

2021: Russia

**A year of regression
for press and
media freedom**



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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 21st century, when Vladimir Putin officially became president in May 2000, the Russian government initiated what would become the total crackdown on freedom of the press. Starting slowly but surely, in early 2003, independent media channels ORT, NTV and TV-6, were taken into State control, the latter completely shut down¹. A ban was also imposed on media outlets campaigning for and against political candidates in the run-up to elections.

In 2006, Anna Politkovskaya, a US-born Russian journalist who had been reporting on the Second Chechnya War, was murdered. Many viewed this as “the murder that killed free media in Russia” and was an act that deterred news organisations from reporting on topics that could anger the Kremlin.²

Increasing attacks on journalists and inadvertent censorship from the Russian government in 2009 created an international stir. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights raised concerns about the “alarming incidence of threats, violent assaults and murders of journalists and human rights defenders... which has created a climate of fear and a chilling effect on the media³.” International scrutiny was not a deterrent for the Russian Government, however, since 2009, what was once ad hoc and scare attacks on media freedom, has now become an everyday accepted occurrence. This year, 2021, marked the highest number of arrests of Journalists since 1992.⁴ This report aims to examine the worrying acceleration of media censorship both nationally and internationally and highlight the new ways in which the Russian government achieves these aims.

Section one examines the shift from outright violence to legal strategies to silence the press. Since the reelection of Vladimir Putin in 2012, the Russian government has overseen the creation, revision and implementation of 50 new laws designed to silence dissenting voices.⁵ In recent years, Russia, under scrutiny from the international community, has turned to using legal means to challenge opposition groups, creating a smokescreen of legitimacy for the erosion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Following on from this, in section two, the report looks at individual attacks and the consequences the aforementioned laws have on individuals carrying out their work as journalists and exercising their freedom of speech and expression.

1. VOANews (2009, October 06) TV Station Closure Raises Questions About Russian Press Freedom - 2003-06-26.

2. The Guardian (2016, October 5) The murder that killed free media in Russia.

3. The Human Rights Committee (2009, November 04) Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties Under Article 40 of the Covenant - Concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee. CCPR/C/RUS/CO/6. Article 16.

4. Committee to Protect Journalists (2021) Journalists attacked in Russia since 1992.

5. International Federation for Human Rights (2018, March 11) Russia 2012-2018: 50 Anti-Democracy Laws Entered into Force Within the Last Presidential Mandate.

6. UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, 217 A (III) Article 19

Section three seeks to highlight the Kremlin's attempts to censor the Internet. 2021 has seen a sharp rise in people turning to social media as their news sources, with various international influences available at the click of a button. The internet is therefore a tremendous threat to the Russian government and can be seen as a crack in their information firewall, which they have now tried to eradicate. Not only are the suppressions of such freedoms contrary to international law – including Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which enshrines the right to “receive and impart information and ideas through any media”⁶ - but in fact abrogated from the Russian Constitution, Article 29 of which bans censorship, and Article 1 of the Russian Law on the Media, which contains a similar provision.

Finally, in section four, the report addresses the expulsion of foreign journalists, an extreme but increasingly more common occurrence that exemplifies Russia's attempt to limit international interference. The last decade has seen the first foreign expulsions since the Cold War. These acts have added to international outrage, and show the acceleration of the Kremlin's attempts at total control and censorship of the press in 2021.

6. UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, 217 A (III) Article 19

Laws Undermining Freedom of The Press

Context

The justification from Russian officials for heightened media surveillance is “to protect internal political processes from outside influence”. Since 2014 however, what the Russian government defines as a threat to Russian interests has worryingly evolved to include media outlets and independent reporters inside and outside of the country. Russia's increasing approach to the use of legislation to justify the crackdown on freedom of speech explicitly seeks to blur legal lines in order to mask the illegality that is ingrained in these actions. The enforcement of anti-democratic legislation creates an ambiguous environment that makes it difficult for journalists to report and exercise their fundamental right to voice dissent⁷. The laws restricting freedom of speech present a worrying case for the fabric of a democratic society in Russia.

