

Author

LEONARDO INGANNAMORTE

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Editors:

Marius Dragomir
Theodore Southgate

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Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC) is an independent media research and policy think tank that seeks to improve the quality of media policymaking and the state of independent media and journalism through research, knowledge sharing and financial support. The center's main areas of research are regulation and policy, media ownership and funding, and the links between tech companies, politics and journalism.



Author

Leonardo Ingannamorte

Leonardo Ingannamorte is a professional lawyer who earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in law from Togliatti State University. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he shifted his focus and enrolled in a two-year master's program in International Relations at Central European University, driven by a commitment to support international peace and stability. Nevertheless, he continues to practice law, collaborating with several Russian human rights projects, as he considers this work essential in countering the dictatorship that has brought war and suffering to the European continent.



Editors

Marius Dragomir

Marius Dragomir is the Director of the Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC). He previously worked as director of the Center for Media, Data and Society at CEU in Budapest. Before, he worked for the Open Society Foundations (OSF) for over a decade, where he managed the research and policy portfolio of the Program on Independent Journalism (PIJ), formerly the Network Media Program (NMP), in London. He has also been one of the main editors for PIJ's flagship research and advocacy project, Mapping Digital Media, which covered 56 countries worldwide, and he was the main writer and editor of OSF's Television Across Europe, a comparative study of broadcast policies in 20 European countries.

Theodore Southgate

Theodore Southgate is a freelance writer and editor who has been working in the field for over 15 years. He has worked across many different disciplines, from educational texts both for native and ESL schools to video game narratives, marketing articles, sports blogs, and novels. He is currently working alongside us as an editor for our ESL submissions.



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1. Legal Overview

1.1. Core Principles of Media Regulation in Russia

Article 15 of the Russian Constitution proclaims that the Constitution has “the highest legal force and direct effect” throughout the territory of Russia.[1] This article also enshrines the supremacy of “universally recognized principles and norms of international law and international treaties.” It is specifically stipulated that in the event of a conflict between national and international law, the provisions of the latter shall apply.[2]

Regarding international treaties, in addition to the customary norms of international law, Russia has signed and ratified a number of international documents obliging it to adhere, among other things, to standards for protecting the rights to freedom of the media and freedom of speech. Such documents include, for instance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Until March 2022, the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights and its protocols also applied in Russia. However, Russia denounced the Convention and left the Council of Europe, due to the latter’s decision to suspend Russia’s participation in the statutory bodies of the Council following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.[3]

In the Russian Constitution itself, Article 29 enshrines the rights to freedom of thought and speech and the right to seek and disseminate information, and prohibits propaganda promoting hatred, enmity, and superiority, as well as censorship.[4] The Constitution recognizes and guarantees human rights in accordance with international standards and declares the protection of these rights to be the duty of the state.[5]

Despite all constitutional guarantees and international commitments, however, the level of media freedom in Russia is extremely low – Russia ranks 162nd out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF).[6] Independent media and NGOs, as well as the opposition, present evidence of widespread censorship and propaganda, with the persecution of independent media extending even beyond Russia's borders.[7] The question remains: how can such constitutional guarantees “coexist” with widespread repression against the media and transform into such repressive measures?

[1] Constitution of the Russian Federation art. 15, § 1.

[2] Constitution of the Russian Federation art. 15, § 4.

[3] On the Termination of the International Treaties of the Council of Europe in Relation to the Russian Federation, Federal Law No. 43-FZ (2023).

[4] Constitution of the Russian Federation art. 29, § 1, 2, 4, 5.

[5] Constitution of the Russian Federation art. 17, § 1; art. 2.

[6] Reporters Without Borders (RSF). (2024). 2024 Press Freedom Index. <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

[7] Anton Troianovski and Valeriya Safronova. Russia Takes Censorship to New Extremes, Stifling War Coverage. 4 March 2022. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/world/europe/russia-censorship-media-crackdown.html>; Reporters Without Borders (RSF). (2024). Russian propaganda: how the Kremlin trains war ‘correspondents’ to work in the occupied territories of Ukraine. <https://rsf.org/en/russian-propaganda-how-kremlin-trains-war-correspondents-work-occupied-territories-ukraine>; International Press Institute (IPI). (2024). Analysis: Russia ramps up pressure on media and journalists in exile. <https://ipi.media/analysis-russia-ramps-up-pressure-on-media-and-journalists-in-exile/>.

For a long time, Russia had been a “dictatorship of spin” – a political regime mimicking democracy with its legal and electoral institutions. These dictatorships create an illusion of media diversity through informal influence (hidden censorship, co-optation, and so on) and disguise repressions under ostensibly legitimate legal mechanisms. Although some researchers believe that the political regime in Russia has started transforming from a dictatorship of spin to a dictatorship of fear,[8] the mechanisms of the former still remain important tools for controlling the media landscape.

Regarding legal mechanisms of repression, there are two enabling provisions at the basic constitutional level. First, the Constitution establishes a public interest clause – the possibility of limiting certain human rights if it is “necessary in order to protect the foundations of the constitutional system, morality, health, rights and legitimate interests of other persons, ensuring the defense of the country and the security of the state.”[9] This clause has been repeatedly used by the presidential-controlled parliament in creating various repressive mechanisms, which will be discussed further.

Second, the 2020 amendments to the Constitution, in addition to the well-known “zeroing-out” of President Putin’s terms, allowing him to run for two more terms totaling 12 years, also introduced changes in other areas.[10] These amendments enabled the abolition of universally recognized principles and norms of international law and international treaties, if they “contradict the Constitution.” Given the inclusion in the Constitution of provisions about God, traditional values, millennial history, and state unity – inserted during the same amendments and interpreted by the country’s political leadership in an extremely nationalistic manner[11] – many international legal provisions indeed began to contradict the Constitution. Another significant change was the extreme strengthening of the president’s role and the increase in his control over the Constitutional Court,[12] a very powerful state body responsible for interpreting the Constitution and deciding on the applicability of international legal texts and international court rulings.

[8] Sergey Guriyev. (2024). Как эволюционируют диктатуры (How Dictatorships Evolve). ReForum. <https://reforum.io/blog/2023/07/28/kak-evolyucioniruyut-diktatury/>.

[9] Constitution of the Russian Federation art. 55, § 3.

[10] On improving the regulation of certain issues of the organization and functioning of public authority, Law of the Russian Federation on Amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation No. 1-FKZ (2020).

[11] Andrei Kolesnikov. (2023). Blood and Iron: How Nationalist Imperialism Became Russia’s State Ideology. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/11/blood-and-iron-how-nationalist-imperialism-became-russias-state-ideology>.

[12] Elizaveta Foht, Sergey Goryashko, & Ilya Varabanov. Поправки в Конституцию приняты. Что это поменяет в балансе власти и жизни россиян? (Constitutional Amendments Passed. What Changes in the Balance of Power and in the Lives of Russians?). 3 July 2020. BBC News Russian. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53282145>.

Overall, it cannot be said that the Russian Constitution has any significant flaws in the realm of human rights. Several Russian opposition figures believe that the Constitution is one of the best in Europe and sets very high standards for human rights protection.[13] The problem lies in the fact that the Constitution initially disrupted the balance of power by granting too much authority to the president at the expense of the parliament, the judiciary, and its federal subjects.[14] This imbalance allowed for the establishment of an authoritarian verticality of power that ignores the Constitution's provisions on human rights in general, and the rights to freedom of the media and speech in particular.

1.2. Federal Media Law and the Concept of “Abuse of Media Freedom”

The main national law regulating media activities is The Russian Federation Law No. 2124-1 “On Mass Media”, dated December 27, 1991. Until the 2010s, this law could be described as democratic and consistent with liberal ideas about the legal regulation of free media. However, gradually, Russian authorities began to amend this law to limit media activities. One of the first such amendments was a ban on the dissemination of information “harmful to the health and development of minors,” which included “denying family values, promoting or demonstrating non-traditional sexual relations, and justifying illegal behavior [such as participation in protests].”[15] Today, the list of prohibited information considered “abuses of media freedom” formally includes: information aimed at committing criminal acts, justification of terrorism and extremism, and coverage of the activities of extremist, terrorist, and “undesirable” individuals and organizations. At first glance, the list does not raise any serious questions.[16] However, a more detailed analysis shows that these are all tools of censorship.

[13] Artem Krechetnikov. Основной закон России глазами оппозиционеров (Russia's Basic Law Through the Eyes of Opposition Figures). 11 December 2013. BBC News Russian. https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2013/12/131211_russia_constitution_opposition.

[14] Dmitriy Kartsev and Egor Fyodorov. Путин прав: поправки к Конституции нужны. Но вот какая конституционная реформа необходима в России на самом деле – версия “Медузы” (Putin Is Right: Constitutional Amendments Are Needed. But Here Is the Constitutional Reform Russia Truly Needs – Meduza's Version). 6 July 2020. Meduza. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/07/06/putin-prav-popravki-k-konstitutsii-nuzhny-no-vot-kakaya-konstitutsionnaya-reforma-neobhodima-v-rossii-na-samom-dele-versiya-meduzu>; Viktor Hamraev. Текст, который всегда с тобой: Почему Конституция 1993 года получилась такой, какая есть (The Text Always with You: Why the 1993 Constitution Turned Out the Way It Did). 12 December 2018. Kommersant. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3827756>; Konstantin Kotelnikov. Конституция России: развязка политического кризиса 1993 года (Russia's Constitution: The Resolution of the 1993 Political Crisis). 12 December 2021. Diletant. <https://diletant.media/articles/45281005/>.

[15] On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation in Connection with the Adoption of the Federal Law “On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development” art. 1, Federal Law No. 252-FZ (2011).

[16] On mass media art. 4, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2124-1 (1991).

Firstly, information aimed at committing criminal acts includes not only details about the manufacture of weapons or the production of drugs, but also, for instance, information about planning and participating in “unsanctioned” protests^[17] (which the Russian authorities prefer not to sanction^[18]) or “false information” (which is deemed false solely because it contradicts the official discourse^[19]).

Secondly, the justification of terrorism and extremism includes not only overt support for far-right movements that incite ethnic hatred but also support for individuals and organizations officially recognized as terrorist and extremist in Russia. Often, the basis for such recognition is “activities aimed at undermining the constitutional order of Russia,” which, according to the current government’s understanding, encompasses opposition activities.^[20] For example, Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation, the largest and most influential opposition structure in Russia, was designated as an extremist organization.^[21] Similarly, the Supreme Court of Russia labeled the “International LGBT Movement” as extremist for “inciting social and religious hatred.”^[22] An absurd consequence of this decision is the “rainbow ban” in Russia – public display of a rainbow is now considered an offense.^[23] Today, any form of LGBT+ activism – whether it be fundraising, organizing events, or making positive public statements about LGBT+ issues – can serve as grounds for criminal prosecution.^[24] Law enforcement agencies have already begun pursuing cases on this basis, and the first criminal charges have been filed.^[25] The reasons for inclusion on the list of terrorists and extremists can be anything – from a play that has won one of Russia’s most prestigious theatrical awards, to street graffiti, or anti-war activism.^[26] Currently, the official list of “terrorists and extremists” includes more than 500 organizations and 14,000 individuals,^[27] and any public support or mention of these entities, without explicitly labeling them as terrorists and extremists, is prohibited.

[17] Interfax. (2021). Генпрокуратура напомнила, что нельзя публиковать призывы к незаконным акциям (Prosecutor General’s Office Reminds: Calls for Illegal Rallies Are Not to Be Published). <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/762021>.

[18] OVD-Info. (2018). The art of ban. <https://en.ovdinfo.org/art-ban#1>.

[19] Roskomnadzor. (2022). Внимание средств массовой информации и иных информационных ресурсов (To the Attention of Media and Other Information Resources). <https://rkn.gov.ru/press/news/news74084.htm>.

[20] First Department. За что могут привлечь по “экстремистским” статьям и как себя обезопасить (What Can Lead to Charges Under ‘Extremism’ Articles and How to Protect Yourself). <https://dept.one/memo/extremism/>.

[21] RBK. (2021). Суд признал ФБК и штабы Навального экстремистскими организациями (Court Recognizes FBK and Navalny’s Headquarters as Extremist Organizations). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/09/06/2021/608670e09a7947709c4de06c>.

[22] Dmitriy Litvinov and Evgeniya Filippova. Движение ЛГБТ* признали в России экстремистским: Можно ли теперь говорить об однополой любви и не окажется ли вне закона радуга (LGBT Movement Recognized as Extremist in Russia: Can Same-Sex Love Be Discussed and Will the Rainbow Symbol Be Outlawed?). 30 November 2023. *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*. <https://www.pnp.ru/social/dvizhenie-lgbt-priznali-v-rossii-ekstremistskim.html>.

[23] Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 282.4; Ivan Voronin. Наказание за радугу (Punishment for the Rainbow). 8 February 2024. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/32811093.html>.

[24] Dmitriy Shvets. Первое уголовное дело об “ЛГБТ-экстремизме”. Как силовики отрабатывают модель для будущих репрессий на оренбургском бапе (First Criminal Case of ‘LGBT Extremism’: How Law Enforcement Tests Model for Future Repressions at Orenburg Bar). 4 April 2024. *Mediazona*. <https://zona.media/article/2024/04/04/pose>.

[25] Petr Sapozhnikov. В России могут впервые посадить за “ЛГБТ-экстремизм” – сотрудников квир-клуба из Оренбурга Почему власти выбрали для прецедента именно клубную индустрию? И как организаторам и посетителям ЛГБТК-вечеринок обезопасить себя? (Russia May Imprison for ‘LGBT Extremism’ for the First Time – Orenburg Queer Club Staff Targeted. Why Did Authorities Choose the Club Industry for This Precedent? How Can Organizers and Attendees of LGBTQ+ Parties Protect Themselves?). 25 March 2024. *Meduza*. <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/03/25/v-rossii-mogut-vpervye-posadit-za-lgbt-ekstremizm-sotrudnikov-kvir-kluba-iz-orenburga>.

[26] Marina Nesterova. Чрезвычайно опасны: кого в России считают террористами и экстремистами (Extremely Dangerous: Who is Considered Terrorists and Extremists in Russia). 31 May 2024. *Freedom*. <https://uatv.ua/chrezvychno-opasny-kogo-v-rossii-schitayut-terroristami-i-ekstremistami/>.

[27] Rosfinmonitoring. Перечень террористов и экстремистов (List of Terrorists and Extremists). <https://fedsfm.ru/documents/terrorists-catalog-portal-act>.

Thirdly, the concept of undesirable organizations warrants special attention. More precisely, it refers to “a non-governmental organization in respect of which a decision was made to designate it as undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation.”[28] The Federal Law No. 272-FZ, dated December 28, 2012, empowers the Russian Prosecutor’s Office to extrajudicially ban the activities of organizations that “pose a threat to constitutional foundations of the Russian Federation, the defense capability or security of the state.”[29]

Besides being intended to suppress unwanted non-governmental organizations[30] – including media outlets – the law also prohibits the dissemination of materials produced by such organizations.[31] Currently, among those designated as undesirable are major independent Russian and international media outlets such as Bellingcat, Meduza, Novaya Gazeta, TV Rain, and others.[32] Additionally, participation in the activities of undesirable organizations and providing them with financial support are subject to criminal prosecution.[33]

Thus, what might appear as positive, from a formal and superficial perspective – such as bans and restrictions on the dissemination of terrorist and extremist views, illegal information contributing to crime, and other related measures – are today being used in Russia to suppress alternative sources of information, serving as tools of censorship.

[28] Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 284.1.

[29] On Measures to Influence Persons Involved in Violations of Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms, the Rights and Freedoms of Citizens of the Russian Federation, Federal Law No. 272-FZ (2012).

[30] Natalya Gluhova. Нежелательная дубина: За первые три месяца 2024-го российские власти признали своими врагами больше организаций, чем за весь 2022-й. “Новая-Европа” показывает, как ужесточили репрессии против медиа и НКО (‘Unwanted’ Club: In the First Three Months of 2024, Russian Authorities Designate More Organizations as Enemies Than in All of 2022. ‘Novaya-Evropa’ Shows How Repressions Against Media and NGOs Have Intensified). 9 April 2024. Novaya Gazeta. Europe. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/04/09/nezhelatelnaia-dubina>.

[31] On mass media art. 4, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2124-1 (1991).

[32] Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. Перечень иностранных и международных неправительственных организаций, деятельность которых признана нежелательной на территории Российской Федерации (List of Foreign and International Non-Governmental Organizations Whose Activities Are Designated as Unwanted in the Russian Federation). <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7756/>.

[33] Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 284.1.

1.3. The Campaign Against “Foreign Agents”

Another legal mechanism for repressing independent media under the pretext of protecting public interest is The Federal Law No. 255-FZ, dated July 14, 2022. Prior to this, there had already been legislation enacted in 2012 concerning foreign agents^[34] According to the strategically vague definition of this law, foreign agents are individuals and organizations receiving support from abroad or simply operating under “foreign influence.” This broad formulation allows the law to be arbitrarily applied against any person or organization at the discretion of the country’s political leadership.

