

Reforum

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MEDIA REFORM IN RUSSIA



REFORUM

2022

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Executive Summary | 3 |
| INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS MEDIA REFORM? | 4 |
| I. THE PROBLEMS OF THE RUSSIAN MEDIA SYSTEM | 6 |
| II. PREPARATION FOR MEDIA REFORM | 9 |
| Preliminary preparation | 9 |
| Media reform experiences in other post-Soviet countries | 9 |
| Media reform experiences in post-coup countries | 10 |
| First steps | 10 |
| III. THE FIRST STAGE OF MEDIA REFORM | 13 |
| 1. End the persecution of journalists based on their professional activity | 13 |
| 2. Repeal repressive media laws and regulations | 14 |
| 3. Dismantle the propaganda apparatus | 15 |
| 4. Engage independent media that still exist in Russia | 19 |
| IV. THE SECOND STAGE OF MEDIA REFORM | 20 |
| 1. Develop new legislation to regulate the work of mass media | 20 |
| 2. Launch an independent public TV and radio channel | 21 |
| 3. Launch educational campaigns to increase public media literacy | 22 |
| 4. Create control mechanisms for the work of mass media | 23 |
| V. FURTHER STEPS (MATURE PERIOD) | 23 |
| Reform of the Russian Union of Journalists | 23 |
| Journalism education reform | 25 |
| CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS | 26 |

Executive Summary

Freedom of speech in Russia and the Russian media system as a whole are currently undergoing a serious crisis. Over the past two decades, the Russian state has built a large repression apparatus to monopolize the public sphere, suppress political discourse, and manipulate public opinion through propaganda and disinformation. The Russian media (with rare exceptions) has never quite evolved into an independent institution of civil society, having instead been incorporated into the power system. Public trust in the media has remained low since it collapsed in the 1990s. A fundamental reform of the media system is long overdue.

Media reform, however, cannot be conducted independently; it needs to be part of a larger transformation of the entire political system and accompanying institutional reforms. This report is a first step toward the formulation of a comprehensive strategy to reform the Russian media system, without which a true democratic transition will be impossible for the country. One of the key objectives of media reform is the establishment of free and independent media aimed at facilitating the development of a political system that is competitive and open for citizen participation, as well as the development of a public sphere that allows the media to deliver unbiased, factual information on key events and simultaneously serve as a communication platform between the authorities and the public.

The Reform project envisions three possible scenarios for regime change in Russia: “perestroika 2.0” (gradual democratization of the existing political system), “building from the ground up” (creation of new state institutions following a coup, possibly a military one, and subsequent restoration of civilian control), and “reform of the federal system” (consolidation of the country as a unitarian state with significant social control). Each of these scenarios opens up opportunities to develop and customize media reform, the main components of which are reviewed in this report.

The report’s structure includes the following sections:

Introduction: Outlines the meaning and main properties of media reform for the three scenarios proposed by the Reform project.

Section I: Offers a brief overview of the Russian media system and identifies its main problems that should be solved at various stages of media reform. These problems are: a monocentric media model; repressive legislation; a powerful state propaganda apparatus; a scarcity of independent media; a low level of journalistic professionalism and media literacy among Russian citizens; and the commercialization and corporatization of the media.

Section II: Outlines the preliminary stage of media reform, during which reformers are advised to reflect on the Russian understanding of freedom of speech and brainstorm a desired model for a future media system.

Section III: Breaks down the first stage of media reform: ceasing the persecution of journalists; repealing repressive amendments to media legislation; dismantling the propaganda apparatus; and engaging independent media in the reform process.

Section IV: Reviews the second stage of media reform, offering the following measures for implementation: developing new normative and legal acts that regulate media work; launching a public television channel; launching informational and educational programs to raise media literacy; and creating mechanisms for civic control over the media.

Section V: Offers long-term recommendations: reforming the Russian Union of Journalists as well as the journalism education system.

Conclusion: Summarizes the key takeaways and recommendations of this report.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS MEDIA REFORM?

The level and state of the mass media determine the development of democracy.

Lech Wałęsa¹

In 2021, Freedom House classified Russia as a consolidated authoritarian regime.² In the organization's annual Freedom in the World index in 2021, Russia was rated as "not free" in terms of political and civil rights.³ It was also rated as "not free" in the 2021 Freedom on the Net index due to significant obstacles to accessing the internet, limits on content, and violation of user rights.⁴

As the Russian state ramps up its repressive policies, media freedom has diminished dramatically. In the 2021 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, Russia was ranked 150th in the list of 180 countries⁵ (in the previous two years it was 149th). Over the past two decades, the Russian government has significantly strengthened its grip over all segments of the media market, and today, according to some estimates, the share of Russian independent media in terms of reach does not exceed 7-8%,⁶ while pressure on these outlets continues to grow.⁷

While Russia's authoritarian system remains relatively stable, potential democratic reforms should be discussed and developed now, and special attention should be paid to the transformation of the media system (media reform).

Media reform is a relatively new research subject that has emerged at the intersection of transitology and communications.⁸ In studies of democratic

transitions, media reform is typically viewed in terms of changing legal regulation of the media, but lately the concept has expanded to include all potential change in the media system. Today, Western communications experts often discuss media reform with regard to Western media systems, which are currently undergoing various crises due to the shrinking profitability of traditional media, overconcentration of media assets, growing domination by the Big Tech giants (Google, Facebook, Twitter), and decreasing public trust. These developments and these discussions offer a unique opportunity for future Russian reformers: they can learn both from the mistakes made during the country's initial democratization in the 1990s and from the challenges facing Western media systems today.

Conceptually, media reform is always closely connected to democratization.⁹ As such, one of the key goals of media reform is the establishment of independent media that would facilitate the creation of a political system where the public sphere can be competitive and open to civic participation and where the media can produce objective, diverse, and factually accurate information on key events of public life and simultaneously serve as a communication platform between the government and the public.¹⁰ Free and independent media is conducive not just to political development, but to economic development as well,

1 Cit. from: Margueritte, B. *Post-communist Eastern Europe: The Difficult Birth of a Free Press*. Shorenstein Center, Harvard University, 1995.

2 "Nations in Transit 2021. Country report: Russia." Freedom House, 2021. URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2021>

3 "Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege." Freedom House, 2021. URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>

4 "Freedom on the Net 2021." Freedom House, 2021. URL: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/FOTN_2021_Complete_Booklet_09162021_FINAL_UPDATED.pdf

5 Reporters Without Borders. "World Press Freedom Index 2021." URL: <https://rsf.org/en/2021-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-vaccine-against-disinformation-blocked-more-130-countries>

6 An estimate by Levada Center sociologist Lev Gudkov in an interview with the author.

7 Satanovsky, Sergei. "Meduza, DOXA and others: what lies behind the prosecution of journalists in Russia," *Deutsche Welle*, May 3, 2021 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/медуза-доха-и-другие-что-стоит-за-преследованием-журналистов-в-россии/a-57392626>

8 McChesney, R. *Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspective*. Eds. Freedman D., Obar J., Martens C., McChesney R., Fordham University Press, 2016.

