasion been presented in the media in Russia?

Within just two weeks, we saw how Russia abruptly changed from being an authoritarian regime with some isles of free press (primarily online) to a dictatorship with almost total control of the narrative that reaches the Russian audience online and offline. And this narrative is pretty clear. It represents Ukraine as a potential aggressor: a country full of Nazis.

It is also important to understand how propaganda works. This dominant narrative has not been created since the invasion began, nor in the weeks and months leading up to it; it has been built up over many years, starting in 2014. Russian state television developed this narrative gradually, so by now people have it in their heads.

As a communications scholar, I find this very striking, because we always assumed that in the times of social media, when so many different sources of information are available (which many Russians can still access, for example by installing a VPN or using the Telegram app to follow independent journalists in exile), the power of TV would wane. But instead, over the years, it has succeeded in creating a picture of the world that is very different from reality within the minds of the population. This power makes people immune to all these new sources of information. They tend to claim that everything that doesn't correlate with what is said on TV is fake.

Just to show you how extreme the effect of this "filter" can be: in Russia, there are a lot of people who have relatives in Ukraine. And even these strong family ties, which we tend to see as the most important determinant of what information we trust, cannot counter this narrative. Even when they speak to their relatives in Kyiv and see the pictures of destruction, Russian people are more likely to believe what is said on TV.

Many people in Russia follow a broken logic; they do not necessarily identify cause and effect. It is not a contradiction for them that Ukrainian people are supposed to be Nazis, while their president Volodymyr Zelenskyy is Jewish. For instance, if people notice that their quality of life is getting worse or prices are getting higher, they normally conclude that the ruler or the administration isn't doing a good job. But in Russia, instead, we can witness this "labyrinth logic", which leads them through intricate passageways to the conclusion that the West or the US is to blame. These narratives are full of contradictions.

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Younger generations tend to rely on newer media, doesn't that make them less likely to believe the propaganda coming from television?

It is true that the impact of television depends on the age, location, socialisation, and economic situation of audiences. Television consumption has declined in recent years. According to [Levada](#), in 2020 about 70 per cent of Russians received their news from TV. In 2021, it had dropped to 62 per cent. I would assume that in the past weeks this share has increased again.

There are many famous vloggers and journalists on YouTube who have a mass audience. These vloggers plant the seeds of doubts in the heads of young people, they explain to them that television may not show the full truth. But even this younger generation, who consume YouTube or TikTok, are not always immune. A lot of the online content they watch is depoliticised, and if they watch TV "with one eye" when someone in the family is

watching it and propaganda is running in the background, they tend to start reciting the same narratives.

The Russian government's messages are also relayed abroad through its international channels. To limit their impact, the EU decided to block two of these channels as part of its sanctions: RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik. Was this necessary?

If you had asked me about this a few months ago, I would have said "no". Many journalistic and civil society organisations, like Reporters Without Borders, have condemned this move. But right now, I see the immense effectiveness of this propaganda narrative, I see how it creates a filter within people's minds that makes them immune to other sources of information. And I think that in an information war with a lot of emotional propaganda, a ban can be justified – at least while there is no ceasefire.

Putin has introduced many different forms of legislation to control state media, restrict the space for independent media, and intimidate journalists critical of the regime over the past 15 to 20 years. How does the current crackdown fit into this pattern?

There have been several milestones in restrictive legislation. From 2011 to 2012, the protests against the re-election of Putin triggered a series of restrictive laws against online media. Another intensive period came after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the latest wave came with the fourth presidency of Putin. We have seen lots of preparations to close or slow down online platforms and bring internet service providers under state control. Independent media were labelled "foreign agents" (in Russian, this term is also used for spies) and forced to publish a disclaimer alongside all their content, including social media posts, stating that it was distributed by an entity "fulfilling the function of a foreign agent". [1] These measures broke the business model of media outlets, as advertisers were reluctant to place ads in outlets bearing such a label.

And right now, we see the final stage of the transition from authoritarianism to dictatorship. Over the past weeks, the Russian public sphere has been almost completely erased. The authorities sterilised the media landscape. We haven't seen such a massive crackdown on freedom of opinion for 30 years – almost everything that was built in this period is now gone. Echo of Moscow (Ekho Moskv), a major independent radio station (which was actually always balanced and tried to set up a dialogue between the Kremlin and opposition), has been blocked. Independent channel TV Rain (Dozhd) has also been closed, and others have had to leave the country. Even some innocent, cultural magazines are being blocked.

