

Essay

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»For a journalist, keeping silent is a crime«

Russian independent media: Caught between responsibility and wartime censorship

Abstract: It did not take long after the first Russian tanks rolled across the border into Ukraine for the Russian government to tighten its censorship laws. The Duma (parliament), the media supervisory authority Roskomnadzor, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the Ministry of Justice joined forces to combat any media that might threaten the Kremlin's control over how the ›special operation‹ in Ukraine is viewed. Rushed through, the new laws target allegedly ›false information‹ and set out both large fines and custodial sentences of up to 15 years. Numerous independent^[1] media websites were blocked, and at least 150 journalists were forced into exile by a wave of repression. Yet their voices have not been silenced – they have found new ways and formats, even in other languages and from other countries. How do independent journalists manage to provide truthful, critical reporting under conditions of wartime censorship? Which channels do they use to ask questions that the Kremlin does not want to hear, and give answers that Roskomnadzor would not allow? Where do they find scope for free reporting? How do users get around blocks online? An insight into a media landscape divided into two worlds: before and after February 24, 2022.

»War is peace.« As Russian rockets rained down on Ukrainian cities, the party slogan from George Orwell's dystopian novel resurfaced in a press release from Roskomnadzor. On February 26, 2022, the Russian media supervisory authority banned the use of the terms ›attack,‹ ›invasion,‹ and ›declaration of war‹ to describe the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine, threatening media outlets

1 In this paper, the term ›independent‹ refers to media that are not subject to state control.

with fines or even closure (cf. Roskomnadzor 2022b). Alongside the »special operation,« as Russia's invasion of its neighbor is officially referred to, the Russian government launched another offensive on its own territory – against critical media.

How the state has introduced wartime censorship, without mentioning ›war‹ or ›censorship‹

Article 29 of the constitution of the Russian Federation bans propaganda and censorship, and guarantees the right to free speech. Yet the state has introduced de facto wartime censorship and criminalized independent reporting. The Duma rushed through a law that punishes the »public dissemination of knowingly false information on the deployment of the armed forces of the Russian Federation« with large fines, forced labor, or custodial sentences of up to 15 years, depending on the specific offence [Art. 207.3, Russian Criminal Code]. According to the government, the aims of the military campaign are to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, and to maintain international peace and security. As a result, any information that deviates from official statements, such as those from the Foreign and Defense Ministries, is considered ›false information.‹ President Putin signed the bill into law on March 4.

The Ministry of Justice then went on to expand the list of ›foreign agents‹ – a term used in Russian to denote not just non-governmental organizations and media, but also individual journalists, scientists, human rights defenders, and activists who receive financial support from abroad and are politically active. This status comes with major bureaucratic obstacles, significantly limits access to sources of information, and is effectively stigmatization (cf. The Village 2021).

Not only the media supervisory authority, the Duma, and the Ministry of Justice have tightened censorship – the editorial offices of state media have also joined in. Television journalists tell of monitoring and internal investigations, dismissals, threats, and armed security forces outside the entrances to studios and editing rooms (cf. Borsunowa/Bablojan 2022). Such measures were ramped up even further following the actions of Marina Ovsyannikova, an employee at *Channel One*. During a live broadcast of the main evening news program *Wremja*, she walked into the picture, stating in Russian that the television news is a lie, and sending a message in English to a global audience: »Russians against war.«

Developments over the last few months have seen Russia slip right down in the Press Freedom Index: to 155th of 180 countries, between Azerbaijan and Afghanistan (cf. RSF 2022b). Marie Struthers, Regional Director Eastern Europe and Central Asia at Amnesty International, spoke of »a scorched-earth strategy

that has turned Russia's media landscape into a wasteland« (cf. Amnesty International 2022).