9 Rozumilowicz, B. "Democratic change: a theoretical perspective." In *Media Reform: Democratizing the Media, Democratizing the State*, Routledge, 2002.

10 Habermas, J. *Structural transformation of the public sphere. An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Moscow, 2016.

since well-informed citizens are capable of making more effective decisions.

However, the creation of free and independent media is not a goal in itself: media reform should also have as its objective the strengthening of democratic values, such as freedom, truth, justice, the common good, diversity, etc. The creation of free and independent media is directly connected to the fundamental human right to freedom of expression, which has as its basis the understanding that one's life cannot be fully actualized unless the person has an opportunity to express his or her opinions, beliefs, and interests and openly share them in the public space. In this way, free and independent media serves a double function: on the one hand, it serves as a platform for important public discussions, and on the other hand, it informs, entertains, and enriches human life.

When we talk about the independent media, one question always arises: independent from whom or from what? In the classic definition of the press as a “watchdog” of democracy,¹¹ independence is juxtaposed to the state monopoly, and freedom is guaranteed by competition and market mechanisms. However, this condition is not always sufficient for the media to serve in the capacity of the “fourth estate”:¹² market powers also implicitly contain a threat of tyranny—resulting in, for example, media concentration or the media's financial dependence on advertisers, investors, sponsors, etc. These vulnerabilities became especially clear over the past decade with the rise of internet media and social media. Even under the conditions of formal competition and independence from the state, media freedom can be constrained by a narrow circle of dominating social and corporate groups that infringe upon the rights of minorities.

Accounting for these limitations and vulnerabilities, at the core of Russian media reform should be a model of a free and independent media that fulfills all three conditions: an absence of state monopoly on media ownership and regulation, a competitive environment, and inclusivity. This model's key properties are **freedom of speech**, **diversity** (of content, owners, political views), and **equality** (the accessibility of information and the ability for various groups to access the media space).

The practical objectives of media reform include building a system of legal, institutional, economic, and sociocultural mechanisms that guarantee diffused control over the media and free access to it. The rule of law and civic control will serve as this system's guarantors, and democratic media policy—formulated during open political discussions to which all social and political groups will have access—should be its central element. This means that a fundamental media reform in Russia will remain impossible unless it is part of a broader package of political reforms. According to some experts, such reforms are most effective during so-called “critical junctions,” when political systems open up and “windows of opportunity” for real transformation emerge.¹³

According to the Reform project's expert consensus, in modern Russia such windows of opportunity may open under the following three scenarios of regime change:

- “**perestroika 2.0**”: gradual democratization of the existing political system triggered by a substantial weakening or departure of the current regime's leader;
- “**building from the ground up**”: new state institutions following a coup, possibly a military one, and subsequent restoration of civilian control;
- “**reform of the federal system**”: consolidation of the country as a unitarian state with significant social control—a scenario that takes place as a result of the weakening of federal control over the regions and the strengthening of separatist sentiments.

All three scenarios create conditions for political change and for new political groups to enter the stage, which will invariably lead to the reformatting of access to public discourse in the media. It is evident that, as part of the last two scenarios, the scale and content of media reform will be significantly constrained by the parameters of the political system; however, as other countries' experiences show,¹⁴ correction of the media system is possible even under far-from-perfect conditions.

11 Baker, E. “The media that citizens need,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 1998. URL: https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3405&context=penn_law_review

12 Schultz, J. *Reviving the fourth estate: democracy, accountability, and the media*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

13 McChesney, R. *Communication Revolution: Critical Junctures and the Future of Media*, The New Press, 2007.

14 Lisa Bronstein. “Impunity, Inclusion, and Implementation. Media Reform Challenges in Thailand, Myanmar, and the Philippines.” In: *Strategies for Media Reform. International Perspectives*.

I. THE PROBLEMS OF THE RUSSIAN MEDIA SYSTEM

In current media scholarship, the traditional classification of the “four theories of press,”¹⁵ which describes the media in different regimes (the Authoritarian, Libertarian, Soviet Totalitarian, and Social-Responsibility theories) has been replaced with a theory developed by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, who identify three contemporary models of mass media: North Atlantic (Liberal), North/Central European (Democratic Corporatist), and Mediterranean (Polarized Pluralistic).¹⁶ Hallin and Mancini also expanded their theory, specifying that this classification needs further deliberation if applied beyond the Western world.¹⁷ Although every media model is formed under conditions unique to a specific country, this process is shaped by common forces (the state, the market, and civil society¹⁸) and factors (politics, economy, and technologies,¹⁹ as well as culture and traditions²⁰). With that in mind, reformers can use Western templates as guidelines for the development of a desired media model in Russia—for example, within the “perestroika 2.0” scenario. The experiences of such countries as Portugal, Chile, Argentina, Myanmar, the Philippines, and others can also be instructive for other regime change scenarios in Russia (“building from the ground up,” “reform of the federal system”), since these countries transitioned from an authoritarian system to a more democratic one at different times and with varying degrees of success (or failure).

What does the Russian media system look like today?

Most researchers point to its ambiguous nature (**dualism**),²¹ featuring a combination of statist media

policy with commercialization and corporatization of the media field. In parallel with strengthening its control over the media, the state actively encourages the development of the commercial segment—apolitical entertainment content that leans strongly into tabloidization.

Into the Russian media model are “sewn” political characteristics of the post-Soviet space: journalism’s subordination to the interests of the state (**paternalism**); a history of formal and informal relationships between the political elite and journalists (**clientelism**); a lack of experience running effective media businesses; and public tolerance of the state’s use of the media as an instrument of politics²² and propaganda.

What has shaped this configuration of the Russian media model? While in the West free and independent media developed over the course of the industrial revolution, urbanization, and growing public literacy and political participation, the situation in Russia was very different. Ever since Peter the Great launched the country’s first newspaper—*Vedomosti*—the Russian media have always been under state control, first serving as an instrument for the communication of the elite, and then as a mouthpiece for Soviet, and now Russian propaganda. Over its entire 300-year history, the Russian media system has only experienced brief periods of democratization and absence of censorship.

Russia’s law on the mass media, adopted in 1991, abolished censorship and allowed the creation of private media companies, but freedom of speech

15 Siebert, F., Peterson, T., Schramm, W. *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do*. University of Illinois Press, 1963.

16 Hallin, D., Mancini, P. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

17 Hallin, D., Mancini, P. *Comparing Media Systems beyond the Western World*. Cambridge University Press, 2012

18 Nordenstreng, K., Vartanova E., Zassoursky Y. (eds.) *Russian Media Challenge* (2nd edition), Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2002.

