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# Russia: crackdown on Ekho Moskvy and Dozhd' TV

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On 3 March, the editor-in-chief of the radio station *Ekho Moskvy*, Aleksei Venediktov, announced that the managing directors of the station had decided to shut it down and close its website. The same day, the editorial staff of the TV channel *Dozhd'* (TV Rain) told viewers that the channel was suspending its activity. The day before, at the request of the Public Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation, Roskomnadzor (the official media market regulator) limited access to both of the above-mentioned media, which have been consistently critical of the authorities. They were accused of "posting content calling for extremist action and violence" and "deliberately disseminating false information regarding the activities of the Russian army in Ukraine", as well as summoning the public to participate in illegal protest actions and even to overthrow the constitutional order. The prosecutors ordered both entities to remove the disputed content under threat of severe criminal sanctions, including closing them. At present, *Ekho Moskvy* has been taken off the air, but the station is continuing to broadcast via social networks and YouTube. The editorial office of *Dozhd'* TV has announced that some employees, including the editor-in-chief Tikhon Dziadko, have left Russia for their own safety.

**Commentary**

- *Ekho Moskvy* and *Dozhd'* TV are among the last independent media in Russia to objectively report Russia's actions in Ukraine and oppose the war. The independent and fully subscriber-financed *Dozhd'*, which has been broadcasting since 2010, has repeatedly been the target of oppressive legislation which has been consistently undermining freedom of speech and other civil liberties in Russia. But so far it has managed to continue broadcasting. *Ekho Moskvy*, a news radio station addressed mainly to the intelligentsia and opposition groups, has so far been treated by the regime as a kind of safety valve to reduce tensions among certain elements of society and the elite. The station is owned by the state-controlled Gazprom-Media holding, owned by the gas company Gazprom.
- The above actions are in line with the Kremlin's earlier steps targeting such independent media as still manage to exist in Russia. These measures include the development of legal tools and the creation of an atmosphere to neutralise them. When the invasion of Ukraine began, the Kremlin introduced restrictions regulating the media coverage of the 'operation', including, in particular, the requirement to report events only on the basis of official state sources. At the same time, representatives of state media and politicians began demanding that the government punish any sources that were objective, blaming them for destroying the morale of society and soldiers during the military 'operation', and

even to charge them with treason. In Russia, this is one of the most serious crimes, punishable by terms of imprisonment ranging from 12 to 20 years. In addition, on 2 March, a draft legislative amendment was introduced to the Duma (the lower house of the Russian parliament) imposing penalties of up to 15 years in prison for disseminating fake news about the activities of the Russian armed forces. The government is also gradually restricting citizens' access to Western social networks such as Meta (Facebook), Twitter and YouTube.

- The Russian authorities' actions reveal that their goal is to introduce complete censorship of the media and to impose an information blockade on their own society during wartime, so they can fully neutralise any sources of unsanctioned information or criticism of the government's policy. For the Kremlin, control of media coverage is important in the context of the information warfare, this is the dimension of its war against Ukraine in which Russian war propaganda has so far not had any success. The Kremlin's other aims include causing information paralysis, as well as the fragmentation and intimidation of Russian society. The goal is to prevent ordinary Russians from cultivating or expressing critical feelings towards the authorities which could arise in the face of severe economic sanctions by the West and will directly affect ordinary citizens, as well as the human losses suffered during the war. We may therefore expect the Kremlin's next target to be the small number of liberal media outlets, such as *Novaya Gazeta*, whose editor-in-chief Dmitri Muratov won the Nobel Peace Prize last year.