Is the media landscape really turning into a »wasteland?«

It did not take long after the introduction of the new paragraphs for the specific effects on the media landscape to become clear. On the day the war began, Roskomnadzor called on the media to base their reporting exclusively on information and data drawn from »official Russian sources« (cf. Roskomnadzor 2022a), threatening penalties and immediate closure. However, few media acted in line with these demands. The newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, the »flagship of independent journalism in Russia« (dekoder 2021), produced a bilingual issue in Russian and Ukrainian on February 25, with the headline »Russia. Bombards. Ukraine.« Shortly afterwards, the Public Prosecutor's Office and Roskomnadzor ordered the closure of numerous websites that had reported on civilian victims and the shelling of cities by Russian troops in Ukraine and referred to the »special operation' as an »attack.« Victims of these censorship measures included the independent television channel *Dozhd* (TV Rain), the oldest government-critical radio channel *Ekho Moskvy*, the exile newspaper *Meduza*, and the *Mediazona* media project, founded by activists from the punk band Pussy Riot. Websites of regional Russian media, such as the Siberian online projects *Taiga.info* and *Ljudi Baikala* [The people of Baikal], were also blocked. Access to foreign media services, such as the BBC, Deutsche Welle, the Ukrainian online newspaper *Ukrayinska Pravda*, and the Belarusian online portal *Zerkalo.io*, was also limited. Multiple reporters were arrested while reporting on anti-war protests in Russian cities (cf. RSF 2022a), while at least 150 journalists have left the country since the start of the war (cf. Agentstwo 2022). In order to further weaken the influence of critical voices, Roskomnadzor also took aim at social media platforms operated by the Meta corporation: Facebook and Instagram were blocked and declared »extremist« (cf. Roskomnadzor 2022c, 2022d; Tass 2022).

On March 3, shortly before the changes took effect in the Russian Criminal Code, *Dozhd* temporarily halted its programming in order to protect its staff from prosecution. That same day, the Board of Directors voted to close down the station, including its websites, after 32 years of operation. *Novaya Gazeta* initially continued reporting »under the conditions of wartime censorship« (*Novaya Gazeta* 2022), with only the newsroom ceasing operations. Given the new legislation, the editorial office removed reporting from war-torn areas and abbreviated some items, clearly noting that they had been forced into conducting this self-censorship. Instead of the word »war,« the paper used three dots in pointed brackets (<...>) or the term »special operation« in inverted commas. But on March 28,

after two warnings from Roskomnadzor, the newspaper paused operations until the end of the war.

Since the war began, many independent media have been confronted with even greater financial difficulties than before. Blocked websites and social media reduced their reach, and partners and advertising customers left – a trend only reinforced by the emerging economic crisis. On March 10, YouTube stopped the monetarization of all video channels in Russia (cf. YouTube Help 2022). This also had an impact on independent journalists, who now rely even more on support from their audiences in the form of donations and digital subscriptions.

At the same time, the Kremlin's media machinery was receiving generous support. Between January and March 2022, the government provided RUB 17.4 billion (around EUR 250 million) in funding for the state mass media – three times more than in the same period of the previous year. Funding was RUB 11.9 billion (around EUR 170 million) in March alone (cf. MinFin 2022). State television channels, especially *Russia-1*, extended the broadcast hours given over to political talk shows, with state propaganda running on an endless loop. Given this background, it is important not to overstate the influence of independent media in shaping public opinion in Russia. A survey conducted by the independent polling company Levada Center in March 2022 showed that 70 percent of the population gain most of their information from television. More than half of Russians (54 percent) trust television news, with online media and social networks trusted much less, at 17 and 15 percent respectively (cf. Levada Center 2022). In May 2022, 53 percent of respondents considered the television coverage of events in Ukraine to be completely (21 percent) or mostly (32 percent) objective, and only 15 percent dismissed the television news as not being objective (see Levada Center 2022b). Television, creating a parallel reality of the ›special operation‹ in Ukraine for its viewers very much in line with state propagande, remains the main source for information and reaches virtually every household.

Why critical voices are not falling silent, despite everything

So has the Russian government succeeded in taming its critics from the »small, rebellious media scene« (Ganske-Zapf quoted in Deppe 2022)? Yes and no. On the one hand, the Kremlin has used draconian censorship and intimidation measures to target media and journalists that could threaten its power over how the progress, goals, and victims of the ›special operation‹ are interpreted. Freedom for independent media has been restricted, with the Chief Editor of the media and science platform *dekoder*, Tamina Kutscher, speaking of a »worst case scenario for media freedom in Russia« (Kutscher quoted in Gräff 2022). On the other, the destruction of the media landscape does not mean that journalists

who refuse to be monopolized by the state and want to continue working conscientiously, nor an audience looking for independent information, have simply disappeared.

One way that many users are getting around Roskomnadzor's blocks on online content is by setting up a VPN (virtual private network) on their devices. This type of software anonymizes online traffic, encrypts the user's location, and thus allows the user to access blocked websites and social networks. In March 2022, VPN services were used by 23 percent of all Russians, including 47 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds and a third (34 percent) of 25 to 39-year-olds (cf. Levada Center 2022a). The Tor browser, best known as the gateway to the darknet, is another method of anonymous access. With a localized internet infrastructure, Russia »does not yet have the technical possibilities of the ›great firewall of China,« for example (Haase 2022).

Although the ›beacons‹ of critical reporting are all but extinguished, the editorial offices of many government-critical media are continuing their work, paying the censorship little heed. Examples include *Mediazona*, the news magazines *Republic* and *Holod*, the investigative portal *The Insider*, and the student magazine *Doxa*.

Journalists whose media have had to cease reporting continue to publish work on platforms that have not (yet) been banned, predominantly YouTube and Telegram. »For a journalist, keeping silent is a crime. We have to show videos from Ukraine, tell the stories of people who are being shelled; otherwise, everyone only sees propaganda,« says Bogdan Bakalejko of *Dozhd* (Bakalejko in Gorjatschewa 2022). *Dozhd* founder Natalya Sindeyewa, and Alexei Venediktov and Sergej Buntman from *Ekho Moskvy*, are just two further examples of journalists who operate YouTube channels.

Many veterans of the YouTube scene are also very popular with audiences. Journalists and bloggers Yuri Dud^[2] and Ilya Varlamov^[3] have published multiple interviews, features, and documentary films since the start of the war, giving some of them multilingual subtitles in order to reach an audience outside the Russian-speaking world. Yuri Dud's interview with author and scientist Boris Akunin, for example, has been watched 24 million times (Dud 2022). Videos on the channel of politician and blogger Maxim Katz^[4], who has been publishing brief analyses with English subtitles, an objective tone, and sharp words on a daily basis since the war began, have also had millions of clicks. The *Redakcija*^[5] channel from former television journalist Alexey Pivovarov reaches between two and seven million users with its weekly reviews and reportages. The YouTube

2 <https://www.youtube.com/vdud> (10 million subscribers, date: 8 May 2022)

3 <https://www.youtube.com/ivarlamov> (3.49 million subscribers, date: 8 May 2022)

4 <https://www.youtube.com/maxkatz1> (1.37 million subscribers, date: 8 May 2022)

5 <https://www.youtube.com/Редакция> (3.14 million subscribers, date: 8 May 2022)

podcast *Skazhi Gordeevoy*⁶¹, produced by journalist Katerina Gordeeva, whose interviews reach up to seven million viewers, has become one of the most important platforms for discussion. Since the beginning of March, she has provided a platform for voices from science, politics, journalism, and culture: figures as diverse as Chief Editor of *Novaya Gazeta* and Nobel laureate Dmitry Muratov, sociologist Grigori Judin, exiled actor Chulpan Khamatova, and member of the Duma Elena Drapeko, who refers to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a »preventative strike.«

As media producers began to emigrate from Russia, state boundaries in journalism became blurred. Russian exile journalism is becoming increasingly important. The author and former Chief Editor of *Dozhd*, Mikhail Zygar, who moved to Berlin at the start of the war, has written a column in *Der Spiegel* since March. The journalist Marina Ovsyannikova, who left Russia after her anti-war protest on state television, began reporting as a freelance correspondent for *WELT* in April. Exiled journalists from the suspended *Novaya Gazeta* have set up the multilingual newspaper *Novaya Gazeta. Europa*, whose first print edition was published in Latvia on May 6.

Summary

February 24, 2022, divided the lives of many independent journalists in Russia into ›before‹ and ›after‹. Russia's military attack on its neighbor brought with it a massive wave of media repression in Russia. The above examples of how free journalism is standing up to this repression show two things: Firstly, independent voices do not fall silent, but instead find new ways to express themselves, even, or indeed especially, in times in which speaking out is difficult, but staying silent even more so. Secondly, these examples show that attempting to describe the Russian media landscape with categories like ›state propaganda‹ and ›repression of government critics‹ undoubtedly fails to go far enough. It is useful to look at what is possible in journalism that is independent of the state. Russian journalists are increasingly giving their YouTube videos multilingual subtitles, writing for Western media, and appearing as experts. The online platform *dekoder.org* is just one of those making their voices accessible to a German audience. The portal translates analyses, reportages, and interviews from independent media in Russia, places them within a social and political context, and thus fills gaps in in-depth knowledge specific to Russia. Paradoxically, the more actively the Kremlin attempts to gag the journalists, the louder and more important their voices become – even across national borders and cultural and language barriers.

6 <https://www.youtube.com/skazhigordeevoy> (1.08 million subscribers, date: 8 May 2022)

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