19 McQuail D., *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory* (5th ed.), London: Sage, 2005.

20 Curran, J., Seaton, J. *Power without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain* (5th edition). London, Routledge, 1997

21 Vartanova E. The Russian media model in the context of post-Soviet dynamics. In: Hallin, D., Mancini, P. *Comparing Media Systems beyond the Western World*. Cambridge University Press, 2012; Lehtisaari, K., Miazhevich G. Introduction: the Russian media system at a crossroads, *Russian Journal of Communication*, 11 (1), 2019.

22 Vartanova, 2012

(just like *glasnost* before it) was handed down from the top: the public did not have to fight for it, and therefore could not truly appreciate its importance. In the early 1990s, when the political system opened up, a special situation took shape: the public showed demand for a free and independent press, while the state no longer strived for ideological domination and could afford to distribute direct and indirect subsidies to media organizations based on their loyalty. Still, researchers call this period the freest in the entire history of the Russian media system.²³ Freedom proved to be short-lived: initial democratic reform went hand in hand with an economic crisis, fragmentation of society, and deterioration of the society's value system, which led to a profound decline of Russian journalism.

Against the backdrop of the state's economic insolvency, the media, accustomed to relying on state support, struggled to survive. Their transition to the market economy was marked by a boom of commercial content, resulting in the rampant spread of paid journalism (*dzhinsa*, *komprobat*, and *zakazukha*). Competition for power and political influence led to information wars waged by the new media owners. Subsequently, the media lost virtually all the public trust it had enjoyed during the Soviet period and the first few years following the USSR's collapse: Russian journalism was increasingly compared to "the world's second oldest profession."²⁴

As democratic reforms in Russia have always followed a "spontaneous transformation" pattern, with elites fragmented and real democratic forces absent,²⁵ by the mid-1990s the country began to slide off the democratic path. With the public's silent consent, the state once again assumed the function of party-building, and the role of political parties was overtaken by television networks, which have turned into the main instruments of voter mobilization.²⁶ Having no genuine civil society traditions, Russians continued to view the media as a part of the state power structure, and themselves as subordinates to that structure—not as agents of influence on the media, but as consumers of media content. The perception of power and au-

thority as a sacral force acting as a guarantor of the nation and society's very existence is deeply rooted in the Russian mass consciousness and reflected in political and media culture.²⁷

By the late 1990s, information wars in Russia had mostly subsided, and influential financial industry groups emerged with key media assets concentrated in their hands. By that time, the public popularity of the reformers had declined, curtailing the democratic transition as conservative groups gained influence. Vladimir Putin's ascent to power in 2000 and his subsequent launch of a large-scale consolidation of power was a logical result of these processes. The intentions of the groups whose interests Putin represented can be traced in the Information Security Doctrine (September 2000), which linked information policy—and mass media as its instrument—with national security and the defense of the state's interests.

At this point, the Russian media market had been largely commercialized, its shares distributed among a handful of major media owners. While not being completely free, the market was not yet fully monopolized by the state, which allowed for the development of a small segment of high-quality independent journalism. This situation began to change quickly during Putin's first term, as the president embarked on a consistent "purge" of the political space and the public field. The 2001 attack on NTV, at the time Russia's best independent television company, sent a signal to other media outlets as to how to build relationships with the state and cover its activities. By the end of Putin's first term, the state had more than 70% of electronic media, 80% of the regional press, and 20% of nationwide publishers under directorial or financial control.²⁸

As the state steered toward authoritarianism, political discourse continued to narrow in the media: publishers and television networks started to avoid politically sensitive subjects in their coverage, concentrating on "safer" topics. Even as censorship was officially banned, self-censorship experienced a powerful comeback in the Russian media. Under

23 Roudakova, N. *Losing Pravda: Ethics and The Press in Post-Truth Russia*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

24 Ibid.

25 Resnyanskaya, L. "Labyrinths of democratization." In *Media in Changing Russia* (a collective monograph). Moscow, 2010.

26 Oates, S. *Television, Democracy, and Elections in Russia*. Routledge, 2006.

27 Vartanova, 2012.

28 Fossato, F. "Medialandscape: 1991–2003." *Otechestvennye Zapiski*. Issue 4 (13), 2003. URL: <https://strana-oz.ru/2003/4/medialandshaft-1991-2003>

state pressure, journalism was essentially depoliticized, political discourse turned into “the language of power,” and entertainment content took center stage, while meaningful discussions on the actual problems of the country ended up marginalized.

The government went on to develop a whole range of pressure tools to control the media: repressive laws and regulations, legal sanctions (libel charges, defamation suits), the acquisition of media assets, and the appointment of top managers loyal to the state. Meanwhile, Russia’s advertising market and the entertainment sector of the media were actively encouraged by the government and thrived throughout the 2000s.²⁹

The 2011–2012 mass protests and especially Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea mark two turning points for the political regime and, by extension, for the media system. The extant trend of media monopolization by the state was subsequently supplemented by the creation of a powerful propaganda apparatus whose work targeted both domestic and international audiences. The 2010s also saw the toughening of media regulation (over 20 repressive federal laws

concerning media work have been adopted in Russia), attacks on the shrinking segment of independent media, and a ramping up of propaganda and disinformation campaigns, which are now conducted not only by state-controlled media, but also by “proxy” agents acting in the state’s interest. After the 2011–2012 protests, which were largely organized through social media, the state’s attempts to take control of the Russian internet (which had harbored freedom of speech since the early 2000s) intensified. However, these attempts have so far been a catch-up effort.³⁰

Despite the negative trends of the last few decades, Russian media underwent a major evolution, having adapted to modern market conditions and technological challenges. Despite the government’s increasing pressure on journalism—especially on the independent segment—the industry saw the creation of some high professional standards and, in recent years, a truly booming, albeit very small, segment of excellent investigative journalism.³¹ Thanks to the ubiquity of the internet and social media, Russia, just like the West, is seeing a rise in civic journalism and web activism.

29 Hallin and Mancini, 2004.

30 Rossokhovatsky, D. Khvostunova, O. “Why Russia Needs a ‘Sovereign Runet,’” Institute of Modern Russia, July 25, 2019. URL: <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3029-why-russia-needs-a-“sovereign-runet”>

31 Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Democracy. “Defending Democracy: Investigative Journalism vs Authoritarianism.” Online conference proceedings. April 5, 2021. URL: <https://nemtsovfund.org/en/2021/04/defending-democracy-investigative-journalism-vs-authoritarianism/>

II. PREPARATION FOR MEDIA REFORM

Researchers highlight four stages of media reform as part of a democratic transition:³² **preliminary preparation, primary transition, secondary transition, and transition of the mature period.** A democratic backslide toward authoritarianism can occur at any of these stages and not a single country went through the transition smoothly and painlessly. Reformers should be aware that they might need to go through these stages several times in any of the three scenarios of regime change identified by the Reform project.

