



MEDIA

Russia's independent media, long under siege, teeters under new Putin crackdown

After blocking media access, Russia banned what it calls 'fake' news of its assault on Ukraine. Journalists are now fleeing the country.

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Ivan Kolpakov, editor in chief of Meduza, one of Russia's most popular independent media outlets, had been expecting the government to block the public's access to his website every day since the war with Ukraine began.

On Friday morning it finally happened. But then Russia's parliament went further, passing a law banning what it considers "fake" news about the military, including any rhetoric that calls the invasion of Ukraine an "invasion" — the preferred language is "special military operation" — with a potential 15-year prison sentence. Putin signed it into law hours later.

"Our sources say they are likely to use this against journalists," said Kolpakov, speaking from a location he would not disclose. "They can use it against journalists, and why wouldn't they? They decided to destroy the industry entirely."

Kolpakov, whose website is based in Latvia, began what he called "an urgent evacuation" of his Russian staff.

Similar scenarios are playing out at countless independent media outlets across Russia, a nation that has never had a fully welcoming attitude toward a free press.

While several Western news organizations say they have temporarily curtailed their activities in Russia while they assess the impact of Putin's new policy, it is Russia's homegrown media that is bearing the brunt. Many outlets are closing their doors, and journalists are fleeing the country.

The result is a silencing of the media voices that provided the Russian public with information that differed from the government's official spin on domestic and world affairs, as presented by state-owned media.

Russia was most recently ranked 150th out of 180 nations on the World Press Freedom Index compiled by the nonprofit Reporters Without Borders, and the government has often pushed restrictions on independent media during times of military conflict, according to Gulnoza Said, coordinator for Europe and Central Asia programs for the Committee to Protect Journalists. But the latest crackdown is unprecedented.

“Putin understands how high the stakes are in the invasion of Ukraine, and a big part of this war is the information war,” she said. “Once Russian officials saw the information war could be lost because of the activities of Russian-based outlets, I think they were outraged and decided to close them.”

The closure Thursday of Echo of Moscow, a 32-year-old radio station, was especially shocking, she said. “Echo Moscow has become a part of Russian identity just as ‘Swan Lake’ or ‘War and Peace.’ And now it’s no more.”

Shortly after the invasion of Ukraine last week, Russia's media regulator Roskomnadzor put Echo and nine other outlets on notice, ordering them to delete news and commentary that used terms such as “invasion” and “war” to describe the incursion. One of them was independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta, whose editor, Dmitry Muratov, recently won the Nobel Peace Prize.

On Monday, Muratov told the New Yorker “we continue to call ‘war’ war.” On Friday, the paper announced it would delete its war reporting because of the new law.

Another was TV Rain, the country's last independent television station. Two hours after the government blocked its website Wednesday, chief editor Tikhon Dzyadko and his wife, the station's news director, fled the country. The station aired its last broadcast over YouTube on Thursday.

In an interview with The Washington Post from Turkey, Dzyadko mourned the end of the work his station had been doing. “In a country which is free only on paper but in reality has been becoming more repressive, in such a country, we were absolutely free and we were saying what we wanted to say and reporting about actually important things,” he said.

Some colleagues also fled, while others remain in Russia. “All of us are just trying to understand where we are and what is happening.”

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Never thought it'd come to this, but I did have to leave Russia, crossing the border on foot in the middle of the night, with my panic-packed bags on my back and my dog in tow. Felt a massive door slam shut behind my back. Barely had enough time to call my parents. Crazy times.

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Russia has also blocked access to Facebook and to broadcasts and websites of Western media organizations, including Voice of America, Deutsche Welle, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. CNN announced Friday it would stop broadcasting its programs in Russia, “while we continue to evaluate the situation and our next steps moving forward.” Britain’s BBC, which announced it would temporarily suspend its journalists’ work in Russia, saying “we are not prepared to expose them to the risk of criminal prosecution simply for doing their jobs”; CBS and ABC soon announced that its Russia correspondents would not appear on-air. Some Russia-based American journalists left before the law was passed.

A company spokeswoman said The Washington Post is still assessing the new law’s potential impact on its correspondents and local staff.

The Russian government either owns or controls most of the TV channels from which older Russians get their news. But for several years, as Russia attempted to participate in the global arena, Putin “tried to appear friendly to independent media and journalists,” Said said.

It has always been an uneasy history, though. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Russia was plagued by a spate of high-profile killings of journalists. And during Putin’s two decades in power, oligarchs have bought up many independent media outlets.

Putin was focused on television news in the first years of his presidency, said Kolpakov, but left newspapers and websites intact: “They didn’t see it as an important part of the market” for controlling public opinion. Dzyadko saw Russia’s tolerance of independent media as mostly window dressing.

“There was an idea to make it look like Russia is democracy,” he said. “But one day they decided that they don’t want to do it anymore.” Crackdowns came during Russian incursions in Chechnya, Georgia and Crimea.

The independent media was often able to do “thoughtful and heroic work,” said Philip Seib, professor emeritus of journalism and public diplomacy at the University of Southern California and author of [“Information at War: Journalism, Disinformation, and Modern Warfare.”](#) But it mostly served as a facade — “Potemkin journalism,” he said, “behind which are the tightly controlled major entities” of state-owned media.

“When global political difficulties arise, the facade is torn down and truth banned,” Seib added.

Since 2019, Russia has designated dozens of journalists and media organizations as “foreign agents,” including Rain TV and Meduza. One of Meduza’s journalists, Ivan Golunov, was arrested on manufactured drug charges, prompting mass protests before he was released.

TV Rain — which grew its audience with coverage of 2010 and 2011 anti-government demonstrations — was kicked off major cable and satellite providers in 2014 before pivoting to YouTube, where Dzyadko said its audience averaged about 15 million viewers monthly.

“The designation of being a foreign agent, the idea was to show to the people that we were spies and enemies, but instead, our audience got bigger,” he said.

Independent media has been especially under pressure over the past two years, since the Russian constitution was amended to allow Putin to remain president until 2036 and opposition leader Alexei Navalny was poisoned and arrested. In April 2021, the Kremlin declared Meduza a foreign agent. Advertisers dropped it, forcing Meduza to close its offices and lay off staff. Sources grew fearful of speaking to its reporters, Kolpakov said. And then U.S. sanctions made it hard for Meduza to access the donated funds it had come to rely upon.

“It’s not like Latin America, where people are shot in the street, but it is still a dangerous profession and there are lots of methods that the authorities use to put pressure on people,” he said. “I have huge concerns about the security of our people. I can’t tell you how many people we have or where they are based because it is so dangerous.”

On Thursday, Meduza published an editorial saying it would continue to report upon unfolding events in the country, while it can, noting that “within a few days, maybe even today, it is possible that there will be no independent media left in Russia.”

And the final few seconds of Rain TV on Thursday featured dozens of staffers who had assembled on set walking off together.

“No to war,” said the station owner and co-founder. And then the feed cut to a scene from the ballet “Swan Lake” — which state TV often broadcasts during moments of political upheaval, most notably during the 1991 failed coup attempt that preceded the fall of the Soviet Union.

“We know when and why this was played once on Russian television, and we know what happened soon after,” Dzyadko said. “So since we are optimistic, we hope good times will come.”

