

Opinion: Why the West should help Russians learn the truth about Putin's war in Ukraine



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While Vladimir Putin's planned blitzkrieg on Ukraine appears to have stalled in the face of firm resistance by the Ukrainian military and its people, another, much less noticed assault has brought the Kremlin swift and total victory. Within a single week, all — literally, *all* — of Russia's remaining independent media voices have been silenced in a coordinated effort by the prosecutor general's office and the government's main censorship agency.

One after another, media outlets that dared to report honestly on Putin's assault on Ukraine had their signals cut off and their websites blocked. The casualties included the legendary [Echo of Moscow](#), the capital's most popular radio station, which symbolized quality journalism in Russia for more than three decades. The last time the authorities attempted to shut it down was during the failed coup d'état by the hard-line communist leadership in August 1991. That closure was short-lived as hundreds of thousands of Muscovites took to the streets to defeat the putsch. Where the Soviet coup leaders failed, Putin has now succeeded.

The officials who cut off Echo of Moscow — as well as TV Rain, a popular online television network, and dozens of other news outlets, both Russian and foreign-owned — cited the presumed offense of “spreading false information about the actions of the Russian military” in Ukraine. In other words, the journalists’ crime was telling the Russian people the bloody truth about Putin’s war — the truth that is completely absent from Russian state television, which is presenting viewers with an Orwellian reality in which it is Ukraine and the West, not Putin, that are to blame for the hostilities, and in which there is no war and no civilian casualties — only a highly targeted “special operation” directed against the imaginary “neo-Nazis” in the Ukrainian government.

Such a total lie depends on a similarly total monopoly on news coverage. After silencing critical voices on television — the largest source of information for most Russians — early in his rule, Putin tolerated smaller outlets such as Echo of Moscow as part of a pretend democratic facade for the West’s benefit. But under the conditions of war, even small pockets of independent media that could show Russians what heinous crimes their government is committing could present an existential danger to the system. For the same reason, Roskomnadzor, the censorship agency, has blocked Twitter and Facebook, both popular social media platforms with millions of Russian users. Near-total darkness has descended on Russia’s information space with frightening speed.

But the Kremlin didn’t stop there. On Friday, in an unprecedented legislative sprint, both houses of Russia’s rubber-stamp parliament unanimously passed a new law — immediately signed by Putin — criminalizing honest reporting (“spreading knowingly false information,” in Kremlin-speak) about Russian military actions and organizing demonstrations against them. Criminal penalties for the said “offenses” run as high as 15 years in prison, and Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin already promised “strict punishment.”

In response, leading Western news organizations — including CNN, CBS News and the BBC — have announced that they are ceasing reporting from Russia to protect their journalists from arrest. As expected, the immediate brunt of the new measures fell most heavily on Russian opponents of the war. On Saturday, just a day after the law came into effect, police in Pskov raided the offices of Lev Shlosberg, a prominent opposition leader and publisher who has been a vocal critic of Putin's attacks on Ukraine since 2014. In Kostroma, police detained a Russian Orthodox priest, Father Ioann Burdin, over his church sermon against the war. They are almost certainly only the first in a long list of targets. Given this threat, it is remarkable that thousands of Russians continue to rally all over the country in opposition to Putin's assault on Ukraine.

As the world's democracies rightly prioritize helping Ukraine withstand Putin's aggression, they should not overlook the other important task: helping Russian citizens gain access to objective information about the war and the Putin regime in general. Now that the Kremlin has silenced all independent media voices, democratic nations must step up efforts to provide news coverage for Russian citizens in the Russian language, as they did during Soviet times when Radio Liberty, the BBC Russian Service and other Western broadcasters reached millions of listeners inside the Soviet Union. (It comes as little surprise that Putin's regime is cracking down on these outlets as well.) According to Soviet dissidents and Western analysts alike, foreign broadcasts played a crucial role in delegitimizing the totalitarian system in the eyes of its own citizens — and paving the way for the end of the Cold War. There are plenty of technological solutions that can help Russians overcome the government's censorship firewall. It is only a question of will and committing the right resources.

The day before he was murdered in February 2015, Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov predicted that the lies built by Putin's regime would "collapse in an instant." "In the 1930s, the German people were enchanted by Hitler but now they hate him," Nemtsov said. "This is exactly what will happen to Putin." After years of appeasing the Kremlin, Western leaders are learning the hard way that the instability, repression and conflict Putin is causing will resolve only when he is out of power. Only Russians can (and should) achieve this. The least the world's democracies can do is help them get access to the truth.