This law imposes a number of obligations on “foreign agents.”^[35] These include expanded requirements for providing the government with financial and statistical reports, as well as reports on the foreign agent’s activities. Interestingly, according to this law, an individual or entity that qualifies as a foreign agent is required to self-declare to the government and request inclusion in the register of foreign agents. Failure to fulfill this obligation results in administrative and criminal liability.^[36] Thus, this law can serve as an entirely arbitrary basis for prosecution against journalists and the media – simply by claiming that an individual or organization “under foreign influence” failed to report themselves as required, thereby violating the foreign agents’ law and subjecting themselves to prosecution.

Another obligation for foreign agents is the requirement to label any materials they publish in a specific way which details their inclusion in the register^[37]. This legal requirement applies not only to foreign agents themselves but also to any third parties wishing to distribute material from a foreign agent.^[38] Failure to comply with this requirement also results in administrative and criminal liability.^[39]

[34] On Amending Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of Non-Commercial organizations Performing the Functions of Foreign Agents, Federal Law No. 121-FZ (2012).

[35] On Control over the Activities of Persons under Foreign Influence art. 9, Federal Law No. 255-FZ (2022).

[36] Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences art. 19.34; Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 330.1.

[37] On Control over the Activities of Persons under Foreign Influence art. 9, Federal Law No. 255-FZ (2022).

[38] RosBusinessConsulting. (2023). Третьих лиц начнут штрафовать на ₽ 500 тыс. за упоминание иноагентов (Third Parties to Face ₽ 500,000 Fines for Mentioning Foreign Agents). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/23/11/2023/655f65169a79474b9558f4c0>.

[39] Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences art. 19.34; Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 330.1.

The consequence of recognizing any media outlet as a foreign agent is also a decrease in the public's trust in that media, as supposedly intended by the country's leadership. In November 2023, the Levada Center conducted a sociological study on the perception of foreign agents, revealing that 52% of respondents believed the law aimed to limit the negative influence of the West on Russia, while only 24% saw it as merely a tool for political repression.[40] In September 2023, the pro-government organization VCIOM also conducted a survey, finding that 71% of respondents had negative associations with the term "foreign agent." When asked who foreign agents are, 61% of respondents answered, "traitors who spread lies about our country for money from hostile nations." [41]

Additionally, in March 2024, a law was passed prohibiting commercial advertising by foreign agents, which for many was the only source of livelihood and continuation of activities.[42] As a result, several independent media outlets have ceased to exist, while others have significantly reduced their activity.[43]

Russian authorities have designated many major independent media outlets as foreign agents, including Mediazona, Meduza, The Insider, TV Rain, The Bell, The Moscow Times, and others. As of July 2024, more than 800 people and organizations are designated as foreign agents in total.[44]

1.4. The Ukraine Invasion and the Emergence of Military Censorship

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the resulting need to tighten control over the media space has led to additional repressive measures against independent media. Instead of utilizing the existing wartime control mechanisms within Russian legislation[45] (which would have required acknowledging the existence of wartime conditions and, consequently, the fact of war – a fact vehemently denied by the Russian leadership[46]), the Russian government introduced new administrative and criminal offenses to control the information field.

[40] Levada Center. (2023). Массовое восприятие иностранных агентов: Ноябрь 2023 (Public Perception of Foreign Agents: November 2023). <https://www.levada.ru/2023/12/12/massovoe-vospriyatie-inostrannyh-agentov-noyabr-2023/>.

[41] Emilia Gabdullina. Агентские проценты: ВЦИОМ заметил ухудшение отношения россиян к иноагентам (Agent Percentages: VCIOM Notes Decline in Russians' Attitude Towards Foreign Agents). 27 September 2023. Kommersant. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6238354>.

[42] On Amending Article 11 of the Federal Law 'On Control of Activities of Individuals Under Foreign Influence' and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation, Federal Law No. 42-FZ (2024).

[43] Asya Miller and Aleksey Voloshinov. Госдума РФ оставила "иностранных агентов" без рекламы (State Duma of the Russian Federation 'Leaves Foreign Agents' Without Advertising). 3 March 2024. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru/gosduma-rf-ostavila-inostrannyh-agentov-bez-reklamy/a-68415292>.

[44] Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. (2024). Реестр иностранных агентов по состоянию на 19.07.2024 (Register of Foreign Agents as of July 19, 2024). <https://minjust.gov.ru/uploaded/files/reestr-inostrannyih-agentov-19072024.pdf>.

[45] On Martial Law, Federal Constitutional Law No. 1-FKZ (2002).

[46] RosBusinessConsulting. (2022). Генпрокуратура объяснила запрет на использование слова "война" в СМИ (Prosecutor General Explains Ban on Using the Word 'War' in Media). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/07/2022/62d952339a7947e78507a3ce>.

The most detrimental change for the media involves the introduction of two new criminal offenses into the Russian Criminal Code. The first offense concerns public actions aimed at discrediting the actions of state authorities, particularly with regard to the armed forces.[47] The maximum punishment for such actions is imprisonment for up to 5 years. If these actions have serious consequences (such as mass unrest or disruption of the functioning of strategically important industries, communications, social infrastructure, etc.), the maximum penalty increases to 7 years. The non-aggravated offense (which does not involve serious consequences) has an administrative prejudice clause – criminal proceedings under this article can only be initiated against a person who has previously been held accountable for a similar violation under the more lenient article of the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences.[48]

The second new criminal offense is regarding the dissemination of known false information about the armed forces, and is punishable by up to 5 years of imprisonment.[49] If these actions are committed using an official position, by a group of persons, with “artificial creation of evidence for the accusation,” or for selfish motives, the punishment increases to up to 10 years of imprisonment. If there are severe consequences, the maximum penalty rises to 15 years. Unlike the first offense, this one does not have an administrative prejudice clause.

Both new offenses are colloquially referred to as the “discreditation article” and the “fake news article.” The first offense has been widely used by the country’s political leadership to persecute anti-war activists and generally intimidate the population. Law enforcement practices include cases of prosecution for the combination of yellow and blue colors in manicures,[50] clothing,[51] interiors/exterior,[52] “tacit support for the protest,”[53] the phrase “no to war,”[54] and even for merely using the word “war.”[55] All these actions, according to the legal practice, “discredit” the Armed Forces of the country. It is noteworthy that public statements referring to the Sixth Commandment – “Thou shalt not kill” – are considered by Russian authorities as acts of discrediting the Russian military as well.[56] For the first time in many centuries, people in Russia are being persecuted for openly displaying their religious beliefs.

[47] Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 280.3.

[48] Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences art. 20.3.3.

[49] Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 207.3.

[50] Aleksandra Ivanova. Маникюр и желто-голубые кроссовки: за что задерживают в РФ (Manicure and Yellow-Blue Sneakers: What Gets You Detained in Russia). 27 April 2024. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru/manikjur-i-zhelto-golubye-krossovki-za-chto-zaderzhivajut-v-rf/a-61600271>.

[51] Maksim Sablin. Baza: 9 мая двух москвичей задержали по статье о дискредитации армии за желто-синюю одежду (Baza: On May 9, Two Moscow Residents Detained Under Article for Discrediting the Army for Wearing Yellow-Blue Clothing). 10 May 2023. Afisha Daily. <https://daily.afisha.ru/news/75861-baza-9-maya-dvuh-moskvichey-zaderzhali-po-state-o-diskreditacii-armii-za-zhelto-sinyuyu-odezhdu/>.

[52] Timofey Pnin. Деукраинизация песочницы. Как в России борются с синим и желтым (De-Ukrainization of the Sandbox: How Russia Fights Against Blue and Yellow). 26 April 2022. Mediazona. <https://zona.media/article/2022/04/26/colors>.

[53] OVD-Info. (2022). Я выступаю против войны. Насколько это опасно? (I Oppose the War: How Dangerous Is This?). <https://ovdinfo.legal/instruction/ya-vystupayu-protiv-voyny-naskolko-eto-opasno#1>.

[54] BBC News Russian. (2022). “Нет войне”: как в России наказывают за пацифистские надписи (‘No to War’: How Russia Punishes Pacifist Slogans). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60926083>.

[55] BBC News Russian. (2022). Прокуратура объяснила, почему в России запрещено слово “война”. Это убедительно? (Prosecutor’s Office Explains Why the Word ‘War’ Is Banned in Russia: Is It Convincing?). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-62248490>.

[56] Aleksandr Soldatov. Божественная дискредитация: Как трансформировалась заповедь “Не убий” за века христианства (Divine Discrediting: How the Commandment ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’ Has Transformed Over Centuries of Christianity). 24 November 2022. Novaya Gazeta. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/11/24/bozhestvennaia-diskreditatsiia-media>.

Even during the Soviet era, when the state endorsed militant atheism, believers and religious figures were persecuted for “participating in counter-revolutionary organizations,” but not for acts of religiosity themselves. This is particularly surprising given that the Orthodox faith is one of the cornerstones of the current ideology promoted by the Kremlin.[57] This article has also been used multiple times against journalists. For example, journalist Andrei Soldatov was prosecuted for “discreditation” after publishing material about the National Guard troops’ unpreparedness for combat operations.[58] Being an internal security force, this branch was not meant to participate in armed conflicts and suffered massive losses during the first weeks of the war. The Russian Ministry of Justice openly stated that the purpose of this offense is to prevent the spread of certain opinions in the public space.[59]

The second offense, for “spreading fake news,” pertains to actions involving the public dissemination of information that contradicts the official Russian position on the conflict in Ukraine and its progress. As repeatedly asserted by Russian authorities, the only “reliable” source of information about the war are official representatives and state bodies, such as the Russian Ministry of Defense and its regular bulletins.[60] Any information that contradicts the official statements of the Russian leadership – about Russian army losses, the actions of the Armed Forces, war crimes, and so on – is considered “fake news,” and its dissemination is grounds for initiating a criminal case.[61] For example, a media statement about Russian war crimes in Bucha, Irpin, or other Ukrainian cities, not confirmed by Russian officials, would result in a prison sentence of 5 to 10 years.[62]

These criminal offenses are not the only methods of controlling the information space introduced since the beginning of the invasion, but they are the most serious. Since February 2022, the Russian government has initiated 989 criminal cases against anti-war activists and independent journalists, including 313 for “spreading fake news” and 190 for “discrediting the Armed Forces” (as of July 2024).[63]

In addition to criminal prosecution, the Russian authorities have initiated nearly 9,000 administrative offense cases for “discrediting the Armed Forces” and conducted almost 20,000 administrative detentions during protest actions, with independent journalists also among those affected.[64]

[57] Olga Malinova. (2014). “Духовные скрепы” как государственная идеология: Возможности и ограничения (‘Spiritual Foundations’ as State Ideology: Opportunities and Limitations). *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 5. <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/duhovnye-skrepy-kak-gosudarstvennaya-ideologiya/>.

[58] Liliya Yarpagova. Андрей Солдатов – один из первых журналистов, на кого завели дело о “фейках” про войну. Он убежден, что это месть ФСБ (Andrey Soldatov – One of the First Journalists Charged with ‘Fake News’ About the War. He Believes It’s FSB Retaliation). 17 June 2022. *Meduza*. <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/06/17/andrey-soldatov-odin-iz-pervyh-zhurnalistov-na-kogo-zaveli-delo-o-feykhah-pro-voynu-on-ubezhden-chto-eto-mest-fsb-za-publikatsii-o-repressiyah-putina-protiv-spetssluzhby>.

[59] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2022). Минюст разъяснил, как отличать фейки об армии от её дискредитации (Justice Ministry Clarifies How to Distinguish Between Fake News About the Army and Its Discrediting). <https://www.svoboda.org/a/minyust-rf-razyasnil-kak-otlichatj-feyki-ob-armii-ot-eyo-diskreditatsii/31970162.html>.

[60] Roskomnadzor. (2022). Внимание средств массовой информации..., cit.; OVD-Info. (2022). Я выступаю против войны..., cit.

[61] RosBusinessConsulting. (2023). За что суды приговаривали по статье о фейках об армии (Charges Under the Fake News Law: What Courts Have Sentenced For). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/03/2023/640202409a7947e857992894>.

[62] Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 207.3.

[63] OVD-Info. Антивоенные уголовные дела: Уголовные репрессии за антивоенную позицию в России (Anti-War Criminal Cases: Criminal Repressions for Anti-War Stance in Russia). <https://repression.info/ru/articles/207.3-pt-1>.

[64] OVD-Info. (2024). Сводка антивоенных репрессий. Два года полномасштабного вторжения России в Украину. Февраль 2024 (Summary of Anti-War Repressions: Two Years of Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine. February 2024). <https://data.ovd.info/svodka-antivoennykh-repressiy-dva-goda-polnomasshtabnogo-vtorzheniya-rossii-v-ukrainu#1>.

Among other things, the Russian government has introduced a criminal offense for calls for sanctions against Russia[65] (with an administrative prejudice clause[66]). For instance, the editor-in-chief of one media outlet was prosecuted under this law for suggesting that the names of Russian officials supporting the war against Ukraine be sent to the “Nuremberg Trials 2.0” Telegram channel, to create a database of such officials.[67]

In total, as calculated by OVD-Info, since the start of the war, Russia has considered and passed 60 repressive laws, of which 12 relate to foreign agents and foreign influence, 10 to freedom of speech, and 5 to internet regulation.[68] This shows that since the start of the war, Russia has made huge efforts to control the public space, leading to a significant deterioration in the level of freedom of speech and the position of independent media in recent years. The laws on military censorship have had an extremely negative impact on journalists, severely restricting their ability to work freely and provide objective coverage of events. Fearing for their freedom, between 1,500 and 1,800 journalists left Russia after the onset of the war with Ukraine.[69] Not just individual journalists, but entire media outlets were forced to relocate and operate from abroad, reasonably believing that continuing their work in Russia would result in substantial prison sentences. Among them are TV Rain, which now operates from the Netherlands, and others.[70]

Relocation destinations of independent Russian media outlets:[71]

City (Country)	Media Outlets
Riga (Latvia)	BBC News Russian, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, The Current Time, Meduza, Novaya Gazeta. Europe, Holod, and others
Vilnius (Lithuania)	Popular Politics, Mediazona, Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s media projects, Helpdesk Media, and others
Tbilisi (Georgia)	Mediazona, The Village, The Bell, Proekt Media, Agents Media, Helpdesk Media, Reuters, Paper Media, SOTA, and others
Prague (Czech Republic)	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, The Current Time, The Insider, and others

Source: Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC) • Created with Datawrapper

[65] Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 284.2.

[66] Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences art. 20.3.4.

[67] OVD-Info. (2022). Я выступаю против войны..., cit.

[68] OVD-Info. (2024). Репрессии на законодательном уровне с начала полномасштабной войны (Legislative Repressions Since the Start of the Full-Scale War). <https://ovd.info/2024/06/24/repressii-na-zakonodatelnom-urovne-s-nachala-polnomasshtabnoy-voyny>.

[69] Reporters Without Borders (RSF). (2024). RSF: более 1500 журналистов покинули Россию после начала полномасштабной войны, им нужна помощь (RSF: Over 1,500 Journalists Left Russia After the Start of the Full-Scale War, They Need Assistance).

[70] Interfax. (2022). Главный редактор “Дождя” решил уехать из России (Editor-in-Chief of ‘Dozhd’ Decides to Leave Russia). <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/825796>.

[71] Yulia Balakhonova, Mikhail Rubin, Roman Badanin, Katya Arenina, and others. Путеводитель по российским медиа времён тотальной цензуры (A Guide to Russian Media in the Era of Total Censorship). 15 August 2022. Proekt Media. <https://www.proekt.media/guide/russian-media-after-war/>.

1.5. Legal Regulation and Censorship of the Internet

In Russia, the practice of blocking internet resources, including websites, blogs, and social media pages of media outlets, is widespread. The general legal justification for restricting access to information, as outlined in the Federal Law “On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection” No. 149-FZ, dated July 27 2006, is the need to “protect the foundations of the constitutional order, morality, health, rights and lawful interests of others, as well as to ensure the defense of the country and security of the state.”[72] This refers to the public order clause mentioned in the Constitution and described earlier in this report. The procedure for blocking internet resources can be either extrajudicial or judicial. Access to websites can be restricted extrajudicially by Roskomnadzor[73] and other executive authorities if the sites or the information they contain, as specified in the Federal Law on Information,[74] fall into the following categories:

- Suicidal content
- Child pornography
- Drug-related content
- Illegal online gambling
- Illegal sale of pharmaceutical drugs
- Involvement of minors in illegal activities
- Illegal sale of alcohol
- Information about minors who have been victims of illegal activities
- Explosives and weapons
- LGBT, pedophilia, gender change
- Personal information about individuals under state protection or protected participants in criminal proceedings
- Violations of election and referendum laws, illegal campaigning[75]
- Tools to bypass blocking measures[76]

[72] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 9, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[73] Roskomnadzor. Блокировка интернет-страниц (Blocking of Internet Pages). <https://rkn.gov.ru/treatments/chasto-zadavaemye-voprosy/blokirovka-internet-stranits/>.

