



Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

**Written Evidence for the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission Inquiry
into human rights in Russia**

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Introduction

Vladimir Putin's 18 years in power in Russia have had a disastrous effect on freedom of expression in the country. Russia has an abysmal record on press freedom, with a ranking of 148th out of 180 countries on Reporters Without Borders' 2018 World Press Freedom Index.¹ Five journalists and two bloggers are currently behind bars in connection with their work, and violent attacks against journalists take place with overwhelming impunity.

Putin's landslide victory on 18 March 2018 has extended his fourth term as president until 2024, making him the first Kremlin leader to serve two decades in power since Josef Stalin. It is against the backdrop of his presidency that the deterioration of press freedom has descended to a state of repression not seen since the fall of the USSR.

Independence of media outlets

The Kremlin controls the major media outlets in Russia, and there has been an unrelenting effort to expand and consolidate state control over the media sector. The most watched television channels today, Pervy Kanal and Rossiya-1, are majority state-owned, while *NTV* is controlled by state gas giant Gazprom. The strength of the Kremlin's hand in the media sector was further accentuated after the Rossiya Segodny consortium was established by an Executive Order of the President of Russia in December 2013. The news agency, which is both owned and operated by the Russian government, aims to present to the world a 'Russian point of view', namely the official positions of authorities. Media outlets such as RT and Sputnik are used to extend Russia's propaganda network abroad.

Under Putin's presidency, increasingly repressive legislation has been enacted restricting press freedom. Most of these laws are vague and broad, and cannot be applied systematically, but they increase the vulnerability of journalists and provide further ammunition to the authorities. In 2014, a law was passed drastically limiting foreign investment in the Russian media, which has further weakened independent media and facilitated the takeover of a number of independent outlets. The legislation controlling access to the internet and news sites has become more drastic every year, and internet users face prison sentences for comments on social networks, or even a simple 'like'.

¹ <https://rsf.org/en/russia>

There is an ever-increasing suffocation of independent media outlets in Russia. High quality investigative journalism exists in independent media such as *Novaya Gazeta*, Dojd TV and RBC. However, the audience of these outlets is vastly out of proportion with the media controlled by the state. If one of these outlets succeeds in reaching a larger part of the population, it is attacked and repackaged in an appropriate manner.

- For example, Dojd TV was created in 2010, and although confined to cable and satellite, it was the only independent national TV channel, and was steadily gaining ratings. It was abruptly excluded from the main satellite and cable packages in 2014 and faced with the loss of its advertisers and the eviction of its premises, forced to raise the price of the subscription, it is almost reduced to a web-TV.² The channel now has more viewers in Israel than in Russia.
- RBC is the only independent media group that could compete in terms of audience with state media. Following the publication of a number of investigations into corruption, growing pressure on the owner led him to fire all editorial management in 2016 and sell the media to a less independent investor.³ Many of the new editorial management came from state media. However, RBC maintains a certain level of independence and publishes incriminating investigations from time to time.

National TV channels remain a constant source of propaganda, the peak of which was reached at the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine. This propaganda fosters a climate of hatred and paranoia towards independent journalists, further impeding journalists' ability to report independently. A culture of self-censorship is pervasive.

Restrictive internet laws

Over the past six years, Russia has adopted a huge raft of laws restricting freedom of expression and the right to privacy online. These include the creation in 2012 of a blacklist of websites, managed by Roskomnadzor, Russia's communications regulator, and the incremental extension of the grounds upon which websites can be blocked, including without a court order.⁴ The 2016 so-called 'Yarovaya Law', justified on the grounds of 'countering extremism', requires all communications providers and internet operators to store metadata about their users' communications activities, to disclose decryption keys at the security services' request, and to use only encryption methods approved by the Russian government - in practical terms, to create a backdoor for Russia's security agents to access internet users' data, traffic, and communications.⁵

Since Putin's re-election last month, his government has intensified its crackdown on the internet in particular, by ordering the blocking of Telegram, a popular encrypted messaging service, as well as measures taken to ban censorship-circumvention tools. On 13 April 2018, Moscow's Tagansky District Court granted Roskomnadzor, Russia's communications regulator, its request to block access to Telegram after it refused to

² <https://rsf.org/en/news/unprecedented-offensive-against-independent-tv-station>

³ <https://rsf.org/en/news/departure-media-group-editors-serious-blow-independent-journalism-russia>

⁴ <https://rsf.org/en/news/more-draconian-legislation-how-far-will-duma-go>

⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/news/draconian-new-law-tightens-control-over-communication-russia>

surrender its encryption keys to the Russian intelligence agencies.⁶ In light of direct and indirect state control over many traditional Russian media and the self-censorship many other media outlets feel compelled to exercise, instant messaging channels like Telegram have become a crucial means of disseminating ideas and opinions.

Impunity for violence against journalists

Violence against journalists remains largely unpunished. A staggering total of 34 journalists have been killed in connection with their work in Russia since 2000. Most were investigative journalists who had reported on corruption and crime. There has been impunity in the overwhelming majority of these cases, and investigations into the murders of journalists almost never lead to the masterminds behind the attacks.

Over the past five years, at least three journalists have been killed in Russia because of their work: Akhmednabi Akhmednabiev, deputy of the weekly *Novoe Delo*, in 2013; Timur Kuashev, who used to be Nalchik correspondent for *Dosh*, in 2014; and Nikolai Andrushchenko, co-founder of the *Novy Peterburg* weekly, in 2017. The person or persons who ordered the murder of well-known journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 have never been arrested.

