Journalist Fellowship Paper

Still listening: audience strategies of Russia-focused media in exile

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Preface

At the outset, it is crucial to acknowledge the thousands of Ukrainian and accredited international journalists who have continued – in the face of violence – to cover the war in Ukraine since February 2022.

In the full context of the large-scale humanitarian catastrophe provoked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the fracturing of Russia's media market may seem minor by comparison, but it carries significant implications.

Reporters Without Borders has recorded more than 100 instances of crimes against journalists by the Russian armed forces, including targeted fire, arrests and disappearances. Among these 100, at least 11 journalists have lost their lives. Local independent voices in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia have been forced to cease all activity.

I want to express my deepest respect for my Ukrainian peers, some of whom I collaborate with daily, and my acknowledgement of all you have lost.

Introduction

> *I am so tired of opening YouTube to find yet another video titled* ‘Impending collapse of Putin’s regime’ *on my homepage. It’s like some invisible force guides my hand, and I click on this video, even though I know I will not learn anything new.*

This a paraphrased translation of a monologue by Russian stand-up comedian, Vitaly Kosarev, on his satirical YouTube show, *Russia – Not Today*.
In the October 2024 episode, Kosarev goes on to describe how – regardless of which independent Russian outlet has produced the latest prediction of Putin’s imminent downfall – the format is always the same: a news anchor interviewing an overexposed expert.

> *This poor guy: he answers a Zoom call; his bed is still unmade in the background. But he replies: ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ while trying to pull on his blazer, ‘the collapse of the regime is inevitable. As inevitable as yesterday, I would say. Thanks for calling, but goodbye. I’ve got Michael Nucky and Current Time on the other line’.* [1]

Kosarev pauses here as the Russian-speaking crowd at a Belgrade comedy club erupts in laughter. I laughed too, the first time I saw it. Then I sighed.
As a journalist at Current Time in Riga, sometimes it is my job to book those expert guests Kosarev is roasting. My outlet – and others like it – are the punchline. But do we deserve it?

This project was written almost exactly three years after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent mass exodus of journalists from independent media in Russia. Across Telegram and social media, many of those now in exile are

[1] Michael Nucky is a journalist and popular YouTube blogger, and Current Time is a Russian-language TV channel, operated by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

marking the date they fled: two years out, three years out. Many of those posts will share similar questions about the future of their professional integrity:

- Is it still possible to stay relevant to an audience inside Russia?
- Who are our readers or viewers now?
- Where are they?

This project asks those questions directly — to editors, reporters, and publishers from Russia-focused media in exile.

It focuses specifically on how they perceive their audience, how they define and structure that audience, and how they try to hold onto it — even as their websites are blocked and their platforms face other administrative pressure from Russian authorities.

This is not a comprehensive study of exiled media; it doesn't attempt to compare Russian exile media to those working from other authoritarian contexts. Nor does it address the critical issue of financial sustainability — that's been explored in depth by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the JX Fund, and others.

I do, however, consider the Russian services of international broadcasters like the BBC, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Deutsche Welle. Their funding structures may differ from independent outlets, but they face many of the same editorial challenges — rooted in the same forces of repression, distance, and doubt.

A note on terminology

An important question I've had to navigate in this project is what to call media outlets that report on Russia from abroad.

In literature and articles, you'll see a range of terms in use. The most common is "media in exile" – accurate and widely understood, but not always welcomed by those inside these newsrooms, as it carries the burden of the context of political preferences.

Other labels include "émigré media", or "offshore journalism", a term reportedly coined by the attorney Ilya Novikov.

For this project, I'm less interested in a newsroom's funding model, registration status, or internal structure – what matters is who they're speaking to. That's why I use the term "Russia-focused media in exile", to reflect that these are outlets working from outside the country, but producing journalism aimed primarily at people inside Russia.

Outlets in this category might have very different setups, but what they share is a goal: to gather information from Russia and its surrounding regions, and to convey that information for the benefit of a Russian audience.

When referring to individual journalists, I follow the framing used in *Kremlin Media Wars: Censorship and Control Since the Invasion of Ukraine*, and use terms like independent, critical, liberal, or oppositional – all shorthand for journalists working outside Kremlin control, politically and financially.

Where needed, I also use "independent media in exile", based on working definitions like those developed by the JX Fund.

Russia's media landscape pre- and post-2022

Three years of war in Ukraine has reshaped the landscape of Russian media. Following the effective introduction of military censorship in Russia, a sizable number of outlets relocated beyond the country's borders to continue reporting from an uncensored space. It is estimated that between 1,000 and 1,800 journalists and media workers left Russia in 2022, and this tally does not include correspondents for international outlets.

Ksenia Luchenko, a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said the situation "represents a unique experiment, the results of which are likely to be significant not only for Russia but also for other countries undergoing processes of autocratization." The JX Fund calls it "a phenomenon of historical proportions."

To understand what has changed, we need to look at what came before. The sections that follow sketch the structure of the Russian media system before February 2022, the forces that drove journalists into exile, and the restrictions now shaping how reporting is done — both inside and outside the country.

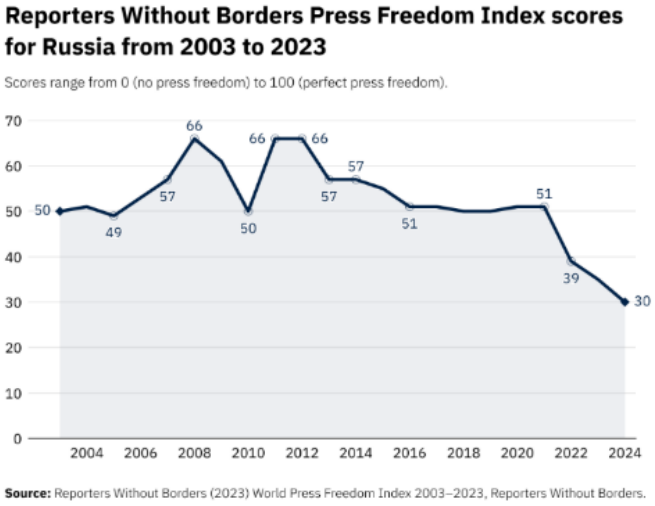
A tale of two media

Since the formation of a "new Russia" in the 1990s – perhaps even since the announcement of the "perestroika" policy in the late 1980s – Russian media has been a constantly evolving system characterized by its volatility. A review of the RSF Press Freedom Index data shows that, despite modest improvements in the early 2000s and 2010s, overall press freedom in Russia has been in decline since 2003.[2]

Long before the full-scale invasion began, the country's press had been operating under what media scholar John A. Dunn described as a "two-tier system". [3] The first tier consisted of tightly controlled television channels and print outlets, while the second tier allowed a degree of media freedom, functioning as a "safety-valve" for oppositional voices. It's an arrangement that provided the illusion of media pluralism and prevented the radicalizing threat of dissenting voices. Russian media

[2] Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index 2003–2024, Reporters Without Borders. Available at: https://rsf.org/en/index (Accessed: 8 July 2025).
[3] Dunn, J.A. (2014) 'Lottizzazione Russian style: Russia's two-tier media system', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66(9), pp. 1425–1451. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2014.956441 (Accessed: 25 February 2025)

ownership was also concentrated in the hands of political elites, blurring the lines between state and commercial enterprises.



Russia's press freedom score declined between 2003 and 2020, before collapsing sharply after 2022

After February 2022, that second tier of fairly independent publications disappeared – along with its 'safety-valve' function. As Anastasia Stepanova, co-author of *Kremlin Media Wars Censorship and Control Since the Invasion of Ukraine*, explained:

> *"Presently, Russian media operates as a state-controlled one-tier system with a combination of imposed censorship from the state and voluntary self-censorship from journalists and editors. According to former NTV news anchor Lilia Gildeeva, 'the state channels' work is based on the 'theme guidelines' (*temniki*), received from 'above' [...] This means that journalists and news anchors cover only the narratives and angles that were supplied or approved by the Kremlin."*

Instead of perceiving the Russian media market as a single system consisting of the media that left and the media that "remained," we can use another classification that Luchenko described.[4] According to her, the landscape today consists of a system of two large and interacting domains – censored and uncensored.

In turn, the censored domain can be further divided into several sectors:

[4] Inside and Outside Censorship: The Russian media landscape two years after the outbreak of the war, RE:Russia, 22 May 2024, https://re-russia.net/en/expertise/0154/ (Accessed 25 February 2025)

- Officialdom: state and corporate media disseminating and supporting the official point of view
- Corporate Media: operating under conditions of censorship but seeking to maintain journalistic relevance (*Kommersant*, *Forbes*, etc.)
- Niche Independent Publications: observing the rules of censorship but otherwise striving to maintain journalistic standards and resist propaganda (*Novaya Gazeta*, *People of Baikal*, etc.).