[74] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.1, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[75] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.3-1, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[76] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.8, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

Most of the categories listed above do not raise concerns in the context of censorship and human rights. However, the blocking of any LGBT+ content, information about VPN services, and “information involving minors in illegal activities” clearly constitutes acts of censorship and restrictions on the right to freedom of speech. Regarding the last category, it is important to note that, under current law enforcement practices in the Russian Federation, calls to participate in a protest, which are rarely authorized by the authorities,[77] can be grounds for blocking a site. Even if such a call does not specifically target minors, authorities can block the site under the pretext of involving minors.[78] During some of the largest protests in recent years, organized by Alexei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation, the authorities used narratives about “protesting schoolchildren and drug addicts,” despite these claims clearly not corresponding to reality.[79]

In addition to Roskomnadzor, other executive authorities also have the right, within their competencies, to identify any of the aforementioned categories of information on the Internet and to submit materials to Roskomnadzor, requesting the blocking of the internet resource.[80] These authorities include the Federal Service for Supervision of Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-being (Rospotrebnadzor), the Federal Tax Service, the Federal Bailiff Service, and other executive bodies.



[77] OVD-Info. (2018). The art of ban..., cit.; Amnesty International. (2013). Свобода в опасности: Ограничение свободы выражения мнений, собраний и объединений в России (Freedom at Risk: Restrictions on Freedom of Expression, Assembly, and Association in Russia). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/eur460112013ru.pdf>.

[78] Eduard Futurye. ГП потребовала заблокировать сайты, призывающие детей к участию в митингах (Prosecutor General Demands Blocking of Websites Encouraging Children to Participate in Protests). 29 January 2021. Ridus. <https://www.ridus.ru/gp-potrebovala-zablokirovat-sajty-prizyvayushie-detej-k-uchastiyu-v-mitingah-346434.html>; TASS. (2021). Роскомнадзор сообщил, что соцсети удаляют призывы к детям участвовать в протестах (Roskomnadzor Reports Social Media Removing Calls for Children to Join Protests). <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/10524727>.

[79] Alya Ponomaryova. Кто “гонит детей на улицы”? Сетевые споры об акции 23 января (Who Is ‘Sending Children to the Streets’? Online Debates on the January 23 Protest). 22 January 2021. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/31063205.html>; Valeriy Beresnev and Aleksandr Gavrilenko. “Кто не скачет, тот Медведь”: как Навальный повел школьников на Кремль (‘Who Doesn’t Jump Is a Bear’: How Navalny Led Schoolchildren to the Kremlin). 27 March 2017. BusinessOnline. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/341021/>; Evgeniy Zologar. Помогите спасти детей от извращенцев и наркоманов из штаба Навального (Help Save Children from the Deviants and Drug Addicts of Navalny’s Headquarters). Fishki.NET. <https://m.fishki.net/anti/2322249-pomogite-spasti-detej-ot-izvravencev-i-narkomanov-iz-shtaba-navalnogo.html>; Fyodor Polyakov. Волынец: Навальный обманом выводит школьников на незаконные акции ради своей выгоды (Volynets: Navalny Uses Deception to Coerce Schoolchildren into Illegal Actions for His Own Gain). 31 August 2019. Sovershenno Sekretno. <https://www.sovsekretno.ru/news/volynets-navalny-obmanom-vyvodit-shkolnikov-na-nezakonnye-aktsii-radi-svoey-vygody/>.

[80] On the Unified Automated Information System ‘Unified Register of Domain Names, Website Page Indicators in the Information and Telecommunications Network ‘Internet,’ and Network Addresses for Identifying Websites Containing Information Prohibited for Distribution in the Russian Federation,’ Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 1101 (2024).

Furthermore, the Prosecutor’s Office of Russia also has the authority to make decisions about blocking internet resources. This authority covers sites containing the following types of content:

- Calls for mass riots
- Calls for unauthorized rallies
- Justification and endorsement of extremism
- Distribution of materials from undesirable organizations
- Dissemination of fake information
- Proposals for financial support of an adversary in an armed conflict
- Calls for sanctions against Russia, its citizens, and organizations
- Offers to acquire forged documents[81]
- Disrespect towards authority[82]
- Unauthorized provision of financial services[83]
- Unauthorized collection of religious donations[84]
- Defamation, reputational damage, related to accusations of committing crimes[85]
- Repeated posting of information in violation of the law (all the above points, collectively, even in the absence of current violations)[86]

The Prosecutor’s Office has a wide range of powers that enable significant internet censorship. The restriction on disseminating information about public events conducted in violation of established procedures is part of a repressive mechanism to suppress opposition activities among Russian citizens.[87]

[81] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.3, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[82] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.1-1, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[83] On the Central Bank of the Russian Federation (Bank of Russia) art. 6.2, Federal Law No. 86-FZ (2002).

[84] On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations art. 16, Federal Law No. 125-FZ (1997).

[85] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.1-2, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[86] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.3-2, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[87] OVD-Info. (2018). The art of ban..., cit.

Although Russia has a notification-based system for holding protests, rather than a permit-based system, authorities often refuse to approve protests on formal or sometimes absurd grounds, exploiting gaps and shortcomings in the legal framework. This refusal categorizes the event as “in violation of established procedures,” which, in turn, prohibits public calls for participation. [88] If such measures, including denial of approval and suppression of information in the public sphere, do not achieve the desired outcome, administrative and criminal punitive measures are employed against participants to intimidate and reduce protest potential.[89]

Restrictions on access to information under the categories of “Justification and endorsement of extremism,” “Distribution of materials from undesirable organizations,” and “dissemination of fake information” are also acts of censorship, for reasons previously discussed in this report. The prohibition against “calls for sanctions” and the refusal to allow appeals to foreign and international actors to hold Russia and its officials accountable, or curb certain actions, restrict the ability to publicly manifest a political position antagonistic to the country’s current leadership and its policies. Regarding “disrespect towards authority,” this is often interpreted as criticism of the country’s political leadership and Vladimir Putin personally. This is an expression of the “fusion” of the state and the political regime,[90] a characteristic of some authoritarian states.[91] According to a study by a human rights organization, most of those prosecuted under the administrative article for disrespect towards authority (on the same grounds that the Prosecutor’s Office can block an internet site) were penalized for derogatory statements about the president.[92] Galina Arapova, a leading lawyer and director of the Center for the Protection of Media Rights, believes that this prohibition “significantly limits the bounds of acceptable criticism” towards the country’s leadership.[93]

In 2020, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) criticized the extrajudicial procedure for restricting access to internet resources, calling this measure excessive and pointing out the lack of procedural guarantees for internet resource owners.[94]

[88] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.3, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[89] Code of the Russian Federation Administrative Offences art. 20.2; Criminal Code of the Russian Federation art. 212.1.

[90] Mikhail Rostovskiy. “Россия – это Путин”: политические последствия 87% президента (‘Russia is Putin’: Political Consequences of the President’s 87% Approval Rating). 17 March 2024. MK.RU. <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2024/03/17/rossiya-eto-putin-politicheskie-posledstviya-87-prezidenta.html>; TASS. (2017). Володин подтвердил свой тезис о том, что “нет Путина – нет России” (Volodin Confirms His Thesis That ‘Without Putin, There Is No Russia’). <https://tass.ru/politika/4658232>.

[91] Dmitriy Olshanskiy. (2002). Вожди и лидеры. Вождизм (Leaders and Chiefs: The Cult of Leadership). Psyfactor.org. <https://psyfactor.org/lib/liider6.htm>.

[92] Roskomsvoboda. (2020). Сто недругов власти: кого и как наказывают за неуважение в Сети (One Hundred Enemies of the Authorities: Who and How They Are Punished for Disrespect Online). <https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/post/sto-nedrugov-vlasti-kogo-i-kak-nakazyiv/>.

[93] Center for the Protection of Media Rights Foundation. (2021). Зачем в России был принят “закон о неуважении к власти” и как он работает (Why Russia Passed the ‘Disrespect for Authority’ Law and How It Works). <https://mmdc.ru/blog/2021/07/20/zachem-v-rossii-byi-prinyat-zakon-o-neuvazhenii-k-vlasti-i-kak-on-rabotaet/>.

[94] Zinaida Pavlova. ЕСПЧ посчитал, что норма о внесудебной блокировке сайтов не соответствует качеству закона (ECHR Rules that Extrajudicial Website Blocking Norm Fails to Meet Quality Standards). 29 June 2020. Advokatskaya Gazeta. <https://www.advgazeta.ru/novosti/espch-poschital-chto-norma-o-vnesudebnoy-blokirovke-saytov-ne-sootvetstvuet-kachestvu-zakona/>.

Internet sites can be blocked through judicial procedures if they contain information related to the following categories:

- Information resource of a foreign agent[95]
- Violation of copyright and related rights[96]
- Repeated violation of copyright and related rights (cumulative, in the absence of current violations)[97]
- Violation of personal data legislation[98]
- “Other information at the discretion of the court”[99]

The ability to block access to internet resources labeled as foreign agents is evidently a censorship tool due to the repressive nature of the law itself and its arbitrary enforcement, as previously mentioned in this report. The capacity to block “other information at the discretion of the court” also presents a clear censorship risk, due to the absence of a fair and independent judicial system in Russia, allowing for potential political manipulation of judicial decisions.[100] Even when the decision to restrict access is made by another executive authority or based on a court ruling, the actual implementation of the block is the responsibility of Roskomnadzor (apart from cases involving intervention by the Federal Security Service (FSB), which can directly contact the domain name registrar).[101] This service manages the registry of internet sites blocked within the Russian Federation and operates the technical measures used for blocking.[102]

Despite the extensive range of justifications for blocking undesirable government websites, there are frequent instances of “silent censorship” online, including the censorship of media outlets.[103] This refers to the restriction of access to an internet resource without any notification or explanation from the controlling authority.

[95] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.9, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[96] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.2, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[97] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.6, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[98] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.5, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[99] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.1, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[100] Maryana Torocheshnikova. Что не так с российским правосудием (What’s Wrong with Russian Justice). 12 November 2019. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30266219.html>; Viktor Burobin. Адвокаты не идут в судьи, потому что в России нет запроса на независимое правосудие (Lawyers Don’t Become Judges Because There Is No Demand for Independent Justice in Russia). 19 December 2018. Advokatskaya Gazeta. <https://www.advgazeta.ru/mneniya/advokaty-ne-idut-v-sudii-potomu-chto-v-rossii-net-zaprosa-na-nezavisimoe-pravosudie/>; Meduza. (2023). “Это пока не Большой террор. Но это сталинская логика.” Россию накрыла волна политических дел. Оппонентов власти сажают на невыносимые сроки. Неужели «новые массовые репрессии» все-таки начались? (‘This Is Not Yet the Great Terror, But It’s Stalinist Logic.’ Russia Hit by Wave of Political Cases. Opponents Are Given Unthinkable Sentences. Are ‘New Mass Repressions’ Really Beginning?). <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/04/13/eto-poka-ne-bolshoy-terror-no-eto-stalinskaya-logika>.

[101] TAdviser. (2024). Блокировка сайтов и приложений в России (Website and App Blocking in Russia).

[102] On the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 228 (2009).

[103] Roskomsvoboda. (2019). Роскомнадзор цензурирует СМИ в немом режиме (Roskomnadzor Censors Media in Silent Mode).

<https://roskomsvoboda.org/ru/post/roskomnadzor-tsenzuriuet-smi-v-nemom/>; Roskomsvoboda. (2022). Непрозрачность и беззаконие: под военную цензуру попали 9300 интернет-ресурсов (Opacity and Lawlessness: 9,300 Internet Resources Subject to Military Censorship). <https://roskomsvoboda.org/ru/post/voyennaya-cenzura-god-2022/>.

1.6. Final Conclusions on Legal Regulation

This section provides a brief overview of the legal mechanisms directly and indirectly regulating the activities of the media and sometimes aimed at repressing independent journalists and media outlets. However, when discussing the legal status and protection of journalists in Russia, it is important to remember that, adhering to the basic principles of a “dictatorship of spin,” the Russian authorities frequently employ various other legal mechanisms for repressing media and individual journalists, disguising them as legitimate measures, such as those aimed at combating crime.

A notable example is the case of Ivan Golunov, a journalist with the investigative department of Meduza. In June 2019, he was detained by law enforcement officers in Moscow, who planted drugs on him and initiated a criminal case accusing him of attempting to distribute narcotics in large quantities.[104] Neither the journalism community nor the public believed these charges,[105] and a large-scale campaign was launched in support of Golunov.[106] Under public pressure, the case was closed,[107] and the police officers who planted the drugs were held accountable.[108] There were suggestions that this was retaliation for his professional work, as Golunov was detained en route to a meeting with one of his informants.[109] Independent research indicates that such methods are not uncommon in the Russian context.[110] Another example is the case of Evan Gershkovich, who was sentenced by a Russian court in July 2024 to 16 years in a high-security prison for espionage.[111] The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has deemed these actions by the Russian authorities as punishment for Gershkovich’s work covering the military conflict. On August 1st, 2024, Evan and 15 other political prisoners were released by Russian authorities in exchange for the freedom of their agents held in various European countries and the United States.[112]

[104] OVD-Info. (2019). В Москве задержали корреспондента «Медузы». Он рассказал, что ему подкинули наркотики (In Moscow, Meduza Correspondent Detained: He Claims Drugs Were Planting on Him). <https://ovd.info/express-news/2019/06/07/v-moskve-zaderzhali-korrespondenta-meduzu-rasskazal-chto-emu-podkinuli>.

[105] Alya Ponomaryova. “Кристалльно чистое зло”. Журналисты о задержании Ивана Голунова (“Crystal Clear Evil”: Journalists on the Detention of Ivan Golunov). 7 June 2019. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29986503.html>.

[106] Mariya Kiselyova. Марш в поддержку Голунова стал самым крупным несогласованным протестом года в Москве. Как это было (March in Support of Golunov Becomes Largest Unauthorised Protest of the Year in Moscow: How It Happened). 12 June 2019. BBC News Russian. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-48613544>.

[107] OVD-Info. (2019). МВД: дело Ивана Голунова прекращено (Interior Ministry: Ivan Golunov’s Case Dropped). <https://ovd.info/express-news/2019/06/11/mvd-delo-ivana-golunova-prekrascheno>.

[108] OVD-Info. (2019). Против полицейских, которые участвовали в задержании Ивана Голунова, возбудили уголовное дело (Criminal Case Opened Against Police Officers Involved in Ivan Golunov’s Detention). <https://ovd.info/express-news/2019/07/17/protiv-policeyskikh-kotorye-uchastvovali-v-zaderzhanii-ivana-golunova>.

[109] Alya Ponomaryova. “Кристалльно чистое зло”..., cit.

[110] Olga Romanova. Мы Иван Голунов. Как фабрикут дела о наркопреступлениях (We Are Ivan Golunov: How Drug Cases Are Fabricated). 10 June 2019. Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. <https://rus.err.ee/1609401367/sud-rf-prigovoril-zhurnalista-wsj-jevana-gershkovicha-k-16-godam-kolonii-strogogo-rezhima>.

[111] Valentin Ponomaryovskiy. Суд РФ приговорил журналиста WSJ Эвана Гершковича к 16 годам колонии строгого режима (Russian Court Sentences WSJ Journalist Evan Gershkovich to 16 Years in a Strict Regime Penal Colony). 19 July 2024. EER.EE.

<https://rus.err.ee/1609401367/sud-rf-prigovoril-zhurnalista-wsj-jevana-gershkovicha-k-16-godam-kolonii-strogogo-rezhima>

[112] The Insider. (2024). Russia exchanges spies for political prisoners: Gershkovich, Kara-Murza, Whelan, Yashin, Kurmasheva, Chanysheva, Orlov released. <https://theins.ru/en/news/273542>.

Not always, as the cases of Ivan Golunov and Evan Gershkovich show, are the Russian authorities able to achieve their objectives through the fabrication of criminal cases. Sometimes, to ensure their goals are met, they resort to the most radical methods of dealing with independent journalists. For instance, in 2018, three Russian journalists who were preparing a report on the activities of the Wagner Group in local gold mines in the Central African Republic were killed. The official version is robbery, despite the fact that the personal belongings of the victims were left untouched.^[113] In 2009, Natalia Estemirova, a journalist and human rights activist with the Memorial Center, was abducted from her home in Grozny. Her body, with multiple gunshot wounds, was later found beside a road in a neighboring region. The case remains unsolved.^[114] In 2006, Anna Politkovskaya, a journalist with Novaya Gazeta, was murdered. She was working on reports about corruption and the conflict in Chechnya. This case, too, remains unsolved (only perpetrators identified, not the planners).^[115] These are just a few of the most high-profile cases of journalist murders in Russia that are widely known. The connected characteristic of all such cases is the suspicious reluctance of Russian law enforcement agencies to conduct a proper investigation.