Preliminary preparation

Effective reform needs thorough preparation, which includes analyzing the mistakes of previous Russian transitions and experiences in other post-Soviet and authoritarian regimes, as well as reflecting on the existing structural problems in the Russian media system. Ideally, these processes should take place in an open discussion with the participation of independent experts and members of the media and civil society. In the reality of today's Russia, reflection should start with independent expert discourse, which accounts for the interconnection between the political and media systems.

Numerous analyses of the Russian media system point to the following problems:

- a monocentric media model;
- repressive legislation and regulation;
- a powerful propaganda apparatus;
- a scarcity high-quality independent journalism;
- commercialization and corporatization;
- a low level of professionalism and journalistic ethics;
- the public's low levels of media literacy and trust in the media.³³

A media reform plan that provides solutions for all of these problems can be used as a blueprint; on its basis, reformers can develop specific steps for each of the three proposed transition scenarios. In each case, the following objectives should be seen as priorities: liberalization of repressive legislation and regulation of the media; dismantlement of the propaganda apparatus created to promote the current regime's interests; and liberalization of the monocentric mass media model (e.g., through the privatization of the state's major media assets). Other problems of the Russian media system can be addressed in the long-term if the initial democratization stages are successfully implemented.

Media reform experiences in other post-Soviet countries

During the democratic transition of the 1990s, media reforms in the post-Soviet space typically followed two stages: first, censorship was formally abolished and freedom of speech was pronounced, and second, the public space was opened up for members of society.³⁴ The adoption of democratic legislation and regulation of the media sphere was the fulcrum of these media reforms. It was assumed that market mechanisms and "correct" laws would bring the media up to democratic standards.

However, it soon became clear that in most post-Soviet countries, media laws were "imitational":³⁵ legislation was often directly borrowed (sometimes simply by translation) from developed democracies, where it corresponded to national media systems. Such borrowing did not account for the specifics of post-Soviet political culture, the existing power structures and their relations with the media, a weak and passive civil society, or the historical context of each country. As an analysis of these media reforms' results shows, they were most successful when the reform's agenda and plan were developed with

32 Rustow D. Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 1970; O'Donnell et al. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986; Linz J. and Stepan, A. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, 1996.

33 Nalitova, N. "How Russians perceive journalists." *Journalist*, October 24, 2018 (in Russian). URL: <https://jrnlst.ru/research2018>

34 Peruško, Z. Great expectations: On experiences with media reform in post-socialist Europe (and some unexpected outcomes). *Central European Journal of Communication*, Issue 3, pp. 241–252, 2014.

35 Splichal S. *Media beyond Socialism: Theory and Practice in East-Central Europe*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

the participation of civil society members, journalists, and researchers (e.g., Croatia in the late 1990s).³⁶ When media reform was handed down “from above,” its results were always worse. Reformers should keep these mistakes in mind when working on a plan for Russian media reform.

Media reform experiences in post-coup countries

Research of countries that experienced coups shows that democratization under such strained conditions is possible, especially if the coup masterminds aim to open up the economy (in particular, to get rid of international sanctions imposed on the previous regime) and to attain higher legitimacy through free and fair elections.³⁷ The scenario of the bloodless military coup that took place in Portugal in 1974 (the Carnation Revolution) is considered optimal in terms of democratic transition. Having ended the rule of António de Salazar’s authoritarian regime, the guerilla organization Armed Forces Movement (unofficially known as the “Movement of Captains”) established a temporary military rule and launched a political transition. In two years, political power was transferred over to political parties. Based on statistical data, in the post-Cold War world, the probability of the Portuguese scenario has slightly increased (globalization and international pressure have been key factors in this), but any coup still carries major risks for any political system.³⁸

Even as part of the “desirable” Portuguese scenario, a military coup leads to a dangerous confrontation of political forces seeking legitimization, and the outcome of their struggle is not always obvious from the start. Thanks to supporters of the pluralistic concept of media who opposed the previous regime’s heirs, as well as radical far-left groups campaigning for preservation of censorship, in 1975, Portugal adopted the Press Law, which guaranteed freedom of speech “without subordination to any form of censorship.”³⁹ A year later, freedom of speech was also secured in the new Portuguese Constitution.

Latin American countries that experienced a series of military coups in the 1970s–1990s showcase the risks of forceful regime change. Argentina’s 1976 military coup that overthrew the rule of President Isabel Perón led to seven years of military junta rule marked by political repressions, which resulted in 30,000 people being kidnapped or going missing.⁴⁰ In Chile, the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, who had overthrown the left-leaning government of Salvador Allende, lasted from 1973 to 1990; in Uruguay, the civic-military regime existed from 1973 to 1985. In addition to political repressions, banning of political parties, and assassinations of opponents, these regimes harshly suppressed freedom of speech and of expression. Still, over time, military dictatorships proved to be unsustainable, and today these countries are undergoing a democratic transition—albeit slow and not always smooth. In Chile, for instance, the Press Law, which repealed the remnants of the military dictatorship’s suppressive media regulations, was only signed in 2001; it still contains some problematic articles (on libel and defamation), which constrain journalists’ work. In Argentina, the law regulating the work of national TV and radio broadcasting was signed even later—in 2009—replacing the 1980 version, which had been put in place during the full swing of the junta rule.

The main achievements of media reform in these countries are the legal securing of freedom of speech and the establishment of a relatively pluralistic media system. Among issues still lingering in their transition from a military dictatorship to a democracy are political populism and highly concentrated media markets.⁴¹

First steps

At the preliminary stage, reformers must create a **task force**, which should include media scholars, independent journalists, members of civil society and groups that protect journalists’ rights, media reform experts, as well as media owners. The main goal of the task force would be the development of the media reform’s conceptual blocks, which should account for

36 Peruško, 2014.

37 Thyne, C.; Powel, J. “*Coup d’état or Coup d’Autocracy?* How Coups Impact Democratization, 1950–2008,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12, 192–213, 2016.

38 Marinov, N., Goemans, H. “Coups and Democracy.” *British Journal of Political Science*, Volume 44, Issue 4, 2013.

39 Sousa, H. “The Liberalisation of Media and Communications in Portugal” in Syrett, Stephen (Coord.), *Contemporary Portugal, Dimensions of economic and political change*, Hampshire (UH) & Burlington (USA), Ashgate.

40 Valdez, S. M. Human rights acts. Media Reform and Politics in Argentina. PhD thesis, Western Sydney University, 2017.

41 Reilly, K. “Latin America: Is media reform enough?” *Media Development*, No. 3 & 4, 2012.

the specifics of the existing media model, previous transition experiences in Russia and other countries, and the relevant scenarios of regime change. Ideally, the reform should be based on a wide approach that aims to transform the entire media system and not just the pertinent media law, but, more realistically, reformers could use a modular approach, one based on the most optimal components of the reform that can be implemented in the present moment.