The Foreign Agent Law

Discussions of specific legislation and events in this report are used to provide insight to the wider disintegration of freedoms in Russia. Regulation of Western media is not a new phenomenon in Russia. However, the crackdown on foreign reporting has acted as a gateway to enable the second stage of media crackdown to target not only foreign outlets, but national ones as well. One such mechanism to do so is the so-called 'Foreign Agent' law. This law was introduced by Russian president, Vladimir Putin, in November of 2012⁸. The term 'Foreign Agent' itself has negative connotations in Russia. Gulnoza Said, in her discussion with Global Human Rights Defence, states that “The term Foreign Agent equates to foreign spy or traitor. Many people are often afraid to read the articles by foreign agent media outlets because they just do not want any trouble”. Therefore, the name itself acts as a deterrent of public engagement with media outlets and individuals identified as a 'Foreign Agent'.

The law applies to anyone who distributes information and receives money from foreign sources. All material published by an individual who receives money from abroad will be labeled as having been distributed by a Foreign Agent⁹. The label enables closer government scrutiny of information and has the ability to undermine the credibility of media outlets and information. The Foreign Agent legislation has expanded over the years and acts as a way for the Russian government to exercise significant control over the activities of journalists and media outlets in general. If an organization or individual that is labeled as a Foreign Agent refuses to comply with the regulations of such a label, it is “banned from participating in public demonstrations, access to its bank accounts is limited, and it may be subject to a fine of up to 300,000 rubles (\$10,000) or up to two years in prison for its personnel¹⁰”. In 2021, the crackdown on media reporting using the Foreign Agent legislation escalated with close to 100 organizations and individuals on the register,

7. Charles J. Dunlap Jr. (May-June 2017) Lawfare 101: A Primer, 97 Military Review 8-17, p.12

8. Federal Law No. 121-FZ (2012 July 20) “On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent.”

9. ibid

10. ibid

68 of whom have been added since the beginning of 2021¹¹.

The legislation has received vast amounts of international criticism. The European Parliament has stated that the law on Foreign Agents has created a deliberate environment of hostility, is being used to harass civil society, and is not in line with Russia's obligations under international law¹². A Council of Europe legal advisory body has also criticized Russia's recent amendments to laws regulating the so-called 'Foreign agents', stating that they constitute 'serious violations' of basic human rights and will have a 'chilling effect' on political life¹³.

The 'Undesirables'

The Russian authorities have escalated what experts identify as the 'second stage' of the media crackdown in targeting smaller media outlets and individual reporters. In this second stage, the expansion and revision of previous laws has become evident as it has further restricted freedom of the press. The 'undesirable' organization law was part of a series of regulations that targeted many organizations that received funding from foreign sources. In 2021 however, the State Duma approved the widening of the scope of the law leaving many media outlets and journalists subject to the rules of such legislation¹⁴. The 'undesirables' law, officially known as Federal Law of 23.05.2015 N 129-FZ, enables authorities to designate any organization that they consider to be undermining Russia's security, defense, or constitutional order as 'undesirable'. The penalty for a first-time offense of 'participation' in such a group is a fine, and the maximum penalty for a second offense committed within 12 months is a four-year prison sentence.¹⁵

In recent months, Russian authorities have intensified their efforts to silence independent voices using this legislation, amounting to greater infringements on freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. Several Russian media outlets have been forced to close due to the 'undesirables' law.¹⁶ Authorities in Russia have effectively banned investigative news outlet The Project after declaring it as 'undesirable'. The Project is a media outlet that has published a series of investigations against the Russian elite. The justification for prosecuting The Project under the undesirables law came from the Prosecutor-General's office stating that "its [The Project's] activities pose a threat to the foundations of the constitutional order and security of the Russian Federation"¹⁷. Such actions have stirred an international response. In October 2021, the Media Freedom Coalition urged the Russian Federation to comply with its international human rights commitments and to ensure the freedom and safety of journalists in conducting their work.¹⁸ This statement was also echoed by the European Parliament who called on the Russian authorities to support the "impartiality of media channels... and to improve the safety and working environment of journalists in Russia".¹⁹

11. Committee to Protect Journalists (2021, October 12) Russia labels Bellingcat, other independent outlets and journalists as 'Foreign Agents'

12. The European Parliament (2019, December 19) 'The Russian "Foreign Agents" Law' 2019/2982(RSP)

13. Todd Prince (2021, July 07) Russia's 'Foreign Agent' Amendments 'Seriously Violate' Human Rights: Venice Commission.

14. RadioFreeEurope/Radioliberty (2021, June 09) Russian Bill Approved Expanding 'Undesirable' Organizations Law.

15. Federal Law No. 129-FZ (2015, May 23)

16. Human Rights Watch (2021, September 27) Russia: Three Human Rights Groups Penalized.

17. RadioFreeEurope/Radioliberty (2021, July 15) Russia Effectively Bans Investigative News Outlet By Declaring It 'Undesirable'.

18. The Media Freedom Coalition (2021, October 28) Russia: Media Freedom Coalition statement (October 2021)

19. The European Parliament (2019, December 19) 'The Russian "Foreign Agents" Law' 2019/2982(RSP)



Russia's Prosecutor-General's Office. Source: Mikhail Pochuyev/TASS

Disseminating False Information in 2021

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments and international organizations recognized the importance of journalism to combat dangerous misinformation and falsehoods. In contrast to democratic states, the Russian effort to combat misinformation proved to be yet another tool for the suppression of free speech. After the outbreak in early 2020, Russian authorities approved a new law against COVID-19-related misinformation, subsequently censoring several critical reports on the government's response²⁰. On March 31, 2020, Russian lawmakers passed amendments to Article 207 of Criminal Code. Under the new law, those found to have deliberately spread 'false information' about issues that may amount to 'socially hazardous consequences', will face serious fines or jail time.²¹ Additionally, legal entities, such as media outlets, can face more extensive and bankrupting fines if they publish what the authorities deem to be misinformation. The new law compliments the continuing series of hardline legislation used to crackdown on critical voices. While the previous misinformation offenses were punishable under the administrative code and resulted in fines and website blocking, the latest law falls under the criminal code, meaning punishment includes jail time.²² Gathering information from 'unofficial' sources or conducting anonymous interviews meanwhile risk sanctions or a police investigation.²³ This only serves to increase government intervention and surveillance of information. The examples in this report reflect a much wider and ongoing problem. The implementation of national laws curbing the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press significantly erodes many of the fundamental principles of international law. The continuous attack on media outlets is testament to Russia's legal creativity in bending and reinterpreting legislation in order to achieve its strategic and political objectives, and erode democratic freedoms.

20. Daria Litvinova (2020, April 1) Fake news or the truth? Russia cracks down on virus postings.

21. The Criminal Code of The Russian Federation No. 63-FZ (1996, June 13) Article 207.

22. ibid

23. Daria Litvinova (2020, April 1) Fake news or the truth? Russia cracks down on virus postings.

Individual Attacks and Consequences

Anti-democratic laws not only violate international law and restrict contribution to Russian civil society, but these laws also have more sinister consequences for individual journalists as they put their personal safety at risk. Journalists working in Russia are not only subject to strict censorship laws, they are also reported to experience arbitrary detention, violence and torture. According to Federal Law No. 2124-1 “On Mass Media”, a journalist has the right “to visit specially protected places of natural disasters, accidents and catastrophes, mass unrest and mass gatherings of citizens, and the areas in which a state of emergency was declared; and [the right] to attend rallies and demonstrations”²⁴. However, evidence and reports show in 2021 this is not the case.

In April 2021, protests broke out all over the country in response to the arrest of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. According to the European Federation of Journalists' Info monitoring, 52 journalists were detained, obstructed or beaten, while covering the protests. Journalists were detained in at least 17 cities: St. Petersburg, Khabarovsk, Moscow, Makhachkala, Pskov, Stavropol, Kursk, Samara, Ufa, Voronezh, Novosibirsk, Vladivostok, Kazan, Blagoveshchensk, Krasnoyarsk, Cheboksary, and Yaroslavl.²⁵ Incidents of state violence towards journalists work hand in hand with censorship laws to deter journalists from doing their work. Journalist Dmitry Bairov, founder of Respublika Buryatia and a freelance correspondent for The Communist of Buryatia, while covering the protest in April 2021, experienced severe violence when five officers ran up to him, pushed him to the ground, and forcefully twisted his arms, dislocating his left arm²⁶. The attack was seemingly justified when Bairov was then found guilty of “repeated violation of the law on mass events”, and sentenced to 25 days of detention for his alleged participation. No action was taken on the attack from police.

24. Federal Law No. 2124-1 (1991, December 27) (as amended on 29 July 2017), Paragraph 7

25. European Federation of Journalists (2021, January 24) Russia: EFJ condemns the use of violence against journalists on Saturday.

26. Committee for the Protection of Journalists (2021, February 10) Russian blogger jailed for 25 days over coverage of Navalny protests, hospitalized after hunger strike.



Source: Getty Images

Unfortunately, these incidents are not standalone events. In March, a freelance correspondent, Vladyslav Yesypenko, was arrested by Russian authorities in Ukraine's Russia-annexed Crimea. At his hearing, Yesypenko told the court that he was tortured with electric shocks, beaten, and threatened with death unless he "confessed" to spying on behalf of Ukraine. He was tortured from the moment of his detention until his transfer to the detention center in Simferopol. Subsequently, the journalist was charged with "making firearms", which is punishable by up to six years in prison²⁷. No investigations into the torture allegations were conducted.

Yesypenko's arrest is yet another example of a continued campaign of violence and harassment directed at journalists. Physical violence, intimidation and direct attacks on journalists with little to no recourse to justice have become common in Russian society and serve to encourage self-censorship of Russian journalists. Law enforcement authorities are extremely reluctant to investigate such attacks and rarely, if ever, institute criminal cases. As a result, a high rate of impunity afforded to perpetrators of such violence serves to sustain the trend of attacks against journalists.²⁸

It is reported that nearly 60 journalists working with the media outlet Crimea. Realities have been forced to stop their work or to leave Crimea as a result of the Russian crackdown on journalists²⁹. Furthermore, in October of 2021, more than one thousand videos and photographs of prisoners being raped and tortured were leaked to the human rights group Gulagu.net. Subsequently, the group published these on Youtube, entering the public domain. The existence of such videos demonstrate the systemic use of

27. Crimea. Realities (2021, April 06) Jailed Crimean Journalist Tells Court He Was Tortured, Coerced To 'Confess' On Russian TV.

28. SOS-Torture Network. (2018) On infringement of the rights of journalists and pressure on them in connection with their journalistic activities.

29. Freedom House (2021, March 29) Crimea: Release Journalist Vladyslav Yesypenko.

torture and rape against hundreds of prisoners in the Russian prison system. The files supposedly date from 2018-2020 in prisons in the Saratov, Vladimir and Irkutsk regions³⁰. Tanya Lokshina of Human Rights Watch said in a statement the footage “gave grounds for strong concern”. She added that the Russian government is “not doing enough to ensure effective investigation³¹”.

These examples suggest a wider, institutional and systemic problem. The criminalisation of media reporting through new legislation justifies state violence against journalists. National legislation is seen as arbitrary and abusive, suppressing the legitimate exercise of fundamental rights. Despite efforts and condemnation from the international community, Russia continues to create an environment of hostility and fear in which journalists are forced to operate.

30. Elia Duran-Smith, Global Human Rights Defense (2021, October 13) Leaked Videos Allegedly Show Torture and Rape of Russian Prisoners

31. BBC (2021, 06 October) Russia investigates prison torture allegations after videos leaked.

Increased Online Censorship



Along with the attacks against journalists and the laws restricting media freedom, Vladimir Putin's government has extended its war against dissenting voices on the internet. For years now, the Kremlin has been assessing the crucial role played by online platforms and trying to control the information and content published by its citizens. However, since the COVID-19 crisis, and the events following the attempted murder of Alexei Navalny, the trend of cracking down on freedom of expression on the internet has worsened and the government has not hesitated to attack the world's biggest social media platforms.

Why is the Russian government increasing its control of the internet? What kind of websites are targeted?

Since the beginning of his premiership in Russia, Vladimir Putin has put the need, in his view, to increase control over media platforms at the center of his policy agenda. In 2001, the main opposition TV channel, NTV, was taken over by the state. The entirety of public television broadcasting is now owned by close relatives of the president and used as the government's media wing³². With few liberal media platforms still in operation, most of the opposition groups have moved to the internet to share their message, and much of the Russian public has followed suit. Indeed, the popularity of TV programming, which was, for a long time, the main source of information in the country, is being substituted for online platforms. In three years, the number of Russians using the internet has more than doubled, increasing from 13% in 2018 to 28% in 2021. This shift is particularly striking among the young generations, 98% of whom use the internet and only 30% occasionally watch television³³. Most of them prefer to rely on social media rather than on state-owned media.

32. Sakhnine, A. (2021, March 21). La Russie aurait tout intérêt à abandonner son projet de mise au pas d'Internet. *Courrier international*.

33. *Ibid.*

Thus, the internet has become an essential resource for the population and for journalists, and, as a result, an important threat for the authoritarian government. At the end of the 2000s, journalists and political dissidents saw, in the growth of the internet, a new channel of communication with the population and with their supporters. At the time, the control of the internet was weak and users could still exercise their freedom of speech. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube or Google became essential for building a free press as they serve as information intermediaries³⁴. Some bloggers are now reaching up to 9 million followers on their Youtube channel, which is much higher than the viewing figures of the national TV channels.³⁵ They tackle subjects that are hidden by the government and censored in the mainstream media such as HIV in Russia, Gulag prisons camps, difficulties faced by the hospitals during the covid crisis, or corruption.

How does the government censor the internet?

In 2008, the Federal Service for Supervision of Communication, Information Technology and Mass Media, called “Roskomnadzor”, was created to act as the state's internet watchdog. The agency is very powerful and can fine individuals and media outlets, block access to specific content, and slow down the internet. Its main objective is to censor discordant and compromising content for the Kremlin. During its first years, Roskomnadzor was not very efficient and many websites ignored its orders. Some defects of its system led to vast swathes of the internet becoming inaccessible, except for the media that was initially targeted, which shook its credibility³⁶. Yet, the laws implemented in recent years strongly contributed to the strengthening of its powers, making it a formidable weapon within the government's arsenal. The regulator blocked almost half a million websites without warning and is seen by Reporters without Borders as one of the worst digital predators of press freedom.³⁷

The ability of the internet regulator to become such a threat to press freedom can be attributed to the numerous laws that were recently passed, giving greater power to the agency. As explained in the first part of this report, the law passed during the COVID-19 crisis, widely known as the “fake news law”, enabled the government to crack down on any critics or comments about the government's management of the pandemic. At the end of 2020, the Kremlin declared it had opened 450 administrative cases and 37 criminal cases related to fake news and Roskomnadzor blocked more than 1000 pages of alleged false information related to COVID-19.³⁸

Moreover, on the 30th of December, 2020, additional laws were passed to further reduce freedom of expression on online platforms. Federal Law No.482-FZ gives Roskomnadzor the authorization to restrain access to all the platforms blocking content published by state-owned media. Seeing itself as the only source of relevant information, the government has accused certain platforms such as Facebook, Youtube

34. Reporter without Borders. (2021, July). “Taking Control? Internet Censorship and Surveillance in Russia.” RSF.

35. Ibid.

36. Jacques, L. (2021, April 1). «Роскомнадзор», le gendarme russe d'Internet. Libération.

37. RSF. (2020, March 12). RSF unveils 20/2020 list of press freedom's digital predators.

38. Reporter without Borders. (2021, July). “Taking Control? Internet Censorship and Surveillance in Russia.” RSF.

or Twitter of censoring its content. A register has also been created to monitor all of the online platforms violating this law and the targeted websites can be penalized with fines going up to 33,500 euros. These sites can also be slowed down or even completely blocked³⁹.