Russian officials,^[116] oligarchs,^[117] and government agencies^[118] also extensively use civil law mechanisms to pressure independent journalists. It is not uncommon for lawsuits to be filed demanding the removal of specific information or changes in phrasing, under the pretext of protecting honor and dignity. Courts loyal to the political leadership often rule against journalists. In some cases, lawsuits have reached the European Court of Human Rights,^[119] which has sided with the journalists. However, since 2022, Russian journalists have had no access to this judicial body.

[113] Marina Sovina. Раскрыты подробности убийства российских журналистов в ЦАР в 2018 году (Details Revealed of the Murder of Russian Journalists in the CAR in 2018). 20 January 2022. Lenta.ru. <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/01/20/syria/>.

[114] Aleksey Aleksandrov. "Ее похитили, пока я спала". Интервью с дочерью чеченской правозащитницы Натальи Эстемировой, убитой десять лет назад ("She Was Abducted While I Was Sleeping": Interview with the Daughter of Chechen Human Rights Defender Natalya Estemirova, Killed Ten Years Ago). 15 July 2019. The Current Time. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/lana-estemirova-interview/30055699.html>.

[115] Darya Pashchenko. Самые громкие убийства журналистов в современной России (Most Notorious Journalist Murders in Modern Russia). 17 February 2024. Diletant. <https://diletant.media/articles/37700782/>.

[116] Center for the Protection of Media Rights Foundation. База данных российской судебной практики по информационному праву (Database of Russian Judicial Practice on Information Law). <https://media-pravo.info/case>.

[117] Interfax. (2017). Усманов подал иск против Навального и ФБК (Usmanov Files Lawsuit Against Navalny and FBK).

<https://www.interfax.ru/russia/558223>; Reporters Without Borders (RSF). (2020). Евгений Пригожин подал новый иск против юриста ФБК Любови Соболю (Evgeniy Prigozhin Files New LawsUIT Against FBK Lawyer Lyubov Sobol).

[118] Moscow Union of Journalists. ФСБ России подала иск к "Новой газете" (FSB Files Lawsuit Against Novaya Gazeta). <https://ujmos.ru/fsb-rossii-podala-isk-k-novoj-gazete/>.

[119] Zinaida Pavlova. ЕСПЧ вновь защитил право СМИ критиковать власть и давать оценку ее действиям (ECHR Reaffirms Media's Right to Criticize Authorities and Evaluate Their Actions). 8 October 2018. Advokat'skaya Gazeta. <https://www.advogazeta.ru/novosti/espch-vnov-zashchitil-pravo-smi-kritikovat-vlast-i-davat-otsenku-ee-deystviyam/>.

Thus, a superficial examination of the formal media regulations within Russia's Constitution and laws provides only a limited understanding of the legal status and protection level of independent journalists and media in the country. On the surface, these legal frameworks may appear quite robust and aligned with international media regulation standards. However, a deeper look reveals extensive interpretations of laws that restrict freedom of speech, blatant distortions of constitutional provisions that justify censorship, fabrication of criminal cases to create a facade of legality for repressive actions against journalists, and even attacks on the lives of independent journalists even without recourse for justice for their families.

The entire legal system in Russia, in the context of media regulation, is distorted and under the complete control of the country's authoritarian leadership. Addressing this situation goes beyond the scope of this report, but several steps are evident: restoring the constitutional balance of power, freeing the judiciary from executive control, and repealing the blatantly repressive laws, particularly those enacted to build up military censorship in recent years.



2. Regulatory Authorities

2.1. Overview of Regulatory Bodies

From a formal perspective, media policy in the Russian Federation, encompassing everything from the licensing of media outlets to the protection of personal data, is administered by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, commonly known as Roskomnadzor.[120] This relatively small government agency, with approximately 3,500 administrative staff, commands a significant budget: in 2023, Roskomnadzor's budget amounted to \$346 million USD[121].[122]

The powers of this agency are extremely extensive; the section detailing them in the Government Decree regulating Roskomnadzor's activities and powers contains approximately 35,000 characters. However, the most significant of these powers include the registration and licensing of media outlets, supervision of media activities, management of the national domain name system, administration of the system restricting access to certain internet services, oversight of copyright compliance, regulation of postal and electronic communications, monitoring the legality of personal data processing, and numerous others.[123]

Roskomnadzor, to a significant extent, acts as a technical conduit for media policy, with the strategic core of this policy residing in the Kremlin – within the Administration of the President of Russia. Initially a clerical and auxiliary body for the head of state, over time, the Administration has gained increasing power in line with the expanding authority of President Putin.[124]

[120] On the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 228 (2009).

[121] According to the exchange rate of the Central Bank of Russia as of December 30, 2023

[122] Roskomnadzor. (2024). Отчет об исполнении федерального бюджета за 2023 год Федеральной службы по надзору в сфере связи, информационных технологий и массовых коммуникаций (Report on the Execution of the Federal Budget for 2023 by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media). https://rkn.gov.ru/docs/doc_3847.pdf.

[123] On the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 228 (2009).

[124] Andrey Pertsev. "Источник в Кремле рассказал", "собеседник в ОП отметил" – а кто это вообще такие? И чем они занимаются? Андрей Перцев отвечает на стыдные вопросы об администрации президента России ('Source in the Kremlin Revealed,' 'Interviewee in the Presidential Administration Noted' – Who Are These People? And What Do They Do? Andrey Pertsev Answers Embarrassing Questions About the Russian Presidential Administration). 2 November 2020. Meduza. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/11/02/istochnik-v-kremle-rasskazal-sobesednik-v-op-otmetil-a-kto-eto-voobsche-takie-i-chem-oni-zanimayutsya>.

For instance, consider Roskomnadzor's role in restricting access to internet sites and services. As of July 2024, Roskomnadzor has blocked 125,000 services (out of 700,000; decisions regarding the remaining ones were made by other government bodies such as the General Prosecutor's Office, courts, tax authorities, and others). [125] It is difficult to assume that every decision about each service was made directly by the Presidential Administration. However, the Administration sets the direction for Roskomnadzor's activities, defining the criteria for blocking services [126] and, in certain cases, intervening to instruct Roskomnadzor to either block or unblock a service. [127]

Under Kremlin orders, Roskomnadzor also performs a range of covert tasks that are not explicitly defined by law and may even contravene legal norms. [128] For example, Roskomnadzor has established an enterprise called the "Main Radio Frequency Centre," which, according to its website, is tasked with ensuring the proper use of radio frequencies. However, journalists have uncovered that the true purpose of this center is to monitor online publications about the current regime and President Putin personally. The center's staff analyzes everything from major global media publications to posts in anonymous Telegram channels, assessing social tensions, protest activity, and tracking negative publications. The center submits monthly reports on the current state of affairs to the Presidential Administration. [129]

In the list of Russian government bodies involved in media policy, one could also mention the General Prosecutor's Office, which has the authority to designate certain media outlets as undesirable organizations, [130] and the Ministry of Justice, which labels journalists and media outlets as foreign agents, [131] as discussed in the previous section. However, it is largely redundant to focus on these agencies, as they too primarily perform technical functions. The real decision-making power regarding which media outlets are permitted to operate in Russia, and which are not, resides with the officials in the Presidential Administration. [132]

[125] Roskomsvoboda. Статистика блокировок (Statistics on Blockings). <https://reestr.rublacklist.net/ru/statistics/>.

[126] Andrey Loshak. История рунета. Новости-282: блокировки и китайский путь (History of Runet. News-282: Blockings and the Chinese Model). 23 October 2019. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30232388.html>.

[127] The Insider. (2021). "Решение о блокировке YouTube не техническое или правовое, его будет принимать администрация президента" – сооснователь "Роскомсвободы" ('The Decision to Block YouTube Is Not Technical or Legal; It Will Be Made by the Presidential Administration' – Co-Founder of Roskomsvoboda). <https://theins.ru/news/240220>; RosBusinessConsulting. (2020). Почему власти решили разблокировать Telegram. Главное (Why Authorities Decided to Unblock Telegram: Key Points). https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/18/06/2020/5ee211609a79473d9eccbc4c; The Insider. (2015). Современная история российской политики, рассказанная в СМС. Часть I (The Modern Story of Russian Politics, Told Through Text Messages. Part I).

<https://theins.ru/politika/5463>; The Insider (2015). Современная история российской политики, рассказанная в СМС. Часть IV (The Modern Story of Russian Politics, Told Through Text Messages. Part IV). <https://theins.ru/politika/6015>.

[128] Agentstvo. (2023). Крупнейший взлом российской цензуры: как она охраняет здоровье Путина, помогает Навке, заводит досье на журналистов и разводит ботов (Biggest Hack of Russian Censorship: How It Protects Putin's Health, Assists Navka, Builds Files on Journalists, and Manages Bots). <https://www.agents.media/tsenzura/>.

[129] Katya Bonch-Osmolovskaya, Irina Dolinina, Polina Uzhvak, Alesya Marokhovskaya, Sonya Savina, & Anastasiya Korotkova. Как Роскомнадзор власть Путина бережет (How Roskomnadzor Protects Putin's Power). Vazhnye istorii. <https://istories.media/stories/2023/02/08/kak-roskomnadzor-vlast-putina-berezhet/>.

[130] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2024). "Им уже все равно". Радио Свобода стало "нежелательной организацией" ('They Don't Care Anymore': Radio Liberty Designated an 'Unwanted Organization'). <https://www.svoboda.org/a/im-uzhe-vse-ravno-radio-svoboda-stalo-nezhelatelnoy-organizatsiyey-/32828021.html>.

[131] BBC News Russian. (2022). Реестр для "массовых репрессий". Почему в России станет больше "иноагентов" (Register for 'Mass Repressions': Why There Will Be More 'Foreign Agents' in Russia). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-63814398>.

[132] Mikhail Rubin, Maria Zholobova, & Roman Badanin. Master of Puppets. Portrait of Aleksey Gromov, Head of Russian State Propaganda. 23 January 2019. Proekt. <https://www.proekt.media/portrait/aleksey-gromov/>.

It is within the Administration that the rules of the game for journalists are established, determining the benefits available to compliant media and the existential threats that await those who violate these rules. Using a carrot and stick approach conducted through behind-the-scenes agreements, high-ranking officials in the Administration control the media landscape, imposing censorship and propaganda. This control is exercised through the dissemination of directives on the proper coverage of events,[133] vetoing the coverage of certain topics,[134] interfering in the appointment of media managing editors,[135] and even sanctioning the takeover of well-known but defiant media outlets by individuals close to the Administration.[136]

For comparison, consider the cases of two Russian television channels: Rain and RT. Journalists at Rain aimed to maintain an objective stance and deliver information in accordance with journalistic ethics.[137] In contrast, RT staff consistently followed the directives of Russian authorities, promoting propagandistic narratives both within Russia and beyond its borders.[138]

TV Rain, one of the largest and most influential Russian opposition media outlets, was established in 2010.[139] In 2012, during Russia's transition to digital terrestrial broadcasting, TV Rain was a frontrunner for acquiring "federal status" – which would have included the channel in the package of mandatory, publicly accessible digital TV channels with nationwide coverage, ensuring free access for Russian citizens.[140] In the end, TV Rain was denied federal status. A member of the selection committee stated that the channel "presents an overly pessimistic view of events in Ukraine." [141] Instead of TV Rain, federal status was granted to TV Spas, which later faced sanctions from the European Union for spreading propaganda and justifying the war.[142]

[133] Aleksey Aleksandrov. Как работают методички Кремля для госСМИ, объясняет спецкор "Медузы" Андрей Перцев (How the Kremlin's Guidelines for State Media Work, Explained by Meduza Special Correspondent Andrey Pertsev). 10 May 2023. The Current Time. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/kak-rabotayut-metodichki-kremlya-dlya-gossmi/32404338.html>.

[134] Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angelica Evans, Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, & Frederick W. Kagan. Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment. 2 August 2023. Institute for the Study of War. <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-2-2023>.

[135] The Bell. (2018). Почему Life.ru и Mash в один день остались без руководителей, при чем здесь Навальный и Кремль (Why Life.ru and Mash Lost Their Leaders on the Same Day: The Connection to Navalny and the Kremlin). <https://thebell.io/pochemu-life-ru-i-mash-v-odin-den-ostalis-bez-rukovoditelej-pri-chem-zdes-navalnyj-i-kremli/>; Elizaveta Surganova. Агентство без петухов: как РИА Новости превращалось в "Россию сегодня" (Agency Without Roosters: How RIA Novosti Became 'Rossiya Segodnya'). 10 December 2014. Forbes.ru. <https://www.forbes.ru/kompanii/internet-telekom-i-media/275199-agentstvo-bez-petukhov-kak-ria-novosti-prevrashchalos-v-ros>; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2016). "Репортеры без границ": захват РБК политически мотивирован (Reporters Without Borders: RBC Takeover Politically Motivated). <https://svoboda.org/a/27736907.html>.

[136] Mikhail Sokolov. Захват НТВ (Takeover of NTV). 15 April 2001. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24197943.html>.

[137] Svetlana Astrakhantseva. Отстоять "Дождь" и другие СМИ по силам только нам всем (Defending 'Dozhd' and Other Media Is Up to All of Us). 21 August 2021. Moscow Helsinki Group. <https://moscowhelsinki.group/otstoyat-dozhd-i-drugie-smi-po-silam-tolko-nam-vsem>.

[138] Tom Schaffer. Russia Today: как функционирует инструмент путинской пропаганды (Russia Today: How Putin's Propaganda Tool Functions). 6 December 2016. Lrt.it. <https://www.lrt.it/ru/novosti/17/195742/russia-today-kak-funktsioniruet-instrument-putinskoj-propagandy>.

[139] Darya Gavrilova, Mikhail Kaluzhskiy, Oleg Kashin, & Natalya Rostova. История русских медиа 1989-2011 (History of Russian Media 1989-2011). Afisha Daily. <https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/gorod/archive/mediahistory/>.

[140] Roskomnadzor. (2012). О результатах конкурсов на получение права осуществлять эфирное наземное вещание, с использованием позиции во втором мультиплексе – при осуществлении наземного эфирного цифрового вещания от 14 декабря 2012 г. (On the Results of Competitions for the Right to Conduct Terrestrial Broadcasting Using a Position in the Second Multiplex for Terrestrial Digital Broadcasting as of December 14, 2012). http://www.rsoc.ru/docs/Soboshhenie_o_rezultatakh_k_12_12_ot_14_12_2012.doc.

[141] Inna Smirnova. Телеканал "Дождь" не попал во второй мультиплекс (TV Channel 'Dozhd' Not Included in Second Multiplex). 18 December 2013. Adindex. <https://adindex.ru/news/media/2013/12/18/105230.phtml>.

[142] Amending Decision 2014/145/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, Council Decision (CFSP) No. 2023/2871 (2023).

In 2014, following a scandal amplified by state officials and state-controlled media,[143] TV Rain faced severe pressure from the Prosecutor's Office and Roskomnadzor, leading most satellite and cable operators to disconnect the channel and threatening its very existence.[144] In confidential conversations, representatives of the operators claimed that the order to disconnect TV Rain came directly from the Kremlin.[145] The employees of TV Rain were convinced that the disconnection was politically motivated and had been planned for several months.[146] The channel continued broadcasting on a limited number of platforms, including its own website and YouTube. Around the same time, the landlord of the premises housing the channel's studio terminated the lease without explanation, and many other landlords refused to lease space to the channel.[147] In 2021, TV Rain was designated a foreign agent – marking the first instance in Russian history where a domestic media outlet with no actual foreign involvement was labeled as such.[148] However, the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights found no human rights violations in the decision.[149] In 2022, with the introduction of laws on military censorship and the subsequent blocking of the channel's website by Roskomnadzor, the management of TV Rain decided to cease broadcasting.[150] This decision was driven by concerns for the safety of its journalists and staff in Russia, given the threat of criminal prosecution. A few months later, the team, now relocated, resumed operations outside of Russia.[151] In 2023, TV Rain was designated as an undesirable organization.[152] Now, any financial donations from Russian citizens could result in criminal prosecution against them. Given that since 2013, TV Rain had been experimenting with subscription models in various forms[153] and frequently relied on viewer support as a source of revenue,[154] this decision dealt a severe blow to the channel.

[143] Turan. (2014). Российские власти стремятся отключить "Дождь" (Russian Authorities Aim to Shut Down 'Dozhd'). <https://turan.az/ru/v-mire/rossiiskie-vlasti-stremiatsia-otklucit-dozd>.

[144] Kseniya Boletskaya and Mari Mesropyan. Операторы отключают "Дождь" по всей стране (Operators Shut Down 'Dozhd' Nationwide). 29 January 2014. *Vedomosti*. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/technology/articles/2014/01/29/operatory-otklyuchayut-dozhd-po-vsej-strane>

[145] Tikhon Dzyadko. Triumph of the will: Putin's war against Russia's last independent TV channel. 10 April 2014. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/10/putin-war-dozhd-russias-last-independent-tv-channel>.

[146] Luke Harding. Russian news channel TV Rain may close after main carrier pulls plug. 4 February 2014. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/04/russian-news-channel-tv-rain>.

[147] Vesti.ru. (2014). "Красный Октябрь" выгоняет "Дождь" ('Red October' Evicts 'Dozhd'). <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1822186>.

[148] RosBusinessConsulting. (2021). Минюст внес телеканал "Дождь" и "Важные истории" в список иноагентов (Justice Ministry Adds TV Channel 'Dozhd' and 'Important Stories' to List of Foreign Agents). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/08/2021/611fc5639a7947029040d854>.

[149] Violetta Khaneneva. В СПЧ не увидели нарушений во включении "Дождя" в реестр иноагентов (Human Rights Council Sees No Violations in Adding 'Dozhd' to Foreign Agents Registry). 23 August 2021. *Gazeta.ru*. https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2021/08/23/n_16421684.shtml.

[150] RosBusinessConsulting. (2022). Телеканал "Дождь" временно приостановил работу после блокировки (TV Channel 'Dozhd' Temporarily Suspends Operations After Blocking). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/03/2022/6220cdcd9a7947b0eb09f135>.

[151] Rus.LSM.lv. (2022). Телеканал "Дождь" вернулся в эфир – вещает из Риги (TV Channel 'Dozhd' Returns to Air – Broadcasting from Riga). <https://rus.lsm.lv/statja/novosti/obschestvo/18.07.2022-telekanal-dozd-vernulsya-v-efir-veshhaet-iz-rigi.a465891/>.

[152] BBC News Russian. (2023). "Дождь" признали нежелательной организацией в России ('Dozhd' Designated an Unwanted Organization in Russia). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cy6y5nxy7vdo>.

[153] Forbes.ru. (2013). Телеканал "Дождь" вводит платный доступ к онлайн-трансляциям (TV Channel 'Dozhd' Introduces Paid Access to Online Streams). <https://www.forbes.ru/news/238146-telekanal-dozhd-vvodit-platnyi-dostup-k-onlain-translyatsiyam>.

[154] *Vedomosti*. (2014). Телеканал "Дождь" проведет сбор денег на вещание (TV Channel 'Dozhd' to Fundraise for Broadcasting). <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/news/2014/03/13/telekanal-dozhd-provedet-sbor-deneg-na-veschanie>; Interfax. (2019).

Телеканал "Дождь" раскрыл доходы от контрактов с Евросоюзом (TV Channel 'Dozhd' Reveals Revenue from EU Contracts). <https://www.interfax.ru/business/673552>.

At the same time, Russia Today (RT), established in 2005, has never engaged in opposition activities.[155] On the contrary, this channel serves as one of the primary conduits for Kremlin propaganda.[156] A substantial influx of state resources has enabled RT to establish offices and commence broadcasting in numerous foreign countries, including the USA and several European nations. In 2022, of the \$1.2 billion USD allocated by the Russian government for media funding, \$400 million USD[157] were allocated to RT.[158]

According to an investigation by the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) led by Alexei Navalny, the loyalty of RT's leadership has been consistently rewarded by the Kremlin. Margarita Simonyan, the channel's editor-in-chief since its inception, along with her husband, Tigran Keosayan, have not only had access to the channel's resources, but have also been able to generate income through intermediary services between state advertisers and RT.[159] These include Aeroflot, the FSB Charity Foundation, the Skolkovo Foundation, and others. Margarita Simonyan, Tigran Keosayan, and several of their relatives were also involved in the production of the propaganda film "Crimean Bridge. Made with Love!" The government allocated approximately \$1.4 million USD for the film's production, of which nearly half, \$660 thousand USD[160], was embezzled through corruption schemes.[161] Despite widespread reporting of this fact, it received no attention from the Kremlin or law enforcement agencies. In 2020, FBK released an investigation into the Simonyan and Keosayan family, revealing that their income over just three years amounted to \$9.7 million USD[162].[163]

While one media outlet faces significant restrictions and sometimes threats to its existence, the other receives substantial privileges from the state. This method of controlling the media landscape is highly effective. Even when interference from the Presidential Administration is exposed, no independent media outlets enjoying a high level of trust from the public, or with a broad enough reach, exist to relay this information to the majority of Russian citizens. Furthermore, the covert nature of this control makes it extremely difficult for independent journalists and opposition activists to conduct investigations and establish causal links. Consequently, the Russian media market is characterized by a variety of outlets that serve primarily two purposes: to create the illusion of a diverse media environment and to propagate the Kremlin's official narratives.

[155] Lenta.ru. (2005). Имидж России собираются улучшить при помощи нового телеканала (Russia to Improve Its Image with New TV Channel). <https://lenta.ru/news/2005/06/06/channel/>.

[156] Bret Schafer, Peter Benzoni, Kamila Koronska, Richard Rogers, & Kevin Reyes. The Russian Propaganda Nesting Doll: How RT is Layered Into the Digital Information Environment. 30 May 2024. The German Marshall Fund. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russian-propaganda-nesting-doll-how-rt-layered-digital-information-environment>.

[157] According to the exchange rate of the Central Bank of Russia as of December 30, 2022

[158] Meduza. (2021). RT остался лидером по объемам госфинансирования среди СМИ. В 2022 году канал получит почти 29 миллиардов рублей (RT Remains Top Recipient of State Funding Among Media: Channel to Receive Nearly 29 Billion Rubles in 2022).

<https://meduza.io/news/2021/12/23/rt-ostalsya-liderom-po-ob-emam-gosfinansirovaniya-sredi-smi-v-2022-godu-kanal-poluchit-pochti-29-milliardov-rublej>.

[159] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2020). Навальный рассказал о заработках Маргариты Симоньян вне канала RT (Navalny Reveals Margarita Simonyan's Earnings Outside of RT). <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30479412.html>.

[160] According to the exchange rate of the Central Bank of Russia as of December 30, 2018

[161] Mezhdu Strok. (2020). ФБК обвинил Маргариту Симоньян и Тиграна Кеосаяна в присвоении половины выделенных на фильм "Крымский мост" средств (FBK Accuses Margarita Simonyan and Tigran Keosayan of Embezzling Half of the Funds Allocated for the "Crimean Bridge" Film). <https://mstrok.ru/news/fbk-obvinil-margaritu-simonyan-i-tigrana-keosayana-v-prisvoenii-poloviny-vydelennyh-na-film>.

[162] According to the exchange rate of the Central Bank of Russia as of December 30, 2020

[163] Mezhdu Strok. (2020). ФБК рассказал о тайной империи Маргариты Симоньян и Тиграна Кеосаяна (FBK Reveals the Secret Empire of Margarita Simonyan and Tigran Keosayan). <https://mstrok.ru/news/fbk-rasskazal-o-taynoy-imperii-margarity-simonyan-i-tigrana-keosayana>.

Today, most civil society institutions in Russia are under governmental control and serve as conduits for its policies and narratives. The Union of Journalists of Russia, the largest professional association of journalists, has also gradually lost its significance as a civil society institution. While the Union criticized Russian propaganda and freedom of speech restrictions in 2006,[174] By 2017 it was actively criticizing the United States for its “unlawful economic pressure,” “witch hunts,” and “political censorship” in relation to actions against the propaganda channels RT and Sputnik.[175] It is assumed that the Kremlin increased its control over the Union through informal influence on its head, Vsevolod Bogdanov, from 1992 to 2017, who exhibited ambiguous and peculiar behavior on various issues.[176] Formally, this control was augmented following the “modernization” of the Union in 2016,[177] when 11 new members, including high-ranking Russian officials and employees of pro-government media, were added to its secretariat.[178]

Some regional branches of the Union had exhibited independent behavior for a long time,[179] but this situation could not persist without a response from the political leadership. One such branch, in Kazan, was eventually persuaded to align with and integrate into the vertical,[180] while another, in Moscow, was effectively taken over in a near-raider fashion.[181] The original legal entity was dissolved under an invented pretext, and a new regional branch in Moscow loyal to the authorities was created in its place, which no longer had any independent significance.

Another significant civil society institution is the League for Secure Internet. Unlike the Union, the League was initiated by pro-Kremlin oligarch Konstantin Malofeev,[182] who is closely connected to the elites of the Russian Orthodox Church and, therefore, has been under Kremlin control from the outset.

[174] DW. (2006). Союз журналистов РФ: теленовости стали рупором Кремля (Union of Journalists of Russia: TV News Has Become the Kremlin's Megaphone).

[175] Union of Journalists of Russia. (2017). Союз журналистов России выражает крайнюю обеспокоенность в отношении непрекращающегося давления на российские СМИ, работающие за рубежом, в частности телеканал RT и агентство Sputnik (Union of Journalists of Russia Expresses Deep Concern Over Ongoing Pressure on Russian Media Abroad, Specifically RT and Sputnik). https://ruj.ru/news/ruj_statements/soyuz-zhurnalistov-rossii-szhr-vyrazhaet-kraynyuyu-obespokoennost-v-otnoshenii-neprekraashchayushcheg-8764.

[176] Kommersant. (2012). Полный журдом (Total Journochaos). <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1981954>.

[177] Kommersant. (2016). Союз журналистов России будет модернизирован (Union of Journalists of Russia to Be Modernized). <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3063540>.

[178] Kommersant. (2016). Секретарями СЖР стали Анастасия Кашеварова и Анатолий Кузичев (Anastasiya Kashevarova and Anatoliy Kuzichev Appointed as Secretaries of the Union of Journalists). <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3063588>.

[179] Lenizdat.ru. (2019). Журналист журналисту не союзник (A Journalist Is No Ally to Another Journalist). <https://lenizdat.ru/articles/1155370/>.

[180] Ramziya Gabitova. Союз журналистов России защищает и поддерживает региональную и национальную прессу (Union of Journalists of Russia Protects and Supports Regional and National Press). *Molodyozhnaya Gazeta*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20180711045108/http://mgazeta.com/category/v-koridorakh-vlasti/soyuz-zhurnalistov-rossii-zashchishchaet-i-podderzhivaet-regionalnyu-i-natsionalnyu-pressu/>.

[181] Moscow City Branch of the Union of Journalists of Russia. (2019). Рейдерский захват председателем Союза журналистов Москвы Павлом Гусевым Московского городского отделения Союза журналистов России (Raider Takeover of Moscow City Branch of the Union of Journalists of Russia by Pavel Gusev, Chairman of the Union of Journalists of Moscow). <https://jourmos.com/4172-2/>.

[182] TJournal. (2021). “Лига без интернета”: кто занимается “очищением” рунета и почему всё держится на борцах за “традиционные ценности” (‘League Without Internet’: Who Is Behind the ‘Cleaning’ of Runet and Why It Relies on Defenders of ‘Traditional Values’). <https://tjournal.ru/analysis/374435-liga-bez-interneta-kto-zanimaetsya-ochishcheniem-runeta-i-pochemu-vse-derzhitsya-na-borцах-za-tradicionnye-cennosti>.

The League, with its stated goal of creating a “safe internet space within the Russian Federation,”^[183] turned out to be merely a PR stunt by Malofeev, aimed at rehabilitating his reputation following a scandal.^[184] Nevertheless, the League became a successful project in terms of financial dividends for Malofeev and the League’s leadership. According to Sarskis Darbinyan, head of the project Roskomsvoboda, these dividends were connected to the procurement of expensive equipment for traffic filtering and “counteracting threats.”^[185]

In reality, the League engages in overt censorship of the internet space. With the help of tens of thousands of “cyber-volunteers,” the League identifies information that it deems inappropriate for public access and demands both the removal of such content and the punishment of those responsible for its dissemination.^[186] This censorship extends not only to content related to extremism, pedophilia, or LGBTQ+ topics, but also to ordinary political statements. In recent years, the League’s activities have expanded so significantly that some have dubbed it the “Internet Inquisition,”^[187] and its reach has extended far beyond the online realm. There are documented cases where, following reports from Yekaterina Mizulina, the League’s head, law enforcement agencies have targeted musicians,^[188] comedians,^[189] and journalists^[190] for their professional activities. Mizulina’s efforts also focus on actively opposing the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, her reports have led to the closure of queer bars^[191] and nightclubs^[192] in several Russian cities, with the owners facing criminal prosecution. For its role in establishing censorship in Russia, the League and its leader were sanctioned by the European Union in early 2024.^[193]

[183] League for Secure Internet. О Лиге (About the League). <https://ligainternet.ru/o-nas/>.

[184] TJournal. (2021). “Лига без интернета”..., cit.

[185] Evgeniy Zhukov. Мизулина и “Лига безопасного интернета” – под санкциями ЕС (Misulina and the ‘League for Secure Internet’ Under EU Sanctions). 29 January 2024. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru/evrosouz-vvel-sankcii-protiv-ekateriny-mizulinoj-i-ligi-bezopasnogo-interneta/a-68113347>.

[186] TJournal. (2021). Интернет-инквизиция: кто и почему указывает властям на “нарушения” в рунете и творчестве артистов (Internet Inquisition: Who and Why Reports ‘Violations’ in Runet and Artistic Works). <https://tjournal.ru/analysis/493815-internet-inkviziciya-kto-i-pochemu-ukazyvaet-vlastyam-na-narusheniya-v-runete-i-tvorchestve-artistov>.

[187] TJournal. (2021). Интернет-инквизиция..., cit.

[188] Meduza. (2023). Инстасамка, Hofmannita и Scally Milano меняют тексты песен по требованию провластной активистки Мизулиной (и еще зачем-то фотографируются с ней). Что это вообще такое? (Instasamka, Hofmannita, and Scally Milano Alter Song Lyrics at the Request of Pro-Government Activist Misulina (and Also Pose for Photos with Her). What Is Going On?). <https://meduza.io/episodes/2023/05/31/instasamka-hofmannita-i-scally-milano-menyayut-teksty-pesen-po-trebovaniyu-provlastnoy-aktivistki-mizulinoj-i-esche-zachem-to-fotografiruyutsya-s-ney-chto-eto-voobsche-takoe>.

[189] League for Secure Internet. (2023). Мизулина призвала провести проверку в отношении комиков Долгополова и Оганесяна за шутку о гибели Татарского (Misulina Calls for Investigation into Comedians Dolgopолоv and Oganesyana Over Joke About Tatarsky’s Death). <https://ligainternet.ru/mizulina-prizvala-provesti-proverku-v-otnoshenii-komikov-dolgopolova-i-oganesyana-za-shutku-o-gibeli-tatarskogo/>.

[190] TJournal. (2021). Интернет-инквизиция..., cit.

[191] DOXA. (2024). В Красноярске силовики ворвались в квир-бар по доносу Мизулиной (In Krasnoyarsk, Law Enforcement Raids Queer Bar Following Misulina’s Report). <https://doxa.team/news/2024-02-25-krasnoyarsk>.

[192] DOXA. (2024). В Оренбурге завели уголовное дело об экстремизме из-за работы ночного клуба, где проходят дрег-шоу (In Orenburg, Criminal Case Launched for Extremism Over Nightclub Hosting Drag Shows). <https://doxa.team/news/2024-03-18-orenburg>.

[193] Evgeniy Zhukov. Мизулина и “Лига безопасного интернета”..., cit.

Yekaterina Mizulina is the daughter of Elena Mizulina, a senator in the Federation Council of Russia. The latter is known for her commitment to “traditional” family values, which have manifested in laws targeting the repression of the LGBTQ+ community and the decriminalization of domestic violence.[194] Senator Mizulina was also the initiator of the bill to create a registry of banned websites in Russia, which has become a cornerstone of Russian internet censorship. To a large extent, Yekaterina Mizulina’s stance aligns with the beliefs of her mother: “A prohibition is precisely where a person is free... What is a right? It is the greatest form of non-freedom. I can tell you that the more rights we have, the less free we are.”[195]

As for international actors, their influence in Russia has traditionally been weak, [196] and any remaining influence was effectively eliminated by the Russian leadership following the invasion of Ukraine. The amendment of the Constitution to limit the supremacy of international law,[197] withdrawal from various international organizations,[198] denunciation of international treaties, [199] enactment of laws prohibiting cooperation with foreign NGOs,[200] and the expulsion of international NGOs from Russia[201] have all contributed to this decline. As a result, the influence of international and foreign actors is now at its lowest level since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These actors lack significant leverage over the Russian leadership and are no longer able to freely operate within the country’s borders.