Some of the suggested first steps for the task force include:

- answer the conceptual question “What is the Russian understanding of freedom of speech?” and formulate a desired model for a future media system;
- conduct an inventory of assets and operating parameters of the Russian media system (e.g., national and regional media, ownership system, laws and regulations, professional unions, etc.);
- pay special attention to the independent media segment; its representatives should be involved in the reform planning discussions, and their support must be enlisted in the event of the opening of the political system;
- formulate the tasks that need to be completed at each stage of the reform.

The foundational issue that requires most serious discussion at the preliminary stage of the reform is the question of **freedom of speech** and its definition under Russian conditions. Right to freedom of speech is recognized in Article 19 of [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), Article 10 of [the European Convention on the Defense of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms](#), as well as Article 29 of [the Constitution of the Russian Federation](#). Despite the fact that this right is formally recognized in Russia, freedom of speech in the country is not a subject of wide public discussion: the state has secured the right to define it for itself.⁴²

Freedom of speech cannot be absolute—it is limited by the modern person’s existence in the bounds of civilized society, whose members have rights and freedoms as well as responsibilities. There are limitations when it comes to issues such as right to privacy,

libel, obscene behavior, pornography, incitement of hatred, violence and overthrowing of the government, commercial information, and state secrets, national security, etc.

A classic criterion that defines the relationship between freedom and its limitations in democratic societies is the so-called “principle of harm” put forward by John Stuart Mill in his essay “On Liberty” (1859):⁴³

“That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”

Freedom of speech exists within a country’s legal system. Thus, the expansive interpretation of freedom of speech in the United States⁴⁴ is provided for by the

42 “Problems of censorship and freedom of speech on the Internet will be discussed at the St. Petersburg Forum.” *Sputnik News*, May 31, 2021 (in Russian). URL: <https://sputnik.by/society/20210531/1047760441/Na-Peterburgskom-forume-obsudyat-problemy-tsenzury-i-svobody-slova-v-internete.html>

43 Mill, J. S. *On Liberty*. Dover Publications, 2002.

44 Abrams, F. *The Soul of the First Amendment*, Yale University Press, 2017.

country's history and the specifics of the American political and legal systems, and is therefore different from the more conservative approach practiced in European countries, not to mention developing countries and authoritarian regimes.⁴⁵ Developing the Russian definition of freedom of speech, reformers should thus account for legal, political, and social factors that influence the way freedom of speech is perceived by the Russian public. For example, in the Levada-Center's 2019 polls, 58% of Russians named freedom of speech as one of the most important human rights and freedoms, while in 2017 only 34% of respondents thought so.⁴⁶ According to political scientists, public demand for political rights and freedoms in Russia has been growing since 2014.⁴⁷

When choosing the **new media model**, reformers should also review the mistakes made during earlier attempts at transition—attempts to borrow or imitate Western models or to impose media reform on the public “from above.” The optimal solution would be reaching a consensus decision on the desired media model over the course of open discussions involving all the members of the task force. Special attention should be paid to such factors as the government's influence on media development (e.g., through subsidies), media policy, laws and regulations (in particular, to prevent concentration of media assets), as well as the media's dual role as a democratic institution and as a business. Discussion of the future media model must be directly linked to the development of political reform, including choosing the best-fitting political model for Russia.

Research on media reform in other countries shows that media activists campaigning for the protection of freedom of speech play an important part in its successful implementation. Educating and informing the public about its rights, these activists bring more people into the discussion, facilitating the development of civic consciousness and laying the groundwork for future public support of the reform.⁴⁸

Without deep reflection on the conceptual questions and active discussion involving members of the public, media reform might once again prove to be ineffective. A thought-out, complex reform project developed on a consensual basis will allow reformers to configure and adapt its modules to existing conditions once a “window of opportunity” opens in the Russian political system.

At that moment the “discourse of the change”⁴⁹ can be launched, for which reformers are encouraged to:

- identify and recruit potential like-minded officials within the regime and enlist their support for the reform;
- involve regime representatives in critical discussions of the country's real problems;
- convince the regime to recognize the “nonsystemic” opposition;
- allow the opposition access to informational (media) resources so they can articulate and spread their ideas;
- enlist the support of foreign media resources, including Russian media resources operating abroad, to widen the discussion field.

45 Wike, R., Simmons, K. Global Support for Principle of Free Expression, but Opposition to Some Forms of Speech Americans Especially Likely to Embrace Individual Liberties, Pew Research, 2015. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/11/18/global-support-for-principle-of-free-expression-but-opposition-to-some-forms-of-speech/>

46 “Human Rights.” Levada-Center, November 20, 2019 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.levada.ru/2019/11/20/prava-cheloveka/>

47 “Something is ripening out there. Why Russians started to appreciate freedom of the speech more.” *BBC Russia*, November 20, 2019 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-50488414>; “The issue of attacks on the media interests people with a high consumer status.” *Kommersant*, June 6, 2016 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3006565>.

48 McChesney, 2016; Rozumilowicz, 2002.

49 Rozumilowicz, 2002.

III. THE FIRST STAGE OF MEDIA REFORM

Transfer of power from the current regime to the opposition (fully or partially) is the key condition for **primary transition**. In three proposed scenarios, this process can take different forms:

1. a formal agreement on the possibility of a power transfer (e.g., through free and fair elections) is reached between the regime and the opposition;
2. the agreement is reached through the assistance of a third party (e.g., an international mediator);
3. the power transfer is implemented as a result of a revolution.

Regardless of the type of power transfer, the list of the main tasks for the primary transition should include: ceasing the persecution of journalists, repealing repressive amendments to media law and regulations, dismantling the propaganda apparatus, and engaging the independent media's resources. This stage is directly linked to and should be coordinated with other institutional reforms, especially those concerning lawmaking. Most of these tasks can be implemented under all three proposed transition scenarios.

To implement the primary transition, reformers need to create a **public commission on media reform** (potentially modeled after the task force), which should include authoritative media experts (especially experts in media law, media economics, and propaganda), professional independent journalists from the national and regional media outlets, and members of civil society. The commission will face a number of crucial questions concerning the scale and radicality of the reform at this stage (depending on the specific transition scenario) and will need to develop clear legal and economic mechanisms for the demonopolization and deconcentration of the media system, closure or suspension of propaganda outlets, firing of odious media figures,⁵⁰ etc. The transparency and universality of these mechanisms will facilitate public acceptance of the reform.