Additionally, the Federal Laws No.511-FZ, passed in December 2020, and No.530-FZ obliged any social network to identify and delete all illegal content. This illegal content includes content “inciting minors to illegal or dangerous activity” or expressing “blatant disrespect for society and state”, information about undesirable organizations, and fake news.⁴⁰ If they fail to do so, the online platforms can be fined up to 10-20% of the company's annual revenue⁴¹. Since the law was voted in, dozens of social networks have been convicted for not deleting illegal content.

What has happened since then?

So far, 2021 has been a crucial year for Russia and showed the extent of internet censorship. Following Alexei Navalny's conviction on charges of corruption in February 2021, six months after his alleged poisoning by the Russian state, massive support has emerged for him on social media. A Tiktok video calling for protests garnered 80 million views. The Kremlin, supported by Roskomnadzor, endeavored to suppress this and warned Tiktok and Vkontakte⁴² to delete all content inciting “minors to commit unlawful acts⁴³”.

Moreover, the parliamentary elections held in September 2021 were a crucial time for the government to show it still retained high levels of support, despite the difficulties the regime has been facing in these last two years. Therefore, an important crackdown on the internet was waged: opposition sites were blocked, the internet was slowed down, and on the 17th of September, 2021, Apple and Google were forced to delete the Alexei Navalny voting application from their stores. While these powerful companies used to ignore government demands, this time the government threatened to prosecute their employees and to slow down internet traffic if they did not cooperate⁴⁴. This marked an important turning point in the relationship between big tech companies and the government, which was widely criticized. Indeed, American online platforms such as Google, Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter have been the Kremlin's biggest targets in their online war. In February and March, 2021, Twitter was slowed down by Roskomnadzor on all mobiles and half of all desktop devices in Russia because of their failure to delete illegal content. Although some restrictions were lifted in May after Twitter deleted some content, it mostly served as a warning to other social media platforms. Overall, Facebook, Google and Twitter were ordered to pay fines up to almost half a million euros and, in June, ten additional court proceedings were initiated against them⁴⁵.

39. Ibid.

40. Lokot, T. (2021, November 24). Russia's Social Media Self-Censorship Law is Misguided – and the West Must Avoid Making the Same Mistake.

41. Fédération de Russie. (2020, December). Loi fédérale « Sur les amendements au Code de la Fédération de Russie sur les infractions administratives » du 30.12.2020 N 511-FZ.

42. The Russian version of Facebook.

43. Reporter without Borders. (2021, July). “Taking Control? Internet Censorship and Surveillance in Russia.” RSF.

44. Partlett, W. (2021, October 4). Russia is building its own kind of sovereign internet — with help from Apple and Google. The Conversation.

45. Reporter without Borders. (2021, July). “Taking Control? Internet Censorship and Surveillance in Russia.” RSF.

Conclusion

The Kremlin's objective to create a “sovereign internet” seems to be a success. By imposing laws with broad definitions of what constitutes illegal content and giving wider powers to its internet watchdog, the government has almost total control of what is posted online and can make the world's biggest companies yield to its commands. What used to be the only remaining space for freedom of expression is now constantly scrutinized by the state's regulating body. Widespread internet censorship continues to worsen the already dire state of press freedom in Russia as it remains the only effective tool of resistance in authoritarian countries.

Expulsions and Silencing of Foreign Journalists

Over the last decade, the first instances of expulsions of foreign journalists occurred in Russia since the Cold War, such as former Guardian Moscow correspondent in 2011, US Financial Times journalist and academic David Satter in 2013, and Polish journalist Waclaw Radziwinowicz in 2015⁴⁶. However, in 2021, the rate of expulsions of foreign correspondents in Russia on reportedly spurious grounds has significantly accelerated, only adding to the outcry of international concern for press freedom within Russia.



