

There was progressive pressure on the media community and journalists in Russia during the last 10 years. Censorship became one of the governmental policies and affected media content within the country a lot. Legislative framework was tightening radically, new restrictions in the field of media and Internet regulation, freedom of expression were introduced every year. The state campaign to put control over Internet users and apply repressions against independent media and journalists in Russia began long before the Kremlin's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. In fact, it became an "artillery preparation" for the hostilities that the Putin regime has been waging not only against a neighboring state, but also against its own citizens who dared to have a different point of view from the authorities on the present and future of the country. "Preparatory repressions" were necessary to take all the media under state control and finally block access to independent information for the population.

Legislation

These anti-free press hostilities have been launched in the form of unconstitutional laws and repressions against individual journalists and whole media entities.

The number of new laws and amendments to the existing legislation restricting the work of journalists and media has increased. The following are a few examples under the names frequently used in public:

The Disrespect for Authority law

The "disrespect for state authorities" regulation in Russia, introduced in March 2019, allows the government to impose fines and even arrest for online publications that show "blatant disrespect for human dignity and public morals, the State, official State symbols of the Russian Federation, the Constitution of the Russian Federation or public bodies exercising governmental authority in the Russian Federation". The vague wording of the law makes it an instrument of state censorship, aimed at limiting free expression on political issues and other matters of public concern. Criticism of President Putin online was the subject of 78% of administrative cases under this provision.

The Sovereign Internet (Runet) legislation

The Sovereign Internet law in Russia allows the government to block foreign services and resources, slow down their work, and impose fines for non-compliance. The law has been used to throttle Twitter in 2021, and demands for data localization and other requirements raise concerns about user privacy and freedom of expression. This policy of controlling online content leads to self-censorship and violates citizens' rights to freedom of expression and information dissemination.

The law on tougher punishment for the publication of the data of security forces

It came into force in January 2021. Amendments were made to Article 320 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. These amendments say that the punishment will be harder if

there is a disclosure of personal data of officials of law enforcement agencies or of agencies which control them. Under this article, a fine of up to 200 thousand rubles (about 2500 euro), compulsory work up to 480 hours, or arrest up to 4 months, or restriction of freedom up to two years. Previously, only an official could be punished, but now those who were entrusted with this information due to official activities can be punished too/ This law directly relates to the activities of journalists.

The “Foreign Agents” Legislation developments

Since 2012, the Russian Ministry of Justice has maintained four "foreign agents" registers, including lists of NGOs, media, unregistered organizations, and individuals designated as "foreign agents". This has led to the blacklisting of journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers, newsrooms, and NGOs. Investigative journalism teams, such as Proekt, IStories, The Insider, Bellingcat, and OCCRP, have been targeted, and some have been designated as "undesirable" organizations, which results in a full ban on their activities, blocking of their websites, and criminal liability for those who work for them or donate to them.

Persecution of Journalists

Svetlana Prokopyeva

Journalists and bloggers began to be tried and convicted under criminal articles for ‘extremism’ and ‘justification of terrorism’. The Pskov journalist Svetlana Prokopyeva who works with Radio Svoboda (the Russian Service of the RFE/RL) was among the first to face these charges. She was accused of publicly calling for terrorist activities or publicly justifying terrorism (205.2, Part 2, of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) . Her “crime” consisted in the fact that on November 7, 2018, on during her programme *A Minute of Enlightenment* on Echo of Moscow on Pskov radio, Prokopyeva talked about the reasons for the act of a 17-year-old student, anarchist Mikhail Zhlobitsky, who caused an explosion at the Federal Security Service Directorate of the Arkhangelsk region. The next day, her column on the same topic was published on the website of the Pskov News Feed agency. The journalist expressed the opinion that the long-term pressure of the state on political and civil liberties has led Russia to the level of a repressive state, which has ‘itself brought up’ a generation of citizens fighting against it. The result of the publication was her inclusion in the list of ‘terrorists and extremists’ and the verdict of the district military court imposing a fine of 500 thousand rubles (the Prosecutor requested imprisonment for six years in a medium security prison and a ban on journalistic activity for four years after release).