The law on "fakes", passed on 5 March, (which imposes prison terms of 15 years on those who report about the war) can be seen as de facto military censorship [2]: it has made it impossible, and illegal, to do balanced journalism. The only legal way to do journalism is to copy and paste the statements of Kremlin.

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What kind of culture prevails within Russian state media that allows Putin to control the narrative so tightly? Is there space for any degree of dissent?

The system is afraid of any form of free voice or alternative information that does not match the Kremlin's narrative. But this fear inside the Kremlin also means that it is a fragile system - and not as strong or monolithic as it might seem from the outside. A lot of fear stems from the so-called "spiral of silence": When a person thinks that she is the only dissenter, she will keep silent; but once people start realising that the majority around them opposes war, that can lead to a very sharp turn into the other direction. It can lead people to speak up, to openly criticise the measures of the Kremlin.

There was also the symbolic action of Marina Ovsyannikova, a TV producer who broke into a live news broadcast brandishing an anti-war banner. Her act is so important because it comes from inside the system. She used to work for the media that spread false narratives, but she could not take it anymore.

After this action, several anonymous interviews were conducted with other people within this system who were actually impressed and inspired by her action. Most people who work in the propaganda media are not there because they believe in the messages they convey. It is rather for the money, and since the beginning of the war, their salaries have increased. But many of them have doubts about the work they do - they live in Moscow, AP and Reuters operate in their editorial office, so they know that something is wrong with what they do. Many of them feel a red line has been crossed, and some have quit.

Do you think this censorship will outlast the war or is it more likely to be a temporary measure?

I haven't seen any examples of moving from restrictive to less restrictive measures in Russia so far. It would also be hard to recuperate: the government is destroying the whole media infrastructure and many journalists have had to flee because they are in danger. Due to the sanctions, the remaining newsrooms cannot receive donations or subscription payments via Mastercard, Visa, or PayPal. This is a disastrous situation for them. Yet regardless of the challenges, journalists in Russia and in exile still keep working, they don't give up. They hope that one day they can return and restore their outlets in Russia.

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Some Russian outlets are based abroad, such as the Latvia-based independent

news site Meduza. Do they still have access to information inside the country?

They still have journalists and freelance reporters in Russia. That is the reason why Meduza, for instance, still publishes all its content with [the foreign agent label](#). People sometimes wonder why they haven't dropped it after they were blocked in the country. The team behind Meduza believes that such a step would further endanger the people who work for them in Russia. At the same time, they also have people in Ukraine who report about war, which is also very challenging and dangerous.

Meduza is the only major media outlet that has its own functioning infrastructure and can still operate as a media outlet (unlike Ekho Moskvy, where journalists have to rely on their personal Telegram channels or on YouTube to produce content.) That's because Meduza was the first major media platform that was started in exile (in 2014). They used to receive advertising, donations, and subscriptions from Russia, but the foreign agent label and the war have cut these revenues substantially, so a [crowdfunding campaign](#) has been set up to support the organisation.

How do Russian audiences access information now?

While important news sources are blocked, many people use VPNs to read news and access Instagram or Facebook. The government might move to censor or block VPNs as well, but that will not be easy, as they adapt quickly. In addition, Telegram has become one of the most important platforms. Of course, you will not come across information coincidentally, you have to actively search for it, to look for the channels of independent outlets and subscribe to them. Meduza is also very successful with its apps which you can download in order to circumvent censorship, and they also created a [mirror website](#) with the help of Reporters Without Borders. In addition, newsletters are another very common way to avoid restrictions, because emails are not considered to be media in Russia.

What can European policymakers do to help?

One way to help would be to provide visas for journalists who have fled the country. Currently, Russians can only stay in the EU temporarily. The issue of vaccines also needs to be sorted out, as Russians received the Sputnik-V jabs that are not accepted in the EU. So, I think helping these people would be the key measure. There are some ideas around creating new outlets for Russian audiences now, but I tend to disagree with this: Russia already has independent news outlets, its journalists have credibility, they have an audience, and they are professional. It is better to support them.

[1] Russia's foreign agent law was passed in 2012 and subsequently expanded in 2019 to apply to any private individual or group who receives any amount of foreign funding.

[2] A heightened level of censorship is deployed in times of war and conflict to prevent the enemy from gaining information regarding military intelligence, strategies, and tactics



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