

Countering Russian Disinformation: Strengthening Ties Between European and Independent Media

Russia is expending significant resources and energy on waging an information war against the EU. In 2025, nearly 140 billion rubles (approximately \$1.5 billion) in the Russian budget were allocated to the "Mass Media" category, and this amount has increased since the budget revision. This is just one channel of propaganda funding. We must also include ostensibly private funding from the 'National Media Group' holding, which formally belongs to Yuri Kovalchuk, an oligarch with close personal ties to Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, approximately \$500 million (over 50 billion rubles) is allocated for 'patriotic education.' One of the key structures in domestic and foreign propaganda today, ANO 'Dialog,' is formally funded through the Moscow city budget. For the first time, Moscow will finance the costs of the 'Russkiy Mir' television and radio broadcasting company, which provides services in Crimea, Sevastopol, and the DNR, LNR, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions. The 'Zvezda' media holding is funded directly from the Ministry of Defense budget. Propaganda is also heavily financed through the channels of the Institute for Internet Development (IRI) and the Presidential Fund for Cultural Initiatives (PFKI). Even this list remains incomplete, but allows for a glimpse of the sheer scale of the operations.

The Kremlin's information arsenal is diverse. Firstly, it includes traditional propaganda methods: statements from officials, traditional media, of which RT (Russia Today) remains a central instrument for foreign audiences. And an accumulation of PR allies among foreign politicians, experts, media commentators, and activists, using both soft power and diplomacy, as well as intelligence services.

Russia also uses all forms of social media for its information warfare (recent examples: elections in the Czech Republic, Romania, and Moldova), using them as key information channels to spread fake news. A new method that Russian propaganda has begun to employ on a particularly large scale is the dissemination of the same content via lookalike websites (Doppelgänger) and lookalike personalities (DeepFake), the largest example of which is the "Matryoshka" (Matriochka) network.

Russian propaganda efforts are aimed at different audiences within the EU. There are at least three: citizens of EU member states, Ukrainian refugees who left after 2022, and several million emigrants from the former USSR who consume Russian-language content, including Russians. The main goal is not merely to spread false information, but to create chaos and dismantle the concept of objective truth itself. By ensuring that no information is trusted, the Kremlin disorients the public, thereby polarizing societies and leaving them increasingly vulnerable to hostile propaganda.

This approach is showing results. For example, according to a study conducted by Finnish sociologists in 2025, only about 25% of Russian-speaking residents of Finland (a minimum of 100,000 people) trust Finnish media. Independent Russian media outlets in exile are efficiently battling Russian propaganda, both within Russia and abroad, including in the EU. They directly refute fake news, and report on events that the Russian authorities are trying to conceal.

Independent Russian media can be classified into four key groups. Classic socio-political media outlets, such as the Dozhd TV channel, Novaya Gazeta - Europe, Meduza, DOXA, Verstka, and others. Investigative outlets such as The Insider, Important Stories, Dossier, Proekt, and Agency, which produce exclusively video content for social media. And, finally, thematic outlets, most often focused on human rights, such as Mediazona, OVD-Info, the Feminist Anti-War Resistance website, and websites of anti-colonialist Russian initiatives. Some of these outlets are members of the Platform. Some of them strive to create content in English and the languages of their EU countries of residence, while some investigative and counter-propaganda content is created and distributed in collaboration with European media.

The audience of these media, according to various sources, ranges from 11 to 3 million people, the majority of whom remain in Russia. According to research conducted by the JX Fund in 2023, the combined domestic audience of all independent Russian media ranges from 5.8 to 7.8 million people. A study conducted with the support of the Dialogue Office for Civil Society Cooperation in the spring of 2025 found that 14% of users of Telegram, Russia's most popular messaging app, read opposition Telegram channels. Despite all efforts by the authorities to force Russians to switch to the official messenger 'Max', which is partially owned personally by Vladimir Putin, as well as the oligarch Yuri Kovalchuk and the family of Sergey Kiriyenko, the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration; even official data shows slightly over 50 million users have transitioned there. The number of Telegram users in Russia remains much higher. Attempts to slow it down have led to a sharp increase in demand for VPN services. This generally improves the chances of mass block circumvention, despite the authorities' ongoing preparations to create a 'sovereign' internet modeled after the Chinese firewall.

Generally speaking, independent media outlets' ability to reach Russian audiences in spite of technical barriers and blocks imposed by Russian authorities, can be measured by the reach of the legendary Soviet and Russian singer Alla Pugacheva, who emigrated from the country. In 2025, her videos alone, partially blocked but still accessible in Russia, attracted over 27 million views. However, despite fundraising campaigns and subscription systems, most of these media remain critically dependent on European and (to a lesser extent, after the closure of USAID) American donors and grantors.

Support for Independent Media

Funding

Independent Russian media require financial support. They lost most of their earning options since the advertising in Russia became unavailable due to the introduction of a direct ban on advertising in media outlets designated as 'foreign agents'. Unfortunately, Big Tech platforms, such as YouTube, Meta, and Apple, also restrict monetization options and algorithmic promotion for Russian independent media. Assistance with advocacy efforts to engage these companies on lifting bans and restoring monetization tools through personal monitoring on the platforms, as well as financial support in the form of direct grants, would be invaluable.

Collaboration

Joint projects of Russian media outlets with national, international, and regional media of the EU would allow European colleagues to get expertise on investigations and analytics on Russia; several Russian media outlets are extremely proficient in investigative journalism.

Furthermore, it is crucial to support physical broadcasting initiatives, such as the 'Svoboda' satellite package led by Reporters Without Borders. This requires EU-level intervention to negotiate with satellite operators (e.g., Eutelsat) to allocate additional bandwidth, ensuring access to independent information for a broader population within Russia.

Relocation assistance

Provision of information, visa support, job search assistance for family members, language courses, and ensuring safety and security for the editorial teams would all be extremely useful for capacity building of Russian independent journalism.