Ivan Golunov

The case of investigative journalist Ivan Golunov, who was framed and detained in Moscow in June 2019, gained widespread public support and led to mass demonstrations. The police officers planted drugs on him, but due to public pressure, the case against him was closed and criminal charges were filed against the policemen involved in 2020. Later, in 2020, a criminal case was opened against the policemen who had planted drugs on the journalist.

Irina Slavina

Journalist Irina Slavina committed an act of self-immolation in front of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Nizhny Novgorod on October 2, 2020. Slavina had been harassed for years due to her critical articles and had her home searched by 12 police officers on the day before her death. Her suicide has been seen as a political gesture and a desperate attempt to draw attention to the problems she had written and talked about.

Ivan Safronov

The landmark criminal case against journalist Ivan Safronov turned out to be a wake-up call before the start of wartime repression.

Safronov worked as a correspondent for Kommersant, and later as a special correspondent for the Vedomosti newspaper. In May 2020, he was appointed Information Policy Advisor to Dmitry Rogozin, Director General of the Roscosmos State Corporation.

On the 7th of July 2020 Safronov was detained by the FSB and accused of treason. On the 13th of July 2020 the journalist was charged with high treason. According to investigators, Safronov was covering the work of the military-industrial complex and allegedly passed information containing state secrets to foreign intelligence services. However, the journalist never had access to state secrets. The criminal case is based on the transfer of information that can be found in open sources. The investigator made an offer to Ivan for cooperation, but Safronov refused. All court sessions, except for the announcement of the verdict, were held behind closed doors, as the case contained materials classified as “secret”. Ivan Safronov delivered a speech during the meeting, said that he did not plead guilty and did not understand the accusations against him.

The Moscow City Court proclaimed its verdict in 2022: Ivan Safronov received the longest term possible of 22 years in a maximum-security prison and a fine of 500,000 rubles under the article of state treason.

Covering the Protests of 2021

After the return of Alexei Navalny to Russia, large-scale protests took place in the country. The Russian Trade Union of Journalists recorded more than 200 violations of the rights of journalists who worked at the protest actions on January 23 and 31 and February 2 in 40 regions of Russia. Some journalists were severely beaten by police officers with batons or electric shockers and received head injuries.

Several online publications were forced to remove materials about the preparations for February 14 due to the threat of being blocked. So, for example, the Spektr website was blocked, since Roskomnadzor decided that the website carried “information containing calls for participation in mass events held in violation of the established procedure.”

After February 24, 2022

The hardest times for Russian independent journalism came with the invasion of Ukraine.

Law on “fake news” and discreditation of the army

Code of Administrative Offences, the Criminal Code and the Law on information were amended swiftly and “military censorship laws” entered into force early March 2022. Criminal liability (a fine up to 1 million rubles and up to 15 years of imprisonment) was introduced for "fake news" with regard to activity of the Russian armed forces. Imprisonment was also introduced for discrediting the Russian army - merely any criticism towards military policy of the Russian authorities and any anti-war expression. Since then journalists are allowed to release only official information on the so-called “special military operation” provided by the Defense Ministry. The word “war” is prohibited.

The Mass Media Law amendments

Another innovation of 2022: according to the Mass Media Law amendments adopted in July, the Prosecutor General's Office received the right to demand suspension of Russian mass media outlets without a court decision, to recognise their registration as invalid and to prohibit the activities of foreign media: closure of a foreign media bureau, withdrawal of accreditation, blocking of website for life and without the right to challenge this decision of governmental body in court. Problems occur when a media entity is accused of disseminating “fakes” or information “insulting human dignity and public morality”, expressing obvious disrespect for society, the state, the official state symbols of the Russian Federation, the Constitution, and the state authorities

The “Foreign Agents” legislation: new developments

In December 2022, the law "On Control over the Activities of Persons Under Foreign Influence" replaced previous "foreign agent" regulations in Russia and expanded restrictions and liability for non-compliance. Individuals can be designated as "foreign agents" for political activities, collecting certain information, or distributing materials, and can face up to 5 years imprisonment if they don't register voluntarily. Since February 2022, many journalists, scientists, lawyers, opposition figures, and human rights defenders have been blacklisted, leading to difficulties in their work or leaving Russia altogether.

Persecution of journalists

At the moment, 33 cases have been initiated against journalists because of military censorship, we will give examples of some of them.