Here the reformers can learn from the experience of the United States, where the public Commission

on Freedom of the Press (also known as the Hutchins Commission) was created in 1947 to review the state of U.S. media. In its final report, titled "A Free and Responsible Press," the commission offered the following duties the media must perform in order to be considered free and responsible:⁵¹

- offer a truthful, comprehensive account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning (be accurate and not lie);
- serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism;
- offer a representative picture of constituent groups in society (no stereotyping);
- present and clarify the goals and values of the society;
- give every member of the society full access to information the press supplies (to serve the public's right to know).

The commission also emphasized the media's role as a political institution—to serve as a "watch-dog" over the state, and to inform and educate citizens in a way that makes them capable of self-governance. Today, one may add to the list the media's responsibilities to guarantee political pluralism and the inclusivity of public discourse.

The Russian commission on media reform can modify and elaborate on these requirements to adjust them to national realities and key challenges facing the media at the opening of the political system.

Possible first steps of this stage of media reform are listed below.

1. End the persecution of journalists based on their professional activity

Under Russia's consolidated authoritarianism, state pressure on journalists is constantly growing. According to RBC, since 1997, criminal proceedings have been initiated against at least 74 journalists, and 21 media workers have received real (not suspended)

50 See, for example: Chelishcheva, V. "Sins of one's fatherland." *Novaya Gazeta*, May 13, 2021 (in Russian). URL: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/05/13/poroki-v-svoem-otechestve>; and Ezhov, S. "Putin's 13 friends. How much most prominent propagandists of the Russian TV earn." *The Insider*, September 23, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://theins.ru/politika/235089>

51 The Commission on Freedom of the Press: "A Free and Responsible Press," 1947. URL: <https://archive.org/details/freeandresponsib029216mbp>

prison sentences. In 2020 alone, 15 cases involving charges against media workers were investigated or heard in court.⁵²

In the aftermath of January–February protests in support of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, many journalists who had been on duty covering these events ended up detained or sentenced to administrative arrest.⁵³ According to the Mass Media Defense Center, a Russian NGO working in the field of media rights, in 2021, the organization’s experts reviewed 72 cases against media workers, participated in 42 court hearings, and conducted 1,796 media law consultations, 20% of which concerned defamation suits; 7.6% were related to Roskomnadzor’s encroachment on mass media and the internet, 5.5% were about defense of private life and personal data, and 3.2% were about extremism.

Reformers must end the illegal prosecution of journalists, review and close criminal and administrative cases initiated against them, release those arrested or serving prison terms, and offer due compensation to the victims of repressive law enforcement.

2. Repeal repressive media laws and regulations

Over the past two decades, numerous repressive amendments have been introduced to Russian media legislation (20 federal laws have been passed on the subject), which have had a detrimental effect on the work of the media overall, but especially on independent journalists. Below is a primary list of laws that are recommended for repeal following a review by a panel of independent experts.⁵⁴ Once again, this stage of the reform should be aligned with other political reforms.

Freedom of expression:

- Article 128 of the Criminal Code “[Libel](#)” (2012) and Federal Law N 538-FZ (2020) introducing [amendments](#) to provide for prison terms for libel

on the internet;

- Federal Law N 139-FZ (2012) “[On the introduction of changes to the Federal Law ‘On protection of children from information harmful to their health and development’ and separate legislative acts of the Russian Federation](#)”;
- The “gay propaganda ban” law, or Federal Law N 153-FZ (2013) “[On the introduction of changes to Article 5 of the Federal Law ‘On protection of children from information harmful to their health and development’ and separate legislative acts of the Russian Federation for the purpose of protecting children from information that propagates the rejection of traditional family values](#)”;
- The 2013 amendments to Article 148 of the Criminal Code “[Violation of right to freedom of conscience and religion](#),” which introduced criminal liability for the offense on the believers’ religious feelings;
- Federal Law N 101-FZ (2014), which made amendments to the law “[On the state language of the Russian Federation](#)” and other legislative acts in reference to “[the enhancement of legal regulation in the sphere of use of the Russian language](#),” which banned the use of obscene vocabulary in the media.

Regulation of the work of the mass media and journalists:

- Federal Law N 305-FZ (2014), which made amendments to [the law on mass media](#), stipulating that the share of foreign capital in Russian media outlets would be lowered from 50% to 20%;
- Federal Law N 464-FZ (2015), amending [the law on mass media and the Code of Administrative Offenses](#) to obligate media outlets to report to Roskomnadzor about any financing they receive from foreign sources;

52 Lindell, D. et al. “What journalists in Russia are being prosecuted for.” RBC, July 27, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2020/07/27/5f16ea649a794744d5fc0870>

53 Glikin, K., Ivanov, M. “Prosecution of journalists in relation to mass protests intends to intimidate them.” Vedomosti, February 4, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2021/02/04/856729-presledovaniya-zhurnalistov>

54 As a simple technical step, the original 1991 version of Article 4 (“On the impermissibility of abuse of freedom of speech”) can be reinstated. This helps to reconcile legal regulation of journalistic activity with Article 10 (“Freedom of Expression”) of the European Convention on Human Rights and strips the state of repressive instruments for prosecuting journalists (and civilians at large) for “thought crimes,” such as criminal prosecution for posting articles and other information on social media.

- The law on “foreign agent media,” or Federal Law N 327-FZ (2017), [amending the laws “On information, information technologies, and information security” and “On mass media”](#);
- The law on the ban of “fake news,” or Federal Law N 31-FZ (2019), amending the law [“On information, information technologies, and information security”](#);
- Federal Law N 30-FZ (2019), [banning “the spreading of information which shows blatant disrespect for society, the government, official state symbols of the Russian Federation” and introducing amendments to the law “On information, information technologies, and information security”](#);
- The law on “individual foreign agents,” or Federal Law N 426-FZ (2019), [amending the laws “On mass media” and “On information, information technologies, and information security.”](#)

Extremism:

- Federal Law N 114-FZ (2002) [“On counteraction of extremist activity”](#);
- Article 205.2 of the Criminal Code (2006) [“Public calls for committing of terrorist activity or public justification of terrorism”](#);
- Federal Law N 153-FZ (2006) [“On amending separate legislative acts of the Russian Federation in reference to the signing of the Federal Law ‘On the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism’ and ‘On counteracting terrorism’”](#);
- Article 280.1 of the Criminal Code (2013) [“Public calls for actions aimed at violating the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation”](#);
- Article 354.1 of the Criminal Code (2014) [“Rehabilitation of Nazism”](#).
- The Yarovaya Law,⁵⁵ or Federal Law N 375-FZ (2017), [amending the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code regarding additional measures countering terrorism and securing public order.](#)

Control over the internet:

- The Lugovoy Law⁵⁶ (on the pre-trial blocking of websites), or Federal Law N 398-FZ (2013) on [amending the law “On information, information technologies, and information security”](#);
- “The law on bloggers” (on mandatory registration with the Roskomnadzor), or Federal Law N97-FZ (2014), [amending the law “On information, information technologies, and information security” and other legislative acts](#);
- The law on keeping personal data on servers in Russia, or Federal Law N 242-FZ (2014), [amending several legislative acts regarding “the processing of personal data on informational and telecommunication networks”](#);
- The law on news aggregators (on checking factual information), or Federal Law N 208-FZ (2016), [amending the law “On information, information technologies, and information security” and the Criminal Procedure Code](#);
- The law on the ban of VPN services and “anonymizers,” or Federal Law N 276-FZ (2017), [amending the law “On information, information technologies, and information security”](#), as well as the law on fines for violating the “anonymizer law,” or [Federal Law N 155-FZ \(2018\), establishing administrative liability on search engines for failing to comply](#);
- The law on mandatory identification of messenger users, or Federal Law N 241-FZ (2017), [amending the law “On information, information technologies, and information security”](#);
- The law on “sovereign Runet,” or Federal Law N 90-FZ (2019), [amending the laws “On networks” and “On information, information technologies, and information security.”](#)

3. Dismantle the propaganda apparatus

The dismantling of the existing propaganda apparatus and disinformation system built by the current regime is a mandatory step of media reform; television networks and publishers that were instrumental in furthering the regime’s interests and manipulating

55 “The ‘Yarovaya’s package’ has been passed. And this is very bad.” *Meduza*, June 24, 2016 (in Russian). URL: <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/06/24/paket-yarovoy-prinyat-i-eto-ochen-ploho>

56 “The law on pretrial blocking of websites will be read in record time” *Lenta.ru*, December 16, 2013 (in Russian). URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2013/12/16/nosites/>

public opinion must be suspended or shut down. Here the inventory of media assets carried out during the preliminary stage of the reform should prove useful.

As part of the “perestroika 2.0” scenario, some realistic tasks at this stage of the reform can include reformatting propaganda outlets to create a more diverse and pluralistic news agenda and establishing the mechanisms to rationally limit the state’s involvement in the media market (e.g., the state can own one TV network, one information agency, and one print publication). This will partially reduce state monopoly of the media system. In the “building from the ground up” scenario, which envisions a full revamp of the political field and the media system following a forceful regime change, opportunities for reform will be significantly broader, while in the “reform of the federal system” scenario, the scale of the reform with regard to the propaganda apparatus, on the contrary, will be smaller. Using a modular approach, reformers can assemble a reform structure that will better correspond to the political realities of each scenario.

Below is a preliminary list of state information resources that can serve as a starting point for this stage of reform.

Government Agencies

Here, reformers should aim to decrease the state’s involvement in the regulation of media work and the media market at large, as well as curtail the control and oversight functions of various agencies. Below are the main government bodies that currently formulate and regulate Russian media policy, whose work should be substantially revised (e.g., administration change, closure, profound reform).⁵⁷

- **Presidential administration:** Responsibility for the state information policy currently lies with First Deputy Alexei Gromov. It is also shared by the Presidential Domestic Policy Directorate; the Presidential Directorate for Public Relations and Communications; the

Presidential Directorate for Social Projects; and the Presidential Directorate for the Development of Information and Communication Technology and Communication Infrastructure.

- **Mintsifra** (the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Communications) is responsible for the state policy on and normative and legal regulation of information technologies, electronic and mail communications, mass communications and media, including electronic media (internet, TV, and radio communications, new technologies), press, publishing, and printing activity, as well as personal data processing.
- **Roskomnadzor** (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media) is responsible for control and oversight of state policy implementation in the aforementioned areas. In particular, it is responsible for licensing mass media, radio frequencies (along with the Defense Ministry and the Federal Protective Service), regulating the internet, etc.
- **State Duma** contributes to regulation through its Committee on Information Policy, Information Technology and Communications and Commission on the Investigation of Foreign Interference in Russia’s Internal Affairs.
- **Federation Council** contributes to regulation through its Interim Commission on Information Policy and Cooperation with the Media, Interim Commission for Legislative Regulation of Cybersecurity and Digital Technologies, and Interim Commission for the Protection of State Sovereignty and Prevention of Interference in Russia’s Internal Affairs.

Media Assets

Considering the long traditions of the Russian government’s strong control over the media system, growing media etatization (state interference), and

57 Reformers might be interested in Poland’s experience, where a dual media model has been identified by media scholars (Anaszewicz, M., Dobek-Ostrowska B. “Government communication in democratic Poland 20 years after the collapse of communism (Chapter 9).” In: *Government Communication Cases and challenges*. Eds. Sanders K, Jose Canel, M. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). They can also consider best practices of media policy implementation in Estonia, which holds the 15th place in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders. This is higher than all other post-Soviet countries and some developed democracies, such as the U.S. and the U.K. (Balčytienė, L. Media transformations: the post-transition lessons in Lithuania and Estonia. *Informacijos Mokslai*, 2005). Important lessons can be learned from the history of German media regulation after 1945, as well as following the reunification of the Federal German Republic and the German Democratic Republic. (Kilborn, R. Unified Germany’s media Anschluss. *British Journalism Review*, 3 (1), 1992; and Sandford, J. The transformation of the media in East Germany since the Wende.” *Journal of Area Studies*, 1:2, 1993).

the ruling regime's efforts in building a powerful propaganda machine, this part of the reform is fraught with many challenges and requires a complex approach. Reformers should pay special attention to the inventory of Russian media assets at the preliminary stage and identify those that should or should not be reformed.

Below is a suggested inventory:

- State-controlled assets created exclusively for propaganda purposes, which must be either suspended or completely shut down (e.g., the Patriot Media Group, RT network, and Russia's Public Television⁵⁸).
- National state-controlled assets that could undergo substantial reform (e.g., Channel One and VGTRK—the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company); as a first step, their propaganda shows should be shut down and editorial policies and practices of the news programs reformed.
- Assets that are formally private but are in fact controlled by the state and/or concentrated within large media holdings (e.g., Gazprom Media, the National Media Group). These can be disbanded, relicensed, and resold to independent companies through properly organized bidding.
- Quality media assets that are formally private but loyal to the state. These can be potentially recovered in the event of the opening of the political system and a subsequent change in ownership and top management (e.g., *Kommersant*, *Vedomosti*, *RBC*).
- Mass media assets that are formally private but loyal to the state and have a widely recognizable brand, lengthy history, large audience, and vast regional network (e.g., *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*). Reformers can attempt to involve them in a constructive dialogue.

State assets

Below is preliminary information about Russia's key media assets—in terms of outreach and web traffic data⁵⁹—that are directly or indirectly controlled by the state. The list is not complete and can be expanded.

