



Russia's New Iron Curtain

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A new iron curtain is descending upon Russia. Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, Western media outlets are closing up shop in the country, independent Russian outlets are being shuttered, and the last embers of press freedom are being extinguished.

On March 5, U.S.-government broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) announced that it was suspending operations inside Russia after local tax authorities initiated bankruptcy proceedings against its Russian office. The move was the culmination of a long-running Kremlin campaign to impede and interrupt the outlet's operations.

RFE/RL is hardly the only Western media outlet to withdraw from Russia. A slew of other print and media sources, from the New York Times to the BBC to Germany's ARD radio-and-television consortium, have all suspended their operations there as well. Others, such as the Washington Post, have changed the way they operate in Russia — hiding sources, obscuring bylines, and taking other measures in order to stay in business.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin is actively working to tighten its control over domestic media, stifling dissent and any reporting that deviates from the official line. In early March, it passed a draconian new law making it punishable by up to 15 years in prison to disseminate "false information" about the war in Ukraine. The move has had a predictable chilling effect on what is left of the country's independent media, causing journalists to self-censor, sources to clam up, and alternative views of the conflict to be drowned out by official Russian disinformation.

All this amounts to an unprecedented assault on narratives that don't comport with the message Moscow desperately wants to convey to the world, both about the new war and about its mounting internal dysfunction. And the situation is soon set to get even worse.

Russian authorities have long touted the idea of a "sovereign Internet," in which the country's websites and their content are disconnected from the broader World-Wide Web. Under the watchful eye of Russian president Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin has made major progress toward this goal over the past several years.

Just how much was detailed in a December 2021 exposé published by the Russian investigative website agentura.ru. According to that report, "RUNET," as the "sovereign Internet" is known internally, consists of several overlapping components: a control center in Moscow dedicated to the "monitoring and management of the public communication network"; a dedicated Internet Registry to de-link Russian domains from Internet registrars abroad; a national domain-name system "to replace the functions of the global DNS (Domain Name System)"; and technical devices, provided by foreign firms such as China's Huawei, designed to give authorities the ability to monitor and counter threats.

After years of concerted investments, the study notes, RUNET is far more pervasive than commonly understood: "At the end of 2021, the Sovereign Internet system controlled 73% of Internet traffic and 100% of mobile traffic" within Russia. And this percentage is projected to expand as more and more devices, components, and capabilities associated with RUNET are installed by Russian authorities.

Now, a few months later, Russia's invasion of Ukraine — and the Kremlin's need to keep Russians unaware of any information that would suggest it isn't going according to plan — has turned what was once merely an administrative initiative into an urgent national-security priority. To that end, Andrei Chernenko, Russia's deputy digital minister, recently ordered Russian websites and online portals to transfer their domains to Russian servers or face severe penalties. The edict could mark the opening step in a serious effort on the part of the Russian government to decouple the country from the global Internet.

In March of 1946, in his now-famous speech at Westminster College, British prime minister Winston Churchill warned that an "iron curtain" was descending across Europe, behind which countries were subject to Moscow's subjugation. Seventy-six years later, a similar barrier — this one informational in nature — is being erected by a Kremlin fearful that its citizens might learn the truth about the extent of its incompetence, corruption, and brutality at home and abroad. In the years ahead, the West will once again have to do everything it can to ensure that its ideas, positions, and principles are known to Russia's captive population.