Impunity has in turn fostered a growing climate of insecurity for independent journalists in Russia. Yulia Latynina, a Russian journalist who worked for *Novaya Gazeta* and *Ekho Moskvy*, was forced to flee the country in September 2017 after a series of attacks in which, inter alia, her car was set on fire, an unidentified substance was sprayed around her home, and faeces were thrown at her.

Imprisonment of journalists

In addition to violent attacks against journalists, Russia currently has five journalists (Alexander Sokolov, Igor Rudnikov, Zhalaudi Geriyev, Alexei Nazimov and Alexander Tolmachev) and two bloggers (Alexander Valov and Alexei Kungurov) jailed in connection with their work.

- **Alexander Sokolov** is an investigative journalist sentenced to 3.5 years in jail after reporting misappropriations on a major strategic site.⁷ Sokolov had specialised in covering politics and corruption at his job with the independent media group RBC since 2013. His last story was about the mass embezzlement of public funds in the construction of the Vostochny Cosmodrome.
- **Igor Rudnikov**, the editor-in-chief of the main independent newspaper of the Kaliningrad region, was imprisoned by the local chief of the special police whose corruption he was exposing.⁸ His detention was an apparent attempt to close the weekly newspaper he edits, *Novye Kolesa*, one of the region's few independent media outlets, which has indeed since been closed.

⁶ <https://rsf.org/en/news/blocking-telegram-russia-crosses-another-red-line-online-censorship>

⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/news/russia-journalist-alexandre-sokolov-condamne-in-call-three-years-and-half-of-jail>

⁸ <https://rsf.org/en/news/russia-editor-local-independent-newspaper-jailed-kaliningrad>

- **Alexander Tolmachev**, the editor in chief of the magazine *Upolnomochen Zayavit* and of the *Pro Rostov* newspaper, was found guilty of extortion of a Novocherkassk businessman, from whom the editor allegedly demanded one million rubles for not publishing compromising information. Tolmachev was arrested on 20 December 2011 and was immediately placed in preventive detention, in solitary confinement, on the pretext that his journalistic activities could prejudice the judicial investigation.⁹
- **Alexander Valov**, BlogSochi editor, was arrested on 19 January. Two days later a judge ordered him held provisionally for at least two months pending trial on a charge of trying to extort money from Yury Napso, a leading Sochi politician who is a representative in the Duma (Russian parliament). The charge against Valov, is based solely on a complaint filed by Napso's assistant, with no sworn statement, no material evidence and no statement by Napso himself.
- **Alexei Kungurov** received a 30-month jail sentence last December for criticising Russia's military intervention in Syria. A military court in Tyumen, Western Siberia, imposed the sentence on Kungurov in a trial held behind closed doors on 20 December, after finding him guilty of "justifying terrorism" in a blog post entitled, "Who are Putin's hawks really bombing?"¹⁰

Chechnya and Crimea

With the encouragement of Moscow, Chechnya and Crimea (annexed in 2014) have turned into 'information black holes', dominated by fear and virtually purged of any independent journalism. In Chechnya, the totalitarian regime of Ramzan Kadyrov operates with the utmost impunity. The region has been virtually emptied of independent journalists and criticism of the regime.

- Zhalaudi Gueriev a young Chechen journalist, received a three-year jail sentence on a charge of drug possession on 5 September 2016 that was clearly a politically-motivated punishment for his reporting. The court systematically ignored defence testimony confirming that three plainclothesmen kidnapped Geriyev from a minibus that was taking him from a town in the interior of Chechnya to the capital, Grozny, from where he had planned to travel to Moscow for work-related reasons.¹¹
- Independent Moscow-based newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* has been threatened by the Chechen authorities ever since it reported that gay men and women were being persecuted in Chechnya.¹² The impunity enjoyed by those who masterminded well-known *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Anna Politkovskaya's murder and those who murdered her colleague, Natalia Estemirova, have reinforced the climate of fear that prevails in the region.

⁹ <https://rsf.org/en/news/relentless-legal-persecution-two-journalists-rostov-don>

¹⁰ <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-calls-release-blogger-who-criticized-russian-policy-syria>

¹¹ <https://rsf.org/en/news/young-independent-journalist-jailed-arbitrarily-chechnya>

¹² <https://rsf.org/en/news/time-end-chechnyas-impunity-after-threats-novaya-gazeta>

- Aleksei Nazimov, the founder and editor of *Your paper*, a weekly published in the resort town of Alushta, Crimea, is alleged to have blackmailed a local politician over information that would have tarnished the politician's reputation. Nazimov, who is known for his opposition to the local authorities, was detained by a court in Alushta.¹³

Recommendations for what the UK could do:

- Raise press freedom concerns as a matter of priority in all areas of bilateral relations with Russia – in particular the need for the immediate and unconditional release of the five journalists and two bloggers unjustly jailed, and for an end to the vicious cycle of violence against journalists and impunity for their attackers.
- Raise these concerns as a matter of priority at international bodies where Russia has human rights obligations including the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the United Nations.
- Once the Government Sanctions Bill becomes law, ensure use of its Magnitsky Amendment to hold to account Russian officials responsible for violent attacks against journalists, unjust imprisonment of journalists, and other abuses of press freedom and broader human rights.
- Seek concrete ways to support the embattled independent media in Russia, and to improve access to independent information of the Russian population.

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¹³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/crimea-s-unfreedom-of-speech>