The uncensored domain can be segmented, too:

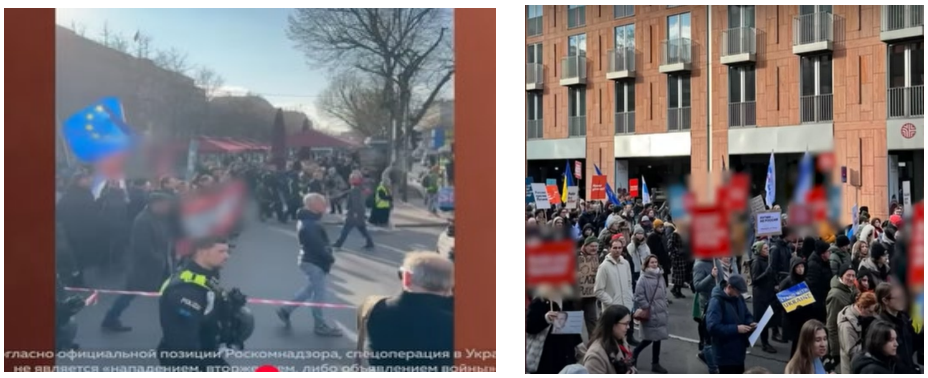
- Traditional Media Outlets: those that have relocated or were created by relocated journalists (*Meduza*, TV Rain, *Kholod*, etc.)
- New Media: created by political and social organisations and initiatives (FBK media, OVD-Info, Teplitsa of Social Technologies, etc.)
- Individual Media: author-driven, blogger projects (Dud, Kats, Plyushchev, Shikhman, etc.), which have a large audience.

In addition to these homegrown segments, the relocated media include Russian-language efforts by Western corporations — "primarily the BBC Russian Service, Svoboda and Current Time, and to some extent, The Moscow Times".
While it's true that a significant proportion of Russian journalists have moved out of Russia, it's not the case that only propagandists remain in Russia or that all exiled media is of a certain political persuasion. In Luchenko's words:

> *This generalisation is understandable if one radically labels all media that comply with Russian law as propaganda and ignores small regional and niche publications. However, if one considers only those authors, editorial boards, and brands that operate outside the Russian Federation and are therefore free from its regulatory constraints to be journalism, this will present a distorted and ideologized picture that excludes important processes taking place within the country's media landscape.*

Some major uncensored domain outlets (such as Kommersant, RBC, Vedomosti) continue to operate in Russia. And the second segment of media that have not left Russia are small independent local and niche publications that report on what is happening in Russian regions (*Yuga.ru*, *Govorit NeMoskva*, *Karavan*, etc.) or cover niche topics (*Mel* on education, *Takie Dela* on charity).

A number of YouTube projects continue to work from Russia, too. For example, Redakciya is a channel operated by popular journalist and TV presenter Alexey Pivovarov. He was declared a *foreign agent* and lost the ability to finance his channel through advertising, but he continues to report the news on his channel, including news related to the war in Ukraine. At the same time, he complies with all censorship laws adopted in Russia. For example, he blurs the slogans on the video of the anti-war demonstration in Berlin and adds a caption that Roskomnadzor does not consider what is happening in Ukraine a war (but still reports on this rally).



Screenshots from Redakciya YouTube channel show the blurring of protest signs at a rally in Berlin

For uncensored domain sites still operating out of Russia, war is the elephant in the room that has to be ignored, according to Dmitry Butrin, deputy editor-in-chief of the Kommersant publishing house. In an interview with Luchenko, Butrin said that even if they could mention it, there would be very little audience demand for it.

"In the place we are in – and it is unpleasant to be in, and no one is proud to be in this place – the reader wants untruth from us," he said. "The reader wants endless stories about how everything will end in favour of the forces of good. The reader demands a continuous description of how we move in the narrative from bad to good. The reader wants there to be 'warriors of light' here and let the 'warriors of darkness' have a twisted face. And everything that the reader does not like is propaganda for the enemy."[5]

It may sound like an excuse for self-censorship, but this is not a uniquely Russian problem. Speaking to journalist Guillermo Draper for his project on "Snow White Mirror Syndrome", the editor and founder of Spanish newspaper elDiario.es, Ignacio Escolar, said: "We see this in the reader or community member who looks to the

[5] Butrin, D. (n.d.) 'The reader now wants untruth', *Colta.ru*. Available at: https://www.colta.ru/articles/revision/29728-dmitriy-butrin-chitatel-seychas-hochet-nepravdu (Accessed: 25.02.2025).

newspaper for a mirror that tells him how handsome he is, how smart he is, how good his people are… and how bad the others are. That you endorse him not in the truth, but in his prejudices, in his ideology, in his values, in his biases."[6]

Despite serious ideological differences – most notably over Russia's role in the full-scale war in Ukraine – Russian journalists in exile also face similar questions about their audiences, which will be described in the following chapters.

A brief history of the exodus

> *News anchor Vasily Polonsky: "We are all extremely tired. Everything was incredibly tense today. […] I think, friends, we should end here. This is the end of today's broadcast – and a pause, a short one – which the TV Rain channel is now taking.*
> *Journalist Vladimir Romensky: "*¡No pasarán!*" [Spanish anti-war, anti-regime statement]*
> *News anchor Vasily Polonsky: "*¡No pasarán!*"*
> *TV Rain co-founder Natalya Sindeyeva: "And no to war."*
> *News anchor Vasily Polonsky: "Definitely, no to war."*

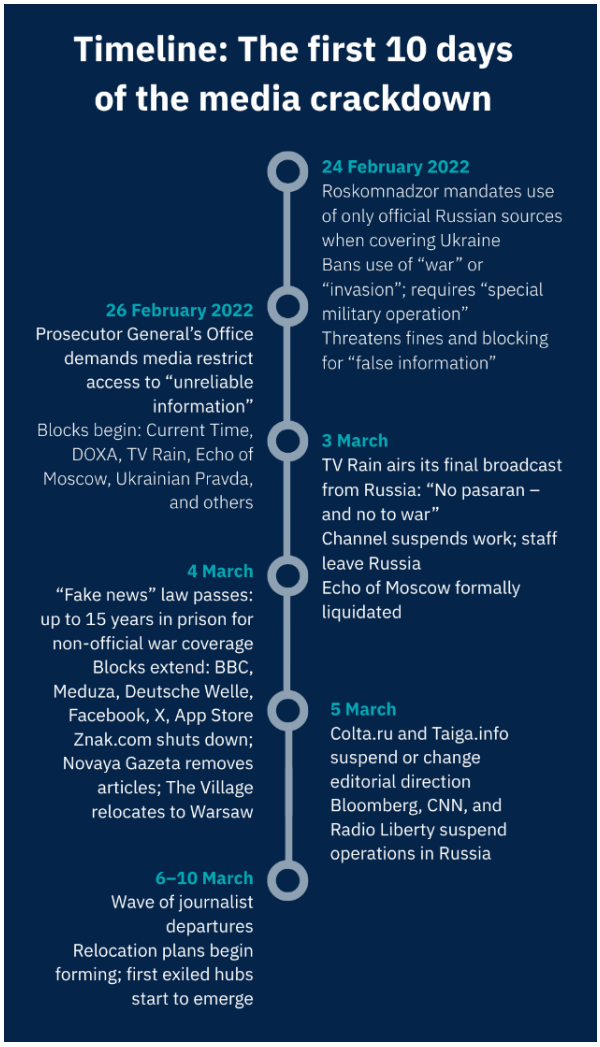
This dialogue concluded the final TV Rain broadcast from Russia on the 3 March 2022. The day before, the channel's editor-in-chief and several employees had left Russia amid the blocking of the site and threats.[7]

Some of the threats came in the form of persistent rumours about possible searches and arrests at the offices of "independent" media. As TV Rain's editor-in-chief recounted in 2023: "I believe that an operation was orchestrated against independent media, primarily in Moscow. From the very first day, rumours spread by word of mouth: 'a source told my colleague that journalists from TV Rain and the BBC will be arrested', and 'Another source said that journalists who had ever worked in Ukraine would be arrested for treason'.
It escalated to the point that on the evening of March 1, just hours after TV Rain was

[6] Draper, G. (2024) Snow White Mirror Syndrome: Protecting editorial values in a reader revenue model. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/snow-white-mirror-syndrome-protecting-editorial-values-reader-revenue-model (Accessed: 8 July 2025).
[7] RBC (2022) Sledkom opened a case over "fakes" about the actions of the Russian army after a statement by the Ministry of Defence. RBC, 2 March. Available at: https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/03/2022/621f7a4e9a79470e6a0764c9 (Accessed: 8 July 2025).

blocked, even our contractors – whose integrity I had no reason to doubt – were telling me that, according to their source (who had supposedly never been wrong), a police raid was imminent at TV Rain. But no such raid ever happened."[8]

In the end, on 3 March, the police did come to the TV station, but there were no profound consequences.[9] That is not to say the first weeks of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had no serious consequences – it forever changed the landscape of Russian media and the lives of many journalists.



Timeline shows events that unfolded in the days following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

[8] Dzyadko, T. (2023) Gde by my ni nakhodilis' [Wherever we may be]. Colta.ru, 3 March. Available at: https://www.colta.ru/articles/revision/29721-tihon-dzyadko-gde-by-my-ni-nahodilis (Accessed: 8 July 2025).
[9] @tvrain (2022) Final moments before TV Rain signs off [Instagram video], 3 March. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/tv/Capsw_loa41/ (Accessed: 8 July 2025).

