

ANNEX IV

**HÓTEL**  
TARGETED BY RUSSIA

**Last Check-In:  
The Russian Strikes on Ukrainian  
Hotels Silencing the Press**

**The Relationship between the Media  
and the State in Russia: How Do They  
Work Together?**

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the Russian government has outlawed all independent media in the country by introducing new legislation and imposing harsher punishments for criticising the regime. The remaining outlets have been subjected to military censorship. According to the 2024 RSF *World Press Freedom Index*, Russia ranks 162 out of 180 countries, falling into the category of countries with the most serious violations of media freedom.<sup>1</sup>

As of 2024, most media outlets working in Russia are owned and controlled either by the state or by government allies, particularly oligarchs close to President Vladimir Putin. The most prominent names include Yury Kovalchuk (a billionaire known as 'Putin's personal banker' and head of the National Media Group, Russia's largest media holding), Alexey Miller (CEO of the majority-state-owned multinational energy corporation Gazprom and a key beneficiary of the Gazprom Media holding company), Alisher Usmanov (a billionaire often described as 'one of Vladimir Putin's favourite oligarchs' and owner of the *Kommersant* publishing house), among several others.<sup>2</sup>

Evidence, such as recent studies based on content analysis of news items and interviews with prominent Russian journalists, indicates that the Kremlin has extensively used the media as a tool to promote its official narratives both domestically and abroad.<sup>3</sup> State-owned international outlets like RT (formerly known as Russia Today) and Sputnik have been explicitly described as 'information weapon[s]' by the former's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan.<sup>4</sup>

Roskomnadzor is the primary government agency responsible for regulating media and online communications in Russia.<sup>5</sup> Its duties include registering, licensing, monitoring, censoring, and banning media outlets in line with Russian laws, including the notorious Foreign Agents Law<sup>6</sup> and, more recently, provisions of the

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<sup>1</sup> RSF (2024). *Russia*. URL: <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; Europea.eu (2022). *Decision 2022/337 — EN — EUR-Lex*. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022D0337&qid=1676435403094> (accessed: 28.04.2025); Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, *Russian Media Ownership and Influence*. URL: <https://www.belfer-center.org/publication/russian-media-ownership-and-influence> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>3</sup> Oates, S. (2026). *Russian Media in the Digital Age: Propaganda Rewired*. *Russian Politics*, vol. 1, no. 4. pp. 398–417, URL: <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00104004>.

<sup>4</sup> Yang, Y., McCabe, S. & Hindman, M. (2024). *Does Russian Propaganda Lead or Follow? Topic Coverage, User Engagement, and RT and Sputnik's Agenda Influence on US Media*. *The International Journal of Press and Politics*, p. 3. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612241271074>.

<sup>5</sup> Mozur, P. et al. (2022). *They Are Watching': Inside Russia's Vast Surveillance State*. *The New York Times*, URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/09/22/technology/russia-putin-surveillance-spying.html> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>6</sup> Russia's 2012 Foreign Agents Law, introduced shortly after Vladimir Putin's return to power amid large-scale protests, laid the groundwork for rising authoritarianism. Initially targeting NGOs receiving foreign funding and engaging in

Russian Criminal Code on the dissemination of 'fake news' and the 'discreditation of the Armed Forces'.<sup>7</sup> Despite its extensive powers, Roskomnadzor functions primarily as an executive body, handling routine tasks on a large scale. In contrast, agenda-setting authority lies with the Presidential Administration, which directly communicates the Kremlin's 'official line' to the heads of the country's most influential media outlets.<sup>8</sup>

Multiple sources have reported that the Presidential Administration holds regular meetings with a select group of editors-in-chief to discuss the weekly agenda and coordinate '*what must be broadcast and what is forbidden*'.<sup>9</sup> At various times, the meetings have allegedly been led by officials close to President Vladimir Putin, such as Alexei Gromov (first deputy chief of staff), Vladislav Surkov (former first deputy chief), and Dmitry Peskov (presidential press secretary).<sup>10</sup> They also supposedly maintain phone contact with journalists throughout the week to promptly resolve problems and address urgent matters.<sup>11</sup> The list of media outlets that have been represented during the meetings includes, but is not limited to, *Channel One*, *VGTRK*, *NTV*, *TVC*, *REN TV*, and *Channel Five*, all of which are primarily state-owned

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'political activities', the law has since been expanded through amendments, particularly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It now applies broadly to individuals or organisations under vaguely defined 'foreign influence', regardless of funding sources. The law has decimated civil society, forcing many organisations, including human rights and media groups, to close due to stigmatisation, onerous reporting requirements, and heavy penalties, including prison sentences.

<sup>7</sup> Sherman, J. (2022). *Russia's Internet Censor Is Also a Surveillance Machine*. Council on Foreign Relations, URL: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/russias-internet-censor-also-surveillance-machine> (accessed: 28.04.2025); Reuters staff (2022). *Russian Parliament Votes to Tighten 'Foreign Agents' Law*. Reuters, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-parliament-votes-tighten-foreign-agents-law-2022-06-07/> (accessed: 28.04.2025); International Press Institute (2023). *Russia Further Tightens Already Repressive 'Fake News' and 'Discreditation' Laws*. URL: <https://ipi.media/russia-further-tightens-already-repressive-fake-news-and-discreditation-laws/> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>8</sup> Ingannamorte, L. (2024). *Media Regulation, Government and Policy in Russia - Media and Journalism Research Center*. Media and Journalism Research Center, URL: <https://journalismresearch.org/2024/11/media-regulation-government-and-policy-in-russia/> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>9</sup> Rubin, M., Zholobova, M. & Badanin, R. (2019). *Master of Puppets: The Man behind the Kremlin's Control of the Russian Media*. Proekt, URL: <https://www.proekt.media/en/portrait-en/alexey-gromov-eng/> (accessed: 28.04.2025); Ingannamorte, L. (2024). *Media Regulation, Government and Policy in Russia - Media and Journalism Research Center*. Media and Journalism Research Center, URL: <https://journalismresearch.org/2024/11/media-regulation-government-and-policy-in-russia/> (accessed: 28.04.2025); Lipman, M. (2024). *Media Manipulation and Political Control in Russia*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2009/02/media-manipulation-and-political-control-in-russia?lang=en> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>10</sup> De Borja Lasheras, F. (2015). *Understanding Modern Russia? Why European Leaders Should Read Peter Pomerantsev*. European Council on Foreign Relations (European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)), URL: [https://ecfr.eu/article/understanding\\_modern\\_russia\\_why\\_european\\_leaders\\_should\\_read\\_peter\\_pomerantsev/](https://ecfr.eu/article/understanding_modern_russia_why_european_leaders_should_read_peter_pomerantsev/) (accessed: 28.04.2025); Sidorov, D. (2015). *How Russian TV Propaganda Is Made*. Open Democracy, URL: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-russian-tv-propaganda-is-made/> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>11</sup> Lipman, M. (2024). *Media Manipulation and Political Control in Russia*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2009/02/media-manipulation-and-political-control-in-russia?lang=en> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

or state-controlled<sup>12</sup> television channels.<sup>13</sup> After the meetings, senior-level attendees allegedly pass the information to their subordinates, ensuring compliance with the Kremlin's 'official line' at all organisational levels.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, far from all content generated by pro-government media outlets—regardless of their closeness to the Presidential Administration—is explicitly dictated or pre-approved by the authorities.<sup>15</sup> Instead, studies suggest that most journalists in Russia who wish to stay in the field develop an intuitive understanding of the informal 'rules of the game' and choose to abide by them, motivated by positive or negative reinforcement from their superiors or the authorities.<sup>16</sup> As a result, they tend to practice self-censorship when covering sensitive political topics and sometimes '*can even anticipate where the "general line" of the Kremlin might move*', producing content aligned with the official agenda autonomously.<sup>17</sup> Positive reinforcement for 'playing by the rules' may include financial rewards, career advancement, access to exclusive contacts within the Kremlin, and inclusion in a select circle of media managers who directly coordinate the media agenda with the Presidential Administration. Negative reinforcement, on the other hand, may range from demotions and layoffs to professional ostracisation and legal persecution.<sup>18</sup>

In this regard, the Russian media operate within an institutionalised discourse that reinforces the power and ideology of Putin's regime and is rooted in the country's authoritarian history.<sup>19</sup> While this discourse allows for a degree of flexibility, it is inherently constrained by a set of formal and informal rules that define the boundaries of what is permissible and what is prohibited. Those who fail to adhere to the rules are marginalised or excluded from the discourse, as is illustrated by the case of Igor Girkin, a key figure in Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and parts of

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<sup>12</sup> As noted above, by state-controlled, we refer to channels that adhere to the same 'general line' as state-owned channels but are not directly owned by the government, instead being controlled by allied companies and/or oligarchs.