- **Channel One** (*Perviy Kanal*): A 38% stake is owned by the Federal Property Management Agency (Rosimushchestvo), 9.1% by ITAR-TASS, the leading state news agency, and 3% by the Federal State Unitary Enterprise “Ostankino Television Center.” Another 29% is controlled by the structures of the National Media Group.⁶⁰
- **VGTRK, or All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company** (owned by the Russian government). Its vast network includes federal TV channels Rossiya-1, Rossiya-K (“Culture”), and Karusel (a children's channel); Rossiya-24 (a 24/7 news channel); bundles of niche digital TV channels; dozens of regional TV networks (e.g., Moskva-24, Zapad-24, etc.); and RTR-Planeta (an international broadcaster). It also includes radio stations Radio Rossii, Mayak, and Vesti FM, as well as a vast internet portal that encompasses about 20 websites (vesti.ru, strana.ru, etc.).
- **The National Media Group** (created through the merger of media assets owned by businessman Alexei Mordashov, Rossiya bank, Surgutneftgaz, and Sogaz insurance group; the group is controlled by Rossiya bank shareholder and businessman Yuri Kovalchuk). The group incorporates federal TV channels, including REN-TV, Channel Five (*Pyaty Kanal*), STS, etc.; the **NewsMedia** holding,⁶¹ which includes online publications Life.ru, Mash.ru, Zhizn.ru, Super.ru, a communications agency, and a production company; the Russian News Service, a national information system; print publications *Izvestiya*, *Sport-Express*, *Delovoy Peterburg*, and others; film production companies (NMG Studio, Art Pictures); internet services (More TV, Vitrina TV

58 Yakovenko, I. “A suitcase without a handle.” *Ezhednevny Zhurnal*, June 3, 2013 (in Russian). URL: <http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=12992>

59 News and media websites ranking. LiveInternet's data as of June 1, 2021. URL: <https://www.liveinternet.ru/rating/ru/media/#period=month;geo=ru;group=media;>

60 “The state will decrease the Channel One stake from 51% to 34%.” *Interfax*, December 22, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/742516>

61 “The Life78 channel will change its name and owner,” *Fontanka*, April 8, 2017 (in Russian) URL: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/04/08/043/>

streaming services, Netflix’s operator in Russia, etc.); and various sales companies.

- **Gazprom Media** (owned by Gazprombank, a subsidiary of Russia’s gas monopoly Gazprom). The group includes federal TV channels, including NTV, TNT, TV 3, Pyatnitsa!, 2x2, etc.; NTV Plus, a digital satellite television service; radio stations Echo Moskvyy, Yumor FM, and Avtoradio; print publications *7 Days (Sem Dney)* and *Media Press*; production and distribution companies (Central Partnership, Comedy Club Production, etc.); internet services (RuTube video hosting platform, NOW.ru online movie theater, etc.); and sales companies that are currently leading operators of the Russian advertising market.
- **TASS** (a state information agency owned by the Russian government), which includes newswire services, a photo agency, online publications tass.ru and tass.com, various special information projects, and other media resources.
- **Rossiyskaya Gazeta** (an official source of the Russian government), a daily newspaper and online publication rg.ru.
- **Zvezda** (“Star”), co-founded by the Russian government and the Defense Ministry’s Central Television and Radio Studio.
- **Public Television of Russia** (OTR), created by the Russian government.
- **Rossiia Segodnya** (“Russia Today”), an international information agency created by the Russian government that includes a group of news agencies—RIA Novosti, RIA Novosti Crimea, Baltnews, and Sputnik News—online publications inosmi.ru, 1prime.ru, sputniknews.com, and ukraina.ru, as well as Sputnik radio station, etc.
- **RT television network** (founded by an autonomous noncommercial organization, TV-Novosti, funded from the Russian state budget), which includes eight news and documentary

channels, online publications (including rbth.ru—*Russia Beyond the Headlines*), and RUPTLY, a global multimedia agency.

- **Patriot Media Group**, also known as the “media factory” (according to media investigations, it is controlled by Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin⁶²), which includes the Federal News Agency (FAN) and publications *Narodnye Novosti* (“Public News”), *Economy Today*, and *Politics Today*.

Strategically important assets

Media assets listed below can be deemed strategically important due to their popularity, mass reach (for mass media), and influence (for quality outlets). Considering how important these brands are for the Russian media system, it is recommended they be preserved as long as certain conditions are fulfilled (for example, a change in editorial policy, proprietorship, and management, conducting special workshops for editors and journalists, etc.)

- **Komsomolskaya Pravda Media Group** (the main beneficiary is reportedly⁶³ Sergei Rudnov, son of the late businessman Oleg Rudnov, founder of the Baltic Media Group), which includes print publications under the names of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (with a wide regional network), *Sovetsky Sport*, etc., as well as the Komsomolskaya Pravda Radio Station, online publication kp.ru, and printing shops.
- **Argumenty i Fakty Publishing House** (owned by the Moscow mayor’s office⁶⁴), which includes a weekly newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* (with a wide regional network) and online publication aif.ru.
- **Moskovsky Komsomolets** (owned by its editor-in-chief and publisher Pavel Gusev), which includes a daily newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets* (with a vast regional network), online publication mk.ru, thematic internet projects, various publishing services, etc.

62 Zakharov, A., Rusyayeva, P. “An RBC investigation: how a ‘media factory’ came out of the ‘troll factory.’” RBC, March 24, 2017 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2017/04/58d106b09a794710fa8934ac>, Kalyukov, Y., Dergachev, Y. “Prigozhin now heads the trustee board of the ‘media factory’ group.” RBC, October 4, 2019 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/business/04/10/2019/5d9748ee9a794794b3601e0f>

63 “The key stakeholder of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* revealed his name.” AdIndex, January 9, 2017 (in Russian). URL: <https://adindex.ru/news/media/2017/01/9/157001.phtml>

64 Afanasyeva, A. “Argumenty i Fakty found a new editor-in-chief.” *Kommersant*, January 23, 2017 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3199865>

- **Kommersant Publishing House** (owned by businessman Alisher Usmanov), which includes the daily newspaper *Kommersant*, online publication kommersant.ru, Kommersant-FM radio station, a photo agency, etc.
- **Vedomosti** newspaper (it is reportedly indirectly financed by Rosneft, Russia's oil giant⁶⁵).
- **RBC** (controlled by businessman Grigory Berezkin, owner of the ESN group of companies), which includes the eponymous newspaper and magazine, the online publication rbc.ru and its thematic subsites, RBC TV channel, various information services, and a large hosting business, all of which are run under the RBC brand.

4. Engage independent media that still exist in Russia

Over the course of the reform, a number of prominent Russian media outlets might be closed, suspended, or subjected to significant reformatting (which is most likely for the scenarios “perestroika 2.0” and “building from the ground up”). The gaps, especially in television broadcasting, can be bridged by engaging the resources of independent media projects (journalists, editