



Russia's Independent Media Diaspora Needs Our Support

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With the outbreak of the Ukraine war more than a year ago, Russia's already unfree media sphere has constricted precipitously. New regulations and constraints imposed by a Kremlin desperate to control the narrative about its "special military operation" have made independent journalism virtually impossible inside the country, and precipitated a mass exodus of journalists, producers, and opposition media figures to locations in Europe and beyond.

The Latvian capital of Riga has become the destination of choice for this media wave. For years, the Baltic nation has served as a hub of sorts for the Russian opposition, owing to its territorial proximity to Russia as well as the size of its Russian diaspora (which makes up a quarter or more of the country's population of 1.9 million). Some 200 of the 500 Russian journalists currently resident in Europe are thought to be based there, and the city serves as the base of operations for multiple Russian opposition media outlets. These include well-known ones, such as Meduza and Novaya Gazeta Europe, as well as smaller outfits such as New Tab and People of Baikal.

These journalists and outlets generally work collaboratively, sharing content and cooperating to tell the real story about what is happening in Ukraine, the Russian government's predatory foreign policy, and the very real impact of its excesses on ordinary people living in Russia's regions. Nevertheless, their status, and that of the people who work for them remains precarious, as a recent fact-finding trip I took to Eastern Europe made all too clear.

The problems abound. Many smaller publications are effectively "startup" operations, with just one or two dedicated editors/reporters. All exile Russian media outlets have felt a financial pinch because of their dislocation, as well as the Kremlin's designation of many as "undesirable organizations" and the subsequent demonetization of their online content by Big Tech firms such as Google. But the situation for smaller, lesser-known outlets is particularly dire. Some have been forced to do content sharing with more established outlets to gain visibility for their work—a practice that could, over time, lead them to be absorbed by these larger organizations.

Practical difficulties also persist; many banks in the Baltics, for instance, have been leery of opening accounts for these individuals, due to their Russian citizenship, forcing them to rely on special letters and dispensation from the Latvian government to continue to live and work in the country. Financial support for Russian opposition media remains severely limited, leading to a competitive atmosphere and a scramble for scarce resources. And mobility is likewise a real problem, since—due to existing EU limits on travel for Russians imposed as a result of the war—many of these individuals have difficulty traveling freely. Those who hold multiple passports are largely unaffected, but those but those who remain solely Russian citizens find themselves locked out of many European destinations, significantly impeding their work.

The resulting picture is of a media sphere caught in mid-stride. If nurtured correctly, Russia's exile media has the potential to emerge as an important independent voice. It can be and a potent counterweight to Kremlin propaganda among those Russians who are seeking authentic Russian voices (rather than Western ones) to inform them of the true state of affairs relating to Ukraine and the wider world. If left unattended, however, many smaller Russian media outlets may soon cease to function, while others will languish because of inattention and insufficient funding, without making much of an impact on the "hearts and minds" of audiences within Russia or Russian-speaking audiences in Europe.

Such a development would be nothing short of a boon to the Kremlin, which is desperately seeking to control the narrative and shape global perceptions—not only about its current war of choice in Ukraine, but regarding its proper place in the international order as well. It is also actively working to stifle voices at variance with its own version of the truth, as the recent arrest of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich eloquently highlights.

Given those stakes, supporting Russia's media exiles, and strengthening their ability to tell a qualitatively different story about their home country, should be a strategic interest not only for the United States, but for anyone seeking an alternative future for Russia.