[194] Anastasiya Sivyakova. Громкие инициативы Елены Мизулиной: борьба с ЛГБТ, семейная политика и запрет на аборт (Elena Mizulina’s High-Profile Initiatives: Fight Against LGBT, Family Policy, and Abortion Ban). 30 June 2023. RIAMO. https://riamo.ru/articles/lyudi/samye-gromkie-initsiativy-mizulinoj-borba-s-lgbt-semejnyaya-politika-i-zapret-na-abort/?from=inf_cards.

[195] TJournal. (2021). “Лига без интернета”..., cit.

[196] Liliya Shevtsova and Dmitriy Trenin. Россия в глобальном мире и как этот мир влияет на Россию (Russia in the Global World and How This World Affects Russia). 16 May 2013. Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2013/05/rossiya-v-globalnom-mire-i-kak-etot-mir-vliyaet-na-rossiyu?lang=ru¢er=russia-eurasia>.

[197] On improving the regulation of certain issues of the organization and functioning of public authority, Law of the Russian Federation on Amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation No. 1-FKZ (2020).

[198] TASS. (2022). Выход и приостановка членства России в международных организациях (Russia’s Withdrawal and Suspension of Membership in International Organizations). <https://tass.ru/info/14596701>.

[199] BBC News Russian. (2023). Путин решил денонсировать международные договоры Совета Европы. К чему это приведет? (Putin Decides to Denounce Council of Europe International Treaties. What Will This Lead To?). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-64311919>.

[200] Human Rights Watch. (2023). В России принят закон..., cit.

[201] TASS. (2023). Что известно о нежелательных организациях на территории России (What Is Known About Undesirable Organizations in Russia). <https://tass.ru/info/17207299>; RosBusinessConsulting. (2022). Минюст закрыл 15 представительств иностранных НКО в России (Ministry of Justice Closes 15 Foreign NGO Offices in Russia). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/08/04/2022/625060489a79475c3e443e22>.

2.3. Operational Aspects of Roskomnadzor

Despite serving primarily as a technical executor of state media policy within the authoritarian structure established by the Kremlin, Roskomnadzor is a giant in the Russian media landscape. Established in 2008 by a presidential decree,^[202] this governmental body holds authority over virtually all communication spheres, from postal services to the internet, including the regulation of mass media activities.^[203] Legally, it operates as a federal service under the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media.^[204]

For its role in creating and maintaining censorship in Russia, and for its participation in disinformation campaigns, Roskomnadzor has been sanctioned by the European Union, Belgium, France, Canada, Switzerland, and Ukraine.^[205] The head of Roskomnadzor, Andrey Lipov, is also subject to personal sanctions from the European Union, Belgium, France, Canada, Switzerland, Ukraine, Australia, and New Zealand.^[206] Despite the clear impact on reducing freedom of speech in Russia and the actions taken against independent media, the head of Roskomnadzor asserts that there is no censorship in Russia. He argues, “Censorship implies reviewing an article or other information before it is broadcast or printed. We react after the fact. Therefore, we do not have any censorship.”^[207]

2.3.1 Remit & Tasks

As outlined in a previous section, the powers and responsibilities of Roskomnadzor are extensive, making a full enumeration in this report impractical and redundant. Key responsibilities of Roskomnadzor include:

- State supervision of media law compliance
- State supervision of communication networks, their operation, and communication service providers
- State supervision of laws protecting children from information harmful to their development
- State supervision of personal data processing
- State supervision of the internet

[202] Issues of the System and Structure of Federal Executive Authorities, Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 724 (2008).

[203] On the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 228 (2009).

[204] On Certain Issues of State Administration in the Field of Communications, Information Technologies, and Mass Media, Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 1715 (2008).

[205] *as of July 2024*; Ruper. Федеральная служба по надзору в сфере связи, информационных технологий и массовых коммуникаций (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media). <https://ruper.org/ru/company/6010>.

[206] *as of July 2024*; Ruper. Липов Андрей Юрьевич (Andrey Yuryevich Lipov). <https://ruper.org/ru/person/2662>.

[207] Kommersant. (2016). “Государство всегда защитит своих журналистов”: Глава Роскомнадзора рассказал студентам о цензуре (The State Will Always Protect Its Journalists: Head of Roskomnadzor Talks Censorship to Students). <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2912413>.

- Assignment of radio frequencies and channels
- Creation, maintenance, and administration of the registry of banned websites
- Implementation of measures to restrict access to banned websites
- Centralized management of communication networks in emergency situations
- Accounting, storage, and processing of information on advertisements disseminated on the internet
- Maintaining registries of media outlets, personal data processing operators, radio-electronic devices and high-frequency equipment for civilian use, traffic exchange points, communication lines crossing the state border of the Russian Federation, and communication facilities to which these lines are connected, as well as hosting providers
- Maintaining a list of foreign entities operating on the internet and applying state enforcement measures to them in cases prescribed by law
- Registering media outlets
- Issuing permits for the distribution of foreign periodical publications within the territory of the Russian Federation
- Other tasks as mandated by law[208]

To fulfill these responsibilities, Roskomnadzor is granted the following powers:

- Requesting and obtaining information necessary for decision-making
- Conducting investigations, tests, examinations, analyses, and assessments, as well as scientific research
- Engaging scientific and other organizations, as well as scholars and specialists
- Providing explanations to government bodies, local self-government authorities, legal entities, and individuals
- Implementing preventive and enforcement measures
- Other powers as prescribed by law.

[208] On the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 228 (2009).

Excluding general state supervision and law enforcement bodies (such as the Prosecutor General’s Office), Roskomnadzor is the sole specialized government agency responsible for regulating media activities. Roskomnadzor handles the registration of media outlets, maintains their registry, licensing television and radio broadcasting, issues permits for foreign media operations, and oversees compliance with numerous regulatory rules governing the media’s operations. Some of these rules were discussed in the Legal Overview section.

Roskomnadzor monitors not only the content aspects of media work but also its technical compliance – such as the requirement for media outlets to disclose information about their founders on their websites.[209] Less formal rules include adherence to standards like the prohibition of obscene language. [210]

Regarding the registration procedure for media outlets, according to the law, Roskomnadzor is not authorized to make decisions at its own discretion; the process is more of a notification than a permissive nature. Roskomnadzor can only deny registration in strictly defined cases: lack of the right to register a media outlet, violation of the media law in the name, theme, and/or specialization of the media outlet being registered, attempts to register a media outlet with an already existing name, or the submission of knowingly false information during registration. However, in practice, Roskomnadzor often uses its powers for censorship purposes. For instance, Roskomnadzor denied the registration of the media outlet “Gazeta Gudkova” submitted by opposition politician Dmitry Gudkov; refusals were also issued to Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation and Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s “Open Media.”

Roskomnadzor used contrived pretexts for these refusals and also resorted to using “spoilers” (the registration of fictitious media outlets with similar names to provide a formal reason for refusal).[211] Although the registration of online media is voluntary[212] (see the Internet Regulation section), refusal of such registration is also a form of censorship because, under the law, unregistered online media are not allowed to appear in news aggregators’ feeds, such as Yandex.News or Google News, thereby limiting their audience.[213]

[209] On mass media art. 27, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2124-1 (1991).

[210] On mass media art. 4, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2124-1 (1991).

[211] Novaya Gazeta. (2019). Роскомнадзор не выдал лицензию на регистрацию СМИ Дмитрия Гудкова, ФБК и “Открытым медиа” (Roskomnadzor Denies Media Registration Licenses to Dmitry Gudkov, FBK, and Open Media).

<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/04/24/151174-roskomnadzor-ne-vydal-litsenziyu-na-registratsiyu-smi-dmitriyu-gudkovu-fbk-i-otkrytym-media>.

[212] Albert Shestakov. Сетевое издание: права и обязанности (Online Media: Rights and Responsibilities). 21 January 2019. Vernoye Resheniye. <https://consultantkhv.ru/periodika/gazeta-vernoe-reshenie/vypusk-01-21-01-19/setevoe-izdanie-prava-i-obyazannosti/>.

[213] On Amendments to the Federal Law ‘On Information, Information Technologies, and Information Protection’ and the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences, Federal Law No. 208-FZ (2016).

2.3.2. Board Composition

The head of Roskomnadzor is appointed and dismissed by an order from the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. However, as in other cases, the decision regarding the official’s candidacy is made not by the person formally specified by law, but by high-ranking officials within the Presidential Administration.[214] In 2020, Andrei Lipov, a former head of the Department for the Development of Information and Communication Technologies and Communication Infrastructure at the Presidential Administration, was appointed as the head of Roskomnadzor.[215] This department within the Presidential Administration has been highlighted in investigations concerning attempts to influence public opinion in several Western countries, through disinformation campaigns involving bots.[216] Andrei Lipov himself is known for his involvement in the creation of the “sovereign internet” law and for large-scale corruption – investigative journalists have uncovered assets worth at least \$10.5 million USD[217] owned by Lipov’s family.[218] The head of the agency has four deputies:

- Vladimir Logunov
- Vadim Subbotin
- Oleg Terlyakov
- Milos Wagner[219]

These individuals are not public figures; they rarely appear in the media, mostly being mentioned in news reports and investigations rather than serving as spokespersons or interviewees.

[214] Aleksandr Kunev. Путин & Со: Who is Who в администрации президента Российской Федерации (Putin & Co: Who is Who in the Russian Presidential Administration). 10 July 2020. Zakon.ru.

https://zakon.ru/blog/2020/07/10/putin_co_ili_who_is_who_v_administracii_prezidenta_rossijskoj_federacii_84798.

[215] Roskomnadzor. (2020). Известия: Назначен новый глава Роскомнадзора (Izvestia: New Head Appointed to Roskomnadzor). <https://rkn.gov.ru/press/publications/news72514.htm>.

[216] Matthew Kupfer. Расследование: кто такой Илья Гамбашидзе, попавший под санкции США за дезинформационные кампании по заказу Кремля? (Investigation: Who is Ilya Gambashidze, Sanctioned by the US for Kremlin-Ordered Disinformation Campaigns?). 6 May 2024. The Voice of America. <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/7597296.html>.

[217] According to the exchange rate of the Central Bank of Russia as of July 23, 2022

[218] Verstka. (2022). “Золотой цензор” России. Семья главы Роскомнадзора владеет имуществом как минимум на 600 миллионов рублей (‘Russia’s Golden Censor’: Roskomnadzor Head’s Family Owns Property Worth at Least 600 Million Rubles). <https://verstka.media/zolotoy-cenzor>.

[219] Roskomnadzor. Руководство (Leadership). <https://rkn.gov.ru/about/leadership/>.

2.3.3. Funding

The revenue side of Roskomnadzor’s budget consists of funds allocated to the service from the federal budget, state fees collected for registrations and other legally significant actions, administrative fines, and civil transactions involving state property under the operational management of Roskomnadzor and its subordinate organizations and institutions.

Roskomnadzor’s expenditures include labor and social payments, utility costs, government procurement, the establishment and maintenance of the internet traffic monitoring system, and other expenses.

RUB m	2455	2578	10491	10024	11292	9993	9519	8527	8280	9770	15846	15124	26062	31068
US\$ m	80	80	345	306	200	137	157	147	120	158	214	204	370	346
Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023

Sources: Roskazna,[220] Roskomnadzor,[221] Central Bank.[222] According to the exchange rate as of the last banking day of each period.

2.3.4. Broadcast Media & Frequency Regulation

Roskomnadzor is the state authority responsible for licensing radio and television broadcasting,[223] as well as the allocation of broadcasting frequencies.[224] To obtain a licence, a media outlet must first be registered as having a radio channel or television channel distribution format.[225] Roskomnadzor is also authorized to revoke licenses in cases of violations of the Law on Mass Media, licensing violations, or if broadcasting ceases for more than three months.[226] The exception to the mandatory licensing requirement occurs when a broadcaster transmits an unaltered signal under an agreement with a company that already holds a broadcasting license. In this case, obtaining an additional broadcasting license is not required.[227] Additionally, registration as a media outlet and licensing radio and television broadcasting are not required for distributing radio and television programs via cable networks limited to the territory of a single state body, educational institution, industrial facility, or to no more than 10 subscribers. [228]

[220] Federal Treasury of the Russian Federation. Федеральнй бюджет (Federal Budget). <https://roskazna.gov.ru/ispolnenie-byudzhetov/federalnyj-byudzhet/>.

[221] Roskomnadzor. Отчёт об исполнении федерального бюджета (Report on the Execution of the Federal Budget). <https://rkn.gov.ru/activity/plans/reports/p547/>.

[222] Central Bank of the Russian Federation. Динамика официального курса заданной валюты (Dynamics of the Official Exchange Rate of the Specified Currency). https://www.cbr.ru/currency_base/dynamics/.

[223] On mass media art. 31, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2124-1 (1991).

[224] On Approval of the Procedure for Conducting Expertise on the Feasibility of Using Declared Radioelectronic Devices and Their Electromagnetic Compatibility with Existing and Planned Radioelectronic Devices, Reviewing Materials, and Making Decisions on the Assignment (Designation) of Radio Frequencies or Radio Frequency Channels Within Allocated Frequency Bands, Decision of the State Commission on Radio Frequencies No. 16-39-01 (2016).

[225] Roskomnadzor. Лицензирование телевизионного вещания, радиовещания (Licensing of Television and Radio Broadcasting). <https://rkn.gov.ru/treatments/chasto-zadavaemye-voprosy/p1584/>.

[226] On mass media art. 31.7, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2124-1 (1991).

[227] On mass media art. 31, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2124-1 (1991).

[228] On mass media art. 12, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2124-1 (1991).

2.3.5. Print Media Regulation

Roskomnadzor is also authorized to register print media outlets and issue permits for the distribution of foreign periodicals within Russia.[229] Certain entities are exempt from the requirement to register as a media outlet, including Russian state, regional, and municipal authorities that publish editions for the dissemination of their official materials and regulations, as well as periodicals with a circulation of fewer than 1,000 copies.[230] As with other forms of media, Roskomnadzor exercises state oversight over print media to ensure compliance with media laws and other relevant regulations.[231]

2.3.6. Internet Regulation

Russian legislation does not mandate the registration of websites as media outlets. While websites can voluntarily register, they are not required to do so, allowing them to operate outside the scope of the Law on Mass Media and without being considered online publications.[232] However, this does not mean that Roskomnadzor has no authority over such websites.

Roskomnadzor wields significant power over the internet space.[233] Firstly, it oversees and monitors internet traffic under the “sovereign internet” law,[234] exerts centralized management over the Runet, monitors websites for prohibited content, makes decisions about blocking such sites, and maintains a registry of prohibited sites in Russia. Additionally, Roskomnadzor supervises internet service providers, participates in managing the national domain name system,[235] and develops and maintains the infrastructure for an autonomous Runet.[236] Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Roskomnadzor launched a large-scale operation against VPN services that allow Russians to access blocked websites, including leading Russian opposition media and non-governmental social networks.[237]

[229] On the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 228 (2009).

[230] On mass media art. 12, Law of the Russian Federation No. 2124-1 (1991).

[231] On the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 228 (2009).

[232] Albert Shestakov. Сетевое издание..., cit.

[233] On the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 228 (2009).

[234] On Amending the Federal Law “On Communications” and the Federal Law “On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection,” Federal Law No. 90-FZ (2019).

[235] Coordination Center for .RU/.RF Domains. Структура управления координационного центра (Management Structure of the Coordination Center). <https://cctld.ru/about/orgstructure/>.

[236] Roskomnadzor. (2022). Отчёт о реализации публичной декларации целей и задач Роскомнадзора за 2022 год (Report on the Implementation of the Public Declaration of Goals and Objectives of Roskomnadzor for 2022). https://rkn.gov.ru/docs/Roskomnadzor_Publichnaja_deklaracija_2022_1.pdf.

[237] Roskomsvoboda. (2023). VPN в России: от блокировки сервисов к блокировке протоколов (VPN in Russia: From Blocking Services to Blocking Protocols). <https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/post/vpn-in-russia-2023/>.

As of July 2024, nearly 700,000 internet resources are blocked in Russia.[238] The authorities significantly increased their efforts to block undesirable sites following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the first year of the war alone, 250,000 internet resources were blocked in Russia, including the websites of independent media, human rights organizations, and journalistic projects covering the war in Ukraine.[239] Many popular media outlets in Russia, such as the BBC, DW, Republic, Meduza, Mediazona, The Village, Doxa, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and others, were among those blocked.

Additionally, this year the Russian leadership found another way to limit access: not only were the sites themselves blocked (which could easily be circumvented by using a VPN), but links to these sites started disappearing from the results of popular Russian search engines like Yandex, Mail.ru, and Rambler.[240] Major global social networks, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, which were not fully controlled by the Russian authorities, unlike VKontakte,[241] were also blocked.[242] YouTube, one of the last strongholds for opposition and independent media in the context of information dissemination, faced forced speed throttling starting in July 2024.[243]

These extensive powers, and the broad efforts to create an autonomous Runet, are believed to stem from the Kremlin's serious concerns about the potential for public mobilisation via the internet.[244] Vladimir Putin has repeatedly expressed negative views about the internet, calling it a "CIA project,"[245] while Nikolai Patrushev, the former head of the FSB and Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, has claimed that the internet is used to "destabilize the socio-political situation" in the country.[246]

[238] Roskomsvoboda. Статистика блокировок..., cit.

[239] Roskomsvoboda. (2022). В 2022 году власти заблокировали более 247 тысяч интернет-ресурсов (In 2022, authorities blocked over 247,000 internet resources). <https://roskomsvoboda.org/ru/post/o-blokirovках/>.

[240] Roskomsvoboda. (2022). Российские поисковики не выдают ссылки на сайты заблокированных СМИ (Russian search engines do not display links to websites of blocked media). <https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/post/poiskoviki-ne-vydayut-smi/>.

[241] Igor Sevryugin. "VKontakte" становится частью кремлевской пропаганды". Как российская соцсеть перешла под контроль друга Путина и сына Кириенко ("VKontakte" Becomes Part of Kremlin Propaganda: How the Russian Social Network Came Under the Control of Putin's Friend and Kirienko's Son). 3 December 2021. The Current Time. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/vkontakte-stanovitsya-chastyu-kremlevskoy-propagandy-kak-glavnaya-rossiyskaya-sotsset-pereshla-pod-kontrol-druga-putina-i-syna-kirienko/31592555.html>.

[242] Roskomsvoboda. (2022). Непрозрачность и беззаконие..., cit.

[243] Amic. (2024). Зачем в России замедляют YouTube и правда ли, что скоро его совсем заблокируют? (Why Is Russia Slowing Down YouTube, and Is It True That It Will Soon Be Completely Blocked?). <https://www.amic.ru/news/zachem-v-rossii-zamedlyayut-youtube-i-pravda-li-chto-skoro-ego-sovsem-zablokiruyut-546350>.

[244] Human Rights Watch. (2017). Онлайн и по всем фронтам: Наступление на свободу выражения мнений в России (Online and on All Fronts: The Assault on Freedom of Expression in Russia). https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/russiafoe0717ru_web.pdf.

[245] BBC News Russian. (2014). Путин заявил, что интернет – это проект ЦРУ (Putin Claims the Internet is a CIA Project). https://www.bbc.com/russian/rolling_news/2014/04/140424_rn_putin_csi_internet.

[246] Alissa de Carbonnel. Russia security chief says foreign sites foment protests. 1 June 2012. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/usrussia-internet-freedom-idUSBRE8500UA20120601/>.

2.3.7. Data Protection Regulation

Roskomnadzor is the primary governmental authority responsible for data protection in the Russian Federation.[247] The agency maintains a registry of data controllers, who are required to notify Roskomnadzor of their planned activities related to the collection, storage, and processing of personal data. This requirement does not apply to operators involved in state registration systems, those operating in the field of transport security, or operators who do not use automated means.[248] At this stage, Roskomnadzor gathers information from these operators to plan subsequent monitoring and inspections of their activities.

Roskomnadzor conducts scheduled and unscheduled inspections as part of its state oversight of personal data protection (unscheduled inspections are conducted only with the consent of the prosecutorial authorities).[249] It can require the cessation of processing and the deletion of personal data obtained illegally. In cases of violations, Roskomnadzor can extrajudicially decide to suspend or prohibit activities involving personal data. It may also file lawsuits on behalf of individuals harmed by violations of personal data legislation and represent their interests. If there are signs of a criminal offense related to personal data processing, as outlined in the Criminal Code, Roskomnadzor refers the case to law enforcement for potential criminal prosecution.[250] Additionally, if there are indications of administrative offenses, Roskomnadzor can initiate administrative proceedings and refer the case to court for adjudication. In addition to all the aforementioned powers, Roskomnadzor, by court order, has the authority to block websites for violating personal data protection laws.[251]

In addition to Roskomnadzor, specific authorities in the field of personal data protection are also vested in the Federal Security Service (FSB). The FSB establishes the composition and content of organizational and technical measures for ensuring the security of personal data during processing in information systems.[252] It also monitors compliance with these measures and participates in approving regulatory legal acts that identify personal data security threats, as well as draft decisions that define additional security threats. Furthermore, the Federal Service for Technical and Export Control (FSTEC) addresses certain aspects of personal data security within its competence regarding technical protection and countering technical intelligence.[253]

[247] On the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, Government of the Russian Federation Decree No. 228 (2009).

[248] On Personal Data art. 22, Federal Law No. 152-FZ (2006).

[249] Searchinform. Кто контролирует защиту персональных данных (Who controls the protection of personal data?).

<https://searchinform.ru/resheniya/biznes-zadachi/zaschita-personalnykh-dannykh/realizaciya-zashchity-personalnyh-dannyh/kto-kontroliruet-zashchitu-personalnyh-dannyh/>.

[250] Garant.ru. Ответственность за нарушение закона о персональных данных (Responsibility for Violating Personal Data Protection Law). <https://www.garant.ru/actual/persona/otvetstvennost/>.

[251] On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection art. 15.5, Federal Law No. 149-FZ (2006).

[252] Regional Privacy Professionals Association. (2016). Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации (The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation). <https://rppa.pro/doku.php?id=nadzor/fsb>.

[253] Federal Service for Technical and Export Control. (2022). Сведения о полномочиях ФСТЭК России; перечень нормативных правовых актов, определяющих эти полномочия (Information on the Powers of the Federal Service for Technical and Export Control of Russia; List of Normative Legal Acts Defining These Powers). <https://fstec.ru/obshchaya-informatsiya/polnomochiya>.

3. Key Decision-Makers in Regulation & Policymaking

3.1. Puppet Masters' Haven: The Presidential Administration as the Source of Media Policy and the Hub of Information Space Control

As previously noted in this report, the actual source of media policy originates from officials within the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation. This fact is corroborated, not only by the analyzed open sources, but also by independent Russian journalists and media experts who were interviewed as part of this study.

The Russian Presidential Administration manages the media landscape through a combination of direct control and informal influence over key media organizations and digital platforms. This control is exerted primarily through state agencies like Roskomnadzor, which enforce media regulations and monitor content. However, the real power lies within the Presidential Administration itself, which sets the overarching media policies and directives.[254]

Given the extent of control that the Presidential Administration exerts over domestic politics, there is substantial reason to believe that many of the most repressive laws, particularly those targeting the media, were either authored or at the very least approved by officials within the Presidential Administration. This is supported, in part, by multiple media reports that highlight various forms of influence exerted by Presidential Administration officials on the actions of elected members of the Russian parliament and their staff.[255]

Beyond legislation, the Administration exerts control through ownership and management changes in media companies. A notable example is the case of NTV, once known for its independent and critical reporting. After a series of legal and financial pressures in the early 2000s, the channel was taken over by the state-owned energy giant Gazprom. This change in ownership led to a dramatic shift in NTV's editorial line, bringing it in line with Kremlin narratives.[256]

[254] Mikhail Rubin, Maria Zholobova, & Roman Badanin. Master of Puppets..., cit.

[255] The Insider. (2015). Современная история российской политики... Часть I., cit.; Ilya Zhegulyov. Битва за балкон. Илья Жегулев – о том, как работает администрация президента при Сергее Кириенко (The Battle for the Balcony: Ilya Zhegulev on How the Presidential Administration Operates Under Sergey Kiriyenko). 3 March 2017. Meduza. <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/03/03/bitva-za-balkon>; The Insider. (2015). Современная история российской политики, рассказанная в СМС. Часть II (The Modern Story of Russian Politics, Told Through Text Messages. Part II). <https://theins.ru/politika/5562>; The Insider. (2015). Запрещенная статья: Взломанные письма Администрации президента (Banned Article: Hacked Emails from the Presidential Administration). <https://theins.ru/politika/2560>.

[256] Darya Gavrilova, Mikhail Kaluzhskiy, Oleg Kashin, & Natalya Rostova. История русских медиа 1989–2011..., cit.; Argumienty i fakty. (2000). В ожидании сюрпризов (Awaiting Surprises). <https://archive.aif.ru/archive/1638837>; Yevgeny Kiselyov. The Seizure of NTV 10 Years On. 19 April 2011. The Moscow Times. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/04/19/the-seizure-of-ntv-10-years-on-a6453>.

The Administration also strategically places loyalists in key positions within media organizations. By controlling the leadership, the Administration ensures that editorial policies align with state interests. This influence extends beyond state-owned media to include ostensibly independent outlets, which often face significant pressure to conform to the Kremlin's party line. The prominent example of the Administration's intervention in media management is the case of RBC (RosBusinessConsulting).

RBC was an independent media group known for its investigative journalism. In 2016, following a series of reports on sensitive topics like the Panama Papers and the business dealings of individuals close to president Putin, the top editorial staff of RBC, including the editor-in-chief, were forced to resign under pressure.[257] This move was widely seen as orchestrated by the Presidential Administration to stifle critical reporting. The arrival of new management affected the editorial policy of the publication. A year later, journalist Ilya Rozhdestvensky was prohibited from publishing an article about a secret FSB prison in the Moscow region. Disagreeing with this decision, the journalist resigned.[258]

It is important to note that the formal ownership of media outlets is not crucial in the context of analyzing media freedom. Media freedom is, in any case, determined by the staff of the Presidential Administration. This can be illustrated by the status and position of two media outlets – the NTV television channel, and the radio station “Echo of Moscow.” Both outlets were owned by the national company Gazprom, yet they promoted diametrically opposed narratives. While NTV has been (and remains) one of the main sources of government propaganda, “Echo of Moscow” enjoyed a certain degree of editorial freedom. Opposition politicians and activists were invited to the radio station's broadcasts, and topics “uncomfortable” for the Kremlin were discussed.[259] The exact reason for the relaxed control over “Echo of Moscow” remains unclear – this could have been due to differences in their audiences (a nationwide television channel versus a radio station with only a few million listeners, a significant portion of whom were urban residents of Moscow) or an effort to create the appearance of diversity and provide a release valve. In any case, a few days after the invasion of Ukraine began, the radio station was shut down by the Russian authorities as part of their drive to unify the country's information space.[260]

[257] Ilya Koval. Насколько независимым будет РБК при новом руководстве? (How Independent Will RBC Be Under New Leadership?). 07 July 2016. DW. <https://www.dw.com/ru/a-19385265>.

[258] Meduza. (2017). Журналист РБК уволился из-за отказа редакции выпустить текст про “секретную тюрьму” ФСБ (RBC Journalist Resigns After Editorial Refuses to Publish Article on FSB “Secret Prison”). <https://meduza.io/news/2017/07/24/zhurnalist-rbk-uvolilsya-iz-za-otkaza-redaktsii-vypustit-tekst-pro-sekretnyu-tyurmu-fsb>.

[259] Institute of Modern Russia. (2012). Пропаганда эпохи Путина. Часть первая: в России (Propaganda in the Putin Era. Part One: Inside Russia). <https://imrussia.org/ru/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0/1333-the-propaganda-of-the-putin-era>.

[260] BBC News Russian. (2022). Радиостанцию “Эхо Москвы” и ее сайт ликвидируют (“Echo of Moscow” Radio Station and Website to be Shut Down). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60599114>.

Additionally, the Administration uses informal methods such as issuing **“temniki” (guidelines or instructions)** to media outlets, dictating how certain events should be covered – or not covered at all. During sensitive times, such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, these directives have ensured a unified and controlled narrative across Russian media.[261]

Persecution of journalists who defy those directives are not uncommon. Independent journalists and media outlets have faced significant pressure in the form of harassment, threats, and even physical violence when reporting on topics considered off-limits by the Administration.[262] In some cases, such as with the investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya, this has led to tragic outcomes. Politkovskaya was assassinated in 2006 after years of reporting critically on the Chechen conflict and the Russian government’s policies.[263] Although the official investigation did not directly implicate the Presidential Administration, many believe that the hostile environment cultivated by the Administration’s stance on independent journalism contributed to her death.

It is noteworthy that, in addition to directly managing the media landscape in the Russian Federation, albeit through illegal and unofficial means, the Presidential Administration has repeatedly been observed employing **black PR tactics** to advance its narratives and target individuals and organizations deemed undesirable. These targets are not limited to opposition politicians or independent journalists but also include Russian officials who have, for various reasons, fallen out of favor. In certain instances, such black PR serves as merely a prelude, setting the stage for the official public opinion and creating the legal and political groundwork for subsequent repressive measures.[264]

[261] Institute of Modern Russia. (2012). Пропаганда эпохи Путина..., cit.; Meduza. (2022). Вы не поверите, но мы раздобыли еще одну методичку Кремля. Теперь пропагандисты будут рассказывать о “пророчествах” Путина и сравнивать 2022-й с 1914-м Бонус: кажется, мы знаем, кто все это придумывает (You Won’t Believe It, but We Got Our Hands on Another Kremlin “Temnik.” Now Propagandists Will Talk About Putin’s “Prophecies” and Compare 2022 to 1914. Bonus: We Think We Know Who’s Behind It All). <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/08/04/vy-ne-poverite-no-my-razdobyli-esche-odnu-metodichku-kremlya-teper-propagandisty-budut-rasskazyvat-o-prorochestvah-putina-i-sravnivat-2022-y-s-1914-m>.

[262] Denis Volkov & Stepan Goncharov. Преследование журналистов в России. Взгляд сообщества журналистов независимых российских СМИ (Persecution of Journalists in Russia: Perspectives from the Independent Russian Media Community). 01 July 2021. Levada Center. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/07/01/presledovanie-zhurnalistov-v-rossii-vzglyad-soobshhestva-zhurnalistov-nezavisimyh-rossijskih-smi/>.

[263] Darya Pashchenko. Самые громкие убийства..., cit.

[264] The Insider. (2014). “Плохой хороший человек”: кто и как сфабриковал новое дело Навального (“The Bad Good Man”: Who Fabricated the New Case Against Navalny and How It Was Done). <https://theins.ru/politika/1008>; The Insider. (2015). А статья найдется... Как Администрация президента фабрикует уголовные дела и публикации в прессе (“If There’s a Will, There’s a Case...” How the Presidential Administration Fabricates Criminal Cases and Media Publications). <https://theins.ru/politika/2684>; The Insider. (2014). Письма Администрации президента: как заказали Навального (Presidential Administration Emails: How the Campaign Against Navalny Was Orchestrated). <https://theins.ru/politika/2349>; The Insider. (2015). Новые вскрытые письма: как Администрация президента “заказала” вице-мэра Москвы (Newly Leaked Emails: How the Presidential Administration “Put a Hit” on the Deputy Mayor of Moscow). <https://theins.ru/politika/2741>.

These examples demonstrate how the Presidential Administration not only shapes media policy but also directly controls the legislative process, to create a legal environment that stifles independent journalism and curtails the freedom of information. By strategically drafting and pushing through laws that target media organizations, exerting ownership influence, issuing directives, and placing loyalists in key positions, the Administration ensures that the information available to the public aligns with state-approved narratives, reinforcing its dominance over the Russian media landscape.

In addition to the previously described cases, the situation with the Yandex.News service and the Yandex homepage, where the Top 5 news, an aggregation of the most significant events happening in Russia and the world at the moment, was once prominently featured, is particularly illustrative. Yandex is one of the most successful IT companies in Russia,[265] and its search engine is the most popular in the country. In 2022, the Yandex homepage was visited by over 90 million people monthly, with an average daily audience of 55 million people. Since November 2021, Yandex has consistently held over 60% of users among all search engines in Russia. The Yandex.News service had an audience of about 30 million people per month in the same year.[266] These figures highlight the strategic importance of both Yandex as a company and its individual services within the media landscape.

The Russian Presidential Administration could not leave Yandex and its services unchecked, given the company's significant potential to shape public opinion in the country. As early as 2008, shortly after the onset of the war in Georgia, Administration officials demanded that Yandex exclude certain sources from its Top 5 news feature and even grant them access to the homepage in case of war. Yandex initially resisted this pressure, but by 2016, it was forced to make concessions and restrict the Top 5 to news only from 15 media outlets approved by the Presidential Administration.[267] As a result, the news landscape for millions of Yandex users became shaped exclusively by information disseminated by media approved by the officials. Arkady Volozh, the co-founder of Yandex, claimed that the censorship of the Yandex.News service was a "compromise." [268]

[265] Irina Yuzbekova. "Яндекс" в четвертый раз возглавил рейтинг самых дорогих компаний Рунета (Yandex tops the ranking of the most valuable companies in the Russian internet (Runet) for the fourth time). 26 February 2022. Forbes.ru.

<https://www.forbes.ru/tehnologii/456329-andeks-v-cetvertyj-raz-vozglavil-rejting-samyh-dorogih-kompanij-runeta>.

[266] Aleksey Begin. Статистика Яндекса в 2022 году (Yandex Statistics in 2022). ER10 Media.

<https://er10.kz/read/tehnologii/obzory/statistika-jandeksa-v-2022-godu/>.

[267] Svetlana Reiter. Мы замучились бороться. Как российское вторжение в Украину раскололо "Яндекс". Расследование Светланы Рейтер (We're Exhausted from Fighting: How the Russian Invasion of Ukraine Split Yandex. An Investigation by Svetlana Reiter). 05 May 2022. Meduza. <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/05/my-zamuchilis-borotsya>.

[268] Mediazona. (2024). Сооснователь "Яндекса" Аркадий Волож в интервью изданию Spiegel назвал "компромиссом" цензуру в "Яндекс.Новостях" (Yandex Co-Founder Arkady Volozh Calls Censorship in Yandex.News a 'Compromise' in Spiegel Interview). 19 July 2024. <https://zona.media/news/2024/07/19/volozh>.

After the invasion of Ukraine began, several Yandex employees left the company, disagreeing with how much the worldview presented by the company's services differed from reality. Yandex was not only unable to provide objective information, but it also could not even shut down the Yandex.News service.[269] Ultimately, Yandex decided to part with the toxic news service, selling it to the corporation VK, which manages the country's most popular social network and is headed by Vladimir Kiriyyenko, the son of Sergei Kiriyyenko, the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration.[270] On July 15, 2024, it was announced that Yandex N.V., the parent company registered in the Netherlands, had finalized a deal to sell its assets in Russia to a "consortium of private investors" for \$5.4 billion USD. [271]Yandex N.V. retained certain intellectual property and services that were not of interest to the Russian government and rebranded itself as Nebius Group.[272]

The primary reason why few resist the demands of officials from the Presidential Administration is fear. When one Yandex employee, who had the appropriate access, was asked to start displaying information about the war, he responded with a refusal citing personal danger. During a company-wide meeting, when the idea of discontinuing the hijacked Yandex.News service was discussed, the then-CEO Elena Bunina and Managing Director Tigran Khudaverdyan decided ultimately that resistance would not be effective, and could be dangerous for the corporation and its employees.[273] It is evident that these individuals felt a threat both to themselves and to the company.

[269] Svetlana Reiter. Мы замучились бороться..., cit.

[270] The Village. (2022). "Токсичный актив" – "Яндекс" продал сервисы "Новости" и "Дзен" VK Как это произошло (Toxic Asset: Yandex Sells News and Zen Services to VK – How It Happened). <https://www.the-village.ru/business/situation/vk-kupil-novosti-i-dzen>.

[271] According to the exchange rate of the Central Bank of Russia as of July 13, 2024

[272] Milena Soldatenko. "Яндекс" закрыл сделку по продаже российских активов. Yandex N.V. вышла из состава акционеров (Yandex Finalizes Sale of Russian Assets. Yandex N.V. Exits Shareholder Structure). 15 July 2024. Fontanka.ru. <https://www.fontanka.ru/2024/07/15/73832696/>.

[273] Svetlana Reiter. Мы замучились бороться..., cit.

3.2. Official Influencers

Vladimir Putin

At the time of this report’s publication, Vladimir Putin has held the position of President of Russia for more than 24 years. Putin first entered the political system in 1990, when he became an advisor to Anatoly Sobchak, who had been elected chairman of the Leningrad City Council. Subsequently, Putin held several positions in the St. Petersburg government under Sobchak’s leadership. After Sobchak’s defeat in the 1996 St. Petersburg gubernatorial election, Putin moved to Moscow, where he began working within the administration of then-President Boris Yeltsin. Within just a few years, he ascended the ranks of the Presidential Administration, eventually becoming deputy chief of staff, followed by appointments as Director of the FSB, Prime Minister, and finally, Yeltsin’s successor. Yeltsin resigned in the night between December 31, 1999, and January 1, 2000, transferring the presidency to Putin, who served as acting president until the next election, in which he won his first term.

A key pillar of Putin’s regime is propaganda and the suppression of dissenting views. Putin achieves the objectives of his information policy in part by maintaining tight control over the media landscape and the broader information space. His administration exerts significant influence over media outlets and journalists, as well as Russia’s law enforcement agencies, which are instrumental in carrying out repressive measures against independent media.[274] This combination of media manipulation and state repression serves to stifle opposition and maintain the regime’s narrative dominance.

Aleksey Gromov

Alexey Gromov became an ally of Putin and a key figure in implementing his information policy in 2000, when he was appointed as the president’s press secretary. At that time, despite holding no formal authority beyond managing media relations, he played a role in the takeover of NTV, a television channel that was broadcasting narratives opposing those of the Kremlin.[275]

[274] Levada Center. (2021). Преследование журналистов в России. Взгляд сообщества журналистов независимых российских СМИ (Persecution of Journalists in Russia. The View of the Community of Journalists of Independent Russian Media). <https://www.levada.ru/2021/07/01/presledovanie-zhurnalistov-v-rossii-vzglyad-soobshhestva-zhurnalistov-nezavisimyh-rossijskih-smi/>.

[275] Mikhail Rubin, Maria Zholobova, & Roman Badanin. Master of Puppets..., cit.

In 2008, Gromov was promoted to deputy chief of staff of the Presidential Administration and became known as the “true master of all television” and the “puppet master,” as dubbed by journalists from an independent media outlet.[276] Within the Presidential Administration, Gromov is responsible for controlling “traditional” media, including television, radio, and print.[277] His influence can be seen in examples such as the “temniki” mentioned earlier in this report,[278] or the regular meetings he holds with senior media editors, where discussions focus on what should be covered and how it should be covered in the media.[279] As explained by Nikolai Mironov, director of the Center for Economic and Political Reforms, such control can encompass a wide range of influence methods, from direct control over the editorial policies of media outlets and the allocation of funding (in the case of state-owned media), to softer forms of “mutually beneficial cooperation.” This latter approach may involve the exchange of insider information for concessions from journalists and media outlets.[280]

Sergey Kirienko

Since 2016, Sergey Kirienko, a former member of the Russian government and presidential envoy to one of the federal districts, has held the position of deputy chief of staff of the Russian Presidential Administration. His responsibilities span a wide range of domestic political issues, from managing relations with governors and political parties to controlling electoral processes. In the media sphere, Kirienko is in charge of controlling the internet, including online media and social networks.[281]

Kirienko once remarked, “The main war being fought today is the war for people’s minds.”[282] Given his oversight of the internet, which has gained significantly more influence than traditional media, Kirienko is a key figure in this battle.

[276] Mikhail Rubin, Maria Zholobova, & Roman Badanin. Master of Puppets..., cit.

[277] RosBusinessConsulting. (2016). Кириенко и Громов поделили сферы кураторства СМИ (Kiriyenko and Gromov divide the spheres of media supervision). <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/22/11/2016/58341c319a79471ca4220674>.

[278] Institute of Modern Russia. (2012). Пропаганда эпохи Путина..., cit.; Meduza. (2022). Вы не поверите, но мы раздобыли еще одну методичку Кремля. Теперь пропагандисты будут рассказывать о “пророчествах” Путина и сравнивать 2022-й с 1914-м Бонус: кажется, мы знаем, кто все это придумывает (You Won’t Believe It, but We Got Our Hands on Another Kremlin “Temnik.” Now Propagandists Will Talk About Putin’s “Prophecies” and Compare 2022 to 1914. Bonus: We Think We Know Who’s Behind It All). <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/08/04/vy-ne-poverite-no-my-razdobyli-esche-odnu-metodichku-kremlya-teper-propagandisty-budut-rasskazivat-o-prorochestvah-putina-i-sravnivat-2022-y-s-1914-m>.

[279] Dmitriy Sidorov. (2015). Как делают ТВ-пропаганду: четыре свидетельства (How TV propaganda is made: four testimonies). 6 August 2015. Colta. <https://www.colta.ru/articles/society/8163-kak-delayut-tv-propagandu-chetyre-svidetelstva>

[280] RosBusinessConsulting. (2016). Кириенко и Громов поделили сферы..., cit.

[281] Andrey Pertsev. (2023). Куратор всего. Как Кириенко завоевывает сферы влияния и президентское ухо (The Overseer of Everything: How Kiriyenko Expands His Influence and Gains the President’s Ear). 9 March 2023. Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/03/how-kiriyenko-is-winning-putins-ear?lang=ru>.

[282] Ann M. Simons and Thomas Grove. (2024). The Putin Propaganda Chief Who the U.S. Says Is Now After American Minds. 6 September 2024. The Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putin-aide-russia-propaganda-us-election-3b3ef3d2>.

In addition to the covert influence repeatedly mentioned in this report, Kirienko wields numerous formal and institutional levers of power. Notably, he serves on the supervisory board of the Institute for Internet Development, which has been sanctioned by the European Union for supporting Russia’s aggressive war in Ukraine.[283] Through this role, Kirienko oversees the allocation of funding for the creation of “spiritual-moral” and “patriotic” content on the internet. In 2023, the Internet Development Institute distributed \$223 million[284] in grants for such initiatives.[285] His son, Vladimir Kirienko, has been leading VK Corporation since 2021. VK manages the two most popular social networks in Russia – VK and Odnoklassniki – as well as the blogging platform Zen and the news service Zen.News (formerly Yandex.News, mentioned earlier in this report), the Mail.ru ecosystem, and a range of other digital platforms and services. Kirienko and his subordinates are also reportedly involved in influencing the U.S. presidential elections, a factor that has led to sanctions being imposed against him.[286]

[283] Viktor Vladimirov. (2023). Триллионы на войну, миллиарды на пропаганду (Trillions for war, billions for propaganda). 8 June 2023. The Voice of America. <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/russian-war-propaganda/7128619.htm>.

[284] According to the exchange rate of the Central Bank of Russia as of December 30, 2023

[285] Svetlana Reiter, Maria Zholobova, Anastasia Korotkova, and Kristina Safronova. (2023). “Чистыми руками взять патриотических денег и не зашквариться”. Российский Институт развития интернета щедро финансирует военную пропаганду. Но деньги у него берут даже те, кто выступают против вторжения. Расследование “Медузы” и “Важных историй” (“Take patriotic money with clean hands and not get embarrassed.” The Russian Institute for Internet Development generously finances military propaganda. But even those who oppose the invasion take money from it. An investigation by Meduza and Important Stories). 06 June 2023. Meduza.

[286] Interfax. (2022). Минфин США ввел санкции против генерального директора VK Group Владимира Кириенко (US Treasury imposes sanctions against VK Group CEO Vladimir Kiriyenko). <https://www.interfax.ru/world/823837>.

3.3. Unofficial Influencers

Industry Players

Although all decisions regarding media policy are made by officials within the Presidential Administration, it is still worth examining the most influential players in the Russian media market. Their submission to Kremlin directives is thought to stem not from an inability, but from an unwillingness to resist. If they chose to, these media giants could challenge the myths propagated by the Kremlin and potentially weaken public support for the regime. However, for reasons unknown, they choose not to take such actions.

The **National Media Group**, Russia's largest media holding, controls 20% of Channel One, 70% of Channel Five, 80% of REN-TV, 50% of CTC, 100% of the Izvestia publishing house, 75% of Sport-Express, and a range of other media assets. This conglomerate is under the control of **Yuri Kovalchuk**, a long-time friend of Putin and a member of his inner circle. Kovalchuk gained significant influence and assets following Putin's rise to the presidency. In addition to owning significant media assets, Kovalchuk is the largest shareholder of Bank Rossiya, which is considered a key component of Putin's corrupt empire.[287] Beyond his direct ownership, Kovalchuk, as a close ally of Putin, enjoys "access to the body", the privilege of meeting with Putin and discussing various matters, thereby exerting direct influence on the president's decisions.

Gazprom Media, another influential media holding, owns the tv-channels NTV, TNT, Match!, and TV-3, as well as several major radio stations, including Avtoradio and Humor FM, other media assets, and a range of digital assets. The most significant of these is Rutube, which was developed as one of the national alternatives to YouTube. Rutube was designed to attract both Russian content producers and viewers, especially following restrictions on access to Google services. A key figure at Gazprom Media is **Alexey Miller**, a top executive of the ultimate beneficiary of Gazprom Media. Miller is also a close associate of Putin, having worked with him in the 1990s during their time in the St. Petersburg mayor's office. Like Kovalchuk, Miller's influence extends far beyond the formal leadership of the assets under his control. For instance, the publication Project released an investigation asserting that Miller wields significant influence over Russian intelligence agencies, whose officers have repeatedly carried out his orders and are implicated in corruption schemes connected to him.[288]

[287] OCCPR. (2017). Relative Wealth in Russia. Accessed on 09 October 2024. <https://www.occrp.org/en/project/putin-and-the-proxies/relative-wealth-in-russia>.

[288] Mikhail Maglov, Roman Badanin, Maria Pevchikh, Dmitriy Sukharev, and Ivan Vasilyev. Investigation on how the Chekists privatized the national wealth. 16 June 2022. Project Media. <https://www.proekt.media/en/investigation-en/gazprom-aleksey-miller-en/>.

Among the influential media magnates is **Alisher Usmanov**, who owns the publishing house Kommersant and the tv-channel Muz-TV, as well as **Konstantin Malofeev**, who owns the tv-channel Tsargrad. The latter was previously mentioned in this report as the initiator of the creation of the Safe Internet League. However, both Usmanov and Malofeev, along with several other media owners, wield significantly less influence over media policy in Russia. Their positions are overshadowed by the more dominant players in the media landscape, such as Kovalchuk and Miller, who have closer ties to the Kremlin.

In the professional community of journalists and media workers, **Konstantin Ernst** remains one of the most significant figures. He has led Channel One since 1999, around the same time Putin became president. Today, Channel One is the largest television channel in Russia in terms of audience and importance, and it serves as one of the primary mouthpieces for Kremlin propaganda within the country. Although Ernst does not have autonomy in determining the channel’s editorial policy, he maintains constant and close contact with high-ranking officials, including those from the Presidential Administration. His relationships with these officials tend to be characterized more by partnership – affording him a degree of freedom while still adhering to the party line, in exchange for privileges and financial resources.



Civil Society

The issue of the influence of civil society institutions was previously addressed in the corresponding section of this report. It was noted that many influential civil society organizations – such as the Union of Journalists of Russia, the League for Secure Internet, the Institute for Internet Development, and others – are now under the control of the Putin regime and have ceased fulfilling their intended functions, or were originally created under the guise of civil society institutions. It was also pointed out that many international and Russian non-governmental organizations have been forced to cease operations in Russia, due to repressive measures against them and the threat of criminal prosecution against their members and activists.

A very limited number of civil society institutions continue to operate today. Among them are organizations like OVD-Info, the Mass Media Defence Centre, and even Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation, which has repeatedly addressed issues related to media freedom. However, it is important to note that most of these organizations now function from abroad, due to the same risks of persecution, and have little influence on media policy within Russia. Nevertheless, they engage with foreign governments and international organizations, consolidate the views of opposition-minded Russians, and provide targeted assistance to individuals and organizations affected by the reprisals – while they may not be able to stop the persecution, they can at least facilitate the evacuation of those at risk.

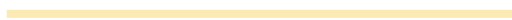
In short, Russian civil society today is in an extremely vulnerable and disadvantaged position, exerting minimal influence on the position of journalists and media outlets within the Russian Federation. On the contrary, the segment of civil society under Kremlin control invests significant efforts in suppressing freedom of speech in Russia.



External Influencers

The influence of foreign governments, non-profit organizations, and international bodies on the Russian media landscape has been reduced to nearly zero. Since Vladimir Putin’s rise to power, such influence, no matter how noble its goals, has come to be seen as a tool of the West’s political warfare against Russia, aimed at undermining the country’s unity and destroying it from within. With the onset of the war in Ukraine, hostility toward foreign non-profit organizations and mounting suspicions about their activities led to the expulsion of nearly all of them from the country, including even seemingly harmless groups like Greenpeace. Today, there is virtually no external force capable of directly impacting Russia’s internal media landscape.

However, there is a nuance – most independent Russian media outlets now operate from abroad, and their survival largely depends on support from non-profit organizations and sympathetic governments. This support often comes in the form of financial grants. Russian independent journalists and media managers report that grant-givers exert considerable influence over the editorial policies of independent media, not through direct orders, as is the case within Russia, but indirectly, by providing funding only to media outlets that meet certain standards. Journalists express concerns that this dynamic could lead to a degree of bias or even agenda-driven reporting, as independent outlets may feel compelled to frame events and present facts in ways that ensure continued funding and support for their work.



For more information about the project:

Media Influence Matrix

<http://journalismresearch.org>

Media and Journalism Research Center

Legal address

Tartu mnt 67/1-13b, 10115,
Tallinn, Harju Maakond, Estonia

Postal address

6 South Molton St, London,
W1K 5QF, United Kingdom

Academic affiliation

Universidade de Santiago de
Compostela (USC)
Colexio de San Xerome, Praza do
Obradoiro s/n,
CP 15782 de Santiago de Compostela.

Contact

www.journalismresearch.org
mjrc@journalismresearch.org

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In this report, ChatGPT was used for translations from Russian to English.