Source: BBC

Expulsion

The BBC Moscow correspondent of more than 20 years was told on August 10th at Sheremetyevo airport that she was being permanently expelled from Russia as she had been noted as a security threat by the FSB, the Russian state's domestic intelligence service⁴⁷.

She had just come from a press conference with Belarussian president, and staunch ally of Vladimir Putin, Alexander Lukashenko where she had pointedly asked “how he could stay on as president after the torture and imprisonment of peaceful protesters”. Visibly enraged by the question, Lukashenko branded Rainsford a “Western propagandist” and the British more generally as “American lapdogs”, telling the United Kingdom it could “choke on [their] sanctions⁴⁸”. Later that same day, following Rainsford's notice of her expulsion, the Russian foreign ministry announced it would be levying new sanctions against the UK because British citizens had engaged in “anti-Russian activity⁴⁹”.

46. Associated Press, 2015; Harding, 2014; Roth, 2021

47. Rainsford, 2021

48. Rainsford, 2021

49. Rainsford, 2021

Rainsford believes her expulsion was linked to this question, which was likely the final straw in a year-long retaliation against the UK's sanctions for human rights abuses committed in Chechnya by federal actors and widespread corruption in Russia. In 2020, she started being issued short-term visas that would only be approved at the last minute. Once, she was told she had been issued her last-ever visa, with the foreign ministry official then retracting this statement.

However, the Russian foreign ministry stated the move to expel Rainsford was done in retribution for the British government's "discrimination" against reporters of the Kremlin-approved Tass news agency after their visas were not granted⁵⁰. Rainsford claims this was likely not the reason for her expulsion as this occurred in 2019, at which time the Russian government had not protested.

Response from the International Community

Reporters without borders said this incident was symptomatic of a wider trend of restrictions on media freedom within Russia's borders and that "foreign reporters will only be allowed to go about their work unhindered as long as they refrain from criticizing those in power in the Kremlin too strongly"⁵¹. The President of the European Federation of Journalists – an association recognised by the European Union and the Council of Europe as "the representative voice of journalists in Europe" – issued a statement saying "journalism and press freedom are being held hostage in the context of diplomatic tensions between Russia and the UK"⁵². Both organizations called for Rainsford's expulsion to be overturned.

Additionally, alongside the British government's unilateral protestations, the Media Freedom Coalition, a group of 19 states (Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States), released a statement condemning the decision to expel Rainsford, calling it "a retrograde step that further damages the cause of media freedom in Russia"⁵³.

Tom Vennink



Source: Alexandra Sjtsjeglova

50. EFJ, 2021

51. RFE/RL, 2021

52. EFJ, 2021

53. Media Freedom Coalition, 2021

Expulsion

Similarly to Rainsford, the correspondent for Dutch newspaper de Volkskrant since 2015 was issued a 7 week short-term visa with no explanation shortly before being notified of his expulsion with immediate effect on November 1st, giving him three days to leave Russia.⁵⁴ He has also been barred from re-entering Russia until January 2025. The Russian foreign ministry cited “administrative violations” as the grounds for his expulsion. He had to pay a fine in 2019 after he failed to register his home address in Moscow after returning from another municipal area, and another in 2020 when he did not obtain permission prior to visiting the restricted border security zone of the Siberian province of Chukotka, both of which are required by foreign residents in Russia⁵⁵. The Russian authorities gave no explanation as to why these violations constituted sufficient justification for Vennink's expulsion⁵⁶.

De Volkskrant Editor in Chief Pieter Klok noted “such administrative violations were never an obstacle to extending the residence permit”⁵⁷. Vennink himself has stated that he does not know exactly why he was targeted in particular, but has speculated that the decision was likely influenced by tensions in Dutch-Russian relations⁵⁸.

One reason for this is the recent trial investigating the involvement of three Russians and a Ukrainian citizen in the downing of the MH17 Malaysia Airlines flight in Ukraine in 2014 by Russian made Buk surface-to-air submarine missiles and fired by Russian-backed separatists⁵⁹. The flight, which left from Amsterdam, killed 289 people, around 200 of which were Dutch nationals⁶⁰.

Another source of tension is the decision made this year to hand over a trove of ancient golden artifacts, on loan to a Dutch museum from a Crimean museum when it was annexed, to the Ukrainian rather than the Russian government.⁶¹

Furthermore, a Dutch Supreme Court adviser ruled earlier this year that the Permanent Court of Arbitration had accurately judged the Russian government was partly liable for €47b owed to former shareholders of defunct oil company Yukos⁶². However, the trial has not concluded as, although the Supreme Court reportedly looked set to follow this ruling, on November 5th it decided to throw the case back for appeal.⁶³

Vennink expressed his concern for the future of press freedom in Russia for foreign correspondents, stating that “this has a very chilling effect on other Russia correspondents. I see they are worried because of my expulsion. And I understand that, I would feel the same way.”⁶⁴ He also said “the expulsion will make it harder to present a full and nuanced picture of Russia and will intimidate other correspondents”⁶⁵.

54. RFE/RL, 2021

55. The Moscow Times, 2021

56. CPJ, 2021

57. RFE/RL, 2021

58. ter Rele, 2021

59. RFE/RL, 2021

60. Roth, 2021

61. RFE/RL, 2021; Roth 2021

62. RFE/RL, 2021; Deutsch, 2021

63. Deutsch and Meijer, 2021; Roth, 2021

64. ter Rele, 2021.

65. CPJ, 2021.

Response from the International Community

In an interview with Global Human Rights Defence, a representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said the decision to expel Vennink was an “ad hoc” opportunity “to demonstrate its protest about the trial that has been ongoing about the shooting of the plane over Eastern Ukraine a few years ago. Instead of doing something as harsh as kicking out Dutch diplomats, they decided to find some ridiculous excuse to kick out the journalists. Kicking out a diplomat would mean a diplomatic war, it means something more serious.” In other statements, the CPJ has said “Vennink's forced departure reeks of censorship” and demanded the reversal of the decision to revoke Vennink's “visa and residence and allow him to continue his work in Russia”.⁶⁶

In addition, the International Press Institute made a statement with the same demands, adding “journalists should not suffer because of the political relations between their home and host countries”.⁶⁷

The Dutch foreign ministry expressed its regret for this decision and stated “it is not acceptable for the Netherlands when a journalist is forced out of the country against his will”.⁶⁸

66. Ibid.

67. ter Rele, 2021

68. Deutsch, 2021.

CONCLUSION

This report has demonstrated the myriad ways the Russian government has ramped up its suppression of free and independent journalism in 2021. The first section of this report has outlined several laws passed this year that have inhibited criticism of the Russian government and created a variety of new ways to send journalists to prison and shut down critical media outlets. The aim of these legislative changes appears to have been the targeted demonisation of the industry as a whole by labeling them 'foreign agents', 'undesirables' and disseminators of 'misinformation'.

The harassment of journalists has reached new levels since Kremlin opponent Alexei Navalny's return to Russia and immediate arrest on arrival.⁶⁹ Journalists reporting events related to the protests against the arrest and detention of Navalny's or the ongoing annexation of Crimea by Russia are being subjected to unprecedented, and sometimes violent, obstruction, what is widely regarded by the international community as arbitrary detention, and torture in prison.⁷⁰ As allegations of torture against journalists go uninvestigated by the Russian authorities, many journalists feel they must self-censor to maintain their safety or flee Russian territory, undoubtedly drastically reducing the number of nonconformist voices.

As the internet has become more widely used in the last several years, this has prompted the Russian government to increase the scale of its censorship of the internet. U.S. social media platforms were slowed, blocked, and heavily fined under the Russian government's heightened censorship powers for hosting content critical to the Kremlin and for not showing state-media produced content. Moreover, Russian citizens' content has been removed on social media after they posted videos of the demonstrations in support of Navalny.

Finally, this report has outlined an emerging trend in 2021 of the expulsion of foreign journalists in retaliation for their government's opposition to the Kremlin's actions, creating a pervasive sense of fear among foreign journalists in Russia, which may further contribute to weakening the presence of any free and independent coverage of Russian politics.

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