Ilia Krasilshchik

Ilia Krasilshchik, media manager and blogger, former publisher of Meduza, former editor-in-chief of the Afisha magazine, former director *Yandex Service project* faced charges under Article 207 part 2 Criminal Code of Russian Federation (Public dissemination of deliberately false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, the exercise by state bodies of the Russian Federation of their powers). His Instagram post about the killings of civilians in the city of Bucha in the Kyiv region by Russian soldiers supposedly

served as a pretext for initiating a criminal case. The journalist left Russia. He is presently on a wanted list.

Maria Ponomarenko

The reason for initiating the case against Maria Ponomarenko, a Barnaul journalist, was her publication of March 17, 2022 about the Mariupol drama theatre where civilians were hiding - the building was destroyed as a result of an airstrike of the Russian army.

The journalist was detained by the police. In September, due to a severe mental condition, she broke a window in her cell and opened her veins. On November 14, Ponomarenko was placed under house arrest. On the night of January 27, due to a conflict with her ex-husband, in whose apartment Ponomarenko was obliged to serve house arrest, she went to the police department, after which the court changed her preventive measure to detention.

On February 15, 2023, a Barnaul district court found her guilty in the case of “fake” against the armed forces. Maria Ponomarenko was sentenced to six years in a penal colony.

Pyotr Verzilov

The publisher of Mediazona (the publication was recognized by the Ministry of Justice as a “foreign agent”) Pyotr Verzilov (also recognized as a “foreign agent” individually) was charged in November 2022 under the article on the dissemination of “fake news” about the army based on political hatred (clause “d” part 2 of article 207.3 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). According to Verzilov’s own words, a criminal case was opened because of two tweets and two posts on Instagram (owned by Meta, which is recognized as “extremist” in Russia and banned) dedicated to the Bucha tragedy.

On January 9, 2023 Verzilov was put on the international wanted list and arrested in absentia.

Mikhail Afanasyev

Mikhail Afanasyev, chief editor of the Novy Focus magazine, Abakan, was detained on the 13th of April 2022, his house was searched, and later the journalist was sent to a pre-trial detention centre. Detention period was extended several times. The case was initiated under article 207.3 of part 2 of the Russian Criminal Code. Afanasyev is accused of dissemination of “fakes” about the Russian army, The reason for the persecution was the publication in the “Novy Focus” where Afanasyev wrote about the OMON officers of Khakassia, who refused to go to the war zone. In the beginning of March the prosecutor's office sent to court a criminal case against Afanasyev. The hearings have started.

Independent Media Blocking

At the end of December 2022 Roskomsvoboda estimated that 9,300 Internet resources were impacted by military censorship and blocked during the war year.

Facebook was among the first to be blocked on March 4. Meanwhile, Meta, the owner of Facebook and Instagram, was recognised as an “extremist organisation” on March 21, and its activities in Russia were banned.

By the end of March 2022, access to independent information for the public was either no longer available, or very difficult - over 250 online media websites have been blocked for covering the war in Ukraine. A research by the [investigative media Proekt](#) shows that from February 24 to the end of July Roskomnadzor blocked the websites of at least 95 independent online media in Russia. The editors are looking for ways to bypass the blocking by creating mirrors, mailing lists, and apps, using Telegram and Youtube to access the audience.

In January 2023 Meduza, in addition to its status of a “foreign agent” was listed as an “undesirable” organisation in Russia, as it was announced by the Prosecutor General's Office, for “posing a threat to the foundations of the constitutional system and the security of the Russian Federation.”

Since the aggression against Ukraine many journalists had to leave Russia, because there is a criminal prosecution if you cover the war. Journalists and entire media projects had to relocate to different countries Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany, Poland, and a few other EU states and now work from there. Many persecuted journalists continue to work from abroad and even from Russia under extremely hostile conditions.

Project media, IStories, Novaya Gazeta-Europe, TV Rain, Doxa, The Bell, Media Zona, TV-2 Tomsk, 7x7, Radio Liberty (Russian Service), Current Time, BBC Russian Service, DW, and a lot of smaller regional projects still can be read, heard and watched by means of VPN in Russia. According to the News.ru information published on October 14 of last year, in the first half of 2022, about 35 million people downloaded VPN applications.

In 2022 Russia dropped to 155th place (out of 180) in the annual international Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (five rows lower than in 2021).