By March 2022, Russia had enacted de facto military censorship through a "fake news" law, which criminalized referring to the war in Ukraine as anything other than a "special military operation". It was followed by other measures – including the blocking of independent media websites.

Facing the threat of fines and potential arrest, hundreds of journalists left the country during the first months of the war. In the words of an editor of one of the international media outlets that had an office in Moscow at that time: "Rumours always help with the intimidation. So you do not need to raid any newsroom; you just need to hint that this might happen.

"And if you are an independent journalist and you were reporting for 10 years about all sorts of repression against human rights, opposition, and so on and so forth… you know pretty well what might happen. You do not need any second source to confirm that, yes, it will be terrible if they come after you. And so that is why it was very swift."

Some journalists left alongside the relocation of entire offices. But organising such relocations took weeks and, in some cases, months. Those who wanted to continue working without censorship – while also avoiding the threat of persecution – left the country on their own, in advance of their teams. This was made possible by the hybrid work environment many newsrooms had operated under since the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, some media outlets assembled online from different countries – with some of them eventually adopting the "distributed team" format.

Speaking anonymously, the editor of one of the international media outlets that had an office in Moscow in 2022, told me: "All the companies were trying to prepare for better or worse. But after the invasion, I think – and we saw it even in our newsroom – that many people decided that it was a personal choice and a personal decision: whether they would like to quit journalism, to leave the country, or to stay and wait and hope that it might settle somehow.

> *"The personal choices were always more important, and they played a crucial role. […] I remember I had a chart of all staff previously based in Russia with an indication of where they are, and you cannot imagine the geography! It was from Southeast Asia to Western Europe – everywhere apart from Russia. People just fled themselves – wherever they could go."*

This mass exodus led to the emergence of new media hubs in cities such as Tbilisi, Riga, Prague, Vilnius, Berlin, and locations in the Balkans, where Russian independent journalists sought to rebuild their operations.

Major Western media outlets, including the BBC, Bloomberg, Reuters, and the *New York Times*, also closed or dramatically reduced their Moscow offices and evacuated their staff.

The media relocation trend was not limited to Russian organisations; Belarusian independent media, facing similar repression, also sought refuge in various European countries. According to a 2024 study by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), at least 81 independent Russian media and 48 Belarusian outlets were operating in exile, though the exact numbers remain difficult to determine due to security concerns and logistical challenges in registration.[10]

A 2023 study by the JX Fund identified 93 Russian independent media operating in exile, with over a third established between 2022 and 2023.[11] These media outlets cover a diverse range of topics beyond just politics and news, including human rights, ecology, and historical analysis.

It is worth noting that while big cities like Moscow and St Petersburg remain central to the exile media sphere, over 20% of projects originated from regional cities or republics, illustrating the broad-based nature of independent journalism efforts.

As the TRF report notes, among exiled media organisations are well-established prominent Russian outlets like *Meduza*, TV Rain, and 7x7 Horizontal Russia, as well as newer entities like KomiDaily and Posle Media. Some organisations, such as *Novaya Gazeta*, launched additional entities in Europe as a security measure and a way to circumvent restrictions imposed by Russian authorities.

There are also journalists from opposition media outlets who chose to remain in Russia after the war began. The reasons might have been personal (having spouses,

[10] Thomson Reuters Foundation (2024) Sustaining Independent Journalism: Civil Society Organisations' Support for Belarusian and Russian Exiled Media, p. 17. Available at: https://www.trust.org/resource/sustaining-independent-journalism-civil-society-organisations-support-for-belarusian-and-russian-exiled-media/ (Accessed: 8 July 2025).
[11] JX Fund (2023) Sustaining Independence: The Current State of Russian Media in Exile, JX Fund. Available at: https://jx-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Sustaining_Independence-Current_State_of_Russian_Media_in_Exile_2023.pdf (Accessed: 8 July 2025).

parents or children who could not leave) or ideological, such as the opinion that it is impossible to work as a journalist covering Russia from outside of Russia.

Two notable examples are the former editor-in-chief and co-founder of *Novaya Gazeta,* Dmitry Muratov (Nobel Peace Prize winner), and former editor-in-chief of Echo of Moscow radio station, Aleksey Venediktov. Both continue living in Russia, despite being labelled *foreign agents*. (More on this label in the following chapter.)

Speaking on Egor Glumov's GlumOFF podcast in 2024, Muratov described his decision to stay in Russia as an act of loyalty to other colleagues at *Novaya Gazeta* who also remained.[12] If you stay, he told Glumov, you're accused of legitimising the regime; if you go, you're accused of abandoning the country – there are critics on both sides, and each side claims the moral high ground.
In 2023, Venediktov told SwissInfo.ch that he was receiving threats but thought that these risks come with the role of a journalist in Russia.[13] His goal is to continue informing the Russian public about the war, and he sees staying as the only way to do that credibly.

A publisher of a small independent outlet now labelled a *foreign agent* anonymously told me many of its employees are still in Russia – a secret they keep for security reasons. "After the war started, most of our team did leave, but some of them stayed. […] Many of those who stayed were not at risk of criminal charges in Russia [being non-journalists] and were not ready to leave. But some journalists also stayed." They continued: "As we approach the end of the third year, we see that among all the countries where we have a [journalistic] presence – about nine countries in total – Russia has moved into first place. We now have the highest percentage of people living in Russia."

The decision to stay or leave – to report from within or beyond – remains fraught. But each journalist's choice reflects a shared goal: to continue bearing witness.

[12] GlumOFF (2023) Dmitry Muratov in Yerevan: a big conversation about what will never happen again [YouTube video], 10 June. Available at: https://youtu.be/uBSNnkUEJvg?t=4944 (Accessed: 8 July 2025).
[13] Venediktov, A. (2023) Aleksei Venediktov: The main vice of this regime is imperialism and revanchism. SWI swissinfo.ch, 20 January. Available at: https://www.swissinfo.ch/rus/business/48262306 (Accessed: 8 July 2025).

What shape does regime oppression take?

As outlined in the JX Fund report, the Russian government has established three legal categories to suppress independent journalism: *foreign agent*, *undesirable organisation*, and *extremist organisation*. Each designation carries severe consequences, restricting the work of affected individuals and media outlets.

According to the Mass Media Defence Centre – a Russian NGO now itself labelled a *foreign agent* – by the end of 2024 there were 688 entities on the foreign agent register, including 160 individual journalists and 63 media organisations.[14] Although the pace of new designations slowed compared to 2023, enforcement became more aggressive, with a rise in administrative fines and criminal cases linked to violations of *foreign agent* regulations.

The *foreign agent* label is applied to individuals and entities accused of receiving foreign support or being under external influence. Introduced for media organisations in 2017 and extended to individual journalists in 2020, the designation imposes strict reporting obligations. Those listed must publicly declare their status in all communications, label their content accordingly, and file quarterly financial reports. Furthermore, *foreign agents* engaged in media work must register as legal entities and submit to costly financial audits.

The category of *undesirable organisation* targets foreign or international legal entities deemed a threat to Russia's national security. Although formally intended for NGOs, the designation has also affected Russian media projects linked to international partners. Once labelled *undesirable*, an organisation is effectively dismantled: its branches are shut down, financial transactions are restricted, websites are blocked, and any public activity – including publishing or hosting events – is prohibited. Even indirect engagement, such as reposting content or quoting from a banned organisation, can result in administrative penalties or criminal prosecution.

In 2024, Russia expanded its list of *undesirable organisations*, adding 65 new entries — including foreign-affiliated media such as *The Moscow Times* and Radio Free

[14] Media Rights Protection Center. (2025) 'Freedom of Speech — 2024', *Media Rights Protection Center*, 22 January. Available at: https://mmdc.ru/blog/2025/01/22/svoboda-slova-2024/ (Accessed 26 February 2025).

Europe/Radio Liberty. According to the Mass Media Defence Centre, at least 79 journalists and experts faced legal consequences for cooperating with these outlets.

The *extremist organisation* designation is the most severe. Groups that receive this label face immediate dissolution, with all affiliated branches and personnel affected. While no independent media outlet has officially been declared *extremist* to date, the legal framework allows for it – and this has a chilling effect.

Another form of pressure targets the personal safety of journalists.

Even journalists working from abroad continue to face threats, including surveillance, cyberattacks, and financial suppression. But operating inside Russia is far more dangerous. According to the Mass Media Defence Centre, at least 45 Russian journalists faced criminal charges in 2024. The most common accusations included non-compliance with *foreign agent* regulations (Article 330.1 of Russia's Criminal Code), spreading false information about the military (Article 207.3), and participating in *extremist organisations* (Article 282.1).

Several prominent journalists were prosecuted in 2024, including Masha Gessen and Mikhail Zygar, both sentenced in absentia. Notably, *Wall Street Journal* journalist Evan Gershkovich was sentenced to 16 years in prison on espionage charges before being released in a prisoner swap.

In the same year, at least 24 searches were carried out on journalists, their families, and the offices of media organisations. Additionally, 33 journalists were detained, with around a third of the cases involving reporters from *Sota.Vision*. Others reported receiving direct threats, including anonymous messages and visits from security services.

Why labels matter

Prior to the presidential election in 2024, the Russian Parliament banned individuals and entities labelled as *foreign agents* from accepting sponsorships or advertising, cutting off a major source of income.

For many Russian media outlets in exile — some of which had operated independently for years — the move further destabilised business models already under strain from state pressure, economic downturn, and the logistical challenges of processing payments under Western sanctions.

The pressure exerted by the state is not only financial. These labels also cloud even a basic understanding of who a media outlet's audience is.

Because many independent media websites are blocked in Russia, they can only be accessed via a VPN – making it nearly impossible to determine where the reader is accessing the site from. As a result, outlets have had to rely other sources of data to calculate the audience.

It is also dangerous for readers who are inside Russia to share materials from media outlets that are considered *undesirable organisations*. This means even distributing materials on social networks becomes complicated – undermining one of the last direct paths to audiences.

Finally, these labels shape audience attitudes, and deter potential sources from engaging with journalists.

Polling shows that a significant portion of the Russian public supports at least some of these oppressive laws — and perceives labels like *foreign agent* or *undesirable organisation* as a kind of "black spot", akin to the one found in Treasure Island.[15]

In June 2022, a Levada Center poll found that most Russians supported the new law introducing criminal penalties for spreading "fakes" about Russian military actions in Ukraine.[16] Seventy-nine percent were in favour of the law, including 53% who were "completely in favour" and 26% "rather in favour". Fourteen percent opposed it (6% "categorically against," 8% "rather against"), while 7% found it difficult to answer.

A note on polling

Some argue that wartime conditions in Russia have compromised the quality of survey data (in particular, because the collection of primary data is difficult due to its politicization). However, others contend that, from a methodological standpoint, Russian public opinion surveys remain a robust working tool. This project takes the latter view.

The term *foreign agent* has been a topic of significant public discussion and research in Russia. In 2022 and 2023, surveys by the state-owned All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (VCIOM showed consistently negative associations — but also shifting perceptions.

[15] The Black Spot is a literary device invented by Robert Louis Stevenson for his novel Treasure Island. It is a message on paper or card, signifying the verdict of accused pirates. Depending on the occasion, it means either their deposition from leadership or their intended death at the hands of other pirates.

[16] Spektr (n.d.) 'Deliberate ignorance: Levada and Spektr'. Available at: https://spektr.press/osoznannoe-nevedenia-levada-spektr/ Accessed: 27 February 2025).

In 2022, *foreign agent* was most commonly associated with "unpleasant feelings" (15%), "spy" (14%), "traitor to the motherland" (7%), and "enemy of the people" (6%).[17] Only 4% linked the term to its legal definition – someone acting in the interest of a foreign state. By 2023, the term had grown even more toxic: "unpleasant feelings" rose to 20%, while "traitor to the motherland" surged to 18% (an increase of 11 percentage points). The association with "spy" declined slightly (-5pp), but a new perception took hold: foreign agents were simply "those who left the country".

Soviet propaganda poster "Talking Helps the Enemy," 1954.
Illustrator: Viktor Koretsky

Public opinion remains split on whether *foreign agents* should be seen as threats or as fighters for citizens' rights and freedom of speech. In a 2023 VCIOM survey "traitors spreading lies for hostile countries" – a rise from the previous year – while only 16% considered them "defenders of civil rights facing government oppression".[18]

[17] VCIOM (2022) Russians on foreign agents, 28 June. Available at: https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/rossijane-ob-inoagentakh (Accessed: 27 February 2025).
[18] VCIOM (2023) *Foreign agents among us: monitoring*, 26 September. Available at: https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/inoagenty-sredi-nas-monitoring (Accessed: 27 February 2025).

The same survey explored how the *foreign agent* label affects public behaviour and attitudes. A sizeable portion of respondents indicated that the designation would alter their perception of media outlets and public figures. If a media outlet were labelled a *foreign agent*, 40% of respondents said they would reconsider their engagement with it. Of these, 24% said they would stop using it entirely, and 14% said they would use it less often. Meanwhile, 46% said the designation would not affect their interest in any way.

Similar data is echoed in a 2024 poll carried about the Levada Center (which has also been declared a *foreign agent*).[19] It found that "…if a politician, NGO, or media outlet were to receive the status of a *foreign agent*, four out of 10 respondents would have a worsening attitude toward them". That's +16pp since July 2021 to 42% in 2024. The share of those who said their attitude would not change decreased (-18pp to 40%), and 2% said their attitude would improve.

Being labelled *foreign agents* or *extremist organisations* creates both legal and psychological barriers to audience engagement. A civil society organisation (CSO) respondent described the challenge in a Thomson Reuters Foundation report:

> *"It's a typical situation when you are trying to create a story from abroad, and your sources refuse to answer you just because you are a toxic media. Toxic media for the authorities, for the autocratic regime."*

As a result of the societal attitudes described above, these labels (which the Russian regime presents as purely bureaucratic obstacles) sometimes threaten the personal safety of journalists who work for outlets deemed *foreign agents* or *undesirable organisations*. A story shared at the 2023 International Journalism Festival by TV Rain's editor-in-chief Tikhon Dzyadko illustrates as much:

> *"Our cameraman was filming a story [in the Belgorod region]. […] This volunteer was driving him in the car, and after 10 minutes he stops next to police and says that this guy – our cameraman – works for a foreign*

[19] Levada Center (2024) 'Representations of foreign agents, November 2024'. Available at: https://www.levada.ru/2024/12/12/predstavleniya-ob-inostrannyh-agentah-noyabr-2024/ (Accessed: 27 February 2025).

> *agent, and TV Rain is designated as foreign agent in Russia. It is a big problem… He was fined $50 or something like that, so not that bad."*[20]

At the same time, in certain circles – primarily those opposed to the Russian regime – a *foreign agent* label is perceived as a badge of honour. One media outlet in exile interviewed for this project shared findings from its own marketing research: every participant in the study reported that their perception of the outlet had improved after it was designated a *foreign agent*, and their respect for it had increased.

[20] Rain TV (2023) Final broadcast before suspension – 3 March 2022 [YouTube video], 3 March. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/live/k7psRngdTGQ?t=441s (Accessed: 8 July 2025).

What Russians read, watch, and ignore

To begin to understand how media in exile remain relevant to audiences inside Russia, we must first understand the consumption habits and attitudes of the domestic audience.

This section aims to unpack what we know with the help of available research. In particular: annual survey results from the Levada Center, and a field ethnographic study conducted by Public Sociology Laboratory (PS-Lab) in the fall of 2023 across three regions of Russia: Buryatia, Krasnodar Krai, and Sverdlovsk Oblast.[21, 22]

The enduring dominance of television

Television has historically been the main news source in Russia – reaching over 90% of the adult population in the 1990s and early 2000s, according to Levada Center. That figure has been declining since the mid-2010s, with only about 65% of Russians still relying on it for information today.

Despite the drop, TV remains the most commonly used and most trusted source of information – especially during times of crisis. News bulletins continue to command large evening audiences, and some households run a TV in the background all day.

Trust in television also remains high: about 50% of Russians consider it reliable. By contrast, only 18% say the same of Telegram channels, 16-17% trust online publications, and just 7% trust YouTube. Older generations see the internet as especially chaotic and unreliable – a space filled with fakes and extreme ideology.

One of the most dramatic shifts in media consumption over the past 15 years has been the decline of print media. Once nearly as influential as television, newspapers have virtually disappeared. In the early 1990s, print readership was strong. By 2024, it had shrunk to just 5-6%. In their place, online publications have grown steadily – from 9% in 2009 to nearly 30% in 2024.

Meanwhile, digital platforms have experienced explosive growth, surpassing even television as the primary news source for more than 40% of Russians. Telegram usage for news grew from 1% in 2019 to 25% in 2024. This growth was largely driven

[21] Levada Center (2024) *Partiya telewizora ne sdaet pozitsii.* Available at: https://www.levada.ru/2024/07/25/partiya-televizora-ne-sdaet-pozitsii/ (Accessed: 1 March 2025).
[22] PS Lab (n.d.) Ethnographic diary: Russia in wartime. The Russia Program, George Washington University. Available at: https://therussiaprogram.org/ps_lab_ethnography (Accessed: 8 July 2025).

by the blocking of Western social networks, the closure of independent media outlets, and the rising demand for alternative sources.

A crucial distinction between internet-based media and television remains, however: while Russian television presents a unified state narrative, the internet is fragmented, offering an array of sources with wildly different levels of credibility. To quote the Levada Center report:

> *"In Russia, where television remains the most widespread source of information, its influence is further reinforced by the lack of diversity in news coverage and the absence of competing viewpoints. Unlike the uniform and monolithic nature of Russian television, the internet is composed of numerous fragmented sources of varying quality [...] For the average internet user, this vast array of information often fails to form a coherent picture, instead breaking down into disjointed fragments and turning into complete mash-up."*[23]

As misinformation spreads and state control over digital space tightens, confidence in online sources has fallen. Many older viewers, in particular, view the internet as a chaotic and unreliable space in contrast to television, which retains its influence due to its structured content and official endorsement.

Screenshot of Olga Skabeeva, news anchor for the Russia 1 channel's daily news broadcasts

Citations, not clicks

Some encouraging news for exiled outlets comes from citation tracking – specifically, how often news content from Russia's digital space is cited.

[23] Levada-Centre (2024) 'Партия телевизора не сдаёт позиции', Levada-Centre, 25 July. Available at: https://www.levada.ru/2024/07/25/partiya-televizora-ne-sdaet-pozitsii/ (Accessed: 27 July 2025).

Independent and foreign outlets continue to shape much of the public conversation, according to a 2025 Agentstvo News analysis of data from news aggregator The True Story (a site launched in 2022 by the former head of Yandex News and swiftly blocked by Roskomnadzor).[24, 25] By the final quarter of 2024, according to the analysis, Russian "independent" outlets accounted for 21.1% of all cited content. Foreign media contributed 40.5%.

This suggests the exiled media still compete as primary sources of information – despite rivalry for attention from outlets who remained in Russia, pro-government bloggers who have access to the frontline, state-owned organisations and state officials with an online presence. (For instance, the governor of Russia's Belgorod region, which borders Ukraine, maintains a popular Telegram channel).

As for the double-digit disparity between citations of foreign press over independent outlets, Agentstvo suggests that Western media have easier access to information from inside Russia. This project argues instead that the disparity reflects a practical choice: it is easier to cite an organisation that has not been labelled a "foreign agent" or "undesirable" – which is the case in Russia with some foreign media, such as Reuters and Bloomberg. It might also be beneficial for pro-government media to quote Western outlets when their reporting aligns with the Kremlin's agenda.

Several exiled outlets interviewed for this project recalled examples of record traffic figures at times when breaking news occurred in Russia. For example, traffic to Current Time's website and app peaked in September 2022, when Putin declared partial mobilization. Traffic decreased after this peak but remained at higher levels than before the war, according to a representative for the channel.

"I do not trust the news – I just watched it"

While surveys like those from Levada track general consumption trends, the PS Lab study provides something different: insight into how media consumption is shaped by attitudes toward the war.

One might assume that television loyalty is primarily a trait of those who support the war. But the PS Lab study shows otherwise: a sceptical attitude toward news

[24] Agentstvo (2025) Telegram post, 9566, posted on Telegram channel Agentstvo, https://t.me/agentstvonews/9566, (Accessed : 10 July 2025)
[25] Meduza (2022) 'Roskomnadzor blocks news aggregator The True Story, launched by former head of Yandex.News three days ago, Meduza, 25 August. Available at: https://meduza.io/news/2022/08/25/roskomnadzor-zablokiroval-novostnoy-agregator-the-true-story-zapuschennyy-byvshim-glavoy-yandeks-novostey-tri-dnya-nazad (Accessed: 10 July 2025).

sources – both state and opposition – is widespread across the political spectrum. Russians with differing views on the invasion often share a core distrust of the media itself.

Attitudes toward media among war non-opponents

Those who support the invasion, justify it, or remain neutral – collectively termed "non-opponents" by PS Lab – tend to distrust all political media. They say opposition media distort the truth, but they admit they don't fully trust state-run outlets either. "To lie well, you have to withhold the truth," said one respondent, a 26-year-old male doctor from Krasnodar. "I am not saying that all channels, both federal and 'independent,' are pure lies. It is just that some parts of the truth are left out."[26]

For many, distrust in the media is so deep-rooted that they do not even think about it anymore. "I never even thought about it. Trust? There is no point in trusting the media," said a 55-year-old construction worker from Krasnodar. "They all dance to someone's tune." While a 29-year-old entrepreneur from Novonekrasovsk said simply: "No, I don't trust the media at all."

The belief that all media are manipulative is so widespread that people sometimes become annoyed when quizzed about it. One message therapist in Southern Sokol became incensed when the researcher asked her about watching TV: "I watched the news. So what? Why do I trust it? I do not trust the news – I just watched it. What else am I supposed to do, read online? It is full of fakes!"

Although television is seen as unreliable because of state censorship, online sources are also mistrusted due to their perceived ideological bias. "If you turn on the TV, according to them, we have already defeated Ukraine three times," said a 56-year-old security guard Krasnodar. "But if you go on YouTube, you get the opposite – Ukraine is already in Moscow. What is the point of watching either?"

This general distrust pushes many to rely on personal contacts for information, especially those with firsthand experience of the war. "I have

[26] Public Sociology Lab. (n.d.). *PSLab Report 3*. Available at: https://publicsociologylab.com/assets/reports/PSLab-Report3.pdf [Accessed: 27 February 2025]

acquaintances from LPR and DPR," said a 33-year-old engineer from Krasnodar. "I understand what's really going on from them."

Attitudes toward media among war opponents

Much like non-opponents, war opponents often limit their exposure to political news. They find most coverage irrelevant to their daily lives and local communities. "Why follow this stuff," asked a 41-year-old male mechanic from Novonekrasovsk. "It doesn't affect us." Others said they find news about the war emotionally overwhelming: "My psyche can't take it anymore," said a 53-year-old female accountant from Ulan-Ude.

Some war opponents avoid not only pro-government news but also opposition sources, seeing them as too one-sided. "At first, I consumed a lot of information from *Meduza* and *Moscow Times*. But then I realised my brain was boiling," said a 44-year-old freelancer from Krasnodar. "They also have their own agenda, always presenting just one side. I decided I did not need it." For many, opposition news sources contribute to psychological distress, leading them to disengage altogether. "When the war started, I followed many news channels, trying to get different perspectives," said a 31-year-old doctor from Novonekrasovsk. "But then I started panicking and unfollowed most of them. Now, I just glance at a couple." Others take more drastic steps: "Recently, I decided to cut off all news channels," said a 41-year-old transport worker from Krasnodar. "I deleted everything because it was affecting me too negatively."

Despite their scepticism, some war opponents still turn to independent media to a degree. Unlike non-opponents, they do not dismiss the idea of trustworthy journalism entirely. However, a growing awareness of bias has led many to question even opposition sources. "At first, only pro-government media seemed manipulative," said the Novonekrasovskian doctor. "But now, I see that opposition media also push an agenda."

Key differences between war opponents and non-opponents

Although both war opponents and non-opponents express distrust toward the media, their reasons for disengagement differ.

Non-opponents believe that no media source can be trusted. Their scepticism is shaped not just by lived experience but also by the state's persistent

messaging about “fake news” and “Western manipulation”. For many, this outlook leads to a passive but loyal reliance on state media, despite recognising its distortions. The choice is less about belief than habit.

War opponents, by contrast, often begin with a desire to stay informed, especially through independent or exiled media. But many eventually withdraw from political news altogether. The reasons are personal as much as political: the emotional toll, the perceived futility of resistance, the overload of negativity. These audiences don’t reject journalism per se, they retreat from it to preserve mental health.

Ironically, in a society that promotes scepticism as policy, distrust of the media runs deeper among regime supporters than its critics.

Ultimately, both groups seek ways to cope with the war’s impact on their daily life. Neither is necessarily looking for truth. More often, they’re looking for something (or someone) that feels on their side.

“No one on our side”

In the book *Peaceful Reflexes*, based on interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024 with residents of the Irkutsk region, one interviewee observed that while the state “uses people”, the media can feel exploitative too. [27]

> *“[Opposition media] seem to be saying: ‘Look, it’s not just in Ukraine that we started a war, things are terrible in Russia too’. And we’re supposed to be outraged, fired up, and do something. But what? And what will happen to us then? You see, there’s no one on our side at all, no one but ourselves, no matter what we do.”*

Even when opposition outlets offer truth, it can ring hollow if it fails to recognise the lived vulnerabilities of its audience. But do these signals reach exiled journalists? In the next chapters, we explore what they hear from their readers – and how they’re responding.

[27] Sibreal, 2024. *Oskolochnye ranyeniya: kak zhivyot sibirskiy region na fone voyny*. Available at: https://www.sibreal.org/a/oskolochnye-raneniya-kak-zhivyot-sibirskiy-region-na-fone-voyny/33337294.html [Accessed 9 Mar. 2025].

How exiled media hear from their audiences

The feedback media outlets receive from their audience is often shaped – and skewed – by the channels through which it arrives. Most often, those who speak up are loyal readers, regular viewers, and/or financial supporters. They are, by definition, the least sceptical members of the audience. Still, this feedback can be useful. It offers a partial but revealing picture of how content is received.

Case study one: Anonymous in exile

One exiled media outlet shared excerpts from its internal marketing research. At the outlet's request, its name is withheld. What can be said: it has been labelled a *foreign agent*, and its website is blocked inside Russia.

Their research indicates that most respondents observe a trend of decreasing media consumption in their lives. This decline takes two primary forms:

1. **A reduction in the number of sources they follow.** One respondent noted: "I try to control my media consumption. I monitor it closely. Right now, I follow [exiled outlet] and a couple of other people, while the rest just keep rehashing the same information."
2. **A reduction in the time spent reading news.** Another respondent stated: "I don't check everything. Once a week, I sit down and read the main channels."

Respondents said they had subscribed to new outlets after the war began — but also unsubscribed from many. The most common reasons were:

- A shift in the media outlet's thematic focus or political stance
- Clickbait headlines
- Unverified information that was later debunked
- Excessive frequency of publication

Respondents expressed uncertainty about their own media consumption habits. Two reasons came up repeatedly: first, they note that "information in the media often repeats itself"; second, they described scrolling through their social media feeds "without distinction".

As one respondent put it:

> *"It's hard to single things out – the media flow is constant, and it's difficult to tell who wrote what. I just scroll through my Twitter feed and read everything in a row."*

Case study two: 7x7

Most media outlets in exile can receive some feedback from their audience on social media – especially through YouTube broadcast chats. But some outlets take a more deliberate approach to studying it than others.

One example is 7x7, an independent Russian online publication founded in the Komi Republic and now covering 31 regions across European Russia. In 2022, the organisation relocated all its managers abroad for safety reasons, leaving only field journalists on the ground.

Editor-in-chief Oleg Grigorenko explained that the outlet tracks its audience through multiple methods: regular marketing research (conducted in 2022 and again in winter 2023/2024), analysis of statistical data (both direct and indirect), and interactive tools including a Telegram feedback bot and a reader chat. Another active channel is the publication's email newsletter, which features two fictional characters travelling across Russia.

According to Grigorenko, 7x7's audience shows consistent interest in regional news, and not stories from Moscow or abroad. He said readers feel that regional issues are underrepresented in the national conversation — and 7x7's coverage of local protests and activism helps foster a sense of solidarity and support among otherwise isolated activist communities. In the words of Grigorenko:

> *This is essentially a summary of the responses we received during our marketing research. Regional coverage is underrepresented in Russian media. There was a strong sense of resentment toward Meduza, TV Rain, and BBC: 'Guys, we're not interested,' [they said].*
> *We literally had responses like: 'We're not interested in reading about car accidents in Moscow, come on. Why do you have ten news stories about car accidents in Moscow and zero news from, say, Kursk?'"*

A satirical slide from one of Grigorenko's presentations captures the challenge faced by media in exile. Titled "How journalism reflects life", it contrasts the lived

experience of an ordinary Russian citizen with the editorial priorities of local and relocated media.

In the chart recreated below, the "ordinary person" wakes up, eats breakfast, encounters a car accident on the way to work, hears about repression, attends an exhibition, comes home, and ends the day with dinner. By contrast, the "relocated media" agenda consists almost entirely of two things: news about repression and the consequences of the war.

Recreation of a table from a public presentation by 7x7's editor-in-chief, Oleg Grigorenko

It's meant to be funny, but there's some truth in it. People want to see their daily life reflected somewhere. At the same time, the question remains as to what portion of the exiled media's audience is actually inside Russia and meaningfully engaged with local news about car accidents and exhibitions.

Case study three: TV Rain

As we've already discussed, feedback tends to come from highly engaged users. This channel distortion may explain why different outlets report hearing such different feedback from their audiences.

At TV Rain, a lack of regional coverage isn't the primary concern they hear from viewers. According to head of news and presenter Ekaterina Kotrikadze, their journalists most frequently receive feedback about tone. She said:

> *"There is, for example, a widespread [...] opinion that we broadcast dark stuff all the time. That it's enough already. 'Enough about the war, we're fed up.' That it's impossible to [hear] bad news all the time. Where is the good news about Russia? This request arises from time to time."*

In the 2010s, TV Rain famously branded itself as "the optimistic channel". That slogan no longer applies.

> *"People now kind of miss those times. They want us to be so cheerful again, an optimistic channel, and so on. But you can't be an optimistic channel when people are being killed every day – and it's your country's army doing it. There's no way. [...]*
> *We don't specially select this news, it's just like that – that's how it is now. I don't like this reality either. But it is what it is. I'm a journalist; I have to show it as it is."*

TV Rain collects its feedback from several sources: live chats during YouTube broadcasts, a Telegram chatbot, comments in presenters' personal Telegram channels, and the newsroom's email inbox.

But the feedback isn't just about tone. Sometimes, it becomes a vital tool for newsgathering. As Kotrikadze recalled:

> *"The Telegram bot is an incredibly useful tool. During emergency situations, it proves especially valuable. When the terrorist attack at Crocus happened, we received an overwhelming – truly*

> *countless – number of messages, videos, and photos from eyewitnesses directly through our Telegram chat bot."*[28]

In moments like these, the importance of maintaining a loyal audience inside Russia becomes clear – not only for distribution, but for verification and access. Whether Russia-focused media in exile manage to retain this audience, we will discuss in the next chapter.

[28] TV Rain Newsroom (2024) Crocus City Hall's roof collapsed as a result of the fire that broke out…, 28 May [X (formerly Twitter) post]. Available at: https://x.com/tvrain_english/status/1771272863229563370 (Accessed: 11 July 2025).

Follow the reader: analytics in exile

While a growing Russian-language diaspora has emerged across Europe and beyond, many independent journalists in exile still consider audiences inside Russia as their primary focus.

In practice, there is no precise data to reliably affirm this notion. Digital censorship and widespread VPN use obscure geolocation data, making it difficult to know who is reading from where. As a result, "knowing your audience" becomes a matter of patchwork identification and informed guesswork.

Measuring reach in exile

Before the full-scale invasion, up to 11.7 million people – around 7-8% of Russia's total population – were engaging with independent media sources, according to Denis Volkov, director of the Levada Center.[29] (The number may have been higher if bloggers are counted.)

After the invasion? The 2023 report by the JX Fund collates statistics from 93 Russian media outlets and recorded:

- Over 38 million monthly website visits
- 165 million monthly YouTube views
- Over 430,000 TikTok followers

These numbers appear impressive, but without user de-duplication across platforms, these figures likely present an inflated view of total audience size.

The audience for media in exile is not only difficult to identify but also volatile in size. Several journalists and editors interviewed for this project noted that during major breaking news events they see a sharp spikes in traffic, with record-high traffic figures. When aggregated over time, these spikes can distort an accurate picture of audiences news habits.

[29] Russia Post, 2024. *Journalism in Exile*. Available at: https://russiapost.info/society/journalism_in_exile [Accessed 9 Mar. 2025].

The methods by which audiences find and access independent media have changed dramatically, too. Many websites have been blocked inside Russia, and the platforms that once helped generate traffic have also shifted.

News aggregators, once a crucial source of referrals, now direct users primarily to pro-government outlets. Russia's largest internet company, Yandex, and its associated news aggregator, have been controlled by VKontakte (VK) – a company linked to the Russian government – since 2022.[30] (Sogaz, a group close to Putin, took control of VK in 2021).[31]

The website for the RFE/RL news channel, Current Time, recorded a huge drop in the share of traffic referred from Yandex, falling from 19% to just 4% over a 12-month period between mid-2022 and mid-2023. Other outlets report similar drops.

While Google remains a source of traffic, its algorithmic criteria for ranking Russian-language content are unclear, making it an unreliable source of search referrals from Russia.

In addition, major social network referrers like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (X) have been blocked inside Russia.

All of these restrictions contribute to the difficulty for exiled news outlets in forming a clear audience profile.

"Decentralised" audience profiling strategies

To build as clear a picture as possible of their audience, independent media outlets in exile rely on a sophisticated mix of decentralised and often indirect methods. Traditional web analytics, as discussed, have become less reliable due to site blockages, VPN use, and changes in platform policies. In response, exiled outlets have developed alternative strategies to infer who is reading — and from where.

Telegram (where users opt in) and YouTube (a mix of opted-in subscribers and algorithmic surfacing), remain among the last major platforms not fully blocked

[30] Roth, A. (2022) 'Russia's Yandex to sell off news service as state tightens grip on online media', The Guardian, 23 August. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/23/russia-yandex-sell-news-service-state-tightens-grip-online-media (Accessed: 11 July 2025).
[31] Sevryugin, I. (2021) "'VKontakte' becomes part of Kremlin propaganda: how the main Russian social network passed under the control of Putin's friend and Kiriyenko's son", Current Time, 3 December. Available at: https://www.currenttime.tv/a/vkontakte-stanovitsya-chastyu-kremlevskoy-propagandy-kak-glavnaya-rossiyskaya-sotsset-pereshla-pod-kontrol-druga-putina-i-syna-kirienko/31592555.html (Accessed: 11 July 2025).

inside Russia. Many outlets operate dedicated channels on both platforms, drawing on in-built platform analytics to track reach and engagement.

Additionally, independent media outlets in exile can leverage Google data tools and Adobe Analytics to inform their understanding of their audience and refine their outreach strategies.

A final contribution to the picture comes from various on-site tracking tools (such as Google Analytics) to measure and analyse any direct traffic that manages to evade state blocking (for example, through the use of VPNs).

Telegram provides view counts but offers no demographic data. Thus this "decentralised strategy", as 7x7's Grigorenko describes it, requires triangulation from limited signals:

> *"In telega [slang name for Telegram] the region can only be determined through indirect data. For example, we analyse which other channels our subscribers follow. If they follow Meduza, it doesn't tell us much, but if they follow a channel like "Car accidents in Tula", it's likely that they are from the Tula region. This is an example of indirect data."*

Meduza, like 7x7, relies on indirect clues – some laced with bitter irony, as a representative described it:

> *"Telegram does not allow monetization for channels where more than 75% of users are from a specific list of five countries, including Russia. Since we don't qualify for monetization, we can infer that at least 70% of our subscribers are likely from Russia."*

The assumption is that the other 5% is attributable to other countries where monetization also does not work.

In July 2024, Russian authorities escalated efforts to restrict access to YouTube by deliberately slowing down its playback speed – blaming it on technical problems with Google's servers.[32]

To get around this, viewers increasingly turned to VPNs — a workaround that further clouds visibility into audience geography. For example, the independent broadcaster TV Rain reported a noticeable rise in viewership from European countries, particularly the Netherlands — almost certainly a reflection of VPN routing rather than genuine local engagement.[33] Current Time also saw a major shift in traffic sources, audience geography, and content consumption.

But in some cases, audiences that use specific methods to bypass government blocking can be identified in the overall traffic. Proxy-labelled views, which were not common in Current Time data before February 2022, accounted for a third of total traffic in the year from June 2022 onwards.

The outlet's Adobe Analytics tool reported that 60% of these proxy visits came via *nthLink*, a circumvention tool funded by the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). *nthLink* routes users to a landing page featuring articles from Current Time, Radio Svoboda, and Voice of America. The remaining proxy traffic came via "mirror" links.

To assess its audience, Meduza relies on a combination of internal statistics, Google Analytics, and Google Search Console. The latter is particularly useful for estimating Russian users, according to Meduza's communications director, Katerina Abramova:

> *"Google Search Console reports helps us better understand how many of our users are from Russia, since other tools can be unreliable due to blockages and VPNs."*

[32] Meduza (2024) 'In Russia, YouTube is reportedly being throttled. Rostelecom claims there are technical problems with Google's equipment', Meduza, 12 July. Available at: https://meduza.io/feature/2024/07/12/v-rossii-kak-zayavil-istochnik-meduzy-nachali-zamedlyat-youtube-rostelekom-utverzhdaet-chto-voznikli-problemy-v-rabote-oborudovaniya-google (Accessed: 11 July 2025).

[33] Germany and the Netherlands are popular locations for free VPN services due to a combination of privacy laws, internet infrastructure, and demand for bypassing geo-restrictions.

Google Analytics also provides insights into device language settings, which helps identify the audience presumably accessing Meduza's content from inside Russia using VPN.

Social media engagement is also measured through platform-specific tools. Facebook and Instagram offer relatively accurate country identification, but tracking X users is more opaque. Still, patterns occasionally emerge. As Katerina Abramova noted, a surge in traffic from a known VPN exit point – like the Netherlands – is often a clue that the outlet's Russian audience is still finding ways to connect.

Platform audience tracking overview

Platform	Type of data provided	Limitations
Telegram	View counts, subscription totals, engagement with posts	No demographic data; user location inferred indirectly
YouTube	Views, watch time, geographic data (obscured via VPN)	Throttling in Russia; VPN use obscures true location
Google Search Console	Search queries, site impressions, approximate geography	Limited by VPN use and access restrictions in Russia
Google Analytics	Sessions, device data, language settings, referrer paths	May reflect VPN exit points; device settings only a proxy
Adobe Analytics	Traffic origins, proxy labels, tool-specific data (e.g. nthLink)	Relies on circumvention markers; still subject to noise
Facebook / Instagram	Geographic and demographic data based on profiles	Still accessible outside Russia; accurate country ID possible
X (formerly Twitter)	Limited referral data; no reliable country-level data	Difficult to track reliably; location data often inaccurate

Overview of platform-specific audience tracking tools used by Russian independent media in exile, showing the type of data available and key limitations affecting accuracy.

What part of the audience remained in Russia?

Using the decentralised strategies described above, exiled outlets are able to estimate the share of their audience still accessing content from inside Russia — despite censorship, blocking, and VPN use. While the picture is fragmented, most outlets estimate that around half or more of their audience remains inside the country.

At 7x7, internal estimates suggest that between 67% and 85% of their audience — depending on the platform — is located in Russia. About half of those people live outside of megapolises: about 25% are in Moscow or St Petersburg, 20% in other large cities such as Kazan, Voronezh, and Yekaterinburg, and another quarter in smaller towns like Lipetsk and Oryol. A further segment includes readers based in administrative district centres – areas often underserved by national news.

For Current Time, reported traffic from Russia dropped significantly after the outlet was blocked at the state level – falling from 20% of total website visits to just 4% between mid-2022 and mid-2023. However, this sharp decline is likely misleading. As the outlet's own reporting explains:

> *"From Adobe Analytics we could identify that traffic from the U.S., the UK and the Netherlands came primarily via the nthLink VPN. Traffic from the U.S. and the UK – but most likely from Russia – nearly quadrupled in the past year."*

More accurate insights come from YouTube, where Current Time's main channel saw 45% of views coming from Russia between August 2021 and July 2022. In the following year (August 2022 to July 2023), that share grew to 52%. Ukraine and Kazakhstan accounted for 10% and 7% of views, respectively.

A similar audience distribution was reported by TV Rain. According to Kotrikadze, around 65-70 % of the channel's audience is based in Russia – a ratio that has remained stable even after the channel relocated operations abroad. She said the remaining 30–35% of viewers are spread across the post-Soviet space (Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia) and further afield in countries like the U.S. and Israel.

The Russian authorities' throttling of YouTube has impacted not only major media outlets but also independent journalists who launched their own video channels after going into exile. One example is journalist Aleksandr Plyushchev, creator of "The Breakfast Show" on YouTube. In a Telegram post, he noted that the share of viewers from Russia fell from 65% to just 29% after the slowdown began.[34]

[34] PlushevChannel (2024) Telegram post, 12 July. Available at: https://t.me/PlushevChannel/30315 (Accessed: 11 July 2025).

> *"Does this mean that Russians stopped watching, and foreign viewers started watching at about the same time, and even more than Russians? Of course not. It's all about the VPN."*

This issue is explored further in the next chapter.

What's really happening with YouTube in Russia?

The slowdown of YouTube has had a noticeable impact on audience engagement with politically and socially oriented channels. According to data analysed by *Agentstvo* and *YouScore*, the viewership of major independent Russian-language YouTube channels dropped by approximately 25% in the first month following the intensified slowdown.[35] Year-on-year, YouTube's daily reach in Russia fell by 21%, with monthly reach declining from 95.3 million in December 2023 to 89.5 million in December 2024.

Journalist Aleksandr Plyuschev argues that the reported audience drop may be misleading due to inconsistencies in methodology.[36] For instance, the analysis did not account for YouTube Shorts (which previously boosted engagement metrics) or seasonal traffic variation. Plyushchev also notes that some channels saw growth during this same period, underscoring that the slowdown's effects have not been uniform.

Separate findings from the Thomson Reuters Foundation suggest an even sharper drop. Their report indicates a 35% drop within just one month following the introduction of deep-packet inspection (DPI) censorship technology – a method that drastically slows video playback to near-unusable levels. DPI can also interfere with VPN connections, compounding the challenge of accessing restricted content.

In response, some independent outlets have developed tools to keep content available. TV Rain, for example, introduced Potok, a Chrome browser extension that grants Russian users free two-hour access to YouTube – effectively bypassing the throttle. Still, there are limits. As TV Rain director general Mark Ten told Meduza: "We have several solutions that allow users in Russia to access our products without a VPN. However, fully replacing YouTube in Russia today is, unfortunately, impossible. It is a highly sophisticated and technologically advanced platform, backed by decades of investment from one of the world's leading IT companies. I'm afraid that TV Rain, in its current state, will not be able to fully replace YouTube at 100% in terms of quality."[37]

When asked what alternative distribution options he is considering, the general director of the Amsterdam-based channel replied: "I'm afraid to name specific solutions in advance; I wouldn't want to make Roskomnadzor's job easier."

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[35] *Agenstvo* (n.d.) *Telegram post*. Available at: https://t.me/agentstvonews/8881 (Accessed: 1 March 2025).

[36] Plyuschev, A. (n.d.) *Telegram post*. Available at: https://t.me/PlushevChannel/29677 (Accessed: 1 March 2025).

[37] Meduza (2024) *Nepravilno dumat' o nas kak o politicheskoy sile* [It's wrong to think of us as a political force]. Available at: https://meduza.io/feature/2024/05/15/nepravilno-dumat-o-nas-kak-o-politicheskoy-sile (Accessed: 1 March 2025).

Audience-centred editorial decision-making

To what extent do declining traffic, incomplete analytics, and audience uncertainty shape editorial decisions for Russia-focused media in exile? And how are exiled newsrooms adapting their approach to topics and genres in response?

In previous years, quantitative indicators played a central (if not decisive) role in planning and evaluating the effectiveness of editorial work. Metrics like pageviews and reading time, tracked through tools such as Chartbeat, were key benchmarks of success in many newsrooms. But after the mass blocking of independent media sites in Russia, traffic dropped sharply along with the ability to interpret that traffic meaningfully.

The exiled Russian outlets are looking for ways to solve this problem. For example, Meduza maintains an internal system that tracks "views, listening and editorial performance per author and per format." This allows the newsroom to monitor the effectiveness of its content strategy despite the limitations imposed by digital restrictions.

Still, view counts no longer provide a reliable indicator of audience interest – especially during wartime, when media cannot always prioritise what readers want.