<sup>13</sup> Sidorov, D. (2015). *How Russian TV Propaganda Is Made*. Open Democracy, URL: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-russian-tv-propaganda-is-made/> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Schimpfössl, E. & Yablokov, I. (2017). *Media Elites in Post-Soviet Russia and Their Strategies for Success*. Russian Politics, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 32–53, URL: <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00201003>; Yablokov, I. (2016). *Russian Journalism's Double White Lines*. Open Democracy, URL: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russian-media-s-double-white-lines/> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>16</sup> Schimpfössl, E. & Yablokov, I. (2017). *Media Elites in Post-Soviet Russia and Their Strategies for Success*, pp. 32–35; Schimpfössl, E. & Yablokov, I. (2017). *Introducing Russia's Media Aristocracy*. Russian Politics, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 1–5, URL: <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00201001>.

<sup>17</sup> Yablokov, I. (2024). *How the Kremlin's Propaganda Machine Works*. Russia.Post, URL: [https://russiapost.info/policies/propaganda\\_machine](https://russiapost.info/policies/propaganda_machine) (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>18</sup> Schimpfössl, E. & Yablokov, I. (2017). *Media Elites in Post-Soviet Russia and Their Strategies for Success*, pp.34–35, 42–47, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, M. (1981). *The Order of Discourse,* in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young, trans. Ian McLeod. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul. pp. 53–54; Volkov, D. (2018). *Foucauldian Notions and Their Applicability to the Russian Case*. Cambridge University Press EBooks, pp.14–56. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108645270.002>

the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, who was sentenced to four years of imprisonment for publicly criticising Vladimir Putin. Similarly, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the notorious leader of the Wagner PMC, was supposedly killed in a plane crash following an attempted armed rebellion against the Russian military leadership.<sup>20</sup>

Telegram channels are another tool that the Kremlin uses to spread its perspective on the war to a wide audience. Many are directly affiliated with the leading pro-government television networks and media outlets (such as the personal channels of *Russia-1* TV presenter Vladimir Solovyov, RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, and special correspondent for the *Izvestia* programme Alexander Sladkov). Some channels allegedly belong to the Russian Ministry of Defence (particularly those associated with specific military units). However, the majority are run by so-called 'war bloggers' (or 'milbloggers'), who claim to be independent but, in reality, predominantly follow the 'official line' and maintain close ties with the government.<sup>21</sup> The most popular include *Rybar* (1.3 million followers; associated with Mikhail Zvinchuk, a former Russian Ministry of Defence employee); *WarGonzo* (991,000 followers; managed by Semyon Pegov), and *Colonelcassad* (886,000 followers; managed by Boris Rozhin).<sup>22</sup>

Telegram channels differ from traditional media outlets in that they are often anonymous or run by individuals or small groups rather than managed by larger, more established organisations. They are not expected to adhere to journalistic standards, which is why they frequently become platforms for sharing exclusive graphic content about the war and expressing more radical and extreme opinions than conventional media. Due to Telegram's lack of transparency, establishing the ownership of specific channels and their connections to the Kremlin is exceedingly difficult. While it is safe to assume that the personal channels of journalists employed by state-owned media follow the 'general line' and maintain close ties to the government, the degree of autonomy of anonymous and allegedly independent channels remains uncertain. In 2022 and 2023, Putin held several meetings with a select group of 'war correspondents', including Telegram channel owners such as Semyon Pegov (*WarGonzo*), Ekaterina Agranovich (*Katrusya*), and Yuri Podolyaka (*World Today with Yuri Podolyaka*).<sup>23</sup> This suggests that at least some of the popular

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<sup>20</sup> Reuters staff, (2024). *Prominent Russian Nationalist Who Insulted Putin Jailed for Four Years*. Reuters, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-court-jails-prominent-nationalist-girkin-four-years-over-extremism-2024-01-25/>; Sestanovich, S. (2023). *Who Killed Yevgeny Prigozhin?* Council on Foreign Relations, URL:

<https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/who-killed-yevgeny-prigozhin> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>21</sup> Buketov, K. (2023). *Kto takie "voenkori" i pochemu oni stali populyarnymi v RF*. Deutsche Welle, URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/kto-takie-voenkory-i-pocemu-oni-stali-populyarnymi-v-rf/a-65260010> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>22</sup> Sklyarevska, H. (2022). «Zhurnalisty osoblyvoho pryznachennia». *Khto taki rosiyski z-voenkory*. Detector Media, URL: <https://ms.detector.media/propaganda-ta-vplivi/post/30572/2022-11-03-zhurnalisty-osoblyvogo-pryznachennya-khto-taki-rosiyski-z-voenkory/> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

<sup>23</sup> President of Russia, (2023). *Vstrecha s voennymi korrespondentamy*. kremlin.ru, URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71391> (accessed: 28.04.2025).

pro-Russian Telegram channels are closely affiliated with the Kremlin and may operate under the same rules as the official media, broadcasting mostly pre-approved messages.