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**MEDIA POLICY AS A TOOL FOR AUTOCRATIC REGIMES TO CONTROL
CIVIL SOCIETY : EXAMPLE OF RUSSIAN FEDERATION**

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Abstract

In the time of well-developed informational technologies, fast and worldwide spread of information can be seen as a positive tendency toward freedom of speech, a useful mechanism of communication between civil society all around the world and a valid instrument to spotlight human rights violations. Social networks became an alternative channel through which information and communication could flow outside of the state censorship. Media, which recently gained more independence, played a significant role in the work of human rights defending campaigns nationally and globally. But what effect did it provoke for autocratic regimes?

The dissemination of information is increasingly limited in autocratic regimes: national laws interfere with the functioning of independent media, impose limitations incompatible with the work of dissent media, prioritize state-controlled media and broadcasts and use propaganda as a tool to shape people's opinion and to support the power-keeping ability of autocrats. This research is multidisciplinary as the topic crosses the realms of political, legal and media sciences, therefore the mixed methods approach will be used. The aim of the research is to explore the connection between established media policy and civil society attitudes in and outside of the Russian Federation, therefore it will use secondary methods (such as systematic reviews of existing literature and qualitative thematic analysis of digital data).

Key words: media policy, autocratic regime, civil society, Russian Federation, propaganda

Résumé

À l'époque des technologies de l'information bien développées, la diffusion rapide et mondiale de l'information peut être considérée comme une tendance positive vers la liberté d'expression, un mécanisme utile de communication entre la société civile du monde entier et un instrument valable pour mettre en lumière les violations des droits de l'homme. Les médias sociaux sont devenus un canal alternatif par lequel l'information ainsi que la communication pouvaient circuler en dehors de la censure de l'État. Les médias, qui ont récemment acquis plus d'indépendance, ont joué un rôle important dans le travail des campagnes de défense des droits de l'homme aux niveaux national et mondial. Mais quel effet cela a-t-il provoqué pour les régimes autocratiques ?

La diffusion de l'information est de plus en plus limitée dans les régimes autocratiques: les lois nationales interfèrent avec le fonctionnement des médias indépendants, imposent des limitations incompatibles avec le travail des médias dissidents, donnent la priorité aux médias et aux émissions contrôlés par l'État et utilisent la propagande comme un outil pour façonner l'opinion des gens et pour soutenir la capacité de maintien du pouvoir des autocrates. Cette recherche est multidisciplinaire car le sujet traverse les domaines des sciences politiques, juridiques et médiatiques, c'est pourquoi l'approche des méthodes mixtes sera utilisée. Le but de la recherche est d'explorer le lien entre la politique médiatique établie et l'attitude de la société civile à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la Fédération de Russie. Par conséquent, il utilisera des méthodes secondaires (comme des revues systématiques de la littérature existante et une analyse thématique qualitative des données numériques).

Mots clés: politique des médias, régime autocratique, société civile, Fédération de Russie, la propagande

Dedications

In the memory of Alexei Navalny, who resisted till the day he was found dead in Artic Circle prison on Friday, 16th 2024.

In the memory of Boris Nemtsov, who believed in Russia more than anyone else till the day he was killed on the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge on Friday, 27th February 2015.

In the memory of Anna Politkovskaya, who spoke the truth till the day she was murdered on the way to her apartment on Friday, 7th October 2006.

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Acronyms used

CC CPSU - Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

CRC - Convention on the Rights of the Child

CRPD - Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

FSB – Federal Security Service

ICCPR - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ICERD - International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination

KGB - The Committee for State Security

NGO – non-governmental organizations

RNK – Roskomnadsor

RWB – Reporters Without Borders

UDHR - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

USA – United States of America

USSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Introduction

Overview of the research and the main objective

This thesis presents a study of the relationship between media policy and civil society performance in autocratic regimes. The research aims to understand how autocratic states such as the Russian Federation use media policy as a tool to limit civil society, primarily through restrictive laws and propaganda. The study researches on the way these policies influence the ability of civil society to operate within the state and to resist, especially within the context of recent Russian invasion in Ukraine and the increased level of political repressions within the country. By tracking the historical evolution of the media policy and its current implementation, this study seeks to detect how it impacted the performance of civil society in Russia, with the focus on independent media, human rights advocates, and opposition members, underlining the effectiveness of propaganda techniques. The research will contribute to the existing literature by exploring the interplay between state and civil society in a specific autocratic context. With the use of a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating political, legal, and media studies, the research will provide a comprehensive analysis of how media policies are designed and implemented in the Russian Federation to maintain authoritarian regime. Moreover, the research, documenting the experience of civil society in the Russian Federation, will be a base for future research on the possible strategies used by civil society in autocratic regimes to counter the pressure.

The right to freedom of speech in the international human rights law

In a western democratic liberalism conception, “a major test of a nation’s freedom is the degree of liberty its people have in speaking, writing and publishing”¹. Human beings, according to this conception, are entitled to produce, consume, or distribute any type of information, including all information concerning the critical evaluation of the leading political parties or powerful political actors in the country in which they operate without any

¹ Dwight L. Teeter and Bill Loving, *Law of Mass Communications: Freedom and Control of Print and Broadcast Media*, 12th ed (New York, [St. Paul, Minn.]: Foundation Press ; Thomson/West, 2008).

restriction imposed by the government. Those rights were highly supported by the international community and therefore recognized as intangible rights of each human being by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). UDHR was adopted after the Second World War, atrocities of which boosted the creation of the international human rights system. The universal Declaration aims to promote the respect for fundamental human rights by States that accepted obligations under the Declaration. The international human rights regime, which received its practical expression in the creation of international bodies, responsible for promotion and protection of human rights, contributed to the democratic development and peace protection at the international level after all the horrors of the two world wars.

Article 19 of the mentioned Declaration is clearly underlying that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”². Basically, these rights are preconditional for the well-functioning of democratic regimes, as they seek to empower people to be the active political actors within the traditionally state’s area of powers. The ability to receive, seek or impart information is the basis on which civil societies are usually operating and practicing their human rights advocacy activities domestically or internationally.

Majority of states have ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Each of these protects freedom of opinion and expression on an international level. Overall, 178 of 197 countries have ratified the ICERD; 169 of 197 countries have ratified the ICCPR; 196 of 197 countries have ratified the CRC; and 174 out of 197 countries have ratified the CRPD. In the process of ratification, states agreed to comply with the international human rights law and to restrict themselves by

² Gudmundur Alfredsson and Asbjørn Eide, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Common Standard of Achievement* (The Hague, Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers ; Sold and distributed in North, Central, and South America by Kluwer Law International, 1999).

legal norms, protecting citizens from the state's abuse. As a result of considerable number of states which decided to comply with these norms, the right to freedom of opinion has become a norm of customary international law³. Therefore, even those states who did not ratify any of the mentioned documents, are obliged to provide their citizens with the freedom of expression.

Despite the almost universal recognition of the rights included in the Universal Declaration and existing overlapping consensus on the nature of human rights, States remain the one implementing their sovereign power within their national territory and on their population. States have officially bound themselves to the rules of law by the ratification of international conventions, consisting of the state's responsibility to neither not to violate protected rights and freedoms (in that case, State has some negative obligations under the law), neither fulfill its obligation aiming to provide necessary conditions for people to enjoy their rights and freedom (in that case, states have some positive obligations).

Freedom of expression is traditionally considered as a negative right. It means, as underlined by Henry Schue, that this right supposes non-interference and prevents states from imposing censorship or imitating free speech, violating the right of freedom of expression⁴. Although, states have some positive obligation under the international treaties as UDHR (as, for example, to provide access to the information, to the Internet access e.t).

Despite such obligations, states who failed to comply with the existing international norms on freedom of speech are not always officially accountable. Currently, international human rights law does not provide mechanisms of forced accountability. Sanctions in case of non-compliance are typically diplomatic, political or economic rather than legal. Therefore, the common way to pressure states which refuse to comply with international human rights obligations is the "naming and shaming" policy, practiced by international and national human rights non-governmental organizations (such as Amnesty International or

³ Gillian Triggs, "The Antarctic Treaty System: A Model of Legal Creativity and Cooperation," in *Science Diplomacy: Science, Antarctica, and the Governance of International Spaces* (Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2011), 39–49, <https://doi.org/10.5479/si.9781935623069.39>.

⁴ Henry Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqsdnkw>.

Human Rights Watch), and intergovernmental organizations (such as the United Nation). National non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also can successfully pressure the government and hold them accountable. It could be a successful tactic in democratic regimes or transitional states, which are more sensitive to the critic of the international community and domestic organizations, as it was demonstrated by scholars⁵. The lack of accountability of the states in international human rights law, thus, remains one of the crucial challenges in the human rights regime, where the state's sovereignty and international obligations overlap.

The process of technical development and globalization of media platforms created new challenges to be addressed. With the advent of the Internet, it has been easier to distribute any information between users and to let it spread fast beyond the borders of the state. States lost control of the global web as it became impossible to govern the Internet purely nationally. Despite the efforts of the resisting governments, civil society actively uses global media platforms to appeal to justice and to spread information about human rights violations. This strategy can be very efficient within democratic political regimes.

Autocratic regimes seek to control civil society through all the means they dispose of, including law making monopoly, control of the so-called independent institutions and control over people's opinions. Such control can be formed very differently – from strong statistical institutions to follow the changing in people's opinion aiming to support or eliminate it, or the concentration of the television, written and online press in the hands of the government or private companies and investors cooperating with the state. Autocratic regimes seek to weaken civil society by limiting access to the media industry, controlling the diffusion of information within the borders of the state, or using oppressing laws to punish those who contribute to the formation of political opposition. Some states such as the Russian Federation have tried to use cyber sovereignty and national cyber security policies to restrict the access to the information for the population. They are using disinformation and propaganda to keep the power as well.

⁵ Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1999), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511598777>.

For this study, Russia has been chosen as the most valid example of an autocracy, tending to use media policy as a tool to control civil society. Russia always tended to limit the access for non-governmental media. With the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, the scope of repressions against opposition, dissident media and human rights organizations and defenders which were using media as a means to spread awareness of the human rights violation, has been significantly multiplied. The scale of individuals and legal entities recognized as foreign agents indicates that its enforcement practice is active and not always selective. Currently, there are more than 600 positions in the unified register of foreign agents maintained by the Ministry of Justice. The list of persons affiliated with foreign agents includes 861 individuals. The United Nations experts expressed deep concern over the escalating crackdown against civil society by Russian authorities.

Research question

This research will explore in detail the connection between media policies implicated by states, civil societies actively facing the aftermath of the mentioned policy and the powerholders' ability to maintain their power in autocratic regimes. The question that will be answered at the end of the research, therefore, will be: how exactly, using the media policy, does the Russian Federation maintain the power of the main leader by controlling Russian civil society?

To answer this question, it is necessary to establish a connection between Russian federal media policy and the ability of political leaders to continue his exercise of power. To do that, that is necessary to achieve the given objectives:

1. Provide a solid historical background of the media policy in the Russian Federation to follow how this policy has been evolving.
2. Analyze current media policy of Russian Federation from 2019 to 2024, investigating how the war in Ukraine reflected in the media policy changes.
3. Explore the practical implementation of the current media policy in the Russian Federation in connection with civil society with the special bias on NGOs

4. Measure the impute of the media policies on the power keeping ability of the authoritarian regime within the Russian Federation.

Conceptual Framework

To develop the chosen topic, I will appeal to such notions as “media policy,” “autocratic regimes,” “civil society” and “propaganda”, which need to be conceptualized for the purposes of the research.

Media policy for the purpose of the research is understood as, according to Garnham, “the ways in which public authorities shape, or try to shape, structures and practices of the media”⁶, with the strong focus of nature and the role of actors involved, as I will concentrate on the government as the main regulator of media policy. This definition will allow me to eliminate other possible actors of defining media policy, as their contribution or completely absent or unusually low in autocracies.

“Information policy” is another definition, understood for the objective of the research as the “all laws and policy affecting information creation, processing, flows and use of information.” Therefore, information policy is one of the media policy’s practices⁷

“Autocratic regime” means a system of government in which supreme power over a state is concentrated in the hands of one person. The people’s control over the actions of the autocrat is neither very limited nor does not exist at all. Autocratic regimes tend to accumulate all the power within principal bodies. The political system in autocracies is not inclined to functional changes, as well as to the change of power⁸. The decisions of the autocrat are subject to keeping the power at all cost and usually for that, the autocrat uses repression practices against the opposition. The Russian Federation is a personalistic autocracy where all the power is constructed in the hands of President Vladimir Putin and his

⁶ Marc Raboy and Claudia Padovani, “Mapping Global Media Policy: Concepts, Frameworks, Methods*,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3, no. 2 (June 2010): 150–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2010.01064.x>.

⁷ Sandra Braman, *Change of State: Information, Policy, and Power* (The MIT Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/1783.001.0001>.

⁸ Erica Frantz, “Autocracy,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, by Erica Frantz (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.3>.

closest political accomplices. Although the elections are present at the framework of the state and held regularly according to the Constitution, it is fictive due to the impossibility for the opposition to be represented at the national elections and a high level of frauds.

Civil societies are understood as “realm in the interstices of the state, political society, the market, and the society at large for organization by nonstate, nonmarket groups that take collective action in the pursuit of the public good”⁹, where public good does not refer to the state’s good or the good of the public in the large utilitarian sense, but to the good of the individuals and groups represented by the civil societies’ institutions. Thus, civil society is not a synonym to the “opposition”, but more an umbrella notion to describe any active groups of people united by a common goal – as, for example, human rights protections.

“Propaganda” is a phenomenon which has been known for centuries and still the definition of it is very vague in the literature. Most of the time, propaganda is understood as something negative, as it was correctly mentioned by Jowett and Donnell, “words frequently used as synonyms of propaganda are lies, distortion, deceit, manipulation, mind control, psychological warfare, brainwashing, and palaver”¹⁰. From the very beginning, propaganda was mainly associated with the high level of governmental control and military activities conducted by states.

Analytical Framework

Different approaches saw the role of the media in shaping public opinion quite differently. The liberal-pluralist view supposed the availability of the so-called “marketplace of idea,” from which the majority of people would choose the one ideologically closer to their value chain¹¹. This approach is not applicable to autocracies as it assumes the presence of democratic mechanisms and the absence of barriers created by states. The critical-Marxist,

⁹ Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, Seventh edition (Los Angeles London New Delhi Singapore Washington D.C. Melbourne: SAGE, 2019).

¹¹ Robert Weissberg, “The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power. By Benjamin Ginsberg (New York: Basic Books, 1986. Xi, 232 p. \$18.95).” *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 2 (June 1, 1987): 611–12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1961981>.

on the contrary, supports the hypothesis of media as a tool for reflection of the interests of upper classes– which is not relevant for the post-Soviet societies. The most suitable approach in the case of the Russian Federation would be the political economy approach which concentrates upon the issues of media ownership and state control over the outlets¹².

One of the most considered of studied models of propaganda concentrated upon the issues of media ownership and control is the Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky propaganda model. It examines the connection between economic and communication power, using five filters that help to define the propaganda. This model will be applied in the current research.

Literature review

This research will be based on the already existing literature. The research will be conducted around the concept of shrinking space of civil society - this notion reflects the increased claims faced by civil society which include restrictions from the government, limitations on their activity or other obstacles that impact the operation of civil society¹³

There is a decent amount of literature which contributed to the development of the concept. Some articles explore the possible causes of closing civic space, tools that states use to impose restrictions on civil society and consequences of those¹⁴. The first mentioned research is primarily focused on legal aspects of the civil society closure, and therefore neglects some social and cultural aspects which leads to the oversimplification. Some of the conducted researches explore transnational causes which led to the closing of civil societies in different political regimes¹⁵. It is important to note that the research is focused on the

¹² Tony Bennett et al., eds., “Large Corporations and the Control of the Communications Industries,” in *Culture, Society and the Media*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2005), 123–56, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203978092-13>.

¹³ Annika Elena Poppe and Jonas Wolff, “The Contested Spaces of Civil Society in a Plural World: Norm Contestation in the Debate about Restrictions on International Civil Society Support,” *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 469–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1343219>.

¹⁴ Antoine Buyse, “Squeezing Civic Space: Restrictions on Civil Society Organizations and the Linkages with Human Rights,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22, no. 8 (September 14, 2018): 966–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2018.1492916>.

¹⁵ David Sogge, “Civic Space: Shrinking from the Outside In?,” *Revista Iberoamericana de Estudios de Desarrollo = Iberoamerican Journal of Development Studies* 9, no. 1 (May 5, 2020): 74–98, https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_ried/ijds.439.

actions of external donors and NGOs, therefore it can overlook the contribution of domestic factors or the influence of social changes - my research aims to fill in this gap by investigating domestic policies and specificity of personal autocracies such as the Russian Federation.

Speaking of autocratic regimes and civil societies, there is plenty of literature describing instruments that such regimes use to squeeze civil society. Existing literature explains the stability of certain autocracies and mentions their relations with civil societies by using a theoretical framework aimed at integrating a static view to explain stability of autocracies with a dynamic perspective to find the foundation¹⁶. However, this research has inherent limitations in generalizing findings across different contexts and does not consider the influence of history, culture, and socio-political dynamics. The role of civil societies under autocratic regimes is also different from those under democracies - research analyzes it in the example of Cambodia and Philippines¹⁷. These studies have limited scope as they only analyze autocratic regimes in specific countries and particular periods of time. Moreover, the research overlooked the agency and resistance efforts of civil society organizations. It follows that these studies should be conceptualized to become applicable to the Russian Federation where one of the instruments of science civil society is the media policy conducted by the state - analyzing the influence of media policy on the actively changing role of civil society, I will contribute to the existing literature in this domain.

Media policy plays a crucial role in shaping the media environment within which propaganda operates. The novelty of my research is the detailed study of the propaganda influence on manipulation of civil society in the Russian Federation. The existing literature, which relies on measuring the volume and valence of government coverage in state-run newspapers as a proxy for propaganda¹⁸. However, this approach may not capture the full extent of propaganda activities, which can also include other forms of media manipulation,

¹⁶ Johannes Gerschewski, "The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (January 2013): 13–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738860>.

¹⁷ Jasmin Lorch, "Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation: Adjusting to Shrinking Space in Cambodia," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 42, no. 3 (December 2023): 395–420, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034231214397>.

¹⁸ Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter, *Propaganda in Autocracies: Institutions, Information, and the Politics of Belief*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009271226>.

ensorship, and information control that are not captured in newspaper articles. It also lacks contextual specificity as propaganda can be diverse depending on the specificities of regimes and historical and cultural background. There is a strong work on strategies states use to build trust by affirming existing beliefs¹⁹. This work, despite conducting randomized experiments, can be biased as a researcher only studying state media and narratives and therefore do not consider dissident viewpoints. Some other studies provide analyses on the nature and role of propaganda within international law²⁰. Author provides a historical analysis of the regulation of propaganda combining methods of international law and social cognitive science. It struggles to justify the causal relations between state propaganda and the high level of support for criminal activity of the state due to the lack of empirical data that is relevant to evaluate the possible impact of propaganda alongside the diverse causes of such behavior.

Political propaganda is an instrument of Russian authorities to artificially shape political opinion and to exclude civil society from the political landscape. My research will provide an evaluation of Russian propaganda contribution to the power-keeping ability of political leader in Russia.

From the literature reviews, we can notice that a few literatures consider the impact of complexly applied media policy which include legal and political decisions aiming to maintain the regime and control civil society. My research is going to contribute to this aspect.

Methodologies

This research is multidisciplinary as the topic crosses the realms of political, legal and media sciences. Therefore, the mixed methods approach will be used. The aim of the research is to explore the connection between established media policy and civil society attitudes in and outside of the Russian Federation, using secondary methods (such as systematic reviews of existing literature and quantitative thematic analysis of digital data).

¹⁹ Anton Shirikov, "Rethinking Propaganda: How State Media Build Trust Through Belief Affirmation," August 24, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/qzubr>.

²⁰ Predrag Dojcinovic, "Introduction to Propaganda and International Criminal Law: From Cognition to Criminality," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3500019>.

Some media-specific doctrines will also be used to make historical and data analyses more profound as, for example, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky²¹.

To respond to the question posed in the study, the primary legal sources will be actively used, as I will provide decent analyses of current laws. I will analyze Russian law on “On media”, “On non-commercial organization”. Judicial cases will also be used to back up with the example of described political and legal tendencies in the Russian Federation. I will as well study the court's decisions from the closed base of Russian human rights defending organization OVD-Info, which cooperates with me on the point of necessary information about current state repressions concerning civil society. To evaluate the impact of the government’s media strategy on public opinion, I will refer to secondary sources such as data from trusted pollster companies such as Levada-Center, The All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center, Mediascope.

Main Argument

The hypothesis to be upheld in the current research is the effectiveness of the media policy for maintaining political power in the Russian Federation. Media tools play a crucial role within authoritarian states, through which states gain the possibility to control media content and regulate access to information within its borders. Propaganda is one of the most efficient tools in state’s disposition, which reinforces the legitimacy of the President. Using propaganda, states suppress civil society activism, major part of which is connected with human rights advocacy or protest activity. These strategies were used more actively after the start of the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022, followed by the increased level of repressions.

Chapter outline

In the first part, I will explore the historical background of the media policy in the Russian Federation, concentrating primarily on the policies used by the Soviet authorities in the domain of media regulation to be able to understand which of these strategies were

²¹ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage Digital, 2010).

adopted in modern Russia and how they were evolved. I will analyze the shift from the control to repression and their strengthening after the start of invasion in Ukraine in 2022. The second part will provide the inside on the current media policy in the Russian Federation focusing on the law on foreign agents, amendments to the Administrative and Criminal codes as a legal mechanism of implementation of a media policy. This part will refer to extra-judicial practices as well. The third part will be dedicated to state propaganda in the media. In this part, I will as well estimate the impute of the media policies on the power keeping ability of President Vladimir Putin by negatively representing the Western democracies as a main competitor to the traditional values, misrepresenting the opposition members in Russia of science their voices. I will also evaluate the contribution to the support of the military operation by state media.

PART I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MEDIA POLICY IN RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Chapter 1: The historical evolution of media regulations in the USSR and modern Russia

In the history of Russia, there were different strategies used by the government to influence public opinion, such as severe censorship imposed by the Communist party or “soft” media policy implemented in the early years of modern Russia. After the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) where all the media was under control of the supreme power of the state, it became possible to broadcast or to access the media market as a private stakeholder with its commercial interests. In the 90s, Russia tried to adapt to the capitalistic model of the open and concurrent market after the communist regimes in the past with its planned economy.

This chapter presents an analysis of the media strategies that were used by Soviet powers to influence civil society. The evolution of such strategies will show the change from the period of liberalization to the following limitations of media activities in modern Russia, until the 2010s, including the first two presidential terms of Vladimir Putin. The objective of the present chapter is to follow the historical development of media regulations within the Soviet Union and later – the Russian Federation. Present chapter argues that Russian officials adopted Soviet-era methods to control the media, despite Russia's democratic claims and proclaimed pro-Western path of development.

The present chapter consists of the following parts: Media policy during the Soviet era (1918-1985), Media policy during Gorbachev's Glasnost and Perestroika (1985-1991). In these chapters, I will focus on analyzing media strategies under the USSR. After that, I will as well analyze strategies of modern Russia, from the Yeltsin Era (1990-1999) to the first presidential terms of Vladimir Putin (2000-2008) and the start of the presidential first term of Dmitri Medvedev.

1.1. Media policy during the Soviet Era (1918-1991)

Until the general trend toward democratization under the Perestroika in the 1990s, all media within the Union (both print and broadcasted) were strictly regulated not by the special laws aiming to provide the common conditions of journalism activities, but by the rulings of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) – the main legislative organ of the Soviet Union - and resolutions of the USSR Council of Ministers – the main executive organ of that time. Therefore, every media who appealed to the power aiming to gain the permit to carry out their activities has been considered case by case by the empowered governmental body. State censorship was omnipresent. Only between 1917 and 1987, the CC CPSU has adopted 185 resolutions, letters, and circulars concerning the periodical press (without Party congress resolutions)²². Some of above-mentioned documents were of a general nature (e.g., “On measures to improve municipal and district newspapers,” 1984) while others, which were more numerous, were more specific (as an example, “On the editor of the newspaper Sever, Comrade Zadov,” 1939).

In that period, we can still notice the dependence of the media on official sources. As it was indicated in the research conducted by Alexseev and Bennett, officials’ sources dominated the media. Often newspapers were owned by the organ of institutional bodies of the Union: for example, the newspaper Pravda was owned by the Communist Party Central Committee, the most popular newspaper Izvestia was the part of the Supreme Soviet. Thus, the state ownership and source dependence prevented the media from gaining independence. As it was noted by researchers, “While encouraging journalists to practice glasnost, the Party still held the monopoly on deciding which subjects were to be debated under the new relaxed rules”²³.

²² Blake Saville, Mark Whitehouse, Linda Trail, Eleeza and Agopian, Lillie Paquette, “Media Sustainability Index,” *The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia*, 2009, 301.

²³ Mikhail A. Alexseev and W. Lance Bennett, “For Whom the Gates Open: News Reporting and Government Source Patterns in the United States, Great Britain, and Russia,” *Political Communication* 12, no. 4 (October 1995): 395–412, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1995.9963086>.

Holding a monopoly over the information flow, Soviet authorities used the media as a tool to dismiss propaganda and disinformation domestically and internationally. Soviet propaganda was very powerful. CSS (The Committee for State Security), represented by Yuri Andropov during the 70s, weaponized media outlets. Tactics used by “disinformation department” CSS (Department A) included, for example, “control of the press in foreign countries; outright and partial forgery of documents; the use of rumors, insinuation, altered facts, and lies; use of international and local front organizations; clandestine operation of radio stations; and the exploitation of a nation’s academic, political, economic and media figures.”²⁴ By the 1980s, when current President Vladimir Putin started his career within the CSS, propaganda and disinformation were one of the central activities or an organ.

It is evident that the main tendency to openness of the media was already noticeable in the time of the Soviet Union during the Perestroika period under Gorbachev – General Secretary of the Communist party. With Gorbachev coming to power and the start of transition to the policy of *Perestroika* in 1985 (the main purpose of which was comprehensive democratization of all social, economic, and political system in Soviet Union and empowerment of people) periodic press, broadcast media and journalists has been given the possibility to conduct their activity under less restricted state policy. The main legal document regulating media activity during Perestroika was the 19th All-Union Conference resolution of CPSU “On openness” 1988. The legislator underlines that “the important role of the media in expanding publicity. They are designed to comprehensively reflect the activities of party, state, and public organizations, serve the consolidation of socialist society, actively promote the accumulated experience, and be an instrument of popular control over the situation in the country. The conference considers it unacceptable to restrain critical speech in the press, as well as the publication of biased information that affects the honor and dignity of a citizen”²⁵. Therefore, the policy of openness has contributed a lot to the process of media liberalization. However, the Conference also made an emphasis on the media’s

²⁴ Nicolas J. Cull and Vasily Gatov, “Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against It. An Analytic History, with Lessons for the Present,” *LSE Consulting*, 2017, 81.

²⁵ “19th All-Union Conference of the CPSU, Documents and Materials: Report and Speeches by Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee; Resolutions” (19th All-Union Conference of the CPSU, Moscow, Russia: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1988), 161.

moral, political and legal responsibilities underlying the ideology and morality as well as the trustworthiness of the information, leaving the possibility to recall the rights to the broadcast or publication.

Later, with the new USSR law “On the press and other mass media”, the legal regulation of the editor’s and journalists’ activities was changed. Necessary legal obligations and rights for both editor offices and journalists were established. Consequently, they indeed “acquired an impersonal and collective existence independent of external pressures from the state and owners (founders)”²⁶. Formally, the media were not placed under state control. First critical articles, which were pointing out the present and past violations committed by authorities and their incompetence, were published.

After the proclaimed course towards democratization, the media (no longer bound by the rules of the supreme power of Communist party) gained their independence and became the fourth branch of power alongside legislative, executive, and judicial, contributing to the formation of the new society. The process of establishing media as a fourth branch followed with such principles as “repeal of state censorship and a pronounced rejection of state interference in the media’s affairs, particular protection of the rights of journalists as persons performing a public duty, and particular privileges for journalists to access state and public sources of information”²⁷. The media, therefore, became formally independent from the government, gaining the trust of citizens, becoming a mediator between state authorities and the population.

1.2. Media policy in post-Soviet Russia: Yeltsin era (1991-1999)

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the newborn state – Russian Federation with its new Constitution chose the Western path of economic and political liberalization, open trade and, consequently, acceptance of the international human rights norms (not only social and

²⁶ Andrei Richter, “The Post-Soviet Media and Communication Policy Landscape: The Case of Russia,” in *The Handbook of Global Media and Communication Policy*, ed. Robin Mansell and Marc Raboy, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2011), 192–209, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444395433.ch12>.

²⁷ idem

economic, but rather political and civil which were constantly violated during Soviet Union). Freedom of speech and freedom of media have become one of such rights. Already in the initial relaxation of the Constitution of Russian Federation, accepted and entered in force by the nationwide voting 12 December 1993, it was stated that “everyone is guaranteed freedom of thought and speech”, therefore, “everyone has the right to freely seek, receive, transmit, produce, and disseminate information by any lawful means. The list of information constituting a state secret is determined by federal law. Freedom of the media is guaranteed. Censorship is prohibited”²⁸. These norms are protected by the Constitution and have a supreme power over all other legal regulations, including Federal laws.

The first Federal law regulating media activities in post-soviet democratic Russia was the Federal law “On mass media” dated from 7th December 1991 № 2124-1. It was signed by the first Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Under his presidency, the freedom of media remained at a high level, allowing the public criticism of authorities – era of liberalization finally reached the borders of the Russian Federation²⁹. The legislator provided a negative definition of the rights to the freedom of speech, staying that “search, receipt, production and distribution of mass information, establishment of mass media, ownership, use and disposal of them, production, acquisition, storage and operation of technical devices and equipment, raw materials and supplies intended for the production and distribution of media products, are not subject to restrictions, except for those provided for by the legislation of the Russian Federation on the media”³⁰. It follows that this right is not an absolute one and can be limited any time by the governmental laws. The legislator used a negative definition, leaving the space for the responsible bodies the ability to restrict the spread of information, if needed. Therefore, as it was mentioned by previous researches, such a negative definition could

²⁸ “The Constitution of the Russian Federation (Was Adopted at National Voting on December 12, 1993),” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, December 25, 1993.

²⁹ “Freedom of the Press since 1980 by Freedom House.,” *Freedom House*, accessed February 14, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/publication-archives>.

³⁰ “Federal Law No.2124-1 of December 27, 1991, ‘On Mass Media,’” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, December 28, 1991.

“reduce the possibility of invoking this freedom when seeking to protect it against legislative encroachment”³¹.

State, according to this Federal law, is obliged to supply all the necessary information about its political, economic and environmental activities on the request of accredited media. There were some grounds of refusal to supply information - for example, if such information constitutes a state, commercial or other secret specially protected by law. It can be also mentioned that the right to the information is perceived more as a right of the citizens to access information about state bodies rather than a right of the freedom of speech or expression in the media. The law itself underline that “citizens have the right to promptly obtain reliable information about the activities of state bodies through the mass media”³². Thus, the media here is just an intermediary between citizens and responsible governmental bodies.

The freedom of media, according to the law, also included the freedom to establish a media outlet and to own, operate and dispose of it. Therefore, as a rule, the state had no right to hinder the establishment of a new media, professional activities of the journalist community or freelancers working with the media and interfere within their business processes. However, at the same time, law indicated some exceptions (converting mostly foreign media operating within the territory of the Russian Federation or freelance journalists pursuing their duties without any contract with publishers). The law, despite the formal limitation of the scope of freedom, was considered as democratic, as pursuing permissive policy toward independent media at the time of the first presidential term of Vladimir Putin.

1.3. Media Policy in post-Soviet Russia: Putin’s first terms (2000-2008)

³¹ A. Voinov, “Legislation on the Media and Its Application in Practice in the Constituent Republics of the Russian Federation,” *Media Law*, accessed February 28, 2024, <http://www.medialaw.ru/publications/books/voinov/index.html>.

³² “Federal Law No.2124-1 of December 27, 1991, ‘On Mass Media.’”

Vladimir Putin became the President in 2000 after his first premiership in 1999, when Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who decided to retire, appointed Putin the Acting President of the Russian Federation.

After Vladimir Putin started his presidential term, the informational flow slowly became more and more under control. It is essential to mention that the freedom of information is one of the most important elements of freedom of expression – it contains the freedom to make, acquire, keep, and use technical facilities, raw and other materials intended for the production and dissemination of created media content. This means that media should not be denied the rights to own their own technical equipment, broadcast, or financial resources. Monopoly on media should be prohibited by the state. The most important element (and the most undesirable for autocratic regimes) is the freedom to openly express people’s opinion in the media. This freedom includes not only the rights to publication of different opinions, but the prohibition of the persecution due to the published information, as well as the right of the journalist to refuse to put his or her name on the article contradicting his or her beliefs.

Legal regulation of media activities should not get in the way of the media performing its socially significant functions. Social role of the media was highlighted in scholar’s publications. Ekaterina Lysova, for example, talks about such roles as: “objective and impartial reporting of events; representation of various viewpoints, including those that run counter to the media’s own; overseeing the authorities and publicizing wrongdoing; enabling ordinary citizens to express their views and, in so doing, to influence the institutions of power; and ensuring full access to current information, thereby putting into effect the right of citizens to obtain information”³³.

All these roles coupled with listed rights make it possible to play specific tasks for the non-state media. Therefore, these roles and assigned rights are highly interconnected. Without the right to establish a media and to operate it freely and independently, it is

³³ Ekaterina Lysova, “Legislation of the Russian Federation on the Mass Media: Concepts, System, Main Developmental Trends” (Vladivostok, Russia, Far Eastern State University, 2004), https://rusneb.ru/catalog/000199_000009_002739328/.

impossible to impartially report on significant events as well. The same way, without the right of citizens to request and obtain information, it would be impossible to oversee violations or wrongdoing of governmental officials or local powers.

Even though the adopted laws regulating the media were sufficiently democratic, in practice the activities of media and journalists were subject to restrictions. These restrictions were expressed by the obstacles to media and journalists in carrying out their professional activities. At the same time, formally, the number of private-owned media registered in Russia was high. In the 2010s, from more than 93 thousand media outlets that were registered in Russia, the absolute majority 90% - are “non-state media”³⁴. The independent media have been actively using their new possibilities to influence the state’s practice by mostly naming and shaming practice, but also by the private investigations by journalists. Private investigations conducted by independent journalists quickly became popular in Russia.

There are other indicators proving a return to state control over the media and censorship (still unofficial). In the early 2010s, the Russian Federation, as a part of the European Convention on Human Rights and the members of the Council of Europe, was accountable for the violations committed by the government before the European Court of Human Rights. During Russian membership, the Court found 256 violations under article 10 of the European Convention, establishing the freedom of speech. Russian authorities found it unacceptable to criticize their decisions publicly and therefore to let the opposition gain the real possibility to influence the political process within the country. Russian journalists were forced to seek justice in the European Court of Human Right after attempts to achieve the repeal of acts of Russian courts restricting freedom of speech.

One of the examples can be the case Dyuldin and Kislov v. Russia 2007, pending before the European Court of Human Rights. On 15 August 2000, the Co-ordination Council of the Penza Regional Voters “Association Civic Unity” during its meeting adopted the draft of an open letter, “Media coverage of the reforms of President Putin in the Penza Region”. Later, followed by discussions, the final text was elaborated and directed to the President of

³⁴ “Dmitry Medvedev Chairs a Meeting on the Development of the Media,” *Kremlin.Ru*, September 7, 2010, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/8311>.

the Russian Federation, the Security Council of the Russian Federation, the Journalists' Union of Russia, the plenipotentiary representative of the President of the Volga Federal District, and the Minister for Press and Information of the Russian Federation and signed by the application and four editors in chief. The local newspaper, *Novaya Birzhevaya Gazeta*, has published an open letter on its front page. The newspaper was appealing to governmental responsibility before its citizens, considering the corruption acts committed by President Putin and his close friends who represent the local population of the Volga region. In February 2001, twelve members of the Penza Regional Government lodged a civil action with the Leninskiy District Court of Penza for the protection of their honor, dignity, and professional reputation, asking for compensation for non-pecuniary damage sustained because of the publication of the open letter. The Court concluded that the honor and reputation of the politicians was indeed damaged by the distribution of false information. The European Court, highlighting the importance of article 10 of the Convention, claimed that “the limits of permissible criticism are wider regarding a government than in relation to a private citizen, or even a politician. In a democratic system the actions or omissions of the government must be subject to the scrutiny not only of the legislative and judicial authorities but also of the press and public opinion”³⁵. Therefore, the Court supported the position about the highest moral, political, and legal responsibilities of the governmental actors before their population, thus confirming the rights of the media to disseminate information on the actions of civil servants during the exercise of their powers.

Aiming to keep media distant from the political ground, Federal Law "On Combating Terrorism" dated 25.07.1998, mostly centered around criminal activities and terrorist acts, contained as well specific norms regarding media performance. For example, article 15 stated that, “it is not allowed to disseminate information...capable of complicating the conduct of the counter-terrorism operation and creating a threat to the lives and health of people who find themselves in the area of the counter-terrorism operation or who are outside the said zone; serving to promote or justify terrorism and extremism”³⁶. This was primarily used to

³⁵ Dyuldin v. Russia, No. No. 25968/02 (European Court of Human Rights July 31, 2007).

³⁶ “Federal Law No. 114-FZ of July 25, 2002 “On Counteraction of Extremist Activities”,” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, July 25, 2002.

stop the media from reporting human rights violations and war crimes committed by military powers in the Republic of Chechnya. Some newspapers, such as Kommersant and Novaya Gazeta, were accused by the political actors for justifying terrorist activities. Nevertheless, it was impossible to close these media, as Law "On mass media " did not contain paragraphs naming the justification of terrorism as a possible reason for the revocation of the right to broadcast or publish. Extremist activities appeared in this law only with amendments adopted in 2003, adding to the previous aspects of inadmissibility of abuse of freedom of media committing "extremist activities". It can relate to events in a terrorist act in one of the schools in Beslan in 2002, as both laws on mass media and terrorist activities toughened up after these events and its investigation by the media.

One of the most known examples of governmental intolerance to the private investigation practice was Anna Politkovskaya. She was firstly investigating humanitarian crimes committed by Russian military forces in the Republic of Chechnya during Chechen wars. She was advocating for the ceasefire in that region and working with wives and mothers of soldiers who died during military operations. Anna was working on the Nord Ost (terroristic act in Moscow, during which a group of Chechen militants kept 912 hostages from the crew, cast and spectators of the musical "Nord-Ost") investigation as well, trying to reach justice for the victims of the tragedy. She insisted that Russian special services were aware of the preparation for a terrorist attack and collaborated with the terrorists. On 7th October 2006, she was killed in the lift on the way to her apartment in Moscow. Despite the independent investigation committed by Novaya Gazeta (a media outlet in which she was working) and the arrest of one of the suspects, no one was detained or charged with the accusations.

Moreover, after the new Law "On countering extremist activities" adopted in 2002, the state got one more tool in the form of a vague definition of "extremist activities" to weaken the influence of independent media, openly criticizing the government. According to the law, "extremist activities" include such actions as "forcible change of the foundations of the constitutional order and violation of the integrity of the Russian Federation; the security of the Russian Federation; seizure or usurpation of authority; the creation of illegal armed

groups; carrying out terrorist activities”³⁷ e.t. After amendments made in 2006, the notion has evaluated - “carrying out terrorist activities or publicly justifying terrorism”, included such acts as “obstruction of the legitimate activities of state authorities...public defamation against a person holding a public position of the Russian Federation or a public position of a subject of the Russian Federation, in the performance of his official duties or in connection with their performance....an encroachment on the life of a statesman or public figure committed in order to terminate his state or other political activities or out of revenge for such activities”³⁸. There, new paragraphs were protecting the government and its officials from public criticism. The possibility of legal accountability for such actions led to the self-censorship of independent editors and journalists in Russia, restricting them from free distribution of information concerning public officials or spreading awareness about government violations of human rights. In 2007, public appeals and speeches encouraging the implementation of these activities, justifying the commission of terrorist activities was also banned by amendments, censoring not only written press materials but also public speeches. A year later, even “providing information services” for the mentioned purposes could be recognized as a violation of the law. The outcome of amendments also resulted in practice of “soft” administrative sanctions imposed on non-obeyed media. Sanctions could be expressed in administrative warnings, which has strengthened self-censorship. In 2008, all abuses of media freedom “invoked 57 written warnings; from which, 37 were issued for dissemination of extremist materials”³⁹, according to the data gathered by Reporters Without Borders.

As we can see, autocratic regimes seek to slow down the spread of information which can possibly lead to the unwanted image of power in the eyes of the public. Therefore, such regimes tend to use media restrictions as a tool to strengthen their power creating a desirable image of the state, willing to provide rights and freedom for people. As we can see from the example of Chechnya, the state is particularly cautious in its external policy and military

³⁷ *idem*

³⁸ *idem*

³⁹ “Reporters Without Borders, Annual Report 2008 - Russia,” February 13, 2008, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/rsf/2008/en/55317>.

interventions. Seeing increased public attention to events that were taking place in Chechnya, the State Duma passed a resolution “On the situation in the Republic of Dagestan, and priority measures to ensure the national security of the Russian Federation and the fight against terrorism.” In this resolution, politicians insisted on “the taking of all necessary steps to prevent appearances in the media by representatives of illegal armed formations” and on “failure to heed this demand to be treated as a serious offense, leading to the imposition of sanctions as contained in Russian Federation legislation up to and including withdrawal of broadcast license”⁴⁰. Thus, any other point of view on Chechen conflict aside from the official version was, according to this law, the lawful ground for investigation by public authorities. We can find witnesses of this statement in administrative practice: a lot of media covering an interview including citations from Aslan Maskhadov (Chechen leader) were sanctioned by written warnings.

Another barrier for media performance in Russia was a strong state presence in the media market. Government, trying to control public opinion, seeks to take a dominant position in the field of information. In 2008, Russian authorities continued to expand the reach of state-owned print media. Natalia Znamenskaya, the chief editor of Zhukovskiy Vesti (one of the regional media outlets), noted that “free copies of the national and governmental newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta were delivered to all local residents for several months, and the city administration required all heads of local enterprises to subscribe to a municipal newspaper owned by the administration as well as make 100 to 150 of their employees subscribe”⁴¹. That situation unfairly creates different conditions for business operations. Private media holders found it extremely difficult to compete with state-owned media, considering their access to the governmental funds and high budget. Only in 2008, the government allocated 83 813 337,7 rubles (around 838 133 370 euro) from its annual budget

⁴⁰ State Duma. “Resolution No. 4293-II ‘On the Situation in the Republic of Dagestan, and Priority Measures to Ensure the National Security of the Russian Federation and the Fight against Terrorism,’” August 16, 1999.

⁴¹ Vyacheslav Shevtsov, “Legal Status of the Official Provincial Print Media in the Periodical Press System of the Russian Empire,” *Bylye Gody* 34 (2014): 10.

for culture, cinematography, mass media, about 50% were spent on mass media in any form (such as subsidies, financial aid for state programs and projects or support of media)⁴²

The most relevant example of preventing private independent investors from television broadcasting would be the case of NTV channel, which was founded in 1993 by private investor Vladimir Gusinsky. NTV quickly became a trustworthy source of information concerning political events for the public. By 1999, NTV had achieved an audience of 102 million viewers, covering about 70% of Russia's territory. It was also available for broadcast in other former Soviet republics⁴³. After the release of a series of political investigations led by NTV journalists, openly criticizing Putin's activities, the channel faced persecutions. On 11th May 2000, the tax police, backed by officers from the General prosecutor's office and the Federal Security Service, stormed the Moscow headquarters of NTV and Media-Most and searched the premises for 12 hours. Vladmimir Gusinsky, the founder of the channel, was charged with accusations of fraud and offered freedom in exchange for selling the channel to Gazprom (state company). On 26th January 2001, Gazprom announced that it had acquired a controlling stake of 46% of NTV Channel. The most popular TV channel became fully under state's control.

In the 2010s, the government imposed more limitations on the freedom of speech. The notion of the prohibition of censorship was not absolute anymore, as it had a lot of reservations made neither by the legislator itself nor by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, whose main function is to check the correspondence of constitutional norms to the legal norms adopted by government, state bodies or local powers. In its Resolution of the Plenum dated June 15th, 2010 N 16 "On the practice of application by courts of the Law of the Russian Federation "On the Mass Media", the Court stated that "It is not considered censorship for authorized bodies and officials to issue written warnings to the founder, editorial board (editor-in-chief) in case of abuse of freedom of mass information, the court's imposition of a ban on the production and release of mass media in cases established by

⁴² "Federal Law No. 198-FZ of 24 July, 2007 (as Amended on 11/28/2008) 'On the Federal Budget for 2008 and for the Planning Period of 2009 and 2010,'" *State Duma*, July 24, 2007.

⁴³ "NTV: Timeline of Events," *CNN*, October 4, 2001, <https://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/04/09/ntv.timeline/index.html>.

federal laws in order to prevent abuse of freedom of mass information”⁴⁴. The Courts therefore decided to leave the opportunity to authorities to broadly define the circumstances in which legal restrictions to the information will be applied. This consequently limited the access of civil society to the various information concerning the activities of the public officials.

The same way autocracies establish the control over informational flow spread within written press and broadcast media, they seek to control the information in the web space. Autocracies tend to dominate Internet infrastructure, which was gaining more attention from citizens – sometimes content-creators decided to “relocate” their activities online. The amount of Internet users grew up rapidly in Russia - over 37.5 million people above 18 years of age, or one-third of all Russians in this age group, had regular access to the Internet in 2009⁴⁵. Consequently, the media shifted from written press to online presence with less restriction and surveillance from the government. Therefore, the Russian Federation faced the challenge resulting in increased development of technology and the possibility for information to circulate around the world wide web without any government regulation. The Internet was considered as a mass media because it is, firstly, possible to gain access for the broad public and, secondly, the function of the internet is to gather, create and distribute information (Intention in this case directly plays the role of a media). Notwithstanding, some might argue that the internet lacks the sign of periodicity of distributing information, which is essential for traditional mass media to be considered as such. Besides, it has a different way of identification. Traditional media are identified by their name or logo, while internet sources are mostly identified by their domain or IP address. The question whether internet is considered as “a form of periodical distribution of mass information”⁴⁶ stayed for a long time

⁴⁴ “Resolution of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation Dated 15.06.2010 No. 16 "On the Practice of Application by the Courts of the Law of the Russian Federation ‘On the Mass Media,’” June 15, 2010.

⁴⁵ MediaScope, “Media Audience Data,” accessed May 15, 2024, <https://mediascope.net/data/>.

⁴⁶ Ksenia Ermoshina, Benjamin Loveluck, and Francesca Musiani, “A Market of Black Boxes: The Political Economy of Internet Surveillance and Censorship in Russia,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 19, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 18–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2021.1905972>.

controversial as scholars provided different answers. Nowadays, modern mass media include the internet as well, giving preference to the first position.

Roskomnadzor (RNK) is a federal executive body responsible for control, censorship, and supervision in the field of media in the Russian Federation – established its practices regarding internet usage applying the rule concerning registration of media that operate only online. Registration was based on a voluntary basis. In the report provided by RNK in 2012, we can notice that along the structure of the revealed violations of the requirements of 436-FZ “On the protection of children”, 12,8% accounts were blocked for offenses committed by online media. 62200 online media were registered by the organ. It can be also noticed that events aiming to control activities of the mass media increased dynamically from 3362 in 2009 to 9523 in 2012, The most popular reason of getting earnings from the organ was the usage of the mass media to conduct extremist activities (36%)⁴⁷.

1.4. Media policy in post-Soviet Russia: Medvedev’s presidency (2008-2012)

Dmitri Medvedev took the presidency after Vladimir Putin in 2008. After his nomination In 2008, new amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation were proposed by President Dmitry Medvedev. During his speech, which was addressed to the Federal Assembly on November 5th, he proposed to increase the term of office of the President from 4 to 6 years, stating that the President would not be able to realize all settled goals. From this proposition, we can see the clear objection of the political elite to secure and maintain their power. Vladimir Putin became the chairman of Medvedev's government, formally heading the executive power in Russia. Despite his formal limited competence as a head of the government, he influenced not only national politics in domains that relate to governmental regulation, but also some aspects of international politics which traditionally assume authority of the elected President. In November 2010, he was ranked fourth in the list of the most influential people in the world compiled by the Forbes⁴⁸. In November 2011,

⁴⁷ Roskomnadzor, “Report on the Implementation of State Control (Supervision) and on the Effectiveness of Such Control (Supervision) for 2013,” 2013, <https://rkn.gov.ru/activity/plans/reports/>.

⁴⁸ “The World’s Most Powerful People,” *Forbes*, November 15, 2010, <https://www.forbes.com/powerful-people/list/#tab:overall>.

Vladimir Putin took the second place in the similar ranking. American magazine proclaimed Putin's most notable achievement in 2011 the idea of creating the Eurasian Union – alliance in the form of confederation between post-soviet countries with the common political, economic, custom and cultural space. The presence of Putin in the political landscape and ability to influence other actors were therefore very noticeable. He even played a role in shaping further domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

From the first sign, the politics of Dmitri Medvedev seemed more democratic and refreshing. During his inaugural speech, he underlined that he considers “further development of civil and economic freedoms, the creation of new civil opportunities”⁴⁹ to be a political priority for the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, increasing the presidential terms from 4 to 6 years after constitutional amendments were broadly criticized by civil society. His tentative plan to collect more data (due to the “digitalization era”) can also be noted as a sign of further straightening of state control. He continued Putin’s strategy of the usage of media policy with the goal to monitor and influence political opposition, civil society and media itself.

After Dmitrii Medvedev won the presidential election in 2008, he took the course on digitalization in domestic policy. Therefore, a lot of aspects which previously were not regulated by the rule of law became strictly included in the legal framework. In parallel with presidential powers, Medvedev chaired the Governmental Commission on the Development of Broadcasting. During the sessions of Commission, it was decided that from now on for all users of digital broadcasting freely will be accessible only eight TV channels (six of them are state-owned channels and two others neither partly owned by state and belong to private stakeholders close to the governmental officials) and three radio channels. These channels were chosen as the result of arbitrary procedures without consultation with different stakeholders. Moreover, these channels are intended to be sponsored by the budget assignments. Basically, all expenses connected with the transfer of channels to a digital

⁴⁹ V. Kryshchaleva, “The Inaugural Speeches of d. A. Medvedev and N. Sarkozy as a Monological Genre of Political Discourse,” *Vestnik NSU. Series: History and Philology*. 17 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.25205/1818-7919-2018-17-9-125-132>.

platform are supposed to be covered directly by the state. Payment of all the expenses of switching to the digital market by the state created the market disproportion between chosen channels (for whom the switch to the digital broadcasting seems to be a logical and profitable investment choice) and other channels who have struggled with paying the market prices. This resulted in benefits for the state-owned channels.

Moreover, according to the Concept of Development of Broadcasting in the Russian Federation in 2008–2015, the mass media were put under control of the Ministry of Communications. Before the adoption of the Concept, it was regulated by the Ministry of the Culture. Analyzing this decision, we can see the pursuit of the government to make mass media and journalism be viewed more as a part of the state’s technical infrastructure and not as a cultural element. With the accepted strategy, the licensing and control body was taken away from Prime Minister’s responsibility and put under the control of the Ministry of Communications in 2008, belittling their social status regarding the public.

Speaking of mass media legal regulations, the already difficult situation of independent media has become more complicated because of newly introduced legal restrictions and policies. After the acceptance and stepping into force of the Federal Law No. 436-FZ of December 29, 2010 "On the protection of children from information harmful to their health and development", any content that violates that law, should be immediately deleted by its creator. The law vaguely defines information harmful to the health and (or) development of children as “denying family values and forming disrespect for parents and (or) other family members; justifying illegal behavior”⁵⁰ “Illegal behavior” is a very ambiguous definition and therefore could include every possible violation of every possible existing law. This law also made it extremely complicated for media holders to defend themselves in the court, as an expertise of informational production is executed by the experts approved by the state. According to the law, “the federal executive authority authorized by the Government of the Russian Federation shall, in accordance with the procedure established by it, accredit experts and expert organizations with the right to conduct an examination of

⁵⁰ “Federal Law No. 436 – FZ of 29 Decembre, 2010, ‘On Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development,’” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, December 29, 2010.

information products, including the issuance of accreditation certificates, suspension or termination of the issued accreditation certificates”⁵¹. Therefore, we cannot talk about independence expertise for information production.

The law on mass media established a strong connection with the new law, stating that “the distribution of mass media products carried out in violation of the requirements established by Federal Law No. 436-FZ "On the Protection of children from information Harmful to their health and development" may be terminated by a court on the basis of an application of the federal executive authority exercising the state supervision and control over compliance with the legislation of the Russian Federation on the protection of children from information harmful to their health or development. Consequently, activities of particular media can be suspended or terminated by the will of the court (which are extremely state-controlled in the Russian Federation). These innovations also affected civil society, which was deprived of the safe space within independence media, where dissident opinions could be expressed. These regulations negatively affected the development of independent media at the same time.

Despite being publicly supportive of independent media, we can therefore observe the pursuit of Medvedev to privilege close-to-state media platforms, press and other information sources. He advocated to support Russian media operating abroad worldwide, aiming to spread Russian propaganda narratives in other states. He also was fond of ideas to promote Russian language through the Internet by, for example, using Cyrillic domain names.

Analyzing the policy of the state in the field of Internet regulation, we can conclude that states tended to consider online information sources as governmental infrastructure, straightening the legislative regulation of their activities. As it could not create beneficial conditions for the state-owned online media outlets, it tended to enforce the control over the private Internet sources by creating special bodies. As for the broadcasting, the state supported the monopoly of the main TV channels, giving them more possibility to develop

⁵¹ idem

their activities within the state. Therefore, states tend to control the flow of information. In those spaces where the state cannot impose the control, it enhances monitoring and applies executive measures to adjust the actions of uncontrolled actors.

Summing up the policies in the field of written press, broadcasting, and from 2000s - indented regulation, we can note that mechanisms used by Russian officials after the fall of the Soviet Union were inspired by those applied in the Union. Self-proclaimed “democratic” Russia, despite publicly speaking about human rights engagement, the course of liberalization and public discourse on freedom of speech, tended to obtain control over mass media by creating new legal barriers to the free and independent development of media. It was justified by appealing to the fights against terrorist and extremist activities and the necessity to provide security for the population. Privileging state-owned media above private mass media or creating special control mechanisms also became a tool for the government to control civil society.

Chapter 2. The development of civil society in the USSR and modern Russia

Civil society has a long history of facing limitations and repressions on the part of the state, which affected its development. The special path of formation of Russian civil society is of interest to explore the topic. To do that, this chapter explores the historical process of the formation of civil society through the period starting with the Soviet Era until the 2010s of modern Russia. The main objective of the present chapter is to understand how civil society has evolved, which challenges it faced during the formation and what are unique characteristics of Russian civil society in comparison with Western one.

The chapter argues that the process of development of civil society in Russia was significantly influenced by the state's control mechanisms, historical legacies from the Soviet era, and the socio-political situation that occurred during the transition from the USSR to the Russian Federation. All of this contributed to the higher dependence of civil society on the state. The chapter will present an analysis of civil society development in the Soviet Era (from 1927 to 1985), during the period of Perestroika (1985-1991), as well as at the time of modern Russia starting with Yeltsin period (1990- 1999), and under the first presidential terms of Vladimir Putin (2000-2008).

2.1. State and society in the Soviet era (1927 – 1985)

The concept of civil society and its role itself was different during the Soviet Union. Civil society was primarily understood as the economic community with its class interests represented by labor units or local powers and acting within the state ideology to implement state policy at a local level. Thus, differently from the Western civil society which were formed from the bottom-up approach and destined to translate the needs of the citizens to the political elites, civil societies in the Soviet Union were formed by the central power of the Communist Party and contributed to the collective communist good rather than to the individual's needs. It was synchronized with the state and not opposed to it.

Special system of political elites (often referred to as nomenklatura in the academic literature) did not dispose of a wide range of opportunities for horizontal cooperation within stakeholders and the government itself. It presupposes vertical cooperation (the top-down path to form civil society) with the aim to create a system of peer surveillance⁵². That means that the role of civil society was the opposite of the role it used to play within the western system – control of the government. Instead, it was used to monitor and therefore to control the population. The most widespread form of popular control was the writing of denunciations. Unfortunately, we do not have reliable sources regarding the number of written denunciations in the USSR. However, we can find the confirmation of this phenomenon in the cases of that time published by human rights organizations – as International Memorial, for example, aiming to study political repression in the USSR and modern Russia, promoting the moral and legal rehabilitation of victims.

Regardless of the state’s constant monitoring and institutionalization of civil society within the state, some “illegal” groups still existed managing to maintain their activities within the settled system. This group usually consisted of like-minded people from intelligentsia who were opposed to the communist regime. The informality, absence of the official registration and cautiousness of the members (as groups often practice the concept of “a friend of a friend” as an entry barrier) they succeeded in sharing information within these small groups and lobbying their interests within the governmental agenda.

Mishler, William and Rose in their researches concerning the role of civil societies in Soviet Union, identified two types of hourglass societies: one located on the top of the political hierarchy and one on the bottom⁵³. The top one was represented by political elites as individuals who, due to their participation in informal meetings and activities, have been successful in persuading their own personal political goals. The bottom one consisted of the working class and usually was formed by friends and families. Such small groups usually

⁵² Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2392263>.

⁵³ William Mishler and Richard Rose, “Trust, Distrust and Skepticism: Popular Evaluations of Civil and Political Institutions in Post-Communist Societies,” *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 2 (May 1997): 418–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381600053512>.

were more trusted by citizens. Family or friends' groups did not have an access to the decision-making process and thus had no political influence. As a result, they were mostly addressing their economic and social interests.

During the Perestroika, despite the democratization wave, civil societies were not institutionalized and continued to exist in the shadows, separately from the government. They still had no possibility to influence governmental decisions or be represented in governmental bodies as an independent entity. Alongside with it, the democratization made it easier to communicate between these informal groups and to exchange possible strategies or experiences between the members⁵⁴. This contributed to the creation of modern civil society, in its Western meaning. Media, at the same time, was not considered by civil society as a means of promoting its political interests.

As Yablokov and Schimpfössl correctly mentioned in their research, “for centuries, journalism as a social institution in Russia has been developing free from economic considerations while the role of the economic regulator has been carried out by the state which in turn secured the paternalistic foundation of journalism...”⁵⁵. Therefore, even with the start of democratization, the media was mostly considered as a part of the state system and not as a connector between civil societies and governmental bodies as it is in western conception.

2.2. State and society in post-Soviet Russia: Yeltsin era (1991-1999)

Civil society started to sharpen after the fall of the Soviet Union. Under Yeltsin governance, when the government has been facing financial challenges and was not capable of properly addressing those, giving all government property to the private owners. The process of ownership change was called privatization, which was basically the process of self-enrichment of political elites, who were able to buy out vital Russian economy

⁵⁴ Sergej Ljubownikow, Jo Crotty, and Peter W. Rodgers, “The State and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Russia: The Development of a Russian-Style Civil Society,” *Progress in Development Studies* 13, no. 2 (April 2013): 153–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464993412466507>.

⁵⁵ Ilya Yablokov and Elisabeth Schimpfössl, “A Brief History of News Making in Russia,” *Journalism* 22, no. 12 (December 2021): 2895–2905, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920941951>.

companies for a low price. At that time, during the second presidential term of Boris Yeltsin, the government basically withdrew itself from its social responsibilities, unable to fulfill its obligations. As a result, citizens at that time more actively cooperated with each other, creating a necessary social web to address all the social and economic issues.

Moreover, former state-formed organizations aimed to address some important social issues or represent the most vulnerable population of the Union (as veterans, disabled persons, youth), operating through budget allocation therefore could not adequately continue to work due to the lack of resources, financial and administrative crisis in the country. This situation led to the development of the new, independent organizations with its own budget who took responsibility to provide care and adequate services to the population in need⁵⁶. Russian civil society finally started to be formed from the bottom, following the example of Western colleagues.

As it can be seen, the starting point of the birth of the civil society was the state's incapacity to conduct its functions in several domains. Consequently, people started to form independent bodies, which performed former governmental duties. Weak government unable to control the activities committed by that newborn independent organization led to the spread of illegal activities within such bodies. Moreover, such groups formed during the period of privatization, did not tend to escape the local level of its sphere of influence and continued to represent interest of the small number of people within the group (as before – neither in the top or bottom of the horizontal cooperation). We can also notice the lack of communication between these groups performing their activities in different regions of Russia, or even between these groups and the government.

Thus, the interest of a broader public was not represented in such groups. The public which used to coercive practice of obliged participation in the Trade Union during the Soviet times did not want to voluntarily engage itself with the activities of different independent organizations. In essence, the link between the civil society and government (usually

⁵⁶ Sergej Ljubownikow and Jo Crotty, "Civil Society in a Transitional Context: The Response of Health and Educational NGOs to Legislative Changes in Russia's Industrialized Regions," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (August 2014): 759–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764013482396>.

provided by establishing the active middle class wishing to participate directly or indirectly in political life of the state) became one of the barriers which slowed down the process of civil society development in the Russian Federation. More than that, civil organizations themselves tried not to attract the broad public as they were supposed to protect the tiny circle of its members (usually formed by the family members, close friends, or professional units) from the government. Therefore, this unwillingness of the civil organizations to develop new strategies aiming to gain the reputation and attract new members as well as their closeness did not speed up the process of creation of new democratic civil society institutions.

The lack of resources has also become one of the barriers in the development of civil society in the Russian Federation. Human rights-oriented organizations followed their path through the cooperation with international sponsors, unable to gain financial support domestically. Advocacy for human rights in the Soviet Union as in modern Russia was primarily formed in intellectual circles, thus the knowledge of foreign languages as well as the necessary networking within the academic community helped human rights defenders to get financial aid from the international organizations. This led to the informal dependence on these organizations which had control over Russia's civil society organizations' agendas. As it has been highlighted by previous researchers, "the agendas of Russian human rights organizations were closer to that of donor organizations, rather than reflecting the needs of Russian women during that period"⁵⁷. That also could be one of the reasons for the low level of political support by the broad public. Russian citizens did not find such organizations efficient and representative and did not see a stimulus to be involved in its activities.

We can observe that the legacy left after the fall of the Soviet Union has left an important mark in the way civil society was formed and operated in the Russian Federation. The lack of financial independence and more informal than formal type of conduction became an obstacle to creating a clear connection between civil society and government. In democratic regimes, this guarantees successful integration of the population into the political procedures and decision-making process. The lack of popular support due to the same factors also contributed to the slowness of the process of formation. During the first presidential term

⁵⁷ Idem

of Vladimir Putin, civil society organizations and press only started formation and therefore, were vulnerable to governmental pressure and legal limitations.

2.3. State and society in post-Soviet Russia: Putin's initial terms (2000-2008)

Under such conditions, when new born civil society institutions were neither efficient enough nor independent enough, Vladimir Putin was elected for the new presidential term in 2008. Under his second term, the state presence has been increased in almost all domains of human activities, therefore the control over civil society was tightened. As it was already mentioned, this type of up to the down approach used to be the main one during Soviet and post-Soviet times. As Putin himself underlined during one of his speeches in early 2000, the Russian Federation needed to “to integrate civil society into the Russian executive’s chain of command, as a network of organizations that would represent citizen interests in state-approved public venues while simultaneously reinforcing state authority”⁵⁸. The central role of the state in terms of financing, creating, monitoring, and controlling civil society and its institutions through the law making, financial support agreements and mechanism of state control, turning civil society organization into the state’s actors. Nevertheless, we can observe a slight change in the perception of such organizations - within the Soviet Union it was mostly concentrated on economic agenda meanwhile in modern Russia civil society finally became a political actor as well.

Civil society members tried to represent their interest by participating in different organizations, with the leading role in this process being NGOs - non-governmental organizations. To evaluate the scale of this trend, we can verify statistical data. According to state statistics, as of January 1st, 2008, the number of NGOs in Russia (except for state and municipal authorities) amounted to 655,400 organizations, which was a considerable number considering the previous unwillingness of the population to participate on a voluntary basis in any kind of informal organizations. We can also notice that the share of non-profit organizations participating in the competition, conducting their activities on the territory of

⁵⁸ Stepan Uglov, “Formation and Development of the Institute of Civil Society in Modern Russia,” *Issues of Russian Justice* 15 (2011).

the has increased (from 21% in 2006 to 36% in 2007 and 2008). Most of these organization were in Central areas, especially in two political centers of the Russian Federation – – Moscow and Saint Petersburg⁵⁹. The review we took this data from was prepared within the framework of the governmental project, aiming to provide state support to NGOs. The demand for statistical data can also indicate the state's intention to monitor non-governmental organizations and, in case if needed, to control activities of NGOs operating within its territory.

Pursuing that goal, the new law regulating activities of NGOs was amended in 2006. To straighten out the control over growing NGOs, legislators put the possibility of refusing to register an NGO in the advised bodies. Article 23 mentioned closed list of possible reasons, for example, “if the constituent and other documents submitted for state registration of the non-profit organization contradict the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the legislation of the Russian Federation”⁶⁰, giving administrative bodies responsive for the registration legal mechanism to sanction unwilling political actors from entering the market of NGOs. Moreover, according to the new amendments, the government acquired the capacity to establish restrictions on the sources of income of certain types of non-profit organizations, and in some cases, institutions. Control over NGOs is also evaluated. Article 32, traditionally setting up mechanisms of state control, emphasized the prime role of the interests of the state over human rights and civil society. It required more documents proving the sources of funding. The law also added more restrictions on foreign NGOs stating that “in order to protect the foundations of the constitutional order, morality, health, rights and legitimate interests of other persons, to ensure the defense of the country and the security of the state, the authorized body shall have the right to issue a reasoned decision in writing to a structural subdivision of a foreign non-commercial non-governmental organization prohibiting the transfer of funds and other property to certain recipients of these funds and

⁵⁹ “Dynamics of Development and Current State of the NPO Sector in Russia,” Analytical report (Certainly! Here is the translation: “ANO ‘Sociological Workshop Zadorin’ (Research Group CIRKON).,” 2009), <https://www.zircon.ru/upload/iblock/6d1/090206.pdf>.

⁶⁰ “Federal Law No. 7-FZ of January 12, 1996 ‘On Non-Profit Organizations’ (with Amendments and Additions),” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, January 19, 1996.

other property”⁶¹. The government, therefore, was seeking to restrict possible foreign support for national or local NGOs who were getting more independence to make them run for public grants. By increasing its dependence on public funds, NGO will become more dependable on the government with limited ability to criticize its policies.

It can be clearly seen that the State aimed to facilitate the integration and development of the so-called “state-friendly” NGOs and to gain the control over anti-state NGOs that do not support widely accepted state ideology. For these purposes, the Public Chamber has been created. The Public Chamber was created as a consultative organ in the Russian Federation aiming to facilitate cooperation between different stakeholders and facilitate the realization of state programs. However, the Public Chamber was mostly destined to “buy” local authorities in the regions. Officially, the participation in the project is based on the voluntary ground, but financial grants given to the project for their realization were usually corrupted fully or partly. It created the link between governmental officials and local powers and made local authorities dependence on the center. As one of the participants mentioned, speaking about dependency of the Public Chamber from the government: “Formally, a member of the Public Chamber does not receive a salary, but their grant applications will certainly be fulfilled in the first place. That is, loyalty will still be paid through grants»⁶².

Speaking of civil society evolution through the years, we can note that the notion and the mode of functioning of civil society institutions developed in a Western way with the fall of the Soviet Union, as it became possible for activists to collaborate with Western NGOs and civil society organizations. Nevertheless, we still cannot see the strong presence of civil society activists within the political sphere of governing.

⁶¹ *idem*

⁶² “Valery Fadeev: The Authorities Should Be Required to Be Adequate to People’s Problems,” *RiaNews*, June 28, 2017, <https://ria.ru/20170628/1497424755.html>.

Chapter 3. From the 2010s to 2018: The Constriction of civil society in the Russian Federation

Social- political events occurred between the early 2010s and 2018 influenced media policy in the Russian Federation, which led to the limitation of civil liberties and increased control over public discourse. The annexations of Crimea, post-election protests, and a crisis in a relationship with Ukraine provoked changes in the state's policy in relation to the media. This chapter will analyze the interactions of state and civil society within the indicated period and evaluate the impact of mentioned events on the governmental strategies aimed to maintain the power.

Present chapter argues that the Russian Federation has employed a combination of legal, political, and media strategies to suppress dissent and fortify its dominance, increasing its violence against opposition and contributing to the shrinking space of civil society. To elaborate more on the argument, the chapter will explore the aftermath of presidential elections in 2012, the annexations of Crimea and the following Ukrainian crisis, its influence on Russian civil society and the growing control over digital content.

3.1. Post-election protests and the Bolotnaya case

After the re-election, Vladimir Putin started his third presidential term on 7th May 2012. A large wave of protests has gripped Russia. The most illustrative one was the famous protests on the Bolotnaya square, which led to the Bolotnaya case - the series of legal persecution of participants of a rally. The event occurred at Bolotnaya square on May 6th, in Moscow. The main purpose of an action was an expression of non-approval of the inauguration of Vladimir Putin. The authorities were accused of fraud at elections. The protest became well-known due to the most mass and violent collision between protesters and law enforcement agencies in modern Russia. As it was claimed by independent media, "the guards used force without warning, beating people with batons and kicks, tearing clothes, and unceremoniously throwing participants into paddy wagons...As a result of the displacements, almost 450 people were detained, and the Moscow Department of the Interior

Ministry had to refute reports on the dead that appeared on the Internet. Officially, there are only 38 victims, of whom 30 are police officers"⁶³. Some of the law enforcement agents were also injured, four of them – hospitalized after the March.

After described events, criminal cases were initiated against participants under part 3 of Article 212 (calls for mass riots) and part 1 of Article 318 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (use of violence against a government representative). Overall, more than 30 people were arrested out of more than 400 detained. Most of them were sentenced from 2,5 to 4,5 years of imprisonment in a maximum-security colony⁶⁴. Some of the accused appealed the decision of the national court in the European Court of Human Rights. The court in majority cases affirmed that “the gravity of the punishment was thus attributable to the general context of the applicant’s assault on the policeman, not to the harm he thus inflicted”⁶⁵. The Court pointed out the nature of violence was initially caused by violence on the part of law enforcement agents which used force against protesters. Bolotnaya case consequently became no more than a judicial act of repression on those members of civil society who did not support the political will of the President to continue his term.

Therefore, the major goal of Vladimir Putin after his reassuming powers as the President of the Russian Federation was to maintain the power and to make sure that no other candidate will not be seen by the electoral majority as a valid alternative. To achieve this goal, a lot of new laws and practices were invited to weaken civil society resistance and make barriers for opposition, not letting it gain popular support in Russia.

The threat to Russian civil society opposed to the state policy and following opposition repression were discussed outside of the Russian Federation as well. For example, in 2014 at German Heinrich Böll Foundation (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung) the seminar on "Russian civil society under pressure" occurred, highlighting the problem of repression

⁶³ “The ‘March of Millions’ in Moscow Ended with Mass Arrests.,” *BBC News*, June 5, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2012/05/120506_livetext_moscow_march.

⁶⁴ Claire Bigg, “Bolotnaya: The One Incident That Symbolizes Putin’s Crackdown,” *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/bolotnaya-the-one-incident-that-symbolizes-putins-crackdown/275000/>.

⁶⁵ *Frumkin v. Russia*. App. No(s). 74568/12. *European Court of Human Rights*, [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-159762%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-159762%22]})

imposed on civil society. One of the lecturers, Russian environmentalist and human rights defender Alexey Kozlov, demonstrated statistics of Russian repressions for 2013. According to his own calculations, about 100 people were prosecuted as defendants and suspects in politically motivated trials in Russia. Some cases were resonant - like the so-called "Bolotnaya case" or the case of environmentalists from the Arctic Sunrise ship. He also noticed that repression on NGO significantly increased through the years: because of the prosecutor's inspection on NGOs in 2013, 109 sanctions were imposed on 99 organizations. According to Kozlov, it was "the largest inspection of dissidents" in the entire modern history of Russia since 1991⁶⁶.

From 2010, political powers used the media to pressure civil society more often. It was documented by numerous civil society organizations and researchers. A report, conducted by the human rights-defending organization OVD-Info report on "Political repression in Russia in 2011-2014: extrajudicial persecution", mentioned that "federal TV channels and other state-controlled media are regularly used to create a negative image of the opposition and individual activists. In some cases, publications in the media go beyond the "verbal aggression"⁶⁷. Narratives, supported by the media, helped the government to seek the approval of its decisions within the population of Russia.

3.2. Annexations of Crimea, Ukrainian crisis, and their impact on Russian civil society

In March 2014, Russian Federation annexed Ukrainian Crimea in violation of the international public and humanitarian law. After annunciation by the local legislative body a popular referendum in Sevastopol to decide on the future status of the region (will it stay under the Ukrainian jurisdiction or will it become a new autonomous republic within the Russian Federation?) the referendum was held. By the majority of votes (96,77%), Crimea became a new autonomous republic. Russian media were celebrating the "victory of democracy" for the people of Crimea. However, almost all international organizations and

⁶⁶ "Annual Report 2014" (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation, n.d.).

⁶⁷ "Political Repression in Russia in 2011-2014: Extrajudicial Persecution" (OVD-Info, October 4, 2015), <https://reports.ovd.info/2014/ej-report/>.

bodies found the referendum unacceptable and violated the law. The General Assembly of United Nations in its Resolution 68/262 affirmed the commitment “to the sovereignty, political independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders”⁶⁸. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe (Venice Commission) agreed that the referendum was in contravention of the Ukrainian Constitution⁶⁹. Majority of the states did not support the annexation of Crimea and recognized it as occupied by foreign state territory, according to international law.

After the illegal annexation of Crimea, the Russian Federation tended to control public opinion more strictly. Political landscape of Russia in 2014 with the considerable number of dissidents who expressed their non-approval of the chosen policy of the leading party and President himself. This non-approval contributed to the increased level of state control over the media and civil societies. And the resistance from active civil society members and some opposed political leaders was also high.

In March 2014, up to 50,000 people came to the opposition march (The March of the Peace), according to estimates by various observers. Participants publicly expressed their disagreement over the invasion of Crimea. On March 19th, an anti-war congress of the Russian intelligentsia occurred in the capital. The Congress issued a memorandum stating that “We, representatives of the Russian intelligentsia, are obliged to warn the authorities against the historical mistake that is being made — the desire to take control of a part of another, more recently fraternal country, Ukraine, with the help of the Russian armed forces”⁷⁰. Other Russian professional units such as Russian Scientists Community or Teacher’s Community also collectively expressed their disagreement with the international policy of Putin.

⁶⁸ Thomas D. Grant, “Annexation of Crimea,” *American Journal of International Law* 109, no. 1 (January 2015): 68–95, <https://doi.org/10.5305/amerjintelaw.109.1.0068>.

⁶⁹ “Opinion on “Whether the Decision Taken by the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in Ukraine to Organise a Referendum on Becoming a Constituent Territory of the Russian Federation or Restoring Crimea’s 1992 Constitution Is Compatible with Constitutional Principles”. Doc. No. CDL-AD(2014)002,” *European Commission for Democracy Through Law*, October 18, 2021.

⁷⁰ Sergei Kovalev and Lev Timofeyev, “Open Letter to Organizers of Congress of Intelligentsia,” April 31, 2014.

When the opposition activities grew in number, Russian political leaders once again decided to focus on media policy to influence the formation of public opinion. Amendments made in 2015, because of the television broadcasting reform mentioned in the previous chapter, mentions mandatory public TV channels and radio channels (which will be free for the public) emphasizing the privileged position of these channels. These channels were translating the popular narrative of the free will of Crimean people to join the Russian Federation. “Savior” narrative resonated with the population – it will be used later, to justify the invasion in 2022.

Moreover, according to the new amendments, the recognition of the certificate of registration as invalid and termination and suspension of activities will be from now on executed by the court during administrative proceedings on the request of the registering authority. Before 2015, civil proceedings were applied for this purpose, which is usually more time consuming. Therefore, the media had more time to appeal or to prepare a line of defense. With the simplification of the administrative proceedings, the registering authority could more quickly recognize the certification invalid or terminate or suspend activities of the media.

However, political powers in Russia did not limit themselves to just formal and legal repressions by adopting new policies and legal norms. Some of the opposition leaders who were openly criticizing the government President Putin were so unwanted in the Russian political arena that they were brutally killed. Boris Nemtsov, well-known Russian opposition politician, the first governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region, and a former deputy of the State Duma, was killed on February 27th, 2015 in Moscow. Boris Nemtsov was the co-chairman of the opposition party RPR-PARNAS and a deputy of the Yaroslavl Regional Duma. He participated in organizing the March of Peace in 2014. Boris Nemtsov was one of the opposition leaders who actively condemned Russian imperialistic policy and Putin’s corruption schemes. Independent investigators found some evidence that behind the murder was the hand of Vladimir Putin. According to the investigation of Bellingcat and The Insider (internet publications specializing in investigation at the military zone and examination of fake news, as well as verification of facts), since May 2014 Nemtsov has been followed by

at least three members of the Federal Security Bureau killer group that poisoned Alexei Navalny, Dmitry Bykov (published, political activist and literary critic) and Vladimir Kara-Murza (political oppositionist, tele journalist and publisher)⁷¹. The death of Nemtsov became a warning for political opposition leaders in Russia, which served as a factor suppressing popular indignation.

From 2016, after Ukrainian Euromaidan (a pivotal moment in Ukrainian history, marked by citizens' determination to pursue closer ties with democratic Europe and demand political change) the Russian-Ukrainian war has started, which resulted in the creation of two independent republics Donetsk and Luhansk on the Ukrainian territory which were controlled by Russian forces. These events attracted increased attention to human rights violations committed by the Russian government by Western media. Unneeded attention became one of the many reasons for the officials to impose more limitations on media activities. It was prohibited to act as the founder (participant) of a mass media outlet, which is the editorial office of a mass media outlet, an organization (legal entity) engaged in broadcasting for a foreign state, an international organization, as well as an organization under their control, a foreign legal entity, a Russian legal entity with foreign participation, a foreign citizen, a stateless person, a citizen of the Russian Federation who has the citizenship of another state⁷². Moreover, even national media which were receiving constant or even one-time financial help from foreign sources now had an obligation to notify of receipts by the editorial office of the media, broadcaster, or publisher of funds from foreign sources.

Tendency of the restriction policy on foreign media could be also seen through amendments made to the law on mass media concerning obligatory public television channels. To be accepted as one, the channel should "contain at least seventy-five percent of the national mass media products and which are broadcast on the territory of residence of at least fifty percent of the population of the relevant subject of the Russian Federation."⁷³ Thus, it is getting more difficult to access independent media information for the elderly

⁷¹ "EU Lawmakers Call For International Probe Into Nemtsov's Assassination," *Radio Liberty*, March 13, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-russia-nemtsov-criticism-probe/26898653.html>.

⁷² "Federal Law No.2124-1 of December 27, 1991, 'On Mass Media.'"

⁷³ *idem*

population in Russia who do not often have access to the worldwide web. It should be mentioned that this is having a considerable impact on political power distribution within Russia where the most politically active citizens are typically older women after 45 years old whose first sources of information are TV channels (we will explore this in the second chapter).

Political leaders were very interested in promoting state-controlled information production for the population, creating a desirable image. In 2016 only the budget for the Ministry of Communications and Mass Media of the Russian Federation was about 14 918 417,4 rubles⁷⁴ (which is about 149 184 euro).

Moreover, the state tended not only to control the access to the broadcasting and the content of the information spreading around the country, but to monitor the viewer's preferences to evaluate the success of the conducted media strategies. For those purposes, to the Mass media law, the whole chapter was added aiming to create a special governmental body (the federal executive authority exercises control over the activities of the authorized organization), to conduct research on the volume of the audience of TV channels. The purpose of above-mentioned activities was not mentioned in the law, but it was primarily used to evaluate and correct strategies in the field of media and information.

3.3. Information control over the media content and restrictive Internet governance policies

This innovation resulted in many legal changes. Having access to the information on the preferences of media consumers, the government tried to disadvantage popular independent media translating alternative agenda. Foreign agent law became a real legal tool for political powers to exert pressure on unwanted media making their activities more accountable to the state. According to the new rules, the non-profit organizations performing the functions of a foreign agent must “submit to the authorized body documents containing

⁷⁴ “Federal Law No. 359-FZ of 14 December, 2015 ‘On the Federal Budget for 2016,’” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, December 14, 2015.

a report on their activities, on the personal composition of governing bodies, once every six months, documents for the purposes of spending money and using other property, including those received from foreign sources, quarterly, and an audit opinion annually”⁷⁵. By increasing monitoring activities for NGO recognized foreign agents, political elites tried to accumulate the needed data and to keep these organizations under state control. The new law left the possibility for organizations to appeal the decision to recognize the performing functions of foreign agents under the court. Nevertheless, not every organization could afford to do so.

As a preventive legal measures to control the activities of political opponents aimed to intercept the registration of a new NGO that could potentially influence the political balance within the country, new amendments to the law of NGO prohibit from being a founder (participant, member) of a non-profit organization “a person who previously was the head or was a member of the governing body of a public or religious association or other organization, in respect of which, on the grounds provided for by the Federal Law "On Countering Extremist Activity"⁷⁶. Here, it is important to mention that from 2015, information materials are recognized as extremist by the federal court inter alia in administrative proceedings – therefore, the procedure takes less time. Moreover, the list of extremist materials is published online at the official website of a responsible organ. This list performs a role of some kind of indicator for the population that this media is not trustable source of information. By using that wording, the state is turning itself into fighting against extremists instead of being an authoritarian regime violating rights to freedom of speech and expression and constantly repressing opposed media, NGOs and members of civil society organizations.

The state by that time also started to pay particular attention to Internet governance, following the course on digitalization taken by Dmitri Medvedev. State tried to control and monitor civil activities in cyberspace using popular conception of internet sovereignty – the

⁷⁵ “Federal Law No. 7-FZ of January 12, 1996 ‘On Non-Profit Organizations’ (with Amendments and Additions).”

⁷⁶ “Federal Law No. 114-FZ of July 25, 2002 “On Counteraction of Extremist Activities”.”

right for the state to exercise its jurisdiction over cyberspace on a national level. We can note that as through legal indicators (adding Internet sources and regulating also activities taking place online and giving more power to bodies monitoring internet activities) as in practical activities conducted by the state with the purpose to gain control over online data.

For example, the whole paragraph on obligations of the organizer of the dissemination of information on the Internet (article 10.1) was added to the Federal Law No. 149-FZ of July 27, 2006 "On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection". We can also see that Internet regulation sometimes can be crucial for dissident media who find their only safe place for publication on the worldwide web.

As it was correctly noticed by Ksenia Ermoshina, Benjamin Loveluck, Francesca Musiani in their article "A market of black boxes: The political economy of Internet surveillance and censorship in Russia," "two main methods of information control are online surveillance (or "lawful interception") and online censorship (or "traffic filtering")"⁷⁷ By filtering the information on cyberspace, political power can influence the most valid political actors and thereby block or hide unwanted and undesirable content. One of the means by which the autocratic regime in Russia monitors this content is the empowerment of RNK (The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media) in that field. For example, in charge of RNK is conducting "The unified Register of domain names, indexes of sites on the Internet and network addresses", that allows to identify websites on the Internet containing information, the dissemination of which is prohibited in the Russian Federation. These powers were given to the federal organ in 2012, but were actively used only after the Ukrainian crisis. We can evaluate the level of activities in 2016 appealing to the RNK review, which is accessible for everyone. It has been indicated that "according to the facts of the revealed violations for 11 months of 2016, 478 cases of administrative offenses were initiated, for which 409 court decisions were made to satisfy

⁷⁷ Ermoshina, Ksenia, Benjamin Loveluck, and Francesca Musiani. "A Market of Black Boxes: The Political Economy of Internet Surveillance and Censorship in Russia." *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 19, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 18–33.

the claims of Roskomnadzor”⁷⁸. As for the blacklist (domains that have been blocked) of the RNK, in April 2018 the blacklist counted 5136 orphan domain names, what is a quite high number⁷⁹. It is worth mentioning that not only RNK has the ability to monitor information on the Internet and add some domains in the “blacklist.” Such competence is owned by at least 6 more governmental actors: the Federal Service of Taxes, tribunals of cities, the General Attorney, RKN, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Tribunal of the City of Moscow, the Federal Service of Drug Control, and RosPotrebNadzor (the state agency responsible for protecting consumer rights and human wellbeing).

From 2010 to 2019, therefore, we can easily track the trend to take under state control all possible information flows within the country and prioritize state-owned or state-controlled media and channels over independent ones. Overall tendency to registry activity is also traceable: the creation of different kinds of registers by empowered governmental bodies (on extremist materials, on foreign agents, on forbidden content on the internet and so on) can be inspired by Chinese political practices. It is one example of peer-to-peer learning within autocracies, as Chinese autocracy was the first to apply the strategy of state control over informational flow and successfully created its own internet ecosystem. The creation of autonomous Internet infrastructure has not been achieved in the Russian Federation, primarily because its internet infrastructure is very dependent on the international cyber infrastructure despite the pursuit to create a national one. The attempt to consolidate the informational flow management has characterized the indicated timeline.

⁷⁸ Andrej Alekseevič Soldatov and Irina Petrovna Borogan, *The Red Web: The Kremlin’s Wars on the Internet*, First trade paperback edition (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017).

⁷⁹ “Report on the Implementation of Licensing, and on the Effectiveness of Licensing for 2019” (Moscow, Russia: Roskomnadzor, 2019), <https://rkn.gov.ru/activity/plans/reports/>.

Chapter 4. From 2019 to 2022: The escalation of state repression in Russia

Following years were characterized by higher political activity, explained by the rise of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his participation in the electoral race. High levels of opposition activity provoked a response from the government, expressed in the intensification of repression, higher control over dissidents and fight against foreign influence. This chapter will explore the interdependence between the rise of opposition sentiments in society and intensified surveillance, coupled with increased control over the media.

The key objective of the present chapter is to investigate the escalation of state repression in Russia in response to the rise of opposition leader Alexey Navalny, analyzing the strategies used by the government to suppress opposition and silence dissidents. The chapter therefore argues that President Putin tends to increase the level of repressions on opposed civil society in response to the growth of dissatisfactions and opposition movements within the territory of the state. To follow up the argument, I will focus on the political aftermath of opposition activities, following changes in the media policy of the state, constitutional reform and its aftermath for Putin's regime and civil society.

4.1. The rise of Navalny campaign and the aftermath of its activities

The next distinctive phase of state repressing activities has started with the rise of the popularity of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny. He became a self-nominated presidential candidate in 2018 and founded FBK - Federal Anti-Corruption Fund. The Fond's main goal is to conduct investigations on state corruption – these investigations were mostly published on YouTube, as it was too risky for the written press. In 2019, as a response to the state's repression policy and preventing Alexey Navalny and other opposition candidates from participating in the presidential and federal elections in 2018, mass protests have started. The most massive protests happened to be on 27th July, according to the statistics gathered by OVD-Info — an independent human rights media project. Overall, 1,373 people were

detained at the rally in support of independent candidates to the Moscow City Duma, at least 265 stayed overnight in the police department⁸⁰.

On August 20th 2020, Alexey Navalny was poisoned at the airport, heading to Moscow. As it has been supposed – the Russian political elite attempted to unalive the opposition leader. After being delivered in Omsk hospital, he fell into a coma, and he then was transferred to the German hospital. In Germany, the usage of the nerve agent was confirmed by five Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons certified laboratories. This context is crucial for the understanding of further repression reforms carried out by Russian legislation.

The phenomena of shrinking space were getting worse after these protests. New amendments made to the Federal law "On mass media" in 2019 provided that the founder of any media can no longer be a person “having a criminal record for committing crimes using mass media or information and telecommunication networks, including the Internet, or for committing crimes related to the implementation of extremist activities”⁸¹. Considering the state's practice to acknowledge extremist organizations and people engaged in opposition activities against political power, there is no doubt that this norm was nothing more than another barrier for opposed media to enter the mass media market.

Internet monitoring and regulation also became more omnipresent. From the amendments proposed in 2019 to the Federal Law "On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection", “the owner of the website on the Internet is obliged to post on the website belonging to him information about his name, location and address, e-mail address for sending the application specified in Article 15.7 of this Federal Law, and also has the right to provide for the possibility of sending this application by filling out an electronic form on the website on the Internet”⁸². The same is valid for the main editor of media as well.

⁸⁰ “The Moscow Experiment” (OVD-Info, December 16, 2019), https://en.ovdinfo.org/mgd-2019_eng.

⁸¹ “Federal Law No.2124-1 of December 27, 1991, ‘On Mass Media.’”

⁸² “Federal Law No. 149-FZ of 27 July, 2006 ‘On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection’.” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, July 27, 2006.

Another wave of mass demonstrations occurred in 2021, starting on 15th January as an act of support for Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny. The main cause of mass distributions was his detention by Russian law enforcement agencies after the official publication on the YouTube Channel investigative documentary by the Anti-Corruption Foundation. The documentary "A Palace for Putin. The story of the biggest bribe" contained allegations of corruption against Vladimir Putin. According to statistical data, protests occurred in 198 cities of the Russian Federation and 95 cities abroad with the most mass one in the capital- around 50 thousand participants were claimed by various sources. The second wave of manifestations were held on January 31st — 121 actions within the territory of Russia and 65 abroad⁸³. On February 2nd, the manifestants gathered in front of the Moscow City Court, where a hearing of the case of Alexei Navalny was held. During the hearing of the Yves Rocher case, which sentenced Navalny to a suspended sentence, the punishment was replaced by a real term. As it can be mentioned, this decision was recognized by the European Court of Human Rights as politicized. The Court found “a convincing assertion that the proceedings in this case were not only unpredictably interpreted and fundamentally unfair in violation of Articles 6 and 7, but also contained an offensive element and may have served an illegal and undemocratic purpose: to silence critics of the government and prevent him from participating in political activities”⁸⁴.

After mass protest activities, a considerable number of people were arrested because of participation in non-authorized demonstrations. According to the data collected by OVD-Info, the number of detainees on January 23rd amounted to 4 thousand, and on January 31 — 5.7 thousand; overall, about 11 thousand were detained. The Russian authorities in their turn announced 17.6 thousand detainees⁸⁵.

⁸³ “All-Russian Protest Day: How the Actions in Support of Navalny Were Held,” *BBC News*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/live/news-55779010>.

⁸⁴ *Navalnyy v. Russia*, No. 101/15 (European Court of Human Rights October 17, 2017).

⁸⁵ “The Second All-Russian Protest Action ‘Freedom to Navalny’. The Results of January 31,” *Ovd-Info*, January 31, 2021, <https://ovd.info/articles/2021/01/31/vtoraya-vserossiyskaya-akciya-protesta-svobodunavalnomu-itogi-31-yanvarya>.

4.2. State's media policy from 2018 to 2022

As a lot of dissidents used the Internet and mass media to spread information about protests (as, for example, the exact location and time and all additional information), the legislative authorities considered this a reason to introduce new amendments to the Administrative Code of conduct of the Russian Federation. Newly added article clearly stated that “dissemination in the mass media, as well as in information and telecommunication networks of deliberately unreliable socially significant information under the guise of reliable messages, which caused death of a person, harm to human health or property, massive violation of public order and (or) public safety, termination of functioning of life support facilities, transport or social infrastructure, credit institutions, energy facilities, industry or communications”⁸⁶. Manifestations not authorized by legally empowered authorities usually fall under the notion of “violation of public order” in Russian legal practice.

At the same time, pressure on foreign media has also increased. License of foreign media can be withdrawn in case of non-compliance of the products of a foreign periodical with the requirements established by Article 4 of this Law and Federal Law No. 114-FZ dated July 25, 2002 "On Countering Extremist Activities".

The law "On Countering Extremist Activities" itself, which has not been amended since 2015, also had some important amendments after 2019. The procedure of suspension the sale of the relevant issue of a periodical or circulation of an audio or video recording of a program or the release of an appropriate television, radio or video program has been simplified and became possible in accordance with the procedure provided for taking preliminary protection measures under the administrative claim⁸⁷.

⁸⁶ “Federal Law No. 195-FZ ‘The Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offenses,’” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, December 30, 2001.

⁸⁷ “Federal Law No. 114-FZ of July 25, 2002 “On Counteraction of Extremist Activities” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta newspaper*. July 25, 2002.

It can be noted as well, that administrative responsibility for violating some provisions of the law (which comes when action does not reach the necessary degree of public danger to be qualified as a civil tort or criminal offense) is considered a new way to “punish” more quickly those members of the civil society who publicly opposed to the decisions of the main political party or President Putin. This trend will only increase in the following years.

Speaking about the freedom of media in a digital space, the monitoring procedures by RNK also significantly increased. The number of media names for which monitoring was planned in 2019 for signs of extremism activities amounted to 10 500 (in reality, 10 592 monitoring activities were carried out). The decrease of freedoms for media and journalists has been noticed by UNESCO in its Global report “Journalism Is a Public Good: World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development.” The report indicated that “online harassment, mass and targeted surveillance, data storage vulnerabilities, and digital attacks (including hacking) are among the many ways that digital tools have been used to jeopardize the safety and integrity of journalists as well as their sources”⁸⁸. Indeed, besides an increased level of governmental monitoring and control of online information flows produced by media and civil society by means of blocking, elevated levels of data collection and surveillance also followed this trend. After the acceptance of so-called Yarovaya law, aiming to detect terrorist threats in cyberspace in 2016, the presence of the government has been significantly increased in online space.

Firstly, amendments authorized the government to oblige telecom operators to keep records of telephone conversations, SMS, and Internet traffic of users for a period from 6 months to 3 years. They also allowed investigators to obtain information from electronic correspondence, what led to the raising of the price of business for telecom operators⁸⁹. Increased costs, at the time, contributed to the monopoly of the most powerful and state-

⁸⁸ “World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Global Report 2021/2022” (Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021), <https://www.unesco.org/reports/world-media-trends/2021/en>.

⁸⁹ “Federal Law No. 375-FZ of 7 June, 2016 ‘On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation Regarding the Establishment of Additional Measures to Counter Terrorism and Ensure Public Safety,’” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, July 6, 2016.

approved telecom operators (such as Beeline, Megafon, Tele2). Regarding civil society, innovations were giving to the population the feeling of omnipresence, provoking fear of personal data leakage and total control. The fear of “to be heard” is very noticeable in Russian society because of the Soviet Union heritage of such practices (eavesdropping, denunciations). Therefore, this can result in the refusal of people to discuss some political topics online, increasing the self-censorship. This is also having a negative impact on sociology science in Russia, as statistical data on political preferences of the population could be inaccurate, as people usually do not wish to reveal their political preferences.

Federal Law No. 149-FZ of July 27, 2006 "On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection" was amended 13 times from 2020 to 2021. As a result, a news aggregator (that could be also a host of the internet website) has now an obligation to “ensure that the authorized organization for the study of the volume of the audience...can conduct a study of the volume of the audience of the news aggregator and the news information”⁹⁰. Government, therefore, gained access to the necessary data to analyze public political preferences and sentiments. The article 10.6. “On peculiarities of information dissemination” in social networks was added to the detailed regulation of its activities and prohibition of diffusion of the materials acknowledged by the authorized organ as violating the law. Moreover, information that contains support and (or) justification for carrying out extremist activities on the internet should be deleted from the sources within 24 hours after receiving from the host provider the request to delete such information.

As we can observe, straightening the presence of the government in every aspect of the social, cultural, political, and digital life of its citizens in Russia is directly linked with the will of political leaders to control or at least to monitor public opinion. The state uses legal and political tools to make dissident voices fall silent and to create an image of wide acceptance of the current political order within the country's borders. Nevertheless, despite the efforts, protest activities were present in Russia before and after presidential elections in 2018.

⁹⁰ “Federal Law No. 149-FZ of 27 July, 2006 ‘On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection’.”

4.3. Constitutional amendments as a mechanism for power consolidation

Under the popular dissatisfaction that was drowned out, Vladimir Putin won the elections in 2018, once again accusing the electoral monitoring organizations of mass frauds. In 2020, after a series of protests and straightening of opposition sentiments, to retain power and enhance his personal status, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin initiated the adoption of amendments to the Constitution. The amendments were adopted in a popular referendum. New Constitution promoted centralization as well as provoking other repressive legal changes in already existing laws with the purpose to level out protests and indignations.

The tendency to secure the central place of President Putin in the hierarchy of power and the will to maintain its status, not allowing political opponents to participate in the race for power, is reflected in the additions to Chapter 4 (President of the Russian Federation). The President gained the capability to hold the presidential term more than two consecutive terms. The term reset, enshrined in the Constitution, allowed Putin to maintain his power. Moreover, “a unified system of public authority” officially was transferred under control of the President, formally turning the Russian Federation into a personalized autocracy. As in personalized autocracies, the powers of the President have also been expended: from 2020, he will not need the agreement of the State Duma to appoint the Chairman of the Government of the Russian Federation, heads of federal executive authorities. He will provide general guidance of the Government of the Russian Federation, formally heading the executive branch. He also gained control over the judicial branch of the government by the appointment of judges of the Constitution and Supreme Court of the Russian Federation and other federal courts, and General Prosecutor. He is empowered to form the Security Council of the Russian Federation and State Council (whose main function is to ensure the interaction of all bodies). Moreover, central power also established control over local governments, gaining the right to appoint officials in the regions.

Responding to the occupation of Crimea and conflict in Eastern Ukraine, new Constitution increased the level of protection of national sovereignty and territory by stating

that “actions (except for delimitation, demarcation, redemarcation of the state border of the Russian Federation with neighboring states) aimed at alienating part of the territory of the Russian Federation Federations, as well as calls for such actions, are not allowed”⁹¹. Consequently, any statement challenging the legality of the annexation of Crimea to the territory of the Russian Federation goes in discordance with the Russian Constitution.

Amendments also officially approved the primacy of national law over international, stating that “decisions of interstate bodies adopted on the basis of the provisions of international treaties of the Russian Federation in their interpretation, contrary to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, are not subject to execution in the Russian Federation”⁹². Therefore, from now on, decisions of such bodies (as, for example, European Court of Human Rights) can be claimed as contradictory to the Constitution and thereby not executable.

Another change is that new article 67. This article seems to be more ideological in its nature than political or legal, pointing out that the memory of the ancestors “who gave us ideals” and faith in God and state’s unity. The article also promoted patriotic upbringing. This article does not by itself produce the effect on media operation or civil society. However, it is indicating the aspiration of powers to create a solid ideological basis for society, thereby also controlling the spiritual and moral sphere of life of its citizens.

Speaking of media policy discourse, we can confidently point out the expansion of governmental power. According to the new Constitution, information technologies and connection, security of individuals, society, and the state in the application of information technology, digital data turnover is now under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation. Previously, these powers were shared with the regions.

After the amendments to the Constitution were made, the mass movement of civil society members “NO” was trying to organize a demonstration in 18 cities of Russia. Local authorities predictably refused approval of the manifestations citing the COVID restrictions

⁹¹ “The Constitution of the Russian Federation (Was Adopted at National Voting on December 12, 1993).”

⁹² “The Constitution of the Russian Federation (Was Adopted at National Voting on December 12, 1993).”

and the danger of mass gathering. Federal powers also made efforts to stop spreading of the information about protests. After Moscow City Hall refused to coordinate rallies against constitutional amendments, referring to the mayor's decree on measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, Roskomnadzor, “without waiting for the court's decision, blocked the website of a company whose members are calling for voting against the presidential amendments”⁹³. RNK is referred to the article 20.2.2 which was added to the Administrative Code of Conduct in 2020 and sanctioned the organization of mass simultaneous stay and (or) movement of citizens in public places that have caused a violation of public order⁹⁴. It became another weapon in the hands of power to detain dissatisfied protestors.

After successful amendments to the Constitution and a growing number of protest activities, repressive practices in relation to media as well as civil society consequently increased. Appeal to the “alienation of a part of the territory of the Russian Federation” from 2020 considered by the Federal law as an extremist activity – which aimed to support the policy of centralization. Moreover, extremist materials can be produced not only for the goal of publication, but for public demonstration (for example, during the mass protest) after the amendments made in 2021⁹⁵.

4.4. State and civil society from 2018 to 2022

Position of organizations or individuals - foreign agents also has been tightened. It became legally prohibited to “disseminate information in the mass media and in messages and materials in the mass media in information and telecommunication networks about a non-profit organization...association...an individual included in the list of individuals performing the functions of a foreign agent, as well as materials created by such”⁹⁶ entities.

⁹³ *Deutsche Welle*. “Roskomnadzor Will Be Able to Block Websites without a Court Decision.” September 30, 2017. <https://www.dw.com/ru/>.

⁹⁴ “Federal Law No. 195-FZ ‘The Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offenses.’”

⁹⁵ “Federal Law No. 114-FZ of July 25, 2002 “On Counteraction of Extremist Activities”.”

⁹⁶ Russia, Federal Law No. 149-FZ of July 27, 2006 "On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection"

The informational flaws, dissident from the state narrative, were therefore under the tight control of the governmental agencies

Additionally, the State Duma of the Russian Federation passed new amendments to the law "On Measures to influence persons involved in violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms", prohibiting the citizens of the Russian Federation from participation in the work of foreign non-governmental organizations recognized as undesirable in Russia. The list of such organizations is being compiled by the Ministry of Justice – the Ministry has no obligation to provide explanations of its decisions. Law indicates that could be recognized as undesirable organization which “poses a threat to the foundations of the constitutional system of the Russian Federation, the country's defense capability or the security of the state, including facilitating or hindering the nomination of candidates, lists of candidates, the election of registered candidates, the initiative to hold a referendum and holding a referendum, achieving a certain result in elections, a referendum (including participation in other forms in electoral campaigns, referendum campaigns, except for participation in election campaigns, referendum campaigns as foreign (international) observers”⁹⁷ or if it provides intermediary services in carrying out monetary transactions for organizing such activities. The owner of an internet domain is also obliged to delete information from such organizations if it violates the law within 24 hours as in case of extremist materials.

Already in October 26th, 2017, the State Duma in the first reading supported the law on the extrajudicial blocking of websites of undesirable organizations, as well as websites containing calls for uncoordinated actions and other undesirable information (as, for example, instructions on how to bypass the blockage). However, before 2020 we could notice very little activity of responsible bodies to track such activities. There were in general just a few organizations located and operated in the USA. It is since the first version of the law assumed that only American organizations or individuals can be targeted because of

⁹⁷ “Federal Law No. 272-FZ of December 28, 2012 ‘On Measures to Influence Persons Involved in Violations of Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms, the Rights and Freedoms of Citizens of the Russian Federation,’” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, December 28, 2012.

undermining relations between the Russian Federation and United States and mutual sanctions in 2017.

After the events occurred in 2019-2020, nevertheless, the law was actively applied to the domestic organizations and individuals conducting their activities within the territory of the Russian Federation. Since then, overall, 49 organizations were recognized as undesirable to the end of 2021⁹⁸. International organizations, highlighting human rights violations in Russia also became a target of the new law. Between organizations we can see such trusted international entities as, for example, the European Network of Election Observation Organizations, International Partnership for Human Rights, Paris center of civil society, Media Development Investment Fund, and others. By creating a potential “blacklist” for international organizations that raised questions about the political legitimacy of President Putin in Russia, violations of international law and signed human rights treaties and prohibiting citizens from active participation in it, regime elites pursued the goal of creating only state-approved information ecosystems in Russia both offline and online.

We can also notice that the will to take control of the spiritual and moral life of Russian citizens is reflected in the work of such bodies as RNK. Therefore, in its review of monitoring activities (which increased by 11101) the organ clearly indicated that monitoring can also be carried out “in order to prevent risks of harm to legally protected values during the implementation of state supervision in the media”⁹⁹.

By not allowing civil society participation in the political life of the Russian Federation, preventing the media from publication of dissident opinions, and increasing control over all domains of civil activity, the government prepared a stage for further authoritarian actions, suppressing opposition movements. Opposition leaders were eliminated from the political arena, meanwhile the power capacity of President Putin has

⁹⁸ “List of Foreign and International Non-Governmental Organizations Whose Activities Are Recognized as Undesirable on the Territory of the Russian Federation” (Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, December 25, 2020), <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7756>.

⁹⁹ “Federal Law No. 149-FZ of 27 July, 2006 ‘On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection’.”

been enhanced. These steps created a platform for the following invasion in Ukraine, which led to mass repressions.

Chapter 5. From 2022 to 2024: The war in Ukraine and its repercussions for civil society

The start of the Russian aggression in Ukraine became a major event, which contributed to the increased repressions against dissidents, opposition members, dissent media and civil society. This chapter will explore the aftermath of civil resistance to Putin's regime in his decision to start a special military operation in Ukraine and the state's reaction to civil disobedience. Therefore, this chapter pursues the main goal to investigate how the start of the war in Ukraine changed the relations between state, media, and civil society, increasing the level of pressure and securing the power of the President by imposing censorship and fear of repression on the population. The main argument of the present chapter shows that the state's repression became mass after the start of the special military operation, targeting selected groups and individuals within the state. The chapter will study the reaction of civil society to the ongoing war, increased repression on civil society and the direct influence of it on the electoral activities, as well as the ability of the regime to maintain its legitimacy.

5.1. Civil Society's response to the outbreak of war in Ukraine

On February 24th 2022, Vladimir Putin announced the start of a special military operation on the territory of Ukraine. In his statement, Putin claimed that the reason behind "special military operation" is "the expansion of the NATO bloc to the east, bringing its military infrastructure closer to the Russian borders"¹⁰⁰. He also appealed to the nationalists and Nazi movements in Ukraine "opposed to a peaceful resolution of the conflict", decorative elections in Ukraine, violation of the rights of Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the East part, non-respect of the right to self-determination of the artificially created People's Republic of Donetsk and Luhansk as well as the historical path of Ukraine under the Russian Empire.

¹⁰⁰ Marco Longobardo, "Legal Perspectives on the Role of the Notion of 'Denazification' in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine under Jus Contra Bellum and Jus in Bello," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4214444>.

The proclaimed goal of the military operation was, therefore, to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years. To achieve such an ambitious goal, President Putin, as a head of Russian army forces aimed to strive for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine, “as well as bringing to justice those who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation”¹⁰¹.

That decision is hard to consider as popular among citizens of the Russian Federation. Antiwar members of civil society from the start of the unlawful military activities, conducted by army forces of the Russian Federation on the Ukrainian territory, actively expressed their disagreement with the imperialistic external policy of President Putin. In contrast to the previous mass events, which usually occurred one-time, these protests have an ongoing nature. They are happening in the form of mass demonstrations such as single picketing and other public actions both in Russia and abroad. According to the statistics of the human rights organization OVD-Info, a total of 15,441 people were detained in the Russian Federation in connection with anti-war actions from February 24th to May 9th, 2022¹⁰².

Russian civil society, despite the predictable reaction of the state in the form of severe repressions, responded with organized resistance and other means of public or individual protests. Speaking of the organized mode of resistance, it is worth mentioning such civil society organizations as the Russian Anti-War Committee created in February by Russian politicians, business representatives and scientists. The main objective of the organization is to help Ukrainian refugees and consolidate the main forces of Russian opposition. Currently, the Committee is leading two main projects: the one called Rassvet (gathering humanitarian aid groups for victims of war in Ukraine) and another - Ark (a group on social platforms for emigrants who left Russia after the war started). In march 2022, the beneficial fund “True Russia” was created. It consisted of Russian influencers aiming to collect aid for Ukrainian refugees. Such initiatives as the Russian Action Committee (mostly aiming to facilitate the

¹⁰¹ “The Speech of the President of the Russian Federation,” *An Emergency Appeal to the Citizens of Russia* (Moscow, Kremlin, February 24, 2022), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

¹⁰² “Repressions in Russia in 2022” (OVD-Info, December 23, 2022), <https://en.ovdinfo.org/repressions-russia-2022>.

immigration process and life for anti-war Russian citizens), Feminist anti-war resistance, or Peaceful resistance are also worth mentioning.

As a sign of protest against Russian invasion in Ukraine, antiwar activists and regular citizens relocated abroad. Conferences held abroad by Russian citizens also appeared as a form of political resistance. A meeting of Russian opposition was organized, for example, in Berlin on April 30th, 2023. During the meeting, the "Declaration of Russian Democratic Forces" was drafted, underlining the illegality of Putin's actions in Ukraine and non-legitimate nature of the political regime in the Russian Federation. In Brussel, in June 2023, large-scale meeting of Russian opposition in immigration since the beginning of the special operation was held. The conference was organized by representatives of four different fractions of the Parliament of the European Union. During the conference, the possible future of the Russian Federation was discussed. Necessary measures to support opposed members of civil society both in Russia and abroad were discussed as well. It was proposed to create a special coalition of IT engineers to prevent the blocking of independent media, to establish the broadcasting of entertainment content along with broadcasts about democracy.

Russian civil society used all accessible common forms of protest. A decent number of open letters¹⁰³ and appeals were written by Russian independent media from Syndicate-100, by more than 250 local deputies, more than 450 NGOs, Russian scientists, teachers, students and professors of Russian universities. Along with the open letters, petitions by the political party "Yabloko" or human rights defender Lev Ponomarev were written. Artistic actions, social media movements (such as the hashtag nowar), refusal to participate in hostilities, and acts of anti-war sabotage can be named as other forms of civil resistance.

Majority of influential and trusted international human rights organizations condemned repressions to which dissident members of civil society were subjected in Russia after the start of the war. For example, well-known international human rights organization Human Rights Watch claimed "brutal arrests of peaceful activists by police officers". Human

¹⁰³ Jake Cordell, "She Signed an Open Letter Calling for Peace. Then Got Fired. Russians Who Signed Petitions against Russia's War in Ukraine Are Losing Their Jobs.," *The Moscow Times*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/03/she-signed-an-open-letter-calling-for-peace-then-got-fired-a76728>.

Rights Watch also noticed that "the actions of the authorities aimed at preventing people from participating in peaceful public protests and freely expressing their opinions violate fundamental rights"¹⁰⁴. Amnesty International in its turn stated that political power in Russia "obsessively suppresses criticism of the state as it forces local media to support its policies" and "usually uses force to disperse nationwide anti-war protests"¹⁰⁵.

It is extremely difficult to statistically measure the political sentiments of Russian citizens. The Russian population under the fear of repressions tend to either not respond to questions posed by sociologists or give them answers that are socially approved. Therefore, different statistics generally give different information about the percentage of people supporting a military operation. For example, the official Russian statistics organ Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTSIOM) measured that 68% of Russians rather support the decision to send military troops in Ukraine, 22% disagree with the decision, and 10% find it difficult to take the position¹⁰⁶. Contrary to the VTSIOM data, surveys conducted by Navalny's Team showed a rapid change in the attitude of Russians towards the war. According to the data collected on February 25th, only 29% of Russian citizens considered Russia an aggressor (compared with 56% who assessed its role as "liberating" or "peacemaking"), while by March 3rd the share of Russian citizens who perceive their country as an aggressor has increased to 53%. According to a Levada Center (a major non-governmental research center) poll, 60% of citizens of Moscow opposed Russia's invasion of Ukraine. From all polls conducted by different entities, a common trend nevertheless can be observed: usually, the older participants are, the more they tend to support Russian powers in its decision to start the military operation (which can be explained by the influence of propaganda).

¹⁰⁴ "Russia: Arbitrary Detentions of Anti-War Protesters," *Human Rights Watch*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/26/russia-arbitrary-detentions-anti-war-protesters>.

¹⁰⁵ "Russia: Authorities Deploy New Criminal Laws to Silence Criticism of Russia's War in Ukraine," *Amnesty International*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur46/5988/2022/en/>.

¹⁰⁶ "Special Military Operation: One Year Later," *VTSIOM*, February 20, 2023, <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/specialnaja-voennaja-operacija-god-spustja>.

5.2. Political persecutions as a state's response to civil resistance

Repressions directed against opposed citizens after the start of the war almost completely deprived Russian civil society of the rights to freedom of expression and speech. Independent media, which operated in Russia, also struggled with the strict censorship and impossibility to present alternative points of view without being subjected to severe sanctions. The most influential members of the Russian opposition who became the center for the conglomeration of the antiwar movement in society, were the first to be considered as victims of political persecution.

On 22nd May 2022, Alexey Navalny was sentenced to nine years in the high-security colony by the Lefortovo court, at a visiting session in the Vladimir region. The court found the opposition leader guilty of especially large-scale fraud and contempt of court. This was undoubtedly a political decision. The decision aimed to silence war criticism by opposition members. Later, on August 4th 2023, The Moscow City Court sentenced Navalny to nineteen (instead of nine) years in a penal colony under the case of "extremism" at a visiting session. Opposition leader was charged under six articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation: organization of an "extremist community" (due to the creation of the Anti-Corruption Fund and Navalny's headquarters recognized as extremist organizations), public calls for "extremism" (due to his speech for participants in the rally in Ufa in 2017), rehabilitation of Nazism, involvement of minors in committing life-threatening acts (due to the participation of minors in manifestations organized by Navalny team) , creation of a non-profit organization that encroaches on the rights of citizens and financing of extremism (due to the collection of donations for the organizations created by Navalny)¹⁰⁷. The process was “exponential” for Russian civil society. This exponential justice” is a common political tool to influence citizens for political powers in Russia.

¹⁰⁷ A.M. Bakatsky, “Legitimacy and technologies of legitimization of systemic and opposition politicians in the post-Soviet countries (On the example of V. Putin and A. Navalny),” №3(15) (2017), November 20, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.25513/2312-1300.2017.3.422-428>.

Another criminal case was filed against Ilya Yashin – well-known political figure in Russia, representative of Russian opposition. He gained the popular support as a member of the opposition democratic party “Yabloko” (which he has left later). He participated in numerous manifestations against the regime as well and was a local deputy of Krasnoselski area. After the murder of Boris Nemtsov in 2015, he headed the team of journalists who completed the report “Putin. The war on the participation of Russian troops in the war in Donbas” opposing to the Russian annexation of Ukrainian territories. Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2022, he actively criticized Putin on social media. On July 12th, the Investigative Committee had filed a criminal case against Yashin. He was accused of spreading deliberately false information about the Russian army (new article added to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation which we will discuss later). On July 22nd, he was added to the list of individuals recognized as "foreign agents" by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. On December 9th, the Meshchansky District Court sentenced Ilya Yashin to 8 years and 6 months in a general regime colony. After appealing to the Supreme Court of Russian Federation, the decision was upheld.

Another victim of “expositive justice” practiced by the Russian judicial machine became Vladimir Kara-Murza - Russian politician, journalist, publisher and film director, member of the Antiwar Committee. In April 2022, he was recognized as a foreign agent by the Ministry of Justice. On April 17th, 2023, the Moscow City Court sentenced Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison on charges of high treason, spreading slander about the Russian army and collaborating with an undesirable organization, Free Russia Foundation. Vladimir Kara-Murza, as Ilya Yashin are political prisoners.

There were more similar cases against public figures who actively expressed their disagreement with the policy of the state. Some of them were sentenced to prison in absentia after leaving the country (for example, Maksim Kaz, Aleksandr Nevzorov and other members of Russian opposition “in exile”).

5.3. The use of anti-foreign influence measures to control civil society

Tending to decrease resistance on a national level, the regime in the same way tried to silence the criticism from abroad. After disruption of diplomatic relations with several states who declared their support to Ukraine, the Russian Federation strove to level out foreign presence within the territory. Political narratives about “foreign influence on the traditional Russians values” could explain new legislative changes which made it impossible for foreign organizations or media judging political decisions of Russian powers to operate in the country. However, we can clearly see that behind the protection of traditional values there is a desire of leading powers to limit civil society with their means to resist. Russian human rights organizations, civil society units and opposition members, who have always been in contact with the international community, were deprived of such possibilities.

To achieve this goal, a new law was adopted on July 14th 2022 – Federal Law No. 255-FZ "On control over the activities of persons under foreign influence". The definition of “foreign influence” itself is extremely vague. “Foreign influence” can be expressed in “providing support to a person from a foreign source and (or) influencing a person, including through coercion, persuasion and (or) other means”¹⁰⁸. Foreign support, according to the law, means “provision of funds and (or) other property to a person by a foreign source, as well as the provision of organizational, methodological, scientific and technical assistance, or assistance in other forms to a person by a foreign source”¹⁰⁹. Therefore, any interaction with foreign organizations with such wording can potentially be considered a foreign influence. Even writing scientific articles with colleges from foreign universities falls within that definition. Consequently, to stay within the law and not lose the trust of citizens, political activists or human rights defenders should only collaborate with local, regional, or national organizations and receive funds only from other Russian citizens. This had a significant impact on the cooperation of Russian civil society organizations with international entities.

Simultaneously, the law contains an impressive list of foreign sources. Foreign countries, public authorities of foreign states, international and foreign organizations, foreign

¹⁰⁸ “Federal Law No. 255-FZ of July 22, 2022 ‘On Control over the Activities of Persons under Foreign Influence,’” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, July 22, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ *idem*

citizens, stateless persons, foreign structures without the formation of a legal entity, or even “citizens of the Russian Federation and Russian legal entities receiving funds or other property” from the sources mentioned earlier. In the world of active globalization, every second one can be recognized as such.

The practice of accounting and monitoring of dissidence has been continued and increased. Due to the law, a new register of individuals affiliated with foreign agents was created by the Ministry of Justice, again allowing a government body to add people to the register extrajudicially without giving any reason.

Moreover, the list of undesirable organizations led by the Ministry of Justice expanded with the start of the full-scale invasion. 87 organizations were recognized as undesirable from 24th February. These organizations are based in the USA, Great Britain, Ukraine, Russia, or other states. In the list, such organizations as Russian Anti-war Committee, Central European University, Fond of democratic development, Greenpeace, Fond “Human right’s home” are present. On the list of individuals recognized as foreign agents, there are 262 individuals, 185 of which were listed after the start of Russian invasion in Ukraine. A lot of organizations could not continue their activity considering restrictions by the law, lack of international donors and loss of trust from Russian citizens. Due to the imposed limitations, 94 organizations were liquidated due to their status of foreign agents from 2022 to 2024¹¹⁰.

5.4. Intensified information control and the establishment of state censorship

The will to limit foreign influence is notable in every domain of governance. Information protectionism seems to become Russian main policy in the sphere of media and information. According to the Federal Law No. 149-FZ of July 27, 2006 "On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection", a news aggregator can be only a citizen of the Russian Federation, an entity registered in Russia or an entity controlled by the

¹¹⁰ “List of Foreign and International Non-Governmental Organizations Whose Activities Are Recognized as Undesirable on the Territory of the Russian Federation.”

Russian Federation. It also became prohibited to spread the information “on the ways and methods of providing access to information resources and (or) information and telecommunication networks, access to which is restricted on the territory of the Russian Federation”¹¹¹ – for example, information about the use of VPN to access prohibited information. Nevertheless, the use of VPN is not prohibited itself in the Russian Federation.

Article 15.3 of the mentioned law “The procedure for restricting access to information disseminated in violation of the law” was an amendment to restrict the access to fake informational about the army forces of the Russian Federation, information aimed to discredit army forces, information with the proposition to sponsor military enemies during the time of the conflict as well as information calling to impose the sanctions on the Russian Federation or selected individuals¹¹². With the amendments accepted in 2022, media sources which repeatedly posted this type of information, could be blocked by the decision of the authorized body of executive power in charge of control and monitoring in case of non-compliance with the obligation to delete information. To fulfill its obligations, the authorized organ of the executive body (RNK) received additional powers to realize the monitoring of information and telecommunication networks, including the Internet.

The freedom of speech for journalists was also dramatically suppressed. The accreditation of journalists can now be revoked if the registration of a mass media outlet, the broadcasting license of a mass media outlet, at the request of which a journalist was accredited, is declared invalid due to spreading information considered prohibited by the law. Information prohibited by the law includes discreditation of army forces, calling for sanctions. Foreign journalists as well can be revoked of their accreditation issued by the foreign organization or media outlet, which were recognized as undesirable by the current law.

New actor after the undated redaction of the law “On mass media” gained its power to suspend activity of the media or to stop broadcasting – General Prosecutor of Russian

¹¹¹ “Federal Law No. 149-FZ of 27 July, 2006 ‘On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection’.”

¹¹² idem

Federation, which is nominated by the President. He has the right to call for suspension or closure of media in case if information distributed by an outlet containing information “under the guise of reliable reports of unreliable socially significant information that poses a threat of harm to life and (or) health”¹¹³, unreliable information about army forces of the Russian, information containing discreditation of military forces or information calling for public demonstrations or protests. Additionally, an information which insults “public morality, obvious disrespect for society, the state, official state symbols of the Russian Federation...or bodies exercising state power in the Russian Federation”¹¹⁴ is also prohibited. In essence, any clear disagreement with actions of public organs can be seen as an “insult” by the General Prosecutor.

Media, therefore, were prevented from spreading information on the military performance of the Russian army when it contradicts official data from empowered bodies such as the Ministry of Defense. Civil society lost their voice and representation in the mass media as well as an ability to discuss all important political information in social media under the fear of persecutions. As it was rightly underlined by Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at international human rights organization Human Rights Watch, “the authorities' offensive against civil society is conducted with bitterness and cynicism, up to accusing the country's leading human rights organizations of violating key international human rights treaties and declaring peaceful opposition and anti-corruption organizations 'extremist’”¹¹⁵. Despite the official prohibition of state censorship in the Russian Constitution, it is evident that all the approved amendments and laws contributed to the significant increase of censorship.

Even some media platforms were banned by Roskomnadzor after the start of full-scale invasion in Ukraine. RNK announced the blocking of popular social media Instagram due to the approval by Instagram managers “the call of violence” to the Russian military. The same reason became the main cause for blocking another important media platform –

¹¹³ “Federal Law No.2124-1 of December 27, 1991, ‘On Mass Media.’”

¹¹⁴ *idem*

¹¹⁵ “World Report 2023. The Russian Federaton” (Human Rights Watch), accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023>.

Facebook (both platforms belong to the same company Meta Platforms Inc.). Prosecutors appealing to the court to ban social media mentioned that Russian citizens who will still use platforms for communication will not be held accountable for the fact of the use of platforms. At the same time, posts on Instagram or Facebook often become grounds for initiating administrative or criminal affairs against citizens. The inability to express someone's opinion publicly had a political impact on civil society, contributing to the image of "all support" for the President. The psychological impact of such limitations is also noticeable for civil society. Political dissidents do not see like-minded people online, which seems to give rise to the feeling of loneliness and non-belonging to the society. This provokes the sentiment of hopelessness and contributes to the marginalization of the dissident's opinion.

5.5. The impact of political repression on civil society in the Russian Federation

Judicial powers used recently created mechanisms for holding citizens accountable for dissident opinions fruitfully. According to the data collected by OVD-Info, during the first year of the war, there have been 20 467 political arrests for antiwar statements as well as for other political statements within Russian territory. We know about 108 cases of illegal prosecution under the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation, mostly within the article 20.3 on the prohibition of the propaganda of Nazis, using the symbols of organization recognized as an extremist (flag of Ukraine, for example, "Glory to Ukraine" posts or proclamations e.t.). In total, 21 people in 2022 were sentenced under the article of Criminal code of the Russian Federation for the rehabilitation of Nazism, 61 cases were initiated due to the online justification of terrorism alone from which in 26 cases the verdict was the real prison term. 75 materials were added to the List of extremist materials by different state organs¹¹⁶.

In 2023, repression by the government continued, as anti-war activities were still present within Russian borders. Around 200 cases were initiated for anti-war activities under the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation in 2023. The most common articles to pressure

¹¹⁶ "Repression in Russia in 2023. OVD-Info Overview" (OVD-Info, January 17, 2024), <https://en.ovdinfo.org/repression-russia-2023-ovd-info-overview>.

citizens were: 207.3 (fake news), 280.3 (discrediting the use of force by the Russian army), 205. 2 (justification or promoting terrorism), 214 (vandalism), 280 (public calls for the performance of extremist activities), 205 (terrorism), 318 (use of violence against representatives of public powers). 2075 people were held accountable under the administrative article on discreditation of the army forces of Russian Federation¹¹⁷.

Besides the judicial forms of persecution of civil society in 2023, state powers also used extra-judicial methods to pressure civil society after the start of invasion. As data collected by OVD-Info indicates, from 24 February to August 2023, 129 individuals received threats, 69 artists suffered from event cancellation due to their political position or expressed opinions, 64 civil society activists reported being victims of vandalism and 22 even became victims of an attack. Dismissal from the workplace also stays a powerful mode of putting pressure on civil society. For example, Elena Gegia, an employee of a subsidiary of «Rosneft» (Russian oil extracting company) was dismissed following her anti-war posts on Instagram. Pavel Kolosnitsyn, a history professor at Novosibirsk State University, did not renew his contract with the University due to the fact of discreditation of the army forces of the Russian Federation.

All mentioned practices used by the state with the aim to weaken civil society achieved its goal. New laws contributed to the impossibility for independent media to criticize governmental military and political decisions, restricted political participation for individuals recognized as foreign agents created strong self-censorship inside civil society. This was admitted by Tatiana Zadirako - one of the leading experts in the field of charity in Russia, founder of the Social Navigator Foundation for Support and Development of Social Programs. During one of her interviews, she noticed that “self-censorship has appeared simply monstrous. Undoubtedly, we are walking through a minefield, we need to talk about everything very carefully.”¹¹⁸ A lot of citizens limited themselves from participating in

¹¹⁷ idem

¹¹⁸ “‘Self-Censorship Is Simply Monstrous’: Tatyana Zadirako on How the Third Sector Is Changing,” *The Forbes*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.forbes.ru/forbeslife/481083-samocenzura-prosto-cudovisnaa-tatana-zadirako-o-tom-kak-menaetsa-tretij-sektor>.

political discussions online. The same can be applied to journalists, scientific activities, whose activities are connected to sensitive topics.

As a result of consistent repression policies against political dissidents, a significant number of Russian citizens have immigrated. The wave of immigration that started after the war, was announced to be the biggest one since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, forcing millions to leave the country. It is extremely difficult to calculate the number of people who left the territory of the Russian Federation to settle in another country. According to the data collected by the project "To be precise", during 2022 at least 500-650 thousand people left the territory of the Russian Federation without returning, therefore the real number could theoretically reach 800 thousand¹¹⁹. Forbes magazine calculated about 700,000 immigrants per year. The Finnish Institute of International Relations at the same time reported about 800 thousand of those who left Russian forever. By the May of 2023, according to the British Ministry of Defense, the number of people who immigrated from Russia after the start of the war reached at 1.3 million¹²⁰.

5.6. Repressions on the LGBT community in Russia

Not only journalists, political activists or human rights defenders are targets of Russian repressions. Another topic that, despite being sensitive for a long time after the start of the military operation acquired not only ideological but political nature is the LGBT rights. LGBT community in Russia has always been a vulnerable group. Queer people were never getting any legal protection from discrimination by the law, same-sex marriages or unions were never recognized within the Russian Federation. Moreover, LGBT propaganda was prohibited by the law regarding minors. However, up to the start of the war, cases of LGBT persecution were mostly presented in such regions as Chechnya. The change of sex was never

¹¹⁹ "Well-Being Was Measured in Tons and Liters. Experts Have Compiled a Rating of Russian Regions by the Level of Environmental Problems," *Kommersant.Ru*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5634786>.

¹²⁰ "This Factsheet Outlines Malign Cyber Activity That the UK Government Attributes to the Russian State." (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, May 4, 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/russias-fsb-malign-cyber-activity-factsheet>.

officially in Russia before the invasion and some LGBT organizations and open spaces freely worked within the Russian Federation.

30th November 2023, Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognized LGBT community as an extremist organization.¹²¹ The consequences of such a decision were severe. As LGBT community does not have an entity and consequently, there could be lots of members who participate in extremist organizations. That means that the provision of the law could be used arbitrarily against any dissident who, according to the state representatives, could be part of the community. The practice of law-executors shows that such concerns have a ground. Recently, for example, the court in Nizhny Novgorod ordered administrative arrest for 5 days for a woman who was wearing rainbow earrings for the “public display of symbols of an extremist organization”¹²². Currently, after the court decision, all symbols of the organization can be recognized as extremist materials.

The repressions against LGBT representatives seem to be a part of the media policy of the state tending to prohibit the free speech and opinions of dissidents. As it was correctly noticed by the sociologist of Levada Centre Alexey Levison, “what is currently being presented as a fight against propaganda is a fight against freedom. Not the freedom for same-sex relationships and marriages – that affects just a small percentage of people living in Russia – and not even the freedom to come out into the public space, but the freedom of all people to express their opinion, their position in this space”¹²³.

The decision of the Supreme Court can entail mass repression on civil society in Russia and opposition members as anyone potentially can become a victim of state machinery for a broad spectrum of activities. Now, for the public demonstration of "symbols" of this non-existent "international extremist organization" comes administrative responsibility

¹²¹ *BBC News*. “Russia’s Supreme Court Has Declared What It Calls ‘the International LGBT Public Movement’ an Extremist Organisation and Banned Its Activities across the Country.” November 30, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67565509>.

¹²² “Girl with a Rainbow Earring. A Resident of Nizhny Novgorod Was Arrested for Five Days for Multi-Colored Jewelry. We Tell the Story of Anastasia Ershova, Accused of ‘Extremism,’” *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, February 2, 2024, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/02/02/devushka-s-raduzhnoi-serezhkoi>.

¹²³ “Persecution of LGBTI+ People in Russia: Increasing Repressions 2021-2022,” *Anti-Discrimination Center*, May 18, 2024, <https://adcmemorial.org/en/articles/persecution-of-lgbti-2021-22/>.

under article 20.3 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation. Meanwhile for "participation", "financing", "persuasion", "recruitment" or "other involvement" in the activities of this organization comes criminal liability. Individuals can also be held criminally accountable for "public calls to carry out the activities of a "non-existent" International LGBT Organization"¹²⁴. Government legal innovations led to the closure of queer organizations in Russia as well as to the increased level of censorship on the LGBT community.

Monitoring activities of authorized bodies on detecting and sanctioning LGBT content online have also increased since the proclamation of LGBT extremist organization. The calculation of the Russian BBC has showed that, from 30th November 2023 to 23rd January 2024, 18 cases of censorship in the sphere of culture were detected, 6 clubs were closed and 3 organizations stopped their existence due to the new laws¹²⁵.

International community condemned the decision of the Supreme Court and supported the Russian LGNT community. As it was mentioned by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "this decision exposes human rights defenders and all those who advocate for the rights of LGBT people to a direct threat of being recognized as "extremists", which in Russia has significant social and criminal consequences"¹²⁶.

This has been proved recently, after the first case opened against the art director and administrator of an LGBT-club in the Orenburg region. They are currently suspected under the case of organizing the activities of an extremist organization (Part 1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code), both are in pretrial detention. In early March 2024, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and OMON (special purpose mobile detachment of enforcement agency which aim is to prevent the violation of public order and security) conducted a raid in a bar.

¹²⁴ "Federal Law No. 260-FZ of July 14, 2022 'On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation,'" *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, July 14, 2022.

¹²⁵ Steve Rosenberg, "Russia's Supreme Court Has Declared What It Calls 'the International LGBT Public Movement' an Extremist Organisation and Banned Its Activities across the Country.," *BBC News*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67565509>.

¹²⁶ "Russia: UN Human Rights Chief Deplores Supreme Court's Decision to Outlaw 'LGBT Movement,'" *United Nation: Press Release*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/russia-un-human-rights-chief-deplores-supreme-courts-decision-outlaw-lgbt#:~:text=GENEVA%20%2830%20November%202023%29%20%E2%80%93%20UN%20High%20Commissioner,LGBT%20groups%20and%20associations%20in%20Russia%20being%20banned.>

The video of the raid was published by active members of the pro-government movement "Russian Community of Orenburg". Later on, on March 20th, the official Telegram channel of the Central Court of Orenburg city announced that the Court considered the materials on the investigator's request to choose a preventive measure in the form of detention against two persons accused of committing a crime under Part 1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, for the organization of an extremist community. According to the investigation, managers, "being persons with non-traditional sexual orientation, acting as a group of persons in collusion with unidentified persons who also support the views and activities of the international public association LGBT banned in our country, worked in the Rose bar, ensured its functioning, promoted non-traditional sexual relations among the visitors of the bar and in the Telegram mobile application"¹²⁷. These managers became the first to be condemned under the new law. We do not have enough data to elaborate on the possible application of the law and therefore – possible consequences for the queer people who openly talked about their belonging to LGBT community. Nevertheless, one can assume that legislative mechanisms could be used to silence political dissidents and human rights defenders in the Russian Federation.

Anti-LGBT laws became other restrictions on the freedom of speech and opinion, worsening the position of civil society. Civil society crisis has been notably noticeable in Russia after the start of aggression in Ukraine. It attracted the attention of international bodies, human rights organizations, and private actors. United Nation Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, stated that "the authorities must immediately halt all acts of repression, judicial harassment and intimidation against civil society organizations, human rights defenders and media outlets and respect their rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly and of expression"¹²⁸. The expert also found that the work of human rights defenders in Russia

¹²⁷ Telegram. "Central Court of the Orenburg Region: Official Channel." Accessed April 24, 2024. <https://t.me/centralsudorb>.

¹²⁸ "Russia: UN Experts Alarmed by Escalation of Crackdown on Civil Society," *United Nation: Press Release*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/01/russia-un-experts-alarmed-escalation-crackdown-civil-society>.

becomes more and more dangerous due to the state's policy of imposing fear on civil society, the scale of repressions and constant monitoring from the government.

5.7. Ideological underpinnings of media policy

By analyzing the existing repression and the content which can potentially lead to administrative or criminal persecutions, we can see the strong will of the state to raise the national spirit and the support of the President's decisions both in the domain of external policy and domestic one. Judicial and extrajudicial practices tend to punish dissidents, openly criticizing the political decisions of Putin and challenging the territorial integrity of Russia. National aspect within repressions is notable, as the state tends to protect so-called "ruskii mir" (Russian world). The protection is achieved through the fear of repressions, judicial persecutions, creating a psychological pressure on citizens using media policy, or maintaining a visual representation of a state policy along with public events aimed to unite the population under the flag (military concerns, parades or "Z" signs used by citizens to show their support for a special operation).

All of that contributed to the creation of an image of a "good citizen" and an opposite one – "bad citizen" who should not be tolerated nor by governmental actors and bodies nor by other citizens. Psychologically, the state put pressure on opposition by creating an image of "others," significantly lowering the level of trust in organizations and individuals claimed as "non-alliance." Nevertheless, Russian civil society used the same instrument as the state to identify like-minded individuals and organizations, collaborating with them to spread awareness about human rights violations in Russia and to protect victims of it.

By using the image of "others," "bad citizens" and "non-alliance", the state succeeded in encouraging the practice of denunciations, which was actively applied in the Soviet Union. The numbers of complaints, law enforcement agencies or specially authorized bodies received on celebrities, politicians, activists, regular individuals or even relatives have increased after the start of a full-scale invasion in Ukraine. Often the reason for denunciation is the "wrongful" position of an individual concerning the military operation in Ukraine.

According to the calculations, during 2022, the common number of complaints to Roskomnadzor increased by 26 percent. As RNK stated itself, the biggest part of the signals received related to the posting of "illegal information on the Internet, including fakes about the conduct of a special military operation in Ukraine"¹²⁹. RNK was not the only agency receiving complaints from citizens. The Prosecutor General's Office as well received in 2022 more than five million appeals – that is the biggest number in the past 20 years¹³⁰. The reason behind the increased participation of the population in the denunciation movement could be different: from the fear of repression to the desire to demonstrate someone's active civic position and to support power. Denunciations are mostly written about online content recognized as illegal, therefore cases of real-life incidents are not rare. For example, in March 2022, Russian citizen Yuri Samoiloov was detained by authorities in the Moscow metro. One of the passengers saw pictures discrediting the Russian army on his phone and called the police. After several stations, law enforcement officers approached Samoiloov, examined his mobile phone, and drew up a protocol on the distribution of extremist materials. Later, the Cheremushkinsky court of Moscow decided to arrest him for 14 days¹³¹.

Therefore, we can see that authorities' efforts to spread governmental influence to the ideological sphere of life gained success - people mobilized against dissidents which they considered immoral. The success of a government is explained by a strong and omnipresent state apparatus, work with the youngest members of civil society in schools (thought, for example, "Lessons about important things" and patriotic events), and the fear of a repression machine. Consistent media policy was one of the keys to success. It imposed restrictions and limits on the freedom of speech, created a desirable image of Russian authorities for the population, and eliminated the information that could contradict the official storyline of the Kremlin.

¹²⁹ "Results of Work with Citizens' Appeals to Roskomnadzor in 2022" (Roskomnadzor, January 31, 2023), <https://rkn.gov.ru/treatments/p436/>.

¹³⁰ "The Power of Fear Works" In Russia, Hundreds of Denunciations of Stars and Ordinary People Are Written. Who Is Doing This and Why?," *Lenta.Ru*, April 24, 2023, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2023/04/24/donos/>.

¹³¹ idem

5.8. The death of Alexei Navalny and its consequences

The practice of extra judicial methods of dealing with political opponents was also well presented after the start of the military operation. Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny was killed during his prison term in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous district on February 16th 2024. The Federal Penitentiary Service reported his death a few hours later. According to the report of The Federal Penitentiary Service, Navalny felt bad after the walk and fell unconscious. Federal Penitentiary Service stated that all necessary medical actions were completed but he was not reanimated¹³². Later, medical specialists stated his death.

Counting the prohibition of mass events and protests, Russian citizens decided to honor Navalny's memory by laying flowers in the memorials connected with victims of mass repression or victims of fascism. This became the common practice used by non-indifferent members of civil society during the past years to express their dissatisfaction with the current policy. As it was reported by the human rights defending organization OVD-Info, 387 people were detained in 39 cities during laying flowers in Russia¹³³.

World leaders such as American President Joe Biden or French President Emmanuel Macron and many others expressed condolences because of the opposition leader's death and spoke up about the Kremlin's involvement. The Kremlin, in its turn, rejected acquisitions. The press secretary of Vladimir Putin, Dmitri Peskov noted that the death of Navalny before the presidential election (that was held in Russia on March 17th) is unprofitable for the political regime in Russia.

A lot of human rights organizations demanded an independent investigation of all circumstances of Navalny's death. For example, The UN Human Rights Office on February 17th stated that it was "appalled" over the sudden death announced by authorities in prison

¹³² "Navalny's Death: The Court in the Yamalo-Nenets District Dismissed the Case of the Seizure of Letters from Alexei Navalny in Connection with His Death," *BBC News*, January 3, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/live/news-68436089>.

¹³³ "Persecution of the Anti-War Movement Report. Two Years of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine. February 2024." (OVD-Info, February 28, 2024), <https://en.ovdinfo.org/persecution-anti-war-movement-report-two-years-russias-full-scale-invasion-ukraine>.

and called for impartial and transparent investigation by independent experts, highlighting the responsibility of the government¹³⁴. These claims were not satisfied.

Media coverage of Navalny's death was not present enough in the governmental media. Posts with a demand of proper investigation and accusations of governmental officials were encouraged to be deleted by Roskomnadzor. It should be noticed that after Navalny was recognized by a Russian court as an extremist, any public support expressed in social media could be qualified as a support of the extremist's activities.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, after the death of Alexey Navalny, expressed its commitment to support civil society in the Russian Federation. This will have found its legal form in the Resolution 2024/2579(RSP), signed on February 29th 2024. In this Resolution, the European Union and its members are called upon to “continue to show their unfailing solidarity with and to actively support independent Russian civil society and the democratic opposition, who are working to transform Russia into an open society where political rights, fundamental freedoms and human rights are respected”¹³⁵, to support Russian citizens who are seeking refuge in the member states and civil society organizations as well as human rights defenders who monitor human rights violations in Russia.

5.9. Presidential elections 2024 and their critiques

The role of the media in the past presidential election, which has been held from 15th to 17th March 2024, is also noticeable. Media favorable to the government during the election period actively supported the idea of online voting, which became accessible for 29 regions of the Russian Federation. They also highlighted the big number of observers, absence of complaints and the high level of participation of Russian citizens (with the highest participation this year abroad).

¹³⁴ “UN – on Navalny’s Death: The State Is Responsible and Must Ensure an Independent Investigation,” *United Nation: Press Release*, February 16, 2024, <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2024/02/1449562>.

¹³⁵ “Resolution 2540 (2024). Alexei Navalny’s Death and the Need to Counter Vladimir Putin’s Totalitarian Regime and Its War on Democracy” (Parliamentary Assembly, April 17, 2024).

Despite the unconstitutionality of the 6th President term of Vladimir Putin, the participation of “reunited territories” (occupied Ukrainian regions) during the military actions, the absence of independent observers, non-acceptance by the Central Commission against candidates for elections, the elections were considered completely legitimate in Russia. Candidates, supported by the opposition, were not allowed to run for a President term. The striking examples of this “now-allowance policy” were Ekaterina Dunzova who was not registered under the Central Electoral Commission. Boris Nadezhdin who collected all 100 000 signs needed to be registered as a self-identified candidate was also denied of such possibility. His signs were recognized as invalid.

These elections contained the most extensive falsifications. Independent researchers stated that “at least 60 million votes for Putin were falsified”¹³⁶. Their calculations were based on a mathematical model which has been developed by election monitor specialist Sergey Shpilkin. To calculate possible falsifications, he uses a discrepancy between voter turnout and votes for each candidate. The same calculation method was used in Russia earlier. However, during these elections the number of falsifications achieved the highest number possible. Other calculations, made by an independent media outlet Meduza, with the aid of statistical analyses of official data demonstrated a pronounced trend where voter turnout strongly correlated with support for Putin. This phenomenon was relatively weak in earlier elections, but became dominant in 2024. Additionally, they noted an intensification of the “Churov's saw” effect - a statistical anomaly indicating potential fraud, wherein sharp spikes occurred at round numbers in both voter turnout and the percentage of votes for Putin. Meduza argued that in 2024, most polling stations exhibited signs of possible fraud, marking a stark contrast to previous elections where fraudulent stations were in the minority. Consequently, they concluded that the presidential election in 2024 was likely the most fraudulent in modern Russian history, surpassing the levels of fraud seen in 2018.

¹³⁶ “At Least 22 Million Fake Votes Cast for Putin in Presidential Election,” *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, March 19, 2024, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/03/18/novaia-evropa-okolo-poloviny-golosov-za-vladimira-putina-na-prezidentskikh-vyborakh-byli-vbrosheny-news>.

Because of the clear formal nature of these elections, they were not considered legitimate by many states. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, for example, in its Resolution 2540 stated that it does not recognize the legitimacy of the Russian newly elected President Vladimir Putin. Besides that, the Resolution also underlined that “the Russian State bears full responsibility for the killing of Alexei Navalny, who was subjected to torture, inhuman and degrading treatment in violation of the judgments and interim measures of the European Court of Human Rights”¹³⁷. The Resolution on its resonant part calls on the President of the Russian Federation to conduct an independent investigation on Navalny’s death, liberate political prisoners and cease persecution of political dissidents. The Resolution also calls on members of the European Union and G7 to strengthen economic sanctions, continue to provide military and financial aid to Ukraine.

As we could notice, after the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine, the repressions dramatically increased. High level of censorship is not allowing civil society to openly express their disagreement, media outlets were either forced to follow the state narrative or physically relocated from the Russian Federation, transferring their activities online.

The historical background, therefore, can indicate the fact that Soviet powers used media limitations combined with persecutions of political disagreeing, which provoked the growing self-censorship in the society and lack of trust in civil institutions. The influence of these policies can be observed in modern Russia: the lack of freedom of speech and independent image of all support for the President within the population and repressions of oppositions with the shirking space of civil society indicates that the strategy used by the Soviet authorities continues to be implemented by the current powers.

As it can be seen, President Putin successfully achieved the preservation of his power by firstly, carrying out the necessary constitutional, legislative and administrative changes that allowed him to extend his own mandate and at the same time eliminate political rivals. The latter is carried out both through political persecutions of civil opposition and through

¹³⁷ Assembly debate on 17 April 2024 (11th sitting) (see Doc. 15966, report of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, rapporteur: Mr Emanuelis Zingeris). Text adopted by the Assembly on 17 April 2024 (11th sitting).

their marginalization. Marginalization is ensured by building a negative image of opposition forces in the state-controlled media and by limiting the influence of independent media. The impact of the conducted media policy will be examined closely in the next chapter.

PART II. ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA POLICY IN MODERN RUSSIA

Chapter 1. Law on the foreign agents as a legal mechanism to silence civil society

The law on foreign agents is, undoubtedly, one of the most efficient legal tools for the state to target undesirable organizations and individuals within the state, silencing dissidents. This chapter will analyze the roots of the law, its development and implementation. The main objection of the present chapter is the evaluation of the impact of foreign agent law on civil society in the Russian Federation, with the focus on NGO, independent media, and opposition members. This chapter argues that the law on foreign agents is an efficient mechanism to silence dissidents, creating reputational damage for the individuals and organizations recognized as such. To evaluate the real influence of the law, I will study the roots of the present legislation, its application, and influence on the media. I will as well analyze how the war in Ukraine changed the application of the foreign agent law.

1.1. The U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act as a prototype for Russian legislation

Foreign agent status has not accrued in Russian legislation specifically. The prototype of Russian legislation on foreign agents is Foreign Agent Registration Act originated in the United States of America on June 8th 1938 and signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. American law aimed to fight Nazi propaganda that was present in the media landscape of the United States due to the influence of Hitler's policies. Later, because of the changing nature of foreign presence in the political landscape of the USA, amendments were made in 1942, 1966, and 1995 to reorient the law away from controlling propaganda activities toward direct control over foreign advocacy and lobbying.

In the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), the definition of foreign agent was itself very concrete and well-written. Foreign agent, according to the act, is an individual (or a group of individuals) that acts "as an agent, representative, employee, or servant, otherwise

acts at the order, request, or under the direction or control of a ‘foreign principal’¹³⁸ and therefore conducts certain types of political activities within the territory of the United States. “Foreign principal”, mentioned in the article, is understood as a foreign state or foreign political party, a foreign citizen or company that conducts its activity fully under the foreign law or operating its business principally in a foreign country. According to the law, such actors should be registered at the Department of Justice as foreign agents to gain the opportunity to conduct the mentioned activities legally. This law is an example of a constant fight between the right of free speech and petition (that was traditionally preferred within the American law system) and minimization of foreign influence on the policy of the States. To solve this confrontation, the principle “not to prohibit but to control” was applied.

In 1966, with the new amendments, the definition of “foreign agent” also included activities not connected with propaganda but other activities directly influencing policy of the United States – lobbying. Legislation shifted from propaganda to advocacy activities with the recognition of “complete public disclosure by persons acting for or in the interests of foreign principals where their activities are political in nature or border on the political”¹³⁹ as a foreign agent’s main activity.

In December 1995, however, the USA accepted a new legislative act - Lobbying Disclosure Act, which specifically regulates lobbying activities. Therefore, entities or individuals who fulfill lobbying activities are required from 1995 to register under the mentioned act and not under the FARA.

Currently, a foreign principal agent is described by the law as “any person who acts as an agent, representative, employee, or servant, or any person who acts in any other capacity at the order, request, or under the direction or control, of a foreign principal or of a person any of whose activities are directly or indirectly supervised, directed, controlled, financed, or subsidized in whole or in major part by a foreign principal, and who directly or through any other person (i) engages within the United States in political activities for or in the

¹³⁸ “An Act to Require the Registration of Certain Persons Employed by Agencies to Disseminate Propaganda in the United States and for Other Purposes.” (the 75th United States Congress, June 9, 1938), <https://www.justice.gov/nsd-fara>.

¹³⁹ idem

interests of such foreign principal; (ii) acts within the United States as a public relations counsel, publicity agent, information-service employee(iii) solicits, collects, disburses, or dispenses contributions, loans, money, or other things of value for or in the interest of such foreign principal; or (iv) within the United States represents the interests of such foreign principal before any agency or official of the Government of the United States”¹⁴⁰ which is the broad notion. After the recognition by the Department of Justice of such an entity or individuals as a foreign principal agent, they are obliged to register in the Department within 10 days, depositing all necessary information, including the oral or written agreement with a foreign principal.

It should be mentioned that FARA contains some exceptions for individuals who are exemption from registration under the Department of Justice: diplomatic or consular officers and staff members, officials of foreign governments, private and non-political activities (such as funds), entities with religious, scholastic or scientific pursuits or individuals qualified to practice law representing foreign legal interested within United States. By that means, the law is limiting the number of actors to whom the law could be applied.

Even though FARA shifted from propaganda to other political activities, FARA still contains an obligation for foreign principal agents who promote political propaganda to label itself. Materials should contain the following statement: “This material is distributed by (name of registrant) on behalf of (name of foreign principal). Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.98”. This label should be present on all platforms that entity or individuals used to disseminate information, including social media or websites¹⁴¹. Russian legislators demanded foreign agents to label their content later on, inspired by the practice of the United States.

As a legislative act, FARA contains enforcement measures and penalty sanctions for those who do not comply with the law. In case of non-compliance, individuals or entities could be fined up to the 10 000 dollars or imprisoned up to five years.

¹⁴⁰ idem

¹⁴¹ Whitney K Novak, “Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA): A Legal Overview,” *Congressional Research Service*, September 3, 2023, 2.

Despite the broad definition of foreign principal agents, the agency's guidance defines six specific factors for the evaluation activities of an individual or an entity in doubt. These factors are: “(1) whether those requested to act were identified with specificity by the principal, (2) the specificity of the action requested, (3) whether the request is compensated or coerced, (4) whether the activities align with the person’s own interests, (5) whether the position advocated aligns with the person’s subjective viewpoint, and (6) the nature of the relationship between the person and the foreign principal”¹⁴². These factors are examined case-by-case by the officials. Such a detailed instruction combined with independent courts of appeal guarantee that the government will not use this legislative act as a repression tool for its political rivals. Currently, on the list of foreign principal agents are 505 active registrants, most of them are businesses or companies operating in foreign countries and conducting lobbying activities in the USA.

1.2. The application of the Foreign agent law in other countries

Some other states have similar legislation regulating foreign activities within the territory of the state. For example, in Austria there is Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act, accepted in 2018 in close collaboration with the Department of Justice of the United States. As the American law, it imposes an obligation of a foreign principle to register to be capable of chasing their political interests¹⁴³. We can note that Western countries adopting laws on foreign agents usually aim to regulate lobbying activity within their territories and not in any case - to restrict undesirable organizations, which emerged within the state territory, from participation in the political life of a state. We also do not observe a mass scope of application of this type of laws to civil society organizations or the pursuit to marginalize those groups.

Some Eastern European countries, on the other hand, tend to take civil society under control by accepting such laws. In Ukraine, for example, after Euromaidan, the law on

¹⁴² “Advisory Opinion Pursuant to 28 C.F.R. § 5.2” (U.S. Department of Justice, April 4, 2019), <https://www.justice.gov/nsd-fara/page/file/1180306/dl>.

¹⁴³ “Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act 2018. No. 63, 2018” (Australia, 20 2023).

foreign agents was introduced in January 2014. This law identified foreign agents as a “public association that receives funding from foreign states, foreign and international non-governmental organizations, as well as individuals who are not citizens of Ukraine, and participates in political activities on the territory of Ukraine”¹⁴⁴. The law aimed to limit the support of Ukrainian civil society organizations provided by international organizations and to monitor their activities. It was also justified by the fight against Russian influence on the Eastern part of Ukraine. Nevertheless, this law was revoked a year later, in February 2015, as it contradicted the principles of democracy and international human rights law.

In Hungary, from 2017, the Foreign Agents Registration Act came into force. Their law was an attempt to control non-governmental organizations (following the example of Russia) by accepting the Law No LXXVI of 2017 on the Transparency of Organizations. Organizations which were receiving support from abroad were obligated to register within the authorized body and to label themselves. However, the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in 2020 was accepted, which stated that Hungarian law does not comply with the international human rights law and restricts some important freedoms. A year after the decision of the European Court, the law was revoked. On the example of Hungary and Ukraine, we can see more clear interest to track financial flows benefiting civil organizations and to monitor them.

Russian law on foreign agents, in the beginning, was a response to the disagreement of Russian opposition with the elections in 2012 and amendments to the Russian Constitution made in 2011. It was mostly inspired by American FARA. Nevertheless, scholars could find more differences between these legal acts, especially in their practical application. As it was rightly noted by Samuel Rebo in his publication, “In Russia, the law’s implementation forced many civil society groups to shut down. In the US, provisions for freedom of association

¹⁴⁴ “The Law 721-VII On Amendments to the Law of Ukraine ‘On the Judiciary and the Status of Judges’ and Procedural Laws on Additional Measures to Protect the Safety of Citizens”,” *Bulletin of the Verkhovna Rada (VVR)*, n.d., No. 22, edition.

have protected civil society groups, preserving their role as critical intermediaries between the government and US citizens, permitting political debate and discourse”¹⁴⁵.

1.3. The implications of the Foreign agent law (2012-2018)

Definition of a foreign agent appeared in Russian legislation for the first time after the amendments made in Federal law “On non-commercial organizations” in 2012. According to these amendments, non-commercial organizations could be recognized as foreign agents if they were “engaged in political activities on the territory of Russia...in the organization and conduct of political actions in order to influence the decision-making by state bodies aimed at changing their state policy, as well as in shaping public opinion for these purposes”¹⁴⁶. Therefore, the law did not recognize a political activity committed in the field of science, culture, art, healthcare, charity, and other socially important activities, therefore repeating some provisions of FARA. Law also demanded such organizations to register in the Ministry of Justice (as an analogue to American’s Department of Justice) and to mark their messages or publication as information dismissed by foreign agents. Before the amendments made in 2014 the registration was voluntary, which led to the boycott among NGOs, which did not comply with the law. Consequently, 2 years later the registration became obligatory with the possibility to sanction NGOs in case of non-compliance.

The law implementation was selective from the very beginning: some NGOs reported more intense inspections and attention received from authorized bodies, meanwhile some of them were less subjected to control. Moreover, some organizations who were boycotting the registration under the Ministry of Justice, received submissions from the office of the prosecutor, obliging them to register. Among those– well-known human rights defending NGOs such as Memorial, Agora and Public Verdict, aiming to provide legal help for the victims of political persecution. Targeted non-governmental organizations reported receiving

¹⁴⁵ Samuel Rebo, “FARA in Focus: What Can Russia’s Foreign Agent Law Tell Us About America’s?,” *Journal of National Security Law & Policy*, July 28, 2021, 47.

¹⁴⁶ Federal Law No. 121-FZ of July 20, 2012 "On Amendments to certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the regulation of the activities of non-profit organizations performing the functions of a foreign agent" Archived copy dated February 9, 2013

official warnings (including, for example, the Committee against Tortures). Overall, 42 organizations received such warnings¹⁴⁷ and were obliged to register to be able to continue its activities within the territory of the country.

The most restricted legal amendment for civil society and political activists in Russia as well as human defenders was the introduction of the definition of mass media- foreign agent in November 2017. Firstly, the extension of the application of law to the media was seen as a response to actions of the United States, which included Russian media “Russia Today” in a register of foreign agents under the FARA. The “western threat” narrative once again became a justification for imposing legal limitations on activities of foreign entities or individuals operating in the Russian Federation. Both Russian political elite and state media tend to use this narrative when they aim to limit Russian citizens’ rights to freedom of speech and expression, freedom of associations or manifestations. As it was constantly repeated by Sergey Lavrov, the Minister of International Affairs of the Russian Federation, “collective West” imposes pseudo liberal values all over the world and uses human rights as an occasion to interfere within the national policy of other states. At the same time, legal limitations to freedom (and especially - amendments in foreign agent law) had another goal – to silence independent media outlets often working with foreign colleges to spread awareness on human rights violations committed in Russia. The newly introduced law also aimed to support propaganda’s vision of modern democratic and well-developed Russia where most citizens are highly satisfied with the current political order within the state.

New Federal law 327 “On Amendments to Articles 10.4 and 15.3 of the Federal Law "On Information, Information Technologies, and Information Protection" and Article 6 of the Law of the Russian Federation "On Mass Media, fixed once again a very vague and ambitious definition of foreign agents. According to the law, a foreign agent is a “legal entity registered in a foreign state or a foreign structure without the formation of a legal entity that distributes printed, audio, audiovisual and other messages and materials intended for an unlimited number of persons (foreign mass media) may be recognized by foreign mass media performing the functions of a foreign agent, regardless of their organizational and legal form

¹⁴⁷ idem

if they receive funds and (or) other property from foreign states, their state bodies, international and foreign organizations, foreign citizens, stateless persons or persons authorized by them and (or) from Russian legal entities receiving funds and (or) other property from these sources.”¹⁴⁸ Therefore, almost any of the independent mass media operating in Russia in 2017 could be recognized as a foreign agent with all following restrictions and limitations.

It should have been noticed that despite the legal limitations imposed on activities of media foreign agents, legislators morally damaged such outlets as well. Making it obligatory to indicate their status is a way to undermine the trust of the population for such mass media, to mark them as “alien” to the Russian Federation. This hypothesis has been proven by a survey conducted by the independent polling center Levada. As the survey demonstrated, almost half interviewed (45%) associated the notion of “foreign agent” with such terms as “spy, recruiter, foreign intelligence, double agent, infiltrator, recruited”¹⁴⁹. Overall, 57% of respondents perceived this notion negatively. Therefore, we can conclude that the mark of foreign agents indeed contributed to a stigmatization process in civil society.

New status also had negative consequences on the operational process of organizations. Alongside with the loss of some amount of financial aid due to the acquired status, non-possibility to participate in the state’s programs and to receive money from state budget, they faced non-judicial restrictions as, for example, undesired of popular main mass media to cover their activities. Evgenyi Mitrofanov, the head of the Novosibirsk Foundation for the Protection of Consumer Rights, indicated that “almost immediately after we were included in the list, all contacts with the media have stopped”¹⁵⁰

1.4. The implication of the Foreign agent law (2018-2022)

¹⁴⁸ idem

¹⁴⁹ “Foreign Agent,” *Levada-Center: Press Release*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2017/03/20/foreign-agent/>.

¹⁵⁰ Valentina Cherevatenko, Ksenia Egorova: “We Were Labeled a Foreign Agent for Peacekeeping,” June 13, 2017.

Legislators, however, were not satisfied with the level of state repressions. From 2018, it became possible to acknowledge as a foreign agent not only an organization of any form and legal status, but individuals “distributing printed, audio, audiovisual and other messages and materials intended for an unlimited number of people (including using the Internet information and telecommunications network)”¹⁵¹. The special register for individuals - foreign agents was created by the Ministry of Justice, which also seems extremely problematic.

According to the article 118 of the Russian Constitution, justice in the Russian Federation is carried out only by the court. The recognition of the status of foreign agents nevertheless is carried out by the Ministry of Justice, which – executive body, directly controlled by the government. Consequently, the guarantee of the independence of the proceedings is not respected. The legislation of protection of personal data also seems to be violated, as foreign agents are required to disclose information about their financial donors. From 2018, they are obliged to disclose not only direct foreign sponsors, but domestic organizations who are getting aid from abroad. Thus, trade secrets are not fully protected.

It can also be noted that the principle of presumption of innocence is not observed. This principle is a fundamental right, which is fixed in such acts as The UDHR (article 11), ICPSR (article 14) and other international acts. Therefore, it is necessary to oblige the Ministry of Justice to determine in whose interests the activities of the "foreign agent" media are carried out during the trial. The Ministry is also obliged to prove the conduct of "political activity" by individuals, as well as to demonstrate the connection between the presence of foreign funding and "political activity" exercised in the interests of a particular government or organization.

Moreover, this practice violates the principle of the prohibition of "double punishment". Double punishment is prohibited by the international human rights law. Often, journalists who carry out professional activities in the media - foreign agents, are also listed as individuals performing the functions of foreign agents. In mid-July 2021, the Prosecutor

¹⁵¹ “Federal Law No. 7-FZ of January 12, 1996 ‘On Non-Profit Organizations’ (with Amendments and Additions).”

General's Office of the Russian Federation declared the investigative publication "Project" as a foreign agent. On the same day, the Ministry of Justice introduced five of its employees to the list of individuals recognized as foreign agents.

Restrictions imposed on individuals – foreign agents do not limit themselves to the obligation to provide financial statements to authorized bodies. Every content, created by foreign agents should be accompanied by an inscription: “THIS MATERIAL (INFORMATION) WAS PRODUCED, DISTRIBUTED AND (OR) SENT BY A FOREIGN AGENT (NAME, SURNAME, FIRST NAME, PATRONYMIC (IF ANY) CONTAINED IN THE REGISTER OF FOREIGN AGENTS) OR IT CONCERNS THE ACTIVITIES OF A FOREIGN AGENT (NAME, SURNAME, FIRST NAME, PATRONYMIC (IF ANY) CONTAINED IN THE REGISTER OF FOREIGN AGENTS).” This requirement seems to pursue the goal of discreditation and breach of trust of citizens of the Russian Federation for individuals acknowledged as foreign agents. By doing this, current political leaders gain more legitimization among the population.

1.5. Criticism of the Foreign agent law

The criticism of Russian law on foreign agents was present in almost all international bodies, non-governmental organizations, and civil society organizations both in Russia and abroad and expressed by scholars. The European Court of Human Rights in its Case of Eco Defence and others against Russia in 2022 clearly stated that the mentioned law violates internationally recognized human rights and freedoms such as freedom of assembly and association. The Court also indicated that the law produces “incoherent results and engendered uncertainty among NGOs wishing to engage in civil society activities relating to, in particular, human rights or the protection of the environment or charity work”¹⁵². Thus, this law is itself a clear barrier for civil society members and organizations willing to actively participate in the decision-making process in Russia.

¹⁵² Ecodefence and others v. Russia, No. Applications nos. 9988/13 (European Court of Human Rights October 10, 2022).

The law was also criticized by United Nations Special reporters on freedom of associations, on the protection of freedom of speech and opinions and on the human rights defender situation in society. Special reporter mentioned, that the approved law is nothing but “an indispensable challenge for those who want to freely exercise their right to freedom of association”¹⁵³. It was also underlined that, “civil society organizations have the right to receive funding from abroad, just as governments have the right to receive international assistance”¹⁵⁴. Therefore, any restrictions on such rights contradict international human rights law.

Domestically, this law was criticized as by members of national organizations petitioning the European Court of Human Rights as by governmental bodies aimed to protect human rights within the Russian Federation. For example, The Presidential Council for Human Rights of the Russian Federation, created to prevent human rights violations, publicly called the law “completely redundant and legally meaningless”¹⁵⁵

The Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, in its turn, verified foreign agent law on its comparability with the Constitution. Court did not find any violations of the right to association and indicated that the law itself aimed to increase the level of transparency in the work of non-governmental organizations rather than to interfere in its activities. Constitutional Court underlined as well, that registration was obligatory to mark NGOs as “special entities involved in political activity,” and not in any case to “threat” to see them as a direct threat to the “public institutions”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ “Russia: The Deterioration of the Working Conditions of Non-Governmental Organizations and Human Rights Defenders Is Unacceptable,” *OHCHR: Press Release*, May 14, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/ru/press-releases/2013/05/russia-increasingly-hostile-environment-ngos-and-rights-defenders>.

¹⁵⁴ *idem*

¹⁵⁵ “Conclusion of the Council under the President of the Russian Federation for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights on the Draft Federal Law N109968-6” (Kremlin.ru, January 27, 2022), <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/assignments/orders/67660>.

¹⁵⁶ “Decision of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation of 08.04.2014 No. 10-P “On the Case of Verification of the Constitutionality of the Provisions of Paragraph 6 of Article 2 and Paragraph 7 of Article 32 of the Federal Law ‘On Non-Profit Organizations’, Part Six of Article 29 of the Federal Law ‘On Public Associations’ and Part 1 of Article 19.34 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation in Connection with the Complaints of the Commissioner for Human Rights in the Russian Federation, of the Kostroma Center for the Support of Public Initiatives Foundation” (Rossiiskaya gazeta newspaper, April 18, 2014).

Indeed, the law on foreign agents has some serious legal contradictions – as direct violation of the Russian Constitution, international principles, or human rights norms as we discussed above. Despite that, the law consists of logical contradictions. Firstly, a foreign agent is supposed to be an individual or organization under the control of a concrete foreign state, not someone who can even indirectly receive foreign funding. Such a definition can be applied in every organization, operating in the time of globalization which cooperates with other international entities or even individuals. Secondly, the status of foreign agent implies the existence of an agreement between a foreign state and an individual or organization acting in its interests. Existing law is worded so that authorities have no obligation to prove under the court the connection between a foreign state and an organization or an individual recognized as a foreign agent. The law does not elaborate criteria to properly define who potentially could be recognized as a foreign agent and who could not. All of this makes an application of the law potentially purely political.

These concerns were expressed by the European Parliament in its Resolution in 2019. The Resolution “expresses its concern at the risk of selective applicability of the law to target concrete individuals, particularly independent journalists and political opposition activists, owing to the lack of clear criteria, as well as legal uncertainties over the grounds and consequences of its application to ordinary citizens...”¹⁵⁷ Resolution also underlined the will of the Russian political elite to use this law to limit freedom of expression and freedom of information.

The government used this law to “punish” undesirable NGOs, cutting off their foreign financial activities as well as receiving aid from donors. At the same time, the law encouraged national NGOs to cooperate more with the government to apply for financial grants – what was called “duality of coercion” by Daucé in her research¹⁵⁸. The law also provided the possibility to be removed from the list of NGOs which no longer receive foreign aid. This

¹⁵⁷ “European Parliament Resolution of 19 December 2019 on the Russian ‘Foreign Agents’ Law” (Official Journal of the European Union, December 19, 2019), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019IP0108>.

¹⁵⁸ Françoise Daucé, “The Duality of Coercion in Russia: Cracking Down on ‘Foreign Agents’.”, *The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 23 (2015): 57–75.

pushed them to participate in governmental programs, meaning that they will be subjected to self-censorship to not to lose money.

After these amendments, made from 2013 to 2021, about 200 organizations were recognized as foreign agents, 27 of them were forced to stop their activities due to the difficulties connected with restrictions and limitations imposed by the law. Most of them relate to opposition activities in Russia one way or another. It could be noticed, that among organizations recognized foreign agents, such socially significant organizations as human rights defending "International Memorial", "Levada Center", "Violence.no" and Meduza media – from where the present statistic was taken¹⁵⁹.

According to the independent media outlet Deutsche Welle, out of 200 non-governmental organizations recognized as "foreign agents" in Russia from 2013 to 2021, 45 are stopped performing their activity due to the acquired status, 56 were voluntary self-dissolute, 16 were forcibly liquidated by the court decision, 8 of them - excluded from the Unified State Register of Legal Entities and 74 remained still¹⁶⁰. From the organizations remaining in the Unified State Register, 15 connect their activities primarily with human rights, 14 operate in the field of civic education, 8 conduct actions connected with HIV control, 7 are concerned about media support, another 7 work with social assistance for those in need and 23 left operate in other different domains.

1.6. The impact of the Foreign agent law on media performance

Media outlets were also subjected to state restrictions in response to their active role in the coverage of crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine. Overall, 103 mass media were recognized as foreign agents by the end of 2021. Some of the media outlets were forced to relocate abroad to be able to continue its activities. For example, the independent

¹⁵⁹ "How Many 'Foreign Agents' Are There in Russia? Has Anyone Gotten Rid of This Status? Why Are Organizations Declared 'Undesirable'?", *Meduza*, January 10, 2021, <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/10/01/skolko-v-rossii-inoagentov-izbavilsya-li-kto-to-ot-etogo-statusa-a-zachto-organizatsii-ob-yavlyayut-nezhelatelnymi>.

¹⁶⁰ "In Russia, the Laboratory of Social Sciences Is Recognized as a 'Foreign Agent,'" *Deutsche Welle*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-rossii-laboratorija-socialnyh-nauk-priznana-inoagentom/a-58009984>.

TV channel Dozhd acquired a Dutch broadcast license in Amsterdam. As it was noted by the head of RSF Eastern Europe and Central Asia, (Reporters Without Borders), TV Dozhd is one of the few independent channels with Russian journalists broadcasting to the Russian-speaking public. Other popular independent media also faced restrictions. In March 2022, at the request of the Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation, Roskomnadzor limited access to the radio station Echo information resources. The decision was explained by the purposeful and systematic publication of deliberately false information about the actions of the Russian military as part of a special operation to protect the Donbass¹⁶¹. Echo was one of the most popular media in Russia: according to the data, in 2021, the audience in Moscow reached 840 thousand, and about 1,8 million in all regions. In 2021, Echo became the most popular radio station in Moscow. After the dictions of powers to prohibit broadcasting of the channel in Russia, the media outlet transferred its activities online. Internet radio is still operating, the main platform for the distribution of content is the YouTube Channel “Zhivoi Gvozd”, which repeats the major part of ex-Echo projects.

Restrictions imposed by the law significantly complicated the lives of those who fell under the law. Attempts to influence the legislators and to bring up the Foreign agent law in line with international human rights standards were made by some politically active opponents of the current regime. In 2021, for example, the liberal political party “Yabloko” and the human rights defending organization “OVD-Info” jointly prepared a bill, proposing to exclude from Russian legislation the notion of “foreign agents”, stating that is goes against some provisions of Russian Constitution as well as international law. It was the most radical proposition.

After the attempt to completely repeal the current law, a new initiative aiming to amend foreign agent regulation was gathered around propositions made by political parties “Fair Russia” and “New People” together with the Council of Human Rights. The Commission on Amendments demanded from legislators to recognize organizations or citizens as foreign agents only by court decision at the request of the Ministry of Justice so

¹⁶¹ “The Websites of Ekho Moskvyy and Dozhd Were Blocked in Russia,” *Meduza*, January 3, 2022, <https://meduza.io/news/2022/03/01/genprokuratura-rf-potrebovala-zablokirovat-sayty-eha-moskvyy-i-dozhdya>.

that the principle of presumption of innocence will be respected. Moreover, the Commission indicated that the Ministry of Justice should firstly make an official warning, which can be potentially appealed. Political party "Fair Russia " also made a proposition to define the sum of money necessarily received from a foreign source for an entity or an individual to be considered as a foreign agent.

1.7. Foreign agent law after the Russian invasion in Ukraine

The law evolved after the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2022. The position of individuals recognized as foreign agents was complicated by new restrictions posed by the law. The list of public actions inaccessible for foreign agents is broad – in fact, foreign agents lost the right to active civic participation in the political life of the state. Foreign agents cannot perform their duties in positions in public authorities, to participate in the activities of commissions, committees, advisory, expert and other bodies formed under public authorities, to be allowed to nominate candidates to the public supervisory commission of public associations, to conduct an independent anti-corruption examination of regulatory legal acts, to carry out activities that promote or hinder the nomination of candidates, lists of candidates, the election of registered candidates, to put forward the initiative of holding a referendum and holding a referendum, to achieve a certain result in elections, referendums, as well as in other forms to participate in election campaigns, referendum campaigns. Foreign agents are as well prohibited from making donations to candidates' election funds, being the organizer of public events, and donating to a political party and its regional branches. Besides, foreign agents have no right "to carry out educational activities in relation to minors and (or) pedagogical activities in state and municipal educational organizations, to produce information products for minors."¹⁶² Basically, individuals who acquired the status of foreign agent were excluded from any active participation in the life of civil society in the territory of the Russian Federation.

¹⁶² "Federal Law No. 255-FZ of July 22, 2022 'On Control over the Activities of Persons under Foreign Influence.'"

The prohibition of using an individual's passive electorate rights is an obvious example of the political use of foreign agent law tools to prevent opposition members from participating in electoral races. It became evident after the recognition of non-governmental organization “Golos” (“The Voice”) - which is an electoral monitoring independent organization that provides services for independent observers for presidential and parliamentary elections in Russia - as a foreign agent. “Golos” became one of the first organizations recognized as such after the acceptance of the 2012 law. The organization had a leading role in monitoring violations of electoral legislations during the 2011 presidential elections and media coverage of recorded frauds. After 2022, “Golos” lost the opportunity to send observers to the elections.

The foreign agent status was used against dissidents more actively after the war started. On the list of individuals recognized as foreign agents 262 individuals, 185 of which were listed after the start of Russian invasion in Ukraine. A lot of organizations could not continue their activity considering restrictions imposed by the law, lack of international donors and loss of trust from Russia citizens - 94 organizations were liquidated due to their status of foreign agents from 2022 to 2024¹⁶³. By December 2nd, 2022, 18% of Russian citizens recognized by empowered authorities as "foreign agents" had been pursued under criminal cases (most often under new articles concerning "fake news"). The fact of belonging to the marginalized by the state group of “foreign agents” is often perceived as a tightening factor by the court in the case when an individual is suspected of committing crimes against the state’s security (such as terrorism, extremist, discreditation of army forces, for example).

Recently, on the 6th May 2024, the State Duma voted a new law, which prohibits individuals recognized as foreign agents from participating in elections on all levels of the governance: federal, regional, and local. According to the amendments to the law ““On Control over the Activities of Persons Under Foreign Influence”, any candidate for the

¹⁶³ “List of Foreign and International Non-Governmental Organizations Whose Activities Are Recognized as Undesirable on the Territory of the Russian Federation.”

elections must "terminate the status of a foreign agent"¹⁶⁴ in case he is willing to participate in elections in any organ of federal, regional, or local powers. In case if a candidate will be still recognized by the Ministry of Justice as a foreign agent on the day when providing the necessary documents to be registered as a candidate, it will be the justified basis for the court to cancel the registration.

Other amendments which were introduced by the law "On the Status of a Senator of the Russian Federation and the Status of a Deputy of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation" stated, that any deputy or senator recognized as foreign agents will be deprived of its status immediately, before the expiration of powers. Individuals who were recognized as foreign agents before the accepted law, will have 180 days to be excluded from the List of foreign agents. In case they will not succeed to do so, they will be denied their status after 180 days.

Therefore, elected deputies or senators will be denied their political immunity and independence. Consequently, the latest amendments can be interpreted not even as an increasing pressure on civil society, but as a reset of the electoral system of the Russian Federation. Any freely elected by the population candidate, opposed to the government, can be, according to these laws, recognized by the state-controlled Ministry of Justice as a foreign agent and excluded from the political landscape. Currently, in the State Duma there are deputies holding the status of foreign agents. For example, deputy of the liberal political party "Yabloko" Daria Besedina, deputy Yevgeny Stupin from the Communist party and the deputy from "Fair Russia"- Mikhail Timonov (who left Russia after the start of the war). There is a discussion on deprivation of the mandate of Timonov which is held in the State Duma.

Amendments affected not only deputies, but the whole participants of the electoral system. From now on, both foreign agents and individuals included in the Register of extremists and terrorists cannot be registered as observers during the elections. They are

¹⁶⁴ "Federal Law of May 15, 2024 "On Amendments to the Federal Law 'On Basic Guarantees of Electoral Rights and the Right to Participate in a Referendum of Citizens of the Russian Federation' and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation"," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, May 15, 2024.

deprived of the possibility to be authorized representatives of candidates or their proxies as well. As a direct consequence, some civil society representatives were deprived of their active electoral rights and the opportunity to actively be involved in the electoral process. The electoral process in the Russian Federation became totally formal.

So far, implementation of the foreign agent law seems to be “an aggressive form of the Kremlin’s “co-optation” of civil society and an attempt to silence human rights discourse in the country”¹⁶⁵, as it was underlined by Mercedes Malcomson. The arbitrary character of implementation of the law is evident: in the absence of well-defined criteria of recognition, vague definition of the notion itself, the absence of definition of “political activity” and a leadership role in the application of the law of executive power (who is under the state’s full control), current legislation is a powerful tool for a state to control civil society and to keep out of discussion those important topics which can possibly weaken public’s support for a President. The law also contributes to the marginalization of civil society organizations and individuals who have acquired the status of a foreign agent and complicates their work, in some cases, making it impossible for them to continue their activities within the Russian Federation.

¹⁶⁵ Mercedes Malcomson, “‘So Whose Agents Are We?’ Defining (International) Human Rights in the Shadow of the ‘Foreign Agents’ Law in Russia.,” *Birkbeck Law Review* 7 (1) (2020).

Chapter 2. Judicial tools to control civil society: amendments to the Administrative and Criminal codes

To successfully implement restrictive media policies, the legislator uses administrative and criminal branches of law to criminalize actions, which go against the interests of the state, especially with the start of the war in Ukraine. This chapter will analyze the changes of administrative and criminal legislation with the objective to identify how these changes contributed to the policy of the state, making civil society actors adjust their behavior so as not to be subjected to repression. The present chapter argues that the presented judicial tool limits the safe space for public discussion and dissident opinion in the media and on the Internet, creating an image of universal consent with the policy of the state and creating a fear of possible persecutions. To talk about this in detail, I will address the practice of implementation of the new amendments, its impact on the work of the media and on the freedom of expression in particular.

2.1. Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and their implementation

Legal amendments made to the foreign agent law were destined not only to influence civil society in Russia, but to make it visibly more conformist to the current political power. With the start of full-scale invasion in Ukraine, it became more important for the political elite to control people's opinions and more precisely – their expression, which could destabilize the situation in the country. Censorship became more visible than ever. The word “war” itself was considered out of use – instead, people should define military actions conducted by Russian army forces in Ukraine as a “special military operation”, as it was proclaimed by governmental authorities since the start of invasion.

To stop the spread of information which contradicts the official version of the government, necessary amendments in existing laws were made. As a result, new crimes and delicts were included in Administrative and Criminal codes. The main aim of the authorities was to, firstly, silence political dissidents, who demanded peaceful resolution of the conflict

in Russia, and secondly, to control the content spreading on social media and television. This aim was successfully achieved by sanctioning those who shared information different from the one given by public authorities. State censorship was created around military actions, which keeps the society under the “right” informational bubble.

New amendments were made in the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation after the start of the special military operation, aiming to criminalize any possible public opposition to the ongoing invasion. The new article 208.3 was added, criminalizing “public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, maintain international peace and security, exercise their powers by the state bodies of the Russian Federation, assist volunteer formations, organizations or persons in performing tasks assigned to the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation or national guard troops of the Russian Federation”¹⁶⁶. The content and forms of “discreditation” were not defined by the legislator, leaving the ground for law enforcement agents to define what contains an act of discreditation and what does not. This led the government to legally persecute dissidents.

According to Russian lawyer and human rights defender Pavel Chikov, Russian courts since the beginning of the war have considered about 3,500 cases under the article on “discrediting” of the Russian army. In almost all cases, their defendants were found guilty and sent to prison¹⁶⁷. Independent experts of United Nations expressed their concerns with the situation in Russia, mentioning that ““The decision to deny constitutional protection of the right to freedom of expression is a new low point in the process of suppressing freedom of speech and the free flow of information”¹⁶⁸ and demanding from Russian powers to revoke the law.

¹⁶⁶ “Federal Law No. 260-FZ of July 14, 2022 ‘On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation.’”

¹⁶⁷ “Courts in the Russian Federation Considered 3.5 Thousand Cases of ‘Discrediting’ the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 24, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ru/cikov-sudy-v-rf-rassmotreli-35-tysaci-del-o-diskreditacii-vs-rf/a-62911364>.

¹⁶⁸ “UN Experts Call on Russian Authorities to Repeal the Law on Discrediting the Army,” *United Nation: Press Release*, August 22, 2023, <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2023/08/1444137>.

The same pattern we can see in relation to the new added article 207.3 “Public dissemination, under the guise of reliable reports, of deliberately false information containing data on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, as well as containing data on the execution by state bodies of the Russian Federation outside the territory of Russia for the specified purposes”¹⁶⁹. With the active presence of the government in cyberspace, increased control over the social media, it is evident that any of the critical opinions on social media or even said in a face-to-face conversation (counting the practice of denunciation), could become a valid ground for the imprisonment. Since the beginning of 2022, even defining military actions of the Russian army, referring to the notion of a “war” could be considered as an act of discreditation, as we could see in legal practice.

A striking example of criminal persecutions of citizens which used media platforms to spread awareness on military crimes committed by the Russian Federation in Ukraine is the criminal case against Anna Bazhutova. Anna is a well-known streamer on the platform Twitch. In April 2022, she dedicated multiple streams to the exposure of humanitarian law violations committed by the Russian army on the territory of Ukraine. More specifically, violations committed in the city of Bucha where Russian forces killed more than 300 civilians. She was charged under the article of “discreditation” and finds herself in pretrial detention since August 2023¹⁷⁰. Overall, in 2022, according to the official statistics of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, two citizens were sentenced to the prison term of 14 Russian citizens condemned under this article¹⁷¹.

To deprive the civil society of the possibility to publicly express their support of the accusation of the Russian Federation of the commitment of war crimes or violations of the international law, some new crimes were elaborated. This was a response to the reactions of the international community. Due to the practice of imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation and political elites in Russia, “public calls to carry out activities against the

¹⁶⁹ “Federal Law No. 260-FZ of July 14, 2022 ‘On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation.’”

¹⁷⁰ “We Consider Streamer Anna Bazhutova (YokoBovich) a Political Prisoner,” *Memorial*, October 19, 2023, <https://memopzk.org/news-eng/we-consider-streamer-anna-bazhutova-yokobovich-a-political-prisoner/>.

¹⁷¹ “Review of Judicial Practice of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation No 3” (Presidium of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, December 21, 2022), <https://vsrf.ru/documents/practice/31943/>.

security of the State” have been criminalized. After the decision of the International Criminal Court on March 17th 2022 to issue an arrest warrant against President Putin and the Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova for committing a war crime in the form of illegal deportation of children from the occupied regions of Ukraine to Russia, it became criminally punishable for citizens to assist in the execution of decisions of international organizations in which the Russian Federation does not participate, or foreign government agencies. The assistance can be expressed by publishing posts on social media in support of decisions of international courts, for example. Even a repost made by a citizen could be qualified as a sign of support.

In addition to the elaboration of new crimes, some amendments to the existing articles of the Criminal Code were made. The article 284.1, which before just prohibited to carry out the activities of “a foreign or international non-governmental organization, in respect of which a decision has been made to recognize its activities as undesirable in the territory of the Russian Federation”¹⁷² after 2022 prohibit the participation in such organizations. The money collection to provide financial support and secure the operation of an undesirable organization also has been criminalized.

Another new article 280.4 added to the Criminal Code criminalized “public calls to carry out activities directed against the security of the Russian Federation, or to prevent the authorities and their officials from exercising their powers to ensure the security of the Russian Federation”¹⁷³. This article, similar to others, contributed to the consolidation of state censorship in Russia.

New articles were actively applied by law enforcement agents since its acceptance. According to the collected data, by the end of 2023, 134 criminal cases have been opened under articles on calls to extremism, terrorism and anti-state activities. The foundations of the open cases were as follows: statements about military attacks on Krimski bridge and Belgorod region (Bridge of Crimea), calls for sabotage of mobilization, statements about

¹⁷² “Federal Law No. 260-FZ of July 14, 2022 ‘On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation.’”

¹⁷³ idem

arson of administrative buildings or other statements connected to the war in Ukraine. Between citizens who became victims of persecutions under the articles are Oleg Kuvaev, the author of the animated series Masyanya, Kazan blogger Parvinakhan Abuzarova and Moscow poets involved in the Mayakovsky case – the case of poets who were declaring anti-war poems, agitating citizens not to participate in the war. This case is also representing interests in the wording.

According to the closed court decision, which was kindly provided to me by the defenders of one of the accused, the court accused poets of “inciting hatred or enmity, as well as humiliations of human dignity, committed in public”¹⁷⁴. The sentence stated that by public declaration of poems with an anti-war narrative “contained derogatory statements towards persons who share the position of the authorities on the need for the participation of citizens in a special military operation, including those participating in this operation voluntarily and defending their antinationalist ideals of the residents of the above-mentioned areas”¹⁷⁵. According to the court, such poems “indicate the image of the latter as stupid, weak-willed, lacking the ability for independent analysis, mindlessly submitting to the policies of the President of the Russian Federation of the state of people, while the official information flow broadcast in this state contains unreliable facts”¹⁷⁶. To prove the political positions of the accused, they cited, for example, the results of a search in an apartment with books with anti-government content or badges with opposition signs or the flag of Ukraine. The court pointed out the public danger of the act and did not consider the health factors of the defendants. Egor Shtobov was sentenced to 5 years and 6 months of imprisonment in a general-regime correctional colony, Anton Kabardin got years in a general-regime correctional colony in the end.

All mentioned legislative innovations represent, in fact, state censorship. Any version of events happening in the context of Russian occupation in Ukraine, expressed by any possible means, should not contradict the “official” version provided by the Kremlin. The

¹⁷⁴ Court’s sentence of the Tverskoy District Court of Moscow (Tverskoy District Court December 28, 2023).

¹⁷⁵ *idem*

¹⁷⁶ *idem*

narrative of the “savior” of the popular republic’s rights of self-identification is the only one truth accepted by authorities. Dissident media and individuals became voiceless after all amendments were made, gripped by the fear of possible criminal responsibility and repressions.

2.2. Amendments to the Administrative Code of conduct in the Russian Federation and their implementation

But the criminal procedure can be very long and not convenient for mass repressions. With the purpose to legislatively regulate actions similar to those described by the Criminal Code, but not containing elements of a crime, similar articles were added in the Administrative code of conduct of the Russian Federation in 2022. This has significantly simplified the procedure of sentencing. For example, article 20.3.3 (public actions aimed at discreditation army forces of the Russian Federation), article 20.3.4 (call for the introduction of restrictive measures against the Russian Federation, citizens of the Russian Federation or Russian legal entities) were elaborated. The administrative proceeding, as it was mentioned before, is much quicker and more effective to affect more mass scope of people¹⁷⁷.

Administrative responsibility is also preferable for the legislator as, according to the law, it comes both for individuals and for organizations – as NGOs or media outlets. If someone was brought to administrative responsibility twice, in the case of repeated violations, an individual can be charged under the Criminal Code, according to the amendments made in 2022. This is an effective tool for silencing civil society members who are using social media as a platform for expressing their concerns or non-approval of military actions.

Setting a goal to stop the spread of information produced by media which activity is not approved by the state, civil servants use all existing tools. Amendments were made in the Administrative code of Conduct, sanctioning participation in a foreign or international non-governmental organization, the activity of which recognized as undesirable. Analyzing the

¹⁷⁷ “Federal Law No. 195-FZ ‘The Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offenses.’”

practice of application of the law, we can see that it was directed against journalists and content creators working on dissident media. For example, the case was opened against journalist Valery Nechay under the article 20.33 prohibiting participation in undesirable organizations. The foundation of the case is the repost of the post of “Meduza” (Russian independent media which was recognized as undesirable by General Prosecutor in January 2023) made on social media. The Court in its sentence indicated that Valery “posted on his page on the social network information materials of a foreign organization registered in the Republic of Latvia, as well as in Ukraine, whose activities are recognized as undesirable in the territory of the Russian Federation”¹⁷⁸. From the presented wording, we can see that courts make no distinction between “posting” (writing on one’s own post published in social media) and “reposting” (sharing someone’s publication).

2.3. Statistical data on the implementation of new amendments

The main target of the adopted laws and amendments are those members of civil society who openly express in one or another way (often using social media) their political position. Antiwar positions became the bulk of motivated criminal cases in Russia for 2022-2023. Majority of them were initiated based on expressed antiwar statements – 166 cases from 317 belong to this category in 69 regions of Russian Federation, according to the statistics collected by the human rights defending organization OVD-Info. Overall, from all criminal cases for different expression of personal antiwar positions, 784 citizens were persecuted by the end of December 2023¹⁷⁹.

One of the most well-known cases is the case of 33-year-old artist Alexandra Skochilenko. She was sentenced to seven years in a penal colony under the case of "fakes" about the Russian army. In March 2022, she replaced several price tags at the grocery store in Saint-Petersburg with anti-war stickers. The court charged her under the article 207.3 of

¹⁷⁸ “An Administrative Case Was Opened against Journalist Valery Nechay for Reposting Meduza Materials. The Reason Is a Repost of an Interview with the Creator of ‘Masyanya’ Oleg Kuvaev,” *Meduza*, May 16, 2023, <https://meduza.io/news/2023/05/26/v-rossii-zaveli-pervoe-delo-po-administrativnoy-statii-za-repost-materialov-meduzy-ego-figurant-zhurnalist-valeriy-nechay>.

¹⁷⁹ “Repression in Russia in 2023. OVD-Info Overview.”

the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation on "dissemination of knowingly false information" motivated by "political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred". As it was stated in the motivational part of the sentence of Vasilievsky District Court of St. Petersburg dated November 16, 2023, she “reads independent news outlets such as Bumaga, Meduza, Current Time, CNN, and BBC, which contain information that differs from that coming from the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation”¹⁸⁰. We can therefore assume that any information which differs from the information published by official Russian sources can be recognized as fake information.

Arguments used by the Court in this sentence are also interesting. Evaluating the information written on the price tags, the Court indicated that it “has a persuasive orientation, the audience, having read the text, understands that the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation have carried out criminal actions”¹⁸¹. Moreover, this information, according to the Court, “contains a negative assessment, forms a negative attitude towards the activities of the President”¹⁸². The negative evaluation of the actions of the President, who is the head of army forces, can be directed against the army of the Russian Federation during the special military operation and therefore represents an increased public danger. In its sentence, the Court also indicated that Alexandra is the representative of the feminist movement of the protest regiment "Eighth Initiative Group", of a radical nature. She participated in uncoordinated actions with the demonstration of posters, flags, and distribution of campaign materials. This wording aims to underlie one more time the dissident opinion of the accused. It is important to note that the Court's sentence, quoted above (like other sentences imposed by courts under articles of discreditation, extremism or other political grounds related to repressions against dissidents) is closed and therefore cannot be posted on official judicial sources or bases. This sentence was provided by Nadezhda Slolichenko – the mother of accused Alexandra.

¹⁸⁰ Court’s sentence № 1-82/2023, (Vasilievsky district Court of St. Petersburg, November 16, 2023).

¹⁸¹ *Idem*

¹⁸² *idem*

We can also note the most high-profile case against the youth movement “Vesna” (“Spring”). “Vesna” is a youth movement of non-indifferent citizens who share liberal and democratic values. The movement is also a part of the International Federation of Liberal Youth and European Liberal Youth. With the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, members of Vesna were actively organizing antiwar manifestations and demonstrations showing their solidarity to Ukraine. The members of “Vesna” were sued under article 239 of the Criminal Code (creation of a non-profit organization that infringes on the personality and rights of citizens) in May 2022. Basmany court accused members of the movement of “disagreeing with the political decisions of the country's leadership, including the decision to conduct a special military operation, as they led a non-profit organization whose activities are associated with inciting citizens to commit unlawful acts”¹⁸³. This wording is indicating the political character of the sentence – “Vesna” members are accused of expressing their non-approval if the state’s policy and act upon their conviction.

Speaking about administrative cases, the statistically collected data mentions about 2830 cases which have been brought under the court under the article 20.3.3. (public actions aimed to discredit Russian army forces) to the end of 2023. From these, 2113 were sentenced guilty and administrative sanctions were applied.

It is also extremely interesting to look at the statistics of sentences passed by regions of the Russian Federation. The biggest number of administrative sanctions were applied to the citizens of the annexed Crimea – 327 sentences. Second place took the capital – Moscow with 284 cases. In the Krasnodar region, where traditionally most Ukrainians were located within Russian territory, 144 cases were initiated in Saint-Petersburg – 143¹⁸⁴.

It was also mentioned in the OVD-Info review on repressions, that the number of cases initiated under the article of Administrative code was less than in 2022. The possible explanation could be the fact that in 2022, considering the number of demonstrations held in different cities of Russia, it was easier for the law enforcement agents to massively file cases

¹⁸³ “Courts of General Jurisdiction of the City of Moscow: Official Channel.” Accessed May 26, 2002. <https://t.me/moscowcourts>.

¹⁸⁴ “Repressions in Russia in 2022.”

against participants. Another reason is the level of censorship, which resulted in increased caution of social media users. Dissidents refused to publish their opinions under the threat of judicial sanctions on the part of law enforcement agents.

We can note the tendency to tougher punishment applied to the antiwar cases. More real prison terms were appointed by the Court in 2023 than in 2022. Moreover, the length of the mentioned prison terms has increased. According to the collected data, only two people were sentenced to a term which is less than one year. Overall, 12 citizens got prison terms from one to two years, 21 – from two to three years, 13 – to four years. The biggest number of sentences – 38 – punished citizens with seven years of prison term, the other 26 – from seven to ten years in prison. From ten to fifteen years got 10 Russian citizens¹⁸⁵.

2.4. The persecution of media under the amended Criminal and Administrative codes

Persecutions of journalists continued as well. Independent media outlets and journalists have become the target of the state's repression machine – especially those of them who openly spoke about Russian war crimes in Ukraine. By the end of 2023, at least 43 journalists faced criminal accusations due to their expressed anti-war position. An example of this – correspondent of RusNews Mariya Ponomarenko who published information about the destruction of the drama theater in Mariupol by Russian military forces. She was sentenced to 6 years of prison term. Besides, Russian authorities persecuted Ukrainian journalists, who covered Russian atrocities in the press. They were sentenced to prison in absentia. Some Russian citizens who left the territory of the state after the war were also sentenced in their absence – as the independent military investigator Ruslan Leviev, for example.

Not only journalists, who published information in official media outlets were persecuted by the state. More than 18 journalists faced repression after publications in their personal social media accounts. Censorship became more ubiquitous: the influence of well-

¹⁸⁵ “Repression in Russia in 2023. OVD-Info Overview.”

known journalists who gained authority within civil society were reduced by “foreign agent” practices as well as by legal censorship. So-called “anti-war censorship” (articles on fake information and discreditation of Russian army) compose more than 60 percent of the foundations for persecution of journalists. Other foundations are: justification of terrorism, slander.

2.5. New amendments as a tool to curtail the freedom of expression

The freedom of expression became non-existent in Russia since the beginning of the war due to the active application of new articles and imputation of already existed in Russian criminal legislation crimes to dissidents. The practice of criminal cases under the articles of propaganda or justification of terrorism or extremism after statements in social media became more present in Russian. Not only statements in connection with the military action in Ukraine could be a foundation for the mentioned claims – any negative statement against government officials or people close to President Putin could lead to criminal charges. For example, 17-years-old citizens of Russia were accused of the call for terrorism after the joke on Vladimir Putin made on the comment section of the popular Russian social media “Vkontakte” after the drone attack on the Kremlin¹⁸⁶.

Another possible foundation to the persecution of dissidents is the usage of prohibited symbols. It should be mentioned that criminal cases under this article could be open just in case of the already issued administrative protocols under an identical article of Administrative Code of conduct. Prohibited symbols include the white-blue-white flag (as a symbol of non-imperialist, democratic and free Russia), the letter “H” (as a sign of support of Alexey Navalny) or any Nazi symbols (even contained in the historian books).

Speaking of the prohibition of Nazi symbols, it should be mentioned that another broadly used for the aim of persecution is the article on the rehabilitation of Nazism and desecration of symbols of military glory. 45 cases opened under the article of rehabilitation

¹⁸⁶ “Society Has Been Placed in Conditions under Which It Is Impossible to Speak out Safely,” *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, July 27, 2023, <https://novyagazeta.eu/articles/2023/07/27/zakonodatelstvo-bez-krasnykh-linii>.

of Nazism had a political nature under the accusations – most of the cases were due to the activities near the monuments of Internal Fire which law enforcement agents classified as inappropriate.

Features of criminal proceedings under the mentioned articles violate the rights of citizens to open and public trial. Almost all trials are closed for the press and for other citizens due to the “nature of accusations”. The sentences which usually could be found on different bases of judicial sentences are not published. The only way to spread the information about political prisoners is to publish the necessary information on social media and independent online media outlets (which is mostly operating outside of Russia due to the new legislation and pressure from the state).

We can admit that the state successfully used the legislative tools at its disposal to pressure civil society and to create a military censorship with new laws that mark some content created by media, journalists, or civil society members as potentially dangerous and harmful for the public safety and to silence dissidents.

Chapter 3. Extra-judicial tools to control civil society

Alongside with judicial tools, Russia authorities use non-judicial ones as well to somehow influence, control, or oppress civil society and to establish some sort of “politically acceptable” behavior. State creates non-written rules of political communication between citizens and the government, non-compliance with which is judged by society and usually has some consequences for civil society members. The following chapter will focus on the studying of possible extra-judicial tools and its impact on civil society in Russia. The main objective of the following chapter is, therefore, is an analysis of extra-judicial practices applied to the civil society in Russia and an evaluation of its efficiency. The chapter’s main argument is that the application of such methods contributes to the limitation of speech and expression in Russia making the work of independent media in Russia impossible. It creates a ground for the success of propaganda. I will start with the historical context of the use of extra-judicial practices, continuing with its current methods. I will pay attention to the regional specificities of such practices, focusing on apology videos and ending with the extra-judicial methods of information control.

3.1. Historical context of extra-judicial practices in Russia

Pressure practices which are not followed by a necessary legal procedure called extrajudicial. Such practices are frequently used within the territory of Russia. One of the possible reasons for the popularity of these methods of control over civil society is the CSS experience of Vladimir. Described tools were common in the Committee. Putin worked in CSS for 16 years as a foreign intelligence officer. It can be noted that SCC was considered as a military institution. Nevertheless, it was actively involved in the civil sector mainly with the aim to eliminate political rivals of party elites or to stop criticism of political decisions made by the government.

As it was stated in the Central Intelligence Agency report on the “Soviet Use of assassination and kidnapping,” the SCC resorted to “abduction and murder to combat what

are considered to be actual or potential threats to the Soviet regime”¹⁸⁷. These methods were well known locally as “executive action” or “liquid affairs” (Mokryye Dela – in Russian). They were practiced by the organization both within the USSR and abroad, directed against both Soviet and foreign citizens. The influence of past CSS practices can be found nowadays, in modern Russia, when governmental authorities use extrajudicial methods.

3.2. Current Extrajudicial Methods of Pressure in the Russian Federation

Criminal (illegal methods of impact on activists to stop their activities such as threats, elimination of property or murder) and departmental (conducting same practices with the use of powers of both law enforcement agencies and a wide variety of officials as the expulsion of unwanted foreigners with the help of the Federal Security Bureau, pressure on business, dismissals) practices were common. Such practices represent a more mobile, quick, and sometimes more effective mode to put pressure on civil society without unnecessary bureaucratic procedures. Such practices do not leave any material evidence of persecutions. Therefore, it is more difficult to collect data on extrajudicial repressions. As it was stated in OVD-Info report on “Political repression in Russia in 2011-2014: extrajudicial persecution”, “the classification of extrajudicial harassment is complicated by difficulties in identifying the initiator of the pressure”¹⁸⁸ between a lot of departmental structures, rivaling with each other for resources and political superiority.

Attacks on activists became the most widespread form of pressure. According to the accessible data, in less than 9 months of 2014, at least 42 attacks occurred, during which about 100 civil and political activists, journalists, environmentalists, urban defenders, politicians, trade union leaders and gay activists were injured. At least 15 journalists were harmed during 2014 while accomplishing their professional activities and spreading publicly important information. In most cases, activists and journalists are susceptible to attacks during participating in mass events.

¹⁸⁷ Amy W. Knight, *The KGB: Police and Politics in the Soviet Union*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003104759>.

¹⁸⁸ “Political Repression in Russia in 2011-2014: Extrajudicial Persecution.”

Property damages also constantly occur. Such damages are usually practiced by non-state actors, who thereby almost always are not persecuted by the judicial system. Thus, they are carried out with the tacit approval of the state. Conversation or “besedy” is an activity practiced by operatives of the E-Center (the main department for combating extremism), precinct officers and other agencies. By existing law, “conversations” are not illegal, but often conducted as part of activities aimed at the prevention of extremist crimes, which is a legal part of their official duties. The aim of the conversations is to collect data about civil activists and members of the opposition as well as make them “review” their political opinions. Often their purpose is to intimidate dissidents. “Such conversations are often accompanied by threats of dismissal from work and attempts at recruitment”¹⁸⁹, what makes them more efficient. Dismissal from work is also one of the forms of extrajudicial repressions. The most illustrating example of this method was the dismissal of Professor Andrei Zubov in 2014. He was fired on the grounds of non—recognition of the annexation of Ukrainian Crimea. Other modes such as threats, business pressure, deprivation of residence permit, threat of deprivation of parental rights, disruptions of concerts, restrictions on freedom of movement (FSS non-accessible for public list of extremists called “Sentinel control) are also common¹⁹⁰.

International bodies always played attention to the big scale of application of extrajudicial practices not only in Russia, but in occupied territories. For example, in it was indicated by Human Rights Committee of United Nations, that after the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, there was a dramatic increase of “excessive use of force, extrajudicial executions, use of torture, rape and sexual violence as tactics of war and intimidation of the population, mobilization and forced conscription of civilians, arbitrary arrests and detentions, ill-treatment of detainees, and ill-treatment of the civilian population”¹⁹¹. Occluded territories suffered the most amount of such tools – the practice of terror with the aim to show the image

¹⁸⁹; idem

¹⁹⁰ idem

¹⁹¹ “Human Rights Committee Considers Report of the Russian Federation in the Absence of a Delegation, Experts Raise Issues on the Persecution of Journalists and the Arrests of Protesters,” *United Nation: Press Release*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2022/10/human-rights-committee-considers-report-russian-federation-absence-delegation-experts>.

of Russian supporters by the Eastern Ukrainian population both for the Russian citizens and for the international community. We cannot evaluate the scale because of the difficulties connected with data gathering on occupied territories during active military actions.

As it can be observed, such extrajudicial practices are extremely difficult to follow and monitor. The political motive behind it cannot be proven or extremely hard to prove. Moreover, victims of listed practices do not have any official documents that can be appealed to the court, which makes it extremely difficult to protect themselves. Actions carried out by public authorities or governmental bodies are usually not sanctioned by the court or by any official state jurisdiction aimed to protect the rights of citizens and people in Russia. Sometimes the only solution for activists under pressure is a spread of information on social media and internet resources to attract the attention of the public. These actions also can be sanctioned and materials blocked by RNK under different pretexts.

3.3. Regional specificities of extra-judicial practices in Russia

Some regions of the Russian Federation are more subjected to extrajudicial practices. It could connect to the specifics of local powers and the high level of sovereignty of the concrete region of Russia. For example, Chechnia and the North Caucasus always had been and continued to be the regions in which numerous human rights violations have been reported. The impunity of local authorities remains the biggest issue of the two regions. According to the data collected by human rights defenders, “there had been around 8,000 enforced disappearances between 1999 and 2006, and these were continuing today”¹⁹². Investigations were not carried out and victims were not returned to their families nor the families acquired a fair compensation. The most vulnerable people in front of forced disappearances are human rights defenders, journalists working in those regions or opposition members.

¹⁹² “Journalist and Human Rights Lawyer Brutally Beaten in Chechnya. Those Involved in the Attack Must Be Held Accountable,” *Human Rights Watch*, May 7, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/ru/news/2023/07/05/journalist-and-human-rights-lawyer-viciously-attacked-chechnya>.

Practices of threats, physical and moral abuse now apply to anti-war activists and opposition members mostly. It became more noticeable since the start of the war in Ukraine. Violations of personal integrity have been multiplied. As an example - recently, in Chechenia, journalists of the leading independent outlet “Novaya Gazeta” Elena Milashina and human rights defender Alexander Nemov were physically abused on July 4th of 2023. According to the press release, “armed men in balaclavas in three cars stopped a taxi in which Milashina and Nemov were traveling to Grozny from the airport, dragged them out of the cabin, threatened to kill them, beat them with legs and sticks, smashed and took away all equipment. Milashina's head was shaved and doused with green paint”¹⁹³. Both victims claimed that the attack was revenge for their active political participation.

Both Milashina and Nemov arrived in Grozny (the capital of Chechenia) to attend a court hearing on the politically motivated case against Zarema Musaeva. Zarina has been charged with accusations of attacking a law enforcement agent – accusation aimed to put pressure on her son, who publicly spoke against Ramzan Kadyrov, a head of Chechen Republic. As president Putin, Ramzan Kadyrov uses methods of all accessible extrajudicial mechanisms to silence dissidents and to create an image of all love and all acceptance by citizens of Chechenia.

It can be noted that physical abuse is not the most popular and most used method of extrajudicial repressions in 2023. If we look at the data collected by the human rights defending organization OVD-Info, we can see that most registered tools are harassment at work (with 163 collected cases), threats (137), 69 cases of event cancellation, 65 – of an expulsion, and 64 of vandalism. Attacks on physical integrity are only at the 6th place with 23 cases, after which follows an expulsion from an organization (16 registered cases) and censorship (11). All these practices tend to secure self-censorship. People are forced to keep their opinions unexpressed under the fear of being fired, beaten, or even killed (as in cases with the most popular opposition figures as Boris Nemzov or Alexey Navalny).

¹⁹³ “Journalist and Human Rights Lawyer Brutally Beaten in Chechnya. Those Involved in the Attack Must Be Held Accountable.”

3.4. The use of apology videos as an extra-judicial practice

In 2023, a new practice of extrajudicial pressure was spread and often used by law enforcement agents, state's agents or Telegram channel owners – the practice of apology videos. Apology video is some kind of “naming and shaming” practice, applied to those who publicly spoke against governmental officials, war crimes or military decisions of the Russian Federation. This practice is dated back in 2015. The first time it was applied in Chechnia by Ramzan Kadyrov, who made his opponents renounce the criticism spoken against him. Chechnia leaders used this practice from 2015 on to deal with political opponents and active civil society members (mostly from the human rights defense domain). Later, apology video practice was spread on the territory of the Russian Federation and used by other regional or national authorities.

Unfortunately, we do not dispose of statistics and decent data on the usage of apology videos as a tool for pressuring civil society. Nevertheless, some little research has been made. The ‘Caucasian Knot’ (foreign agent news website) tried to collect data on forced apology video that were practiced within Kavkaz region; only in 2022 there were at least 30 such cases recorded¹⁹⁴.

During the period of COVID-2019, such practice was applied against those who spread unreliable information on social media. Later, during the winter protests in support of Alexey Navalny in 2021, the Investigative Committee and Ministry of Internal Affairs offices released apology videos of the detained participants (Timur Salikhov, Konstantin Lakeev, and Olga Bendas). They were apologizing for involvement in the protests and encouraging others not to participate. There is a high possibility that mental or/and physical abuse was applied to detained citizens, forcing them to make a public apology.

After the start of the Ukraine occupation and the official “special military operation,” apology videos by governmental officials were directed toward ideologically anti-war

¹⁹⁴ “Chronicle of Public Apologies in the Caucasus,” *Caucasian Knot*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/345536/>.

citizens. The most striking example of this is the case of the popular content creator Nekoglai. He made a parody on Russian soldier's exploits on social media. Influencer was tortured by the police forces who made him make an apology video. In the video published on his official social media channel, he calls himself "an animal" and admits the heroic behavior of Russian soldiers. Later, Persnensy district court of Moscow sentenced him to deportation and accused of t violation of immigration rules. Influencers were subjected not only to the practice of apology videos, but to deportation. Deportation and expulsion are also tools for oppressing civil society, as we mentioned above¹⁹⁵.

The practice of apology videos has been spread unproportionally on Russian territory. It became significantly spread in the region of Crimea — 66 of the 90 cases recorded since 24 February 2022, have occurred there. The most widespread reasons for apologizing, according to the collected data, are: anti-war posts on social media, anti-war statements, pro-Ukrainian symbols (as a flag, for example), distraction of patriotic symbols (such as a St. George's ribbon – a sign of a victory over Germany in 1945), anti-war activism (including humanitarian aid collected for Ukrainian n refugees), listening to Ukrainian songs in public places, refusal to participate in pro-war activities organized by local or national authorities¹⁹⁶.

Apology videos are usually published publicly on official sources, such as websites of the Federal Security Service, The Investigation Committee of Russian Federation, Ministry of Internal Affairs. They are published as well on pro-governmental social media sources or Telegram channels of official bodies. This practice is, firstly, destabilizing the opposition by making its members admit that they made a mistake by not obeying the power's policies. Secondly, this is a clear message for the civil society in Russia: there will be consequences of your actions. Such demonstrative justice is very typical for the Russian

¹⁹⁵ "Abused by Putin's Troops: This Is the Story of the Soldier Who Dances against the War in Ukraine in the Viral Video on Tiktok," *Luzerner Zeitung*, July 27, 2023, <https://www.luzernerzeitung.ch/leben/viral-video-abused-by-putins-troops-this-is-the-story-of-the-soldier-who-dances-against-the-war-in-ukraine-in-the-viral-video-on-tiktok-ld.2492575>.

¹⁹⁶ "Apology Videos and More: Post-Full-Scale Invasion Analysis of Extrajudicial Pressure Tactics" (OVD-Info, April 7, 2023), <https://en.ovdinfo.org/apology-videos-and-more-post-full-scale-invasion-analysis-extrajudicial-pressure-tactics>.

Federation. This is a perfect tool to pressure dissidents, without using legal tools which take more time and resources.

In the occupied region of Crimea, the situation is more terrifying. To silence pro-Ukrainian voices and to create an image of oppressed by Ukrainian regime citizens, who were waiting for the Russian troops to “save them”, local powers in cooperation with an activists created some specifics for the region extrajudicial practices. A great example is the database of “Russophobes, Ukronazis and Traitors” created by pro-Russian activist Alexander Talipov – the owner of its own Telegram channel. On the channel, some screenshots are posted with clear anti-war statements or pro-Ukrainian graffiti asking to “punish” those who created such content. Later, videos of apologies are downloaded to the channel with the original posts. This led to the layoffs of the people whose video apologies were published — as in case with the teacher Ekaterina Pavlenko, nurse Anisia Yankova and Simferopol airport worker Natalia.

Similar Telegram channels later appeared in 25 other regions of the Russian Federation and in 3 occupied territories of Ukraine with similar content. Nevertheless, Crimea is the region which is more subject to such practices. It could be linked to Tapilov's connections with local enforcement authorities. People were often detained after publications on his channel, video apologies, often recorded in police stations, with the threat to open an administrative case or to use physical violence on the detained, when detained citizens do not want to cooperate with enforcement agents.

The response of civil society to such practices became another form of civil protest, which became widespread after the start of the war - laying flowers after the mass attack of Russian Federation in Ukrainian territories which entailed civil victims. Memorials which were chosen for that action are either connected with victims of political repressions or have a direct link with Ukraine (such as monuments of Lesya Ukrainka, for example). Law enforcement agents often illegally collected participants in such actions and had conversations with them, threatening to open an administrative case.

3.5. Extra-judicial methods of information control

Blocking of Roskomnadzor is also one of the extrajudicial ways to repress civil society. Lawsuits challenging blockages last for many months, which in the current reality of the Internet webspace makes it almost pointless to ask for the right to dismiss an article about the events which has been passed long ago. RNK, as it has been shown during the attempts to appeal its decision in the court, does not motivate its decisions to block the source. Decisions on blocking Internet domains or information are made by the department's on-duty monitor (including, for example, on weekends or during the night). The courts are not even provided with any official reports on why the material is blocked. At the same time, the courts predictable side with Roskomnadzor recognizing its non-motivated decisions lawful. This practice existed a long time ago - only in August 2014, dozens of pages mentioning actions for federalization were blocked, from posts on social networks to publications in the media.

Later, during the protests in 2018 and 2019, the Russian government used Internet shutdown to prevent participants from spreading necessary information and from connection with potential defenders. Such practices are also used by Russian neighbors such as Belarus or Kazakhstan during protest activities.

In 2021, during the election campaign, Russian authorities used brutal methods to force Apple and Google companies to take down the application “Smart Voting App”, developed by the Navalny team. This application aimed to target the opposition whose voting strategy was to unite around the second popular candidate after Putin’s party, United Russia. Russian authorities threatened companies’ workers with the prison term in case of not deleting the application within the given 24 hours.

After the start of the war, Roskomnadzor became more active in detecting and blocking websites, which contain information about war crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine, anti-war or anti-governmental statements. According to the statistics, in the end of December 2022, “Russian digital rights group Roskomsvoboda estimated that the

Russian authorities blocked almost 640,000 websites inside Russia”¹⁹⁷ – that means about 4900 websites were blocked every week. In its official report, Roskomsvoboda (Russian NGO that promotes open self-regulatory networks and protection of digital rights of Internet users) also underlined the topics, websites, and services susceptible to censorship. These are: websites of Ukrainian and foreign media, anti-corruption investigation and resources, VPN services, websites with leaked personal data of Russian citizens, links connected with LGBT topics, different podcasts, platforms, and social media spreading information about the ongoing war.

All the mentioned extrajudicial tools aimed to increase state censorship, limit the freedom of speech and expression in Russia, and therefore to make the work of independent media in Russia impossible. Dissidents lost their voices under the pressure of different state actors. At the same time, the described actions aim to create an image of “bad citizens,” contributing to taboo certain political topics, and silencing civil society within the Russian Federation. It also helped to increase the level of trust in official state propaganda.

¹⁹⁷ “How Internet Censorship Changed in Russia during the 1st Year of Military Conflict in Ukraine” (Roskomsvoboda, February 24, 2023), <https://ooni.org/post/2023-russia-a-year-after-the-conflict/>.

PART III. PROPAGANDA AS A SOCIAL INSTRUMENT TO INFLUENCE PEOPLE'S OPINION

Chapter 1. Propaganda as a tool to maintain the power-keeping ability of the President.

As a result of the described earlier media policies and new laws, currently Russian media space is represented mostly by governmental media who support governmental policies and contribute to the spread of state propaganda. To make civil society in Russia believe in the image of stability, economic development and widespread support of President Putin, the media use state propaganda to shape people's opinion on valid political issues and to influence civil society in the Russian Federation. This chapter will analyze the role of propaganda in the livability of Putin's regime. The main objective of the present chapter is to provide a connection between efficiency of the use of propaganda and the power-keeping ability of the President.

The chapter argues that propaganda significantly contributed to the maintenance of Putin's power by creating an image of major support within the population, building a negative representation of opposition forces with the help of information strategies used by Russian media. This chapter will provide a theoretical overview of the Russian propaganda model, evaluate the impact of social and traditional media on the political power and its impact on the political legitimacy of the President, underlining its role in elections coverage. The chapter will as well examine the efficiency of anti-Western and anti-opposition narratives in propagandistic media.

1.1. The propaganda model of the Russian Federation

Autocratic regimes tend to use well-elaborated strategies to maintain the power ability of the main political actor. Those strategies usually include not only repressions on the civil society, but, for example, the constant cooperation between the government and its

citizens. The “shrinking space” of civil society in autocratic regimes is often linked with the repression policies on NGOs and the connection between repressive and limitative policies conducted by officials with the ability to maintain the power¹⁹⁸. However, not only the repression policies can impact the possibility or impossibility of autocrats to keep their power. These regimes use political propaganda as one of the instruments to maintain the political power of the autocrat.

As in the case with Russian media policy, the ongoing repression on independent media and journalists are combined with the governmental support for the “right” media, which translates the official position of governmental officials through political propaganda. Political propaganda is “the use of information, ideas, opinions, or images that are often false or exaggerated to influence people's opinions in favor of a cause, a political leader, or a government”¹⁹⁹. This definition lies perfectly in the reality of Russian propaganda today and lies within the Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky propaganda model.

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky propaganda model examines the connection between economic and communication power, using five filters that help to define the propaganda²⁰⁰.

The first filter of this model underlines the corporate ownership, the large size of the media and its orientation toward profit. Usually, smaller media outlets are owned by a limited number of giant companies or holdings, which grow bigger, increasing their profit. Second filter characterized by the advertiser influence on the media – someone, capable of providing funds for the media, therefore becoming the main customer for the services. Media dependence on official sources and cooperation with the government (which usually increases their credibility and helps to gain access to political events, press-conferences, or political party unions). The fear of flak is also relevant as media outlets tend to be self-

¹⁹⁸ Gerschewski, “The Three Pillars of Stability.”

¹⁹⁹ “Propaganda,” in *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed May 16, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/propaganda>.

²⁰⁰ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

censored fearing the following repressions or possible limitations from the side of the government. Finally, the media share the same ideological narrative as the government.

Therefore, it was necessary to add to that list a sixth filter – the influence of the powerful actors, which often can afford themselves to purchase the loyalty of media outlets and to impose the narrative profitable for the government. By adding this filter, as it was stated by Mullen and Klaehn, one can be sure that “a degree of fusion between state and news media practices that goes beyond the dynamics of everyday political economy”²⁰¹ These filters were proposed by American scholars, therefore, reflecting an American propaganda machine, which participated in forming broad public support for the USA invasion in Iraq in 2003, bringing justifications to the war in the most trustful media outlets.

Nevertheless, it can be easily applied to the Russian Federation. Speaking of the first filter of the propaganda model (ownership and funding), we can note that in Russia, the majority of the media is either under the direct or indirect ownership of the government and businessmen, who are close to the regime. This is applicable to the television, newspapers, and online media outlets functioning in the Russian Federation. They work under the control of governmental officials, shaping their editorial content to align with the interests of the ruling regime. Government having resources, tends to fund “friendly” media, while private investors do not fund dissident media under the fear of their closure or block. Speaking about sourcing, it can be mentioned that the Russian Federation controls the flow of information that is available to media consumers both online and offline, which can form the basis for the spread of disinformation and propaganda. The media support the official narrative due to the fear of being subject to repressions. Informal censorship characterizes the current Russian media marketplace. Journalists, content creators, human rights defenders, opposition leaders or activists criticizing the state's narrative, can become victims of repressions, including harassment, physical attacks, and imprisonment. This provokes the spread of self-censorship in Russian media.

²⁰¹ Andrew Mullen and Jeffery Klaehn, “The Herman–Chomsky Propaganda Model: A Critical Approach to Analysing Mass Media Behaviour,” *Sociology Compass* 4, no. 4 (April 2010): 215–29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00275.x>.

Ideological aspect is very strong in the official state narrative, spread by controlled outlets. Russian President Vladimir Putin promotes a nationalist and conservative agenda, protecting traditional values – it can be traced in the official media and political communication. Dissidents are often pictured as unpatriotic citizens, working for the profit of international organizations or states. As the propaganda model of the USA, which had anti-communist ideology during the Cold War, the Russian propaganda model contains a strong anti-West narrative. The sixth filter is also perfectly fitting in the Russian propaganda model, as powerful political actors can influence the content of the media, neither by financial nor by political pressure on media outlets. Propaganda in the Russian Federation is omnipresent, which makes the operation of civil society activists and opposition forces very difficult.

Propaganda is especially noticeable in autocratic regimes where independence media are absent or repressed and state-controlled media highly supported by the government. As it was noticed in the research on Cambodia's civil society in an autocratic regime, some "CSOs and individual civil society activists allow themselves to become co-opted by the regime to secure their survival and be able to continue their activities"²⁰². This is leading to the possibility for state's representatives to influence the media content appearing in those media, to impose informal limitations and to control its activities through monitoring procedures. That it, in its turn, provokes the loss of trust of civil society members, who tend to receive the information from independent sources and have lack of trust to the media actors who cooperate with the state. With the loss of opposed audiences and the increase of loyalty to government readers or viewers media outlets tend to reshape their functioning and the content of produced information – the transformation of that kind is possible.

The success of Russian propaganda and its effectiveness is provided due to the high level of ownership of the main Russian TV channels and media by the close circle of the President. Ownership of propaganda models is very noticeable in Russia. For example, the major share of Channel One (main TV channel) belongs to the national agency Rosimuschestvo (the Federal Agency for State Property Management). The other part of the

²⁰² Lorch, "Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation."

Channel is owned by National Media Group (controlled by the structure of Yuri Kovalchuk, Chairman of the Board of Rossiya Bank - one of the biggest banks in Russian Federation, and Vladimir Putin's friend; and Roman Abramovich, who is also Putin's supporter). Rossiya 2, second most popular TV channel, is a part of All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company which is owned by Rosimushchestvo. NTV is also controlled by the state through Gazprom Media. TNT and Fifts Channels that come respectively fourth and fifth in the top TV channels by audience reach, are also controlled by the state. TNT belongs to Gazprom Media, while Channel 5 is controlled by National Media Group²⁰³.

We can also notice by looking at the autocratic regimes in the world, that they exchange the most successful strategies between themselves, adopt some of them with or without necessary modification within their national borders and constantly cooperate – as democratic regimes do. An increasing tendency of autocratic regimes around the world to replace brutal repressions which can be easily visible with the constant media policy which can be more efficient in the long run. This can testify the “shift among autocratic leaders to increasingly rely on information manipulation and performance legitimation over repression strategies”²⁰⁴. Russian media propaganda is one of the “hidden” strategies which helps Putin to visibly increase the level of popular support, to create an image of an all-trusted and strong figure who is able to provide stable development for the Russian Federation and to decrease or silence opposition voices criticizing the policy of the President at the same time.

One of the outcomes of state propaganda is the reduction of the protests within the state. It happens because citizens under propaganda, even if they are not amenable to it, tend to believe that their “neighbors” indeed support political elites. And if citizens know about the unpopularity of the main leader along the civil society, they “may believe that an autocrat who broadcasts extremely positive pro regime and propaganda may be signaling to citizens that his capacity for repression is so unconstrained that he has no need to seek their genuine

²⁰³ Yablokov and Schimpfössl, “A Brief History of News Making in Russia.”

²⁰⁴ Ivar Kolstad, “Legitimising Autocracy: Re-Framing the Analysis of Corporate Relations to Undemocratic Regimes,” *Contemporary Politics* 30, no. 3 (May 26, 2024): 294–315, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2023.2271657>.

support”²⁰⁵. Thus, efficient propaganda can contribute to the creation of a narrative of neither “major support” of the President nor the repression ability of the governmental apparatus. All of this significantly decreases the possibility of mass protests.

1.2. Political influence of social media in the Russian Federation

The most politically influential media are social media. Social media represent modern Internet websites and programs which allow members of civil society to communicate, share the information and to discuss events with a broad circle of Internet users. The role of social media in politics was explored by different scholars and so far, estimated to be high, contributing to political polarization as well as political participation and electoral choice of targeted citizens. This makes these sources efficient in terms of spreading the propaganda. In their article, Emily Kubin and Christian von Sikorski (2021) researched the impact of social media on political polarization in the United States, South Korea, Germany, and some other Western states. The article found that social media actively contributes to the increased ideological political polarization through algorithms (which surround people with the similar content of like-minded individuals creating some sort of “informational bubble”) or by involving users in active discussion on politically polarized topics. Traditional media can also contribute to the ideological and affective polarization by highlighting the discourses of politically polarized actors²⁰⁶. This is particularly relevant for states in which ideological polarization is promoted by the state policy and independent media are absent – as in the case of the Russian Federation.

Speaking of the role of social media in the Russian Federation on the power-keeping ability of the President, we need to define which media are indeed social in Russia. We would talk about such platforms as Zhivoy Zhurnal (Living Journal), Blogger, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, Vkontakte, YouTube, news generator Lenta.ru or Newsland.

²⁰⁵ Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter, “Propaganda and Protest in Autocracies,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 5 (May 2021): 919–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002720975090>.

²⁰⁶ Emily Kubin and Christian Von Sikorski, “The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review,” *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 188–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070>.

The function of communication (which is the main function of all social media) refers to the ability of users to publish information, spread it to the self-formed circle of other users and to discuss the most relevant social or political topics. With the development of social media and their active impact on the social life of everyone, autocratic states tended to control the use of such media as social media significantly expanded the public space for political discourse. Social media becomes a valid instrument for the realization of public policy of the state. In democratic society, openness and non-centralization of social media helps non-governmental organizations and civil society to involve in their activities or events their compatriots and to find like-minded individuals. In autocratic regimes, with the absence of opposition and independent media combined with the high level of state control, social media perform a function of so-called “shapers of opinions and ideas”.

It is not a relevant instrument for dissidents because of the inability to freely express protest in the fear of repressions. Despite that, social media remains an important communication instrument for civil society, counting the decreased trust in traditional media sources in Russia. After the period from 2015 to 2017, when the public trust in information on television fell from 63 to 47%, in the print press – from 9 to 7%, and in radio – from 8 to 7%²⁰⁷, social media became a new source of information for many Russian citizens. According to the information presented by Foundation “People’s Opinion,” 56% of interweaved Russian citizens read news on internet websites, and 19% of them seek to receive an information through social media²⁰⁸. The biggest number of people receive information through news aggregators.

In the Russian Federation, social media has always played an important role in setting the citizen’s mindset and shaping their political opinion on important issues, supporting the state's point of view. According to the data collected by Mediascope - a technology research company, the leader of the Russian market of media research, advertising, and media monitoring (which is the responsible company for state media monitoring according to the

²⁰⁷ “On the Objectivity of the Media and the Thematic Preferences of Citizens” (Public Opinion Foundation, July 20, 2017), <https://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/13618>.

²⁰⁸ “News on the Internet Is Read by 56% of Russians,” *Interfax*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/750378>.

law “On mass media”), the audience of Internet users reached 98,6 million people per month in 2022, what is 81% of the whole population²⁰⁹. Russian citizens spend about 4 hours 11 minutes in cyber space every day. Every user within the Russian territory spent at least 95 hours per day on social media. It can be noticed that after February 2022, due to the start of a special military operation, the amount of time spent on social media increased along with the time spent on news platforms. This could relate to the increased desire for information among Russian citizens. The most popular social media in Russia in 2022 were V Kontakte – biggest Russian speaking social media - and Telegram (which approached coverage to V Kontakte in 2022). With the start of the war, both mentioned social media got more user’s time per day, while previously actively used media such as Instagram and Facebook have lost their positions after their blocking by Russian authorities and recognized Meta an extremist organization. After the blocking, the number of minutes spent on social media decreased from 41 to 25 for Instagram and from 15 to 6 for Facebook. In May 2023, only 4% of the overall population actively used Instagram (visit social media for at least 5 minutes or more) while Facebook continued to be used by only 0,2% of the population.

1.3. Political influence of Traditional media outlets in the Russian Federation

Speaking about traditional media outlets and television, we have some decent amount of data which allows us to confirm the importance of media sources on the process of formation of political views of Russian citizens. According to the data collected by Mediascope researcher Ksenia Achkasova, 98% of the Russian population watch television at least once a month. Overall, 3 hours and 33 minutes every Russian citizen spent by watching a national television every day²¹⁰. From this daily viewing, 12% of the consumed content comes from news or and 13% from social-political programs. We can also observe a trend of increasing time spent watching socio-political programs and news with increasing

²⁰⁹ MediaScope, “Media Audience Data.”

²¹⁰ idem

age (16 and 14% for people aged 55 and more, 10 and 10% for people from 35 to 55 years old and only 6 and 6% for people below 35).

Another data collection was made by Levada Center. It aimed to describe the media landscape in the Russian Federation. The survey showed that the main source of information is still television – 88% of Russian citizens responded “television” to the question “Where do you most often learn about the news in the country and in the world?”²¹¹. The level of trust in television has also hardly changed — from 50% in March 2020 to 46% in July 2021, which means that people still tend to trust news translated on state-controlled TV Channels. The level of trust in social networks and online publications as news sources has not changed since 2020 and is 21% and 23%, respectively, which is significantly less.

1.4. The impact of state propaganda of the political legitimacy of Vladimir Putin

If we analyze the way propaganda in the Russian Federation is used as a social mechanism to influence or change people’s opinions on the legitimacy of the President and on the perception of the current political situation in general, we will determine that Russian propaganda decreases the possibility of mass protests and activities of any type. As it has been highlighted by scholars, “propaganda can inhibit people’s willingness to protest by reducing their perceptions of other people’s willingness to protest”²¹². We can find proof of that hypothesis by comparing the number of protests that occurred within the Russian Federation throughout the years.

Moreover, the common level of trust to the President increases in case of effective propaganda policies conducted by the state. As we can see from the data collected by Levada Center in 2022 in their report “Trust in public institutions”, the percentage of people who consider the President to be worthy of trust reached 80%. Only 6% of interviewed people

²¹¹ “Media Landscape 2021: Use and Trust.”

²¹² Haifeng Huang and Nicholas Cruz, “Propaganda, Presumed Influence, and Collective Protest,” *Political Behavior* 44, no. 4 (December 2022): 1789–1812, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09683-0>.

stated that the President “does not deserve trust at all”²¹³. Second place with 77% was taken by the army as an institution, the third trusted institution was the Federal Security Service with 61% of citizens. Media meanwhile reached only 41% of the voices of citizens ready to rely on them. About 20% did not find the media trustworthy, which is very interesting, as the media is the primary source of information for Russian citizens, as we saw earlier. It could relate to the fact of a different reality described by state-controlled media and independent media.

1.5. The role of media in reporting electoral events

Media is also contributing to the legitimacy of President Putin by covering the democratic election process and depicting an image of major support. For example, during the election in the State Duma in 2021, the digital media played an important role in promoting Putin’s party – United Russia and its candidates. In the research conducted by Russian scholars Zuikina Kristina and Olesya Eduardovna, more than 350 texts were analyzed from three main social media, where information about the election were published – Vkontakte, Telegram and Odnoklassniki. The research found 5 manipulative mechanisms used by the media during the election in Moscow Duma. Logical manipulation was very present in “media adhering to dominant ideologies generate and spread various fears, using precisely verbal means of influencing the addressee”²¹⁴. Lexical manipulation was also present in social media during the electoral campaign. It can be expressed through, for example, the use of euphemisms and dysphemisms, which are widespread in Russian propaganda. Mentioned techniques aim to identify the attitude toward the subject. State-controlled media uses them to describe opposition members, rival candidates, and protest messages. “Thus, those communities which take a pro-government position most often called Alexei Navalny exclusively a “blogger”, denying his socio-political activities, and the word

²¹³ “Trust to Public Institutions: Use and Trust” (Levada Center, 09 2022), <https://www.levada.ru/2022/09/20/doverie-obshhestvennym-institutam-2/>.

²¹⁴ Larisa L. Zelenskaya et al., “Verbal Means of Media Manipulation with Fears (on Material of the American, English and Russian Tabloid Press),” *XLinguae* 11, no. 3 (2018): 39–50, <https://doi.org/10.18355/XL.2018.11.03.04>.

"protests" of the community was replaced by "unauthorized rally", "prohibited action", "mass riots"²¹⁵. This created a negative image of Russian opposition to the population and underlined their lack of popular support and legitimacy, therefore enforcing the legitimacy of President Putin.

Another lexical technique used by media is the use of very emotionally colored vocabulary in relation to an object or a subject that they aim to describe in a negative way. For example, Russian TV programs often refer to anti-war citizens who chose to leave Russia after the war as “traitors”, “fifths colony” or “enemies of Russia”.

In the recent presidential elections held from 15th to 17th March 2014, state-controlled media contributed to the legitimate image of elections. We do not have any exact data by now, nevertheless from the analysis of 6 main sources of Russian propaganda (news websites of RiaNews, Lenra.ru, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Izvestia and TV program “News”) we can see a trend of promoting online voting among the population. Online voting this year became accessible in 29 regions of the Russian Federation. State media also created an image of active civil participation in the current election.

It is also important to underline that propaganda usually has a long-term effect much delayed in time. The effect of social influence needs to be upheld during the years, so the population will accept the state version of reality. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the process of control over the media started in 2008 with the new policy of Dmitri Medvedev and the state’s support and promotion of selected broadcasting channels as a free one.

1.6 Anti-Western narrative in Russian propaganda

Gaining access to the control over the distribution of information, the state defines what political topics need to be highlighted and which ones should be either neglected or negatively represented in Russian media. Therefore, one of the strategies that Russian

²¹⁵ Lomonosov Moscow State University et al., “MANIPULATIVE METHODS OF REPRESENTING MOSCOW CITY DUMA ELECTIONS ON SOCIAL NETWORKS,” *Вестник Пермского Университета. Политология* 15, no. 1 (2021): 84–96, <https://doi.org/10.17072/2218-1067-2021-1-84-96>.

propaganda uses is to support the negative image of Western democracies by Russian media. If we analyze the news which were discussed in Russian newspapers, we can note that Western liberalism is often opposed to Russian traditionalism with its traditional values system. Liberal values are represented as something alien to the Russian society, imposed by the Western states, which follows its hegemonic goals in international policy.

This narrative can be followed in the official position of Russian powers. For example, during his speech at the opening of the Compatriots Forum on 1st November 2023, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov stated that “An increasing number of people, including those on the European continent, not only sympathized with our country, but also look to Russia as a defender of enduring traditions and values, real values”²¹⁶. Referring to traditional values, the Minister mentioned ideals common to the main religions and cultures, respect for the identity of the peoples of the world, and their right to their own path of development. These values were opposed to such Western ideas as permissiveness, tolerance “taken to the point of absurdity”²¹⁷. These ideas would lead to the rise of xenophobia, radical nationalism, and distractions, according to the Russian officials.

Another noticeable narrative that is used by the media is the image of Western states as states which are not capable of providing their citizens with basic human needs, compared to Russia. Headers of popular media outlets can refer to the financial crisis in Europe and its military disadvantages: “A new poverty has engulfed Europe” (RiaNews, 14 march 2024), “Losing the EU: aid to Kiev worsens the economies of European countries” (Izvestia, 1 February 2024), “Rising prices and fights over food: the consequences of anti-Russian sanctions in Europe” (RiaNews, 28 March 2024). Hyperonization is one of the most used techniques of Russian propaganda. This narrative aims to make Russian citizens question the success of the liberal Western democratic model of governing, which is more susceptible to economic crises and instability. The connection between democratic decisions taken by

²¹⁶ “Lavrov: Russia Is Now Perceived as a Defender of Traditional Values,” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, January 11, 2023, <https://rg.ru/2023/11/01/lavrov-rossiia-teper-vosprinimaetsia-kak-zashchitnica-tradicionnyh-cennostej.html>.

²¹⁷ idem

Western powers and the following financial disadvantages is underlined by propagandistic media.

1.7. Negative coverage of opposition activities in the Russian media

Another tool that propaganda uses is the negative coverage of the activities conducted by opposition members or civil society organizations that publicly expressed their dissatisfaction with the state's actions or omissions. For example, describing manifestations, organized by opposition forces, articles usually refer to them with the terms “illegal,” “uncoordinated” or even “violate”. This can lead to the creation of an image of opposition as offenders. It is also common for Russian media to refer to the opposition leaders not as to political actors, but as to “bloggers”, “content-creators” which makes the opposition to lose credibility from citizens. Therefore, Russian citizens do not consider them nor as a valid political alternative to current officials nor even a real political figure. This increases the level of power-keeping ability for the President, which is considered the only possible leader by the public.

During demonstrations organized by the regional headquarters of opposition leader Alexey Navalny in 2019, Russian media outlets referred to events as “illegal manifestations”, and made a strong accent on participation in those events of minors. Some media even neglected to highlight manifestations. The number of participants indicated according to the official statistical data collected by the Ministry of Inner Affairs was significantly underestimated.

For example, the mass rally "For Fair Elections" on August 10th in Moscow, with 50 thousand people participated, became the biggest rally in Russia since the protests in 2011. It was dedicated to the refusal to register independent opposition candidates for the election to the State Duma. State-controlled television channels and loyalist's media outlets painted a different picture, depicting the participants of the rallies as a collection of tattooed youths, feeble-minded pensioners, LGBT activists, communists, as well as groups of foreigners whose goal is to undermine Russia. "Bums, freaks and gypsies" – this is how one of the

Russian websites, claiming to be a news agency, described those gathered at the rally to support rejected candidates on August 10th. The headline of another website read: "Gypsies, transvestites and homeless people turned an opposition rally in Sakharov into a freak show"²¹⁸

One of the assumptions replicated by pro—government media sources is that the youth who participated in the rally did not come to express their political protest, but to listen to their favorite musicians, who performed at the two-hour event. Pro-government information resources have published photos of teenagers and young people with colorful hair, dreadlocks and tattoos. *Izvestia*, a major pro-Kremlin newspaper, published an article stating that the main speakers during the protest "were not politicians, but musicians," without mentioning that many political figures were under arrest at the time of the rally. "Many participants of the action on Akademik Sakharov Avenue confessed to the *Izvestia* correspondent that they had come to listen to their favorite performers," the newspaper stated. From a similar angle, information about the rally was provided in the evening news on state TV channels and in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (Russian Newspaper) – one of the most read newspapers in Russia. "Most of those who came to the rally have no idea that it was organized by unregistered candidates for the Moscow City Duma under the motto "For Fair Elections in Moscow"²¹⁹, reported the article.

This is one of the most striking examples of the way Russian media are reporting on mass manifestations, political protests, and actions. By denying the status of political actors to political figures and depicting political demands into the cultural or social event, media outlets show the absence of opposition forces in the Russian Federation, which can resist the current power elite.

²¹⁸ "'Bums, Freaks and Gypsies.' How the pro-Kremlin Media Cover the Demonstrations," *Radio Azzatyk*, August 19, 2019, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/how-pro-kremlin-madia-depicts-the-moscow-protesters/30110629.html>.

²¹⁹ "Video: Participants of the Rally on Sakharov Avenue Were Asked about Their Demands," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, October 8, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/08/10/reg-cfo/video-uchastnikov-akcii-na-prospekte-saharova-sprosil-pro-ih-trebovaniia.html>.

Therefore, propaganda is actively used by the state to influence people's attitude toward the government or President Putin himself. It also tends to create a negative image of opposition members in Russia, Western states, and Ukraine. Combined with non-allowance of any alternative opinions within the federal television, press or even cyberspace, propaganda succeeded in the demonstration of major support (or at least the absence of major opposition) for President Putin and contributed to his legitimacy in the eyes of citizens.

Chapter 2. The role of propaganda in support of the special military operation

Russian propaganda significantly contributed to the people's support for the start of the aggression in Ukraine, dismissing narratives which tend to justify the political decision of the President. The present chapter will analyze how the propaganda contributed to the maintenance of Putin's regime and created a foundation for the war in Ukraine. The chapter is aimed to evaluate the impact on the support of military actions in Ukraine, arguing that Russian propaganda increased the level of popular support for military actions in Ukraine, popularizing propagandistic narratives and regulating citizen's attitudes toward Ukraine and its Western partners. The following chapter presents statistical data on Russian propaganda and the level of public support of the special operation, the interconnections between propaganda and public attitudes toward targeted states and the quantitative analyses of Russian propaganda to prove the main argument.

2.1. Statistical data on Russian propaganda and public support levels

Even before the official proclamation by Russian powers of the start of the "special military operation" 24 February 2022, Russian propaganda media contributed a lot to the narrative of the flourishing Nazis activities in Western Ukraine. By shaping anti-Ukrainian mood in civil society, the media prepared the ground for the following full-scale invasion on Ukrainian territory, which was highly supported by loyalists.

Looking closer at the specific distribution of socio-political programs and news, we can notice that with the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, the amount of time spent watching this content increased. For example, the time spent watching news increased from 8% in January 2022 to 16% in March 2024. Every time the Russian state experienced a critical moment the audience coverage increased. Interest in the news also went up with the start of partial mobilization in September 2022 and the attempt of military mutiny in June 2022. The most popular news sources for Russian citizens were such programs as News on TV Channel Russia 1, Today evening on NTV Channel, Time of The First TV Channel.

Socio-political programs also doubled their audience from 7% in January to 18% in March 2022. The most viewed socio-political TV programs before the war in 2021 were "The investigation is conducted with Leonid Kanevsky", "Central television on NTV Channel", "The man and the law", "60 minutes", "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin" and "Sunday evening with Vladimir Soloviev" – Russian propagandist who was put under sanctions for his propaganda activities. After the start of the war, in March-April 2022, the most popular socio-political shows were "New Russian sensations", "60 minutes", "Sunday evening with Vladimir Soloviev" and "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin" – all political²²⁰.

Different data collected by different sources show different levels of support of the "special military operation" by Russian citizens. Thus, according to the state-controlled All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion, the level of support for the special military operation among Russian population increased by three percentage points compared to the last year, reaching 68% by February 2024²²¹. At the same time, the share of citizens who believe its success rate for Russian troops decreased by 6% compared to 2023 and amounted to 65%. Meanwhile, concerning the goals of the special military operation, the opinion of citizens was not so unanimous: 43% of respondents considered that the military operation aims to protect the Russian Federation, disarm Ukraine, and prevent the deployment of NATO military bases on its territory. According to the polls, 25% of participants see the protection of the population of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics as the main goal. For 15% of the respondents, the main goal is to change the political regime of Ukraine and destroy nationalists' movements.

Another survey conducted by Levada Center showed that the percentage of citizens who are fully in support of the special military operation has not changed since the beginning of the war in 2022 and stayed at 46% of respondents. The amount of those who "mostly in favor" increased by 9% and reached 30% till the end of 2024. Moreover, the number of those who were previously definitely against military action decreased from 15% to 7%²²². Most

²²⁰ MediaScope, "Media Audience Data."

²²¹ "Special Military Operation: One Year Later."

²²² "Conflict with Ukrain: Mass Estimates of February 2024" (Levada Center, May 3, 2024), <https://www.levada.ru/2024/03/05/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-massovye-otsenki-fevralya-2024-goda/>.

closely follow the news about the military conflict in Ukraine: citizens 65 years and older (75%) and TV viewers (59%) – the most vulnerable to propaganda.

We can conclude from the poll results, that keener to support the special military operation Russian citizens- representatives of older age groups (82% of respondents aged 55 and older), as well as those who trust information received through television (86%). Meanwhile, the level of support from younger groups below 24 years old is 66%. YouTube users also showed a lower level of support with the same 66%. From the following results, we can see the influence of state propaganda on the level of popular support. The belief in the success of the special military operation is more present among TV viewers and reaches 82%. Doubts in the successful accomplishment of the operation are typical for those who trust information from Telegram, YouTube channels (23% and 27% respectively).

Therefore, it is important to note that any type of social polls in authoritarian countries practicing repression policies cannot mirror the real perceptions within its population. As it was imitated in the Levada Center’s report “trust in the polls about “the special operation”, any survey conducted in Russia after the start of the war can give wrong results because of self-selection associated with the systematic refusal of certain groups of the population to participate in surveys. Experts also name the influence of preference falsification which is “a situation in which, instead of an honest answer to a directly posed question, respondents report what an imaginary majority expects them to hear”²²³.

Thus, we cannot be sure that surveys mirror the real moods inside Russian civil society. Nevertheless, we can notice some trends connected with the propaganda influence on the attitude toward military actions (as correlations between higher support from TV viewers and lower for YouTube viewers as I mentioned before).

2.2. Propaganda and attitudes towards foreign states

²²³ “Trust in the Polls about the Special Operation” (Levada Center, January 11, 2022), <https://www.levada.ru/2022/11/01/doverie-oprosam-o-spetsoperatsii/>.

Propaganda can influence people's attitude toward some states depending on how its policies and relations with Russia are depicted on TV. For example, in the 2010s, the attitude toward the USA was very positive: not more than 30% of the population related to the USA in a negative way. Before 2014, the percentage of Russians that negatively described the USA never reached 50%. After the occupation of Crimea and the start of massive state propaganda on Western desire to somehow "impose their will" on Russia, the attitude changed. In 2014, 73% of respondents claimed their negative perspectives about the USA. Then the hostility has been decreasing and in 2019 amounted to 40%. With the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine, the high indicators came back and reached 77% in the second half of 2023.

The same trend can be explored with the European Union: in 2003, 73% of Russians showed their positive attitude toward the Union, but after the Crimea occupation in May 2014, only 45% reported about their positive grade of the European Union, meanwhile 41% responded negatively. By 2020, it decreased, following the American trend and was about 36-37%. After the proclaimed start of "special military operation" by Russian officials, the percentage of citizens negatively attitude toward the European Union grew up and amounted to 72% in 2023²²⁴. This can relate to the sanction policies of the United States and European Union and the impact of state anti-West propaganda.

We can also follow how attitudes toward Ukraine have changed since the spread of anti-Ukrainian narratives on federal TV channels, broadcasts, and media. As can be seen by the data of Levada Center, after the fall of the Soviet Union, 78% of citizens expressed their support for the independent Ukraine. Later, in 2008, there was a decrease in the support, but the indicators reached the level of 70% by 2010. After the occupation of Crimea and the creation of an independent people's republic on the territory of Ukraine in 2014, the percentage of citizens who reported negative attitudes grew up to 60-64%. Rights after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the percentage reached 70% and decreased to 66% by the end of 2023. Attitude to the allied Belarus, vice versa, reached in 2023 its historical maximum

²²⁴ "Attitude toward Different States" (Levada Center, 2023), <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/otnoshenie-k-stranam/>.

and amounted to 92%. The same trend can be noticed in relation to China with 85% approval in 2023.

2.3. A quantitative analysis of Russian propaganda

How did Russian propagandistic media contribute to the increased support of the war in Ukraine? If we analyze the Russian media sources and the way they highlighted the war in Ukraine, we will see the common language that they share to increase the level of active support or at least loyalty to the military actions.

Russian sources to conduct analyses were chosen based on audience size, state ownership/control, and their role in propagating information²²⁵. RussiaToday, a state-owned TV channel, stands out as one of the Kremlin's most heavily funded channels for disseminating propaganda. Ria News is likewise prominent among both domestic and international Russian-speaking audiences, being part of the Sputnik News conglomerate. Komsomolskaya Pravda leads the print media landscape, while Izvestia has experienced a notable growth in its audience in recent years. Lastly, Ryadovka serves as an illustration of an ultra-right publication widely embraced by supporters of the Putin regime and the conflict in Ukraine. The articles were published from February to May 2022 in the first months of the war and from February to May 2024 – after two years of full-scale invasion.

From the articles analyzed in the chosen period, we can notice that they use common keywords to describe the war in geopolitical agenda and news directly connected with the ongoing war in Ukraine. These keywords are: Liberation, Nazi, Special operation, Collective West, Western's doll (towards Ukraine), Russophobia. The common language contributes to the increase of the level of trust in the Russian media. Moreover, constantly repeated notions find their way to the citizen's perceptions of the ongoing events, strengthening their position on the war.

²²⁵ MediaScope, "Media Audience Data."

Firstly, Russian propaganda translates the image of the desperate Ukrainian situation on the ground and underlines their military disadvantages. It can be noted in expressions as, for example, “Ukrainian army lost 250 troops and dozens of vehicles by attempting to attack Kursk and Belgorod regions” (Russia Today, 12 March 2024). To straighten assumptions about the inability of the Ukrainian army to proportionally respond to their rivals, propaganda often uses the information from Western leaders or appeals to the experts to make the connected information look more credible for the audience. We can note that reading headlines as ““The regions will be painted red”: political scientist Anpilogov explained the meaning of the Ukrainian sabotage raids” (Readovka, 15 March 2014), “US Senator Says Lack of Ukraine Peace Efforts ‘All About the Money’”- (Sputnik International, 24 February 2024),” “The Wall Street Journal recommended that Ukraine forget about the borders of 2014” (Isvestia, 3 January 2024). Appeal to authority is one of the study's propaganda techniques that doubles its effect by referring to experts or power officials of non-aligned states. It makes the information look more reliable as even not-aligned states confirm the advantages of the Russian military.

At the same time, the Ukrainian regime as well as its Western supporters got accused of disinformation. It is weighted by the accusation of Kiev of the Nazi ideas which caused the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the region of Donbass. The Ukrainian People’s Army was accused of mass murders of innocent people of Donbass who were exercising their right to independence. Here, we can follow the usage of over-simplification and appeal to justice as propaganda techniques: oversimplification, is often used to create the narrative “People of Donbass wanted the independence of Ukraine and Ukrainian regime has started the war against its own citizens”, meanwhile Russian army depicted as liberators who helped self-proclaimed Republics fight for their independence (appeal to justice). For example, in the article of Russian media outlet RiaNews from 15 March 2024 it described the visit of anti-fascists from Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Portugal and Brazil who arrived in Luhansk National Republic to express their support to the citizens of Donbass. The article tends to show that people unfriendly to Russian states disagree with the policy of their governments and do support the Russian Federation in its attempts to protect people from Donbass and to

achieve justice. In another article of *Readovka* from 26 April 2022 Ukrainian military forces were represented as violators of all norms of humanitarian law who committed violent crimes against civilians and tended to be dehumanized by the storyteller. Victims, quoted in the article, reported that “The Azov residents allowed themselves to drive up to shelters with civilians during shootouts with Russian soldiers, thereby exposing completely innocent people to bullets”²²⁶.

Another popular narrative that is constantly present in Russian media landscape is the description of Ukraine as a Western tool to weaken the Russian Federation – therefore, Ukraine does not have its own subjectivity – doubt as the propaganda technique on Ukrainians subjectivity helps to create an image of direct confrontation between the Russian Federation and “collective West”. It can be seen on the following headlines: “Ukraine was considered by NATO as a springboard against Russia, Zakharova said” (*RiaNews*, 7 March 2022), “Peskov called Ukraine a tool of the West to deter Russia” (*RiaNews*, 26 March 2024) or “An endless conflict in Ukraine would be ideal for NATO, said Patrushev” (*RiaNews*, 24 March 2022).

Not only newspapers but TV broadcasting made impute to the support of Russian invasion in Ukraine justifies by the narrative of genocide of Donbass people and Western participation. Popular Russian TV program “Sunday’s Evening with Vladimir Soloviev” is one of the most striking examples of propaganda broadcasting in Russia. Vladimir Soloviev himself is under sanctions due to his media activities. The program analyzes the political situation in Russia, its relations with other states, and military situations on the field. In the broadcast from 25.02.2024, one of the hosts - Margarita Simonyan - was talking about the special role of the Russian Federation as a “bright hail” for the followers of traditional values and as an alternative view for the rest of the world. United Russia gathered around President Putin is opposed to the “collective’s West dream”²²⁷ - the break of the Russian Federation. The war in Ukraine is depicted as a war against the West. The change of people’s opinions

²²⁶ “Pregnant Women Were Killed and Raped for Food: Mariupol Woman Told about the Atrocities of the Azov People,” *Readovka*, April 26, 2024, <https://readovka.news/news/95069>.

²²⁷ “Sunday’s Evening with Vladimir Soloviev” (*Russia 1*, February 25, 2024), <https://yapolitic.ru/58699-voskresnyy-vecher-s-solovevym-250224>.

on the aid for Ukraine was underlined. Russian citizens opposed to the President, anti-war dissidents are presented as “traitors” (during the broadcast, this wording was used 15 times)²²⁸. Considering the amount of population that consumes the mentioned information which reached the scope of 8,9% of the population between 18 and 54 years old that week, the influence of such techniques is supposed to be very high.

Despite traditional tools to spread the propagandistic narratives, the Russian propaganda machine actively uses modern technologies pursuing its aims. The most striking example of using bit attacks is the existence of a special Telegram channel named “Digital Army of Russia.” Channell main tasks are: “The task is to force as many Ukrainians as possible to leave for Europe,” “To create maximum distrust of the government in Ukrainian society”, “despondency and depression should reign in Ukrainian society”²²⁹. Achievement of formulated by channel creators’ tasks is provided by posting in Ukrainian group chats, channels, social media comments on different platforms with approved materials, which could be comments about Ukrainians policy, untrust to the government, army failures, memes and videos with the aim to influence Ukrainian population.

The Internet and television are not the only places where propaganda spreads in Russia. To be more efficient, it is applied to the schoolchildren at school. By addressing children, the government can shape their political culture from a young age and prevent future disbalance. From 2021, the schools conduct a special lesson in patriotic education which are aimed at “developing in students a sense of patriotism, citizenship, respect for the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland and the exploits of the Heroes of the Fatherland, law and order”²³⁰. As part of the implementation of this project, schools are conducting lessons “Talking about important things” where they discuss political issues as well. For example, in a lesson dedicated to the tenth anniversary of “reunification” of Crimea and Sevastopol with Russia, teachers are supposed to tell children the following: “The decision of the residents of

²²⁸ Giovanni Da San Martino et al., “Fine-Grained Analysis of Propaganda in News Articles,” 2019, <https://doi.org/10.48550/ARXIV.1910.02517>.

²²⁹ “Digital army of Russia”, Telegram channel, accessible at: t.me/digitalarmyrus

²³⁰ “Federal Law N 304-FZ of July 31, 2020 ‘On Amendments to the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” on the Education of Students,” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta Newspaper*, July 31, 2020.

Crimea and Sevastopol to reunite with Russia 10 years ago this is a conscious choice that restored historical justice and allowed the regions to revive and develop steadily”²³¹. During the conservation, teachers are also recommended “support the emerging motivational conversation, feelings of joy and celebration associated with this date”²³². The proposed lesson scenario also contains children's drawings, poems, and other forms of creativity that are recognized to have an emotional impact on children, giving them a distorted view of reality.

Summing up, it can be stated that in the conditions of the dominant position of state media, the existence of censorship and constant control over the informational flow in the media and the Internet, propaganda is an effective means of shaping public opinion on a political issue. The high level of popular support for the war in Ukraine can be explained by the long-term dissemination of propaganda messages in Russian media, which paved the way for the decision to launch a military operation.

²³¹ “Extracurricular Activity for Students in Grades 1–2 on the Topic ‘Crimea and Sevastopol: 10 Years in the Home Harbor,’” *Conversations about Important Things*, accessed April 27, 2024, <https://razgovor-cdn.edsoo.ru/media/file/crimea2024-12-script.pdf>.

²³² idem

Conclusion

In the research, the relations between implemented media policy and power-keeping ability in autocracies were studied, using the Russian Federation as a case study. Applying the propaganda model by Herman and Chomsky, research demonstrates the influence of state propaganda on shaping people's beliefs, maintenance of the President's image and marginalization of dissidents in Russia. Historical analyses of media policy in the Russian Federation showed that the use of media as an efficient instrument for political control over the population – it was used persistently first by Soviet powers and then by current political elites.

Conducted research reveals that the Russian government successfully uses ownership and funding mechanisms to dominate the media ecosystem, assuring its alliance with the official policy of the state. Coupled with the tight control over independent media activities and informal censorship, it regulates informational flows within Russia, silencing the voices of dissidents. Informal censorship in its turn provokes self-censorship under the fear of repressions, which could have both judicial and extrajudicial nature.

Government uses primary judicial mechanisms to straighten the regulation over media actors and civil society activists. Amendments made in Russian laws regulating the activities of NGOs, media and civil society organizations made it almost impossible for dissident organizations to continue their activities within the Russian Federation. As it could be seen in Chapter 5 of the first part, the situation of the shrinking space of civil society worsens after the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022.

The government became omnipresent. It did not limit itself to control the political sphere of its citizens by not allowing opposite candidates to participate in any political institutions and decision-making processes on all levels. The control over the cultural and spiritual life of people shows the will to create an ideological foundation for the justification of taking political decisions. Ideological underpinnings of Russian media reinforce state narrative and discredits opposed voices. This foundation enables President Putin to maintain

his power in the long run, gaining more popular support and at the same time, decreasing the possibility of mass protests, as it was stated in the third part.

This research has a goal to answer the posed research question - how media policy contributes to the stability of the autocratic regime in Russia. After the investigation of the practical implementation of these policies and its influence on civil society in the second part, especially NGOs and independent media, studies concluded that the opportunities and freedom for civil society groups, including NGOs and independent media, to operate and express themselves without government interference or control are diminishing. The legal tools, such as foreign law agents or amendments made to the Administrative and Criminal codes of the Russian Federation, are shown to systematically repress civil society dissidents and bolster state propaganda. Increased administrative control through the activities of executive bodies also contributed to the limitation of freedom of speech and expression both offline and online. Vague definitions used by legislators and executive bodies allowed law enforcement agents to broadly exercise their powers, increasing the possible foundation to make dissidents responsible for publicly expressed dissatisfaction.

The research also filled in the gap in the existing literature on civil society spaces in autocratic regimes, contextualizing theories for the case of the Russian Federation. It addressed gaps related to domestic factors including civil society's resistance tools in Russia. With the aid of a multidisciplinary approach, combining legal analyses, historical context and media theory, the research provided comprehensive studies on how media policy was used as a tool to maintain power in autocratic regimes.

As it was shown in Chapter 1 of part III, Putin's administration successfully applied media policy to suppress opposition, regulate public discord and maintain an image of people's support for the President. The research underlined the significant impact of state propaganda in silencing dissidents and shaping political realities. This contributed to the overall stability of the current political regime.

Present research made a valuable contribution to the discourses on media policy, civil society, autocratic regimes and interconnection between media policy and power stability. It

created a foundation for future studies to research accessible civil society methods of resistance and the role of external actors in supporting civil society's resilience in autocratic regimes. Future researchers could also develop a topic on the opposition in exile and its media strategies, using the example of Russian opposition alongside independent media who transferred their activities abroad.

In summary, this research demonstrates that the media policies in Russia are not merely regulatory measures but are integral to the state's strategy of political control. By examining the historical and contemporary practices, it becomes clear that the fusion of state and media is instrumental in perpetuating autocratic rule, limiting civil freedoms, and shaping societal norms. This study provides a critical perspective on the dynamics of media influence in autocratic regimes, emphasizing the need for continued scrutiny and support for independent media and civil society.

Recommendations. The possible recommendation for empowering civil society, support of independent media and enhancing of international efforts to promote human rights within the Russian Federation could be:

1. Financial and technical support of Russian independent media who were forced to relocate their activities abroad by European institutions. Financial support would let them continue to operate, meanwhile technical support would let independent media outlets to resist cyber-attacks and possible blockages.
2. Enhance Russian civil society by providing legal aid to Russian NGOs and activists who find themselves in Russia and by advocating for legislative changes, highlighting the situation of civil society in Russia. Creating an active network for Russian civil society organizations abroad and special training both for relocated organizations and online- for those still in Russia - could also be a good solution.
3. International diplomacy actions aimed at assistance for Russian civil society activists, human rights defenders, journalists, and opposition members in the relocation. Cooperation between international and European agencies in

questions concerning political asylum for Russian dissidents and integration of individuals in European states.

4. Protection from Russian propaganda abroad by blocking the most propagandistic sources on the territory of EU member states, creation and dismissal of alternative narratives through public events with guests from Russian society media platforms.
5. Implement on the level of EU institutions the promotion of Digital Literacy programs and disinformation awareness campaigns, which will enable residents to fight against propaganda and develop critical thinking.
6. On the level of EU legislation, develop a special regulation related to propagandistic materials, prohibiting propaganda sources from entering the media landscape of European Union states.

These recommendations will empower civil society both in the Russian Federation and abroad, supporting independent media and enhancing international efforts to promote human rights are feasible. Providing financial and technical, legal assistance as well as creating networking could be practical steps, easily implemented with international cooperation and sufficient sources. Nevertheless, Russian government's resistance to external influence could become a challenge for the implementation of such activities. Rising level of digital literacy and regulating the access to propaganda materials, which is within the competence of EU members, would contribute to the fight against propaganda. At the same time, such actions demand legislative measures, what could be time-consuming. Summing up, the present recommendations are attainable with the high level of international cooperation, commitment of international organizations crucial for the implementation of such recommendations, and robust planning to address potential challenges.

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