As early as 2023, research from RE:Russia found that audiences were tired of bad news and increasingly avoided it. The early wartime surge in subscribers had given way to apathy. TV Rain's Kotrikadze said:

> *"I don't like this reality either, but it is what it is. I'm a journalist, I have to show it as it is."*

Editorial tension: demand vs duty

Another audience demand – greater coverage of Russia's regions – presents its own challenges. Exiled media are trying to retain correspondents inside Russia, but most work anonymously. Cooperation with a media outlet that is labelled a *foreign agent* may be interpreted as "foreign influence", which is grounds for receiving a *foreign agent* label personally. And cooperation with an *undesirable organisation* carries the more direct threat of administrative or criminal liability.

Meduza, one of the largest exile outlets, was founded in Latvia in 2014 by a team of journalists from Lenta.ru. But until 2022, most of its staff still lived in Russia. That changed quickly. As Meduza's founder Galina Timchenko explained: [38]

> *"After the war and especially after the new law in regards to war fakes and propaganda was introduced in March 2022, which promises up to 15 years in prison for publishing information about the state of the Russian army, we got all of them and their families out in two weeks."*

These concerns are not unfounded. Although criminal cases directly related to journalism remain relatively rare, some of the 2024 arrests of Russian journalists were connected to Russia-focused outlets abroad. For example, two of the four people arrested that year for alleged ties to Navalny's FBK organisation — Konstantin Gabov (Reuters) and Sergei Karelin (Associated Press/Deutsche Welle) — had worked for foreign media.[39]

One editor interviewed for this project, who runs a blacklisted outlet in exile but continues working with freelancers inside Russia, described a growing sense of shrinking space:

> *"On the one hand, we need to work with Russia. On the other hand, with every piece of news about problems faced by freelancers, stringers, and colleagues, it becomes scarier to do so. And if we don't work with Russia, then it's... well, it's not very clear why we're working at all. Because I, at least, position my work not as an émigré media outlet, but as a media outlet that tries to be with Russia – even if it's in a somewhat limited format. Another problem is a crisis of ideas [...] in the third year, when we've already covered a certain number of stories, made explainer videos, and conducted dozens of interviews. You understand that more and more often, it all comes down to the fact that there are no new ideas. And that worries me a bit. At the same time, the agenda itself, the flow of news, throws up certain topics. A few years ago, it was easier to deal with this."*

[38] Timchenko, G. (2023). *I have never been afraid of bullies*. [online] DW Akademie. Available at: https://akademie.dw.com/en/galina-timchenko-i-have-never-been-afraid-of-bullies/a-64658676 (Accessed: 18 April 2025).

[39] OVD-Info (2024) Court closes trial of four journalists accused of cooperating with Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), 2 October. Available at: https://ovd.info/express-news/2024/10/02/sud-zakryl-process-po-delu-chetverykh-zhurnalistov-obvinyaemykh-v (Accessed: 11 July 2025).

Adapting genres to shrinking space

In the face of ethical, legal, technical, and ideological pressures, exiled media are necessarily constrained in their choice of genres. They have developed new techniques – or leaned more heavily on ones used rarely back home – to continue producing journalism under these conditions.

Remote journalism

The ability to report from the ground is no longer possible for most exiled journalists. Instead, they rely on what Meduza's Timchenko calls proxy journalism: a mosaic model where the work is divided across multiple fixers and freelancers on location.

> *"One person calls someone, a second person goes to places, a third person asks questions and a fourth one keeps an eye on everything and so on. This mosaic journalism is really hard on us. It takes way longer, three to four times longer than normal, to publish a story and to verify the facts, but we do it. Because being the fastest was never our goal. We are fearful because all independent voices are being muted. It is a systematic phenomenon, but we still manage to operate".*

Journalists might communicate with their subjects via mobile video calls, asking to be shown the situation on the ground.

Proxy journalism has another meaning, too: the use of proxy publication. When a journalist works for an outlet designated as an undesirable organisation, they may first publish through a smaller platform. The larger *undesirable* outlet can then share the material second-hand, helping the story reach more readers while reducing risk for the source.

Several techniques can be combined for one report. An example: a story originally published by Smola later appeared in Novaya Gazeta Europe, with a note explaining that the interview had taken place via video link.[40]

[40] Novaya Gazeta Europa (2024) "A story too familiar: [original Russian title in transliteration if needed]", 21 March. Available at: https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/03/21/siuzhet-znakomyi-do-boli (Accessed: 11 July 2025).

Tracking messenger apps

Telegram, Russia's second-most-used messenger (after WhatsApp as of 2024), is a key source of both story ideas and characters on almost any topic.[41] Because Telegram allows users to be contacted directly unless they change their settings, journalists can sometimes message users based on what they write in community discussions.
Screenshots from Telegram communities are sometimes used as supporting investigative material. For example, The Insider's coverage of Telegram conversations among relatives of mobilised Russian military personnel.[42]

VK, Russia's dominant social network, is another source of information. While it's more closely monitored by authorities, it remains a valuable tool for regional journalism due to its the variety of regional groups and the official pages of government figures, where locals can leave openly available comments. One Verstka article examined VK communities where women seek to meet Russian military personnel.[43]

Using open-source intelligence (OSINT)

OSINT is perhaps the most widely used critical coverage techniques, but it's also increasingly one of the most labour-intensive due to disappearing data.[44] Between 24 February 2022 to the end of 2023, at least 44 agencies removed nearly 500 datasets from their websites – including 35 that removed statistical indicators, as well as official lists, and indicators used regularly by journalists and analysts.

Journalists are left playing whack-a-mole with the state: constantly searching for new ways to build datasets and verify information so that they can deliver data-driven scoops.

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[41] Mail.ru Hi-Tech (2024) The most popular messenger in Russia in 2024. Available at: https://hi-tech.mail.ru/news/117622-samyj-populyarnyj-messendzher-v-rossii-2024/ (Accessed: 11 July 2025).
[42] The Insider (2024) Name of the article [Please insert actual English title—e.g., "Title"]. Available at: https://theins.ru/news/255729 (Accessed: 11 July 2025).
[43] Verstka.media (2024) Women looking for partners among the military, [translated from Russian]. Available at: https://verstka.media/zhenshiny-ishut-partnerov-sredi-voennyh (Accessed: 11 July 2025).
[44] Tochno.st (2024) Over the past two years, 44 authorities deleted almost 500 datasets from their sites: tracker update on open data. Available at: https://tochno.st/materials/za-poslednie-dva-goda-44-organa-vlasti-udalili-so-svoix-saitov-pocti-500-datasetov-itogovoe-obnovlenie-trekera-otkrytyx-dannyx-ot-esli-byt-tocnym (Accessed: 11 July 2025).

The most well-known example is the name-by-name tally of Russian war dead compiled by Mediazona and the BBC Russian Service, based on open obituaries, VK posts, and volunteer fieldwork in cemeteries.[45]

Some outlets are now combining OSINT with machine learning. For example, on the third anniversary of the invasion, iStories launched Charon – an AI-powered database of Russian military losses, trained to extract names from open sources.[46]

Interviewees said they are trying to combat audience news fatigue using various approaches. For example, they produce programmes in the genres of "infotainment" or "popular history". They are also paying more attention to daily or weekly reviews and explainers.

Despite all of these efforts by journalists, many stories now feature characters based outside Russia. As Novaya Gazeta Europe's Irina Kravtsova puts it:

> *"There is always a fear that someday this topic [the stories about people who are linked to Russia but living abroad] will end. And what to do next?*
>
> *There have already been so many fears [like this] in recent years, and then somehow I managed to come up with something. I just don't think about it now, which may sound stupid. And I do what I can."*

[45] Zona.Media (2024) Casualties – a tracker of wartime losses. Available at: https://zona.media/casualties (Accessed: 11 July 2025).
[46] iStories.Media (2024) Charon – an AI-powered database of Russian military losses. Available at: https://istories.media/charon/ (Accessed: 11 July 2025).

Conclusion

The situation of Russian journalists in exile presents a unique and historically significant case of professional adaptation under severe political pressure.

This project has shown that, despite being physically distant from their audience, many media professionals continue to consider people inside Russia as their primary target group.

Maintaining this connection, however, is increasingly difficult due to censorship, technical restrictions, and the psychological toll of war and propaganda.

Declining public trust, blocked websites, throttled platforms, and unreliable data have all shaped the editorial strategies of media in exile. Still, many of them continue to adjust and search for ways to understand and serve their audience, including those who use VPNs, send feedback, or contribute anonymously from within Russia.

At the same time, media professionals are forced to constantly weigh ethical principles against practical risks – especially in cases where collaboration with journalists inside Russia may cause legal danger to those contributors. These challenges have led to new editorial formats and techniques, including proxy journalism, decentralised production workflows, and a growing reliance on indirect analytics.

In preparing this project, it became clear that the audience for Russian media in exile is not only fragmented, but also emotionally and mentally exhausted. Even among those opposed to the war, many avoid the news entirely, overwhelmed by the steady stream of negative information. Journalists are acutely aware of this but continue their work, believing that showing the real picture is part of their mission.

Ultimately, the long-distance relationship between media in exile and their audience remains complex, fragile, and full of contradictions. But as long as this relationship exists – even under pressure – it proves that independent journalism still matters: both for those who create it and for those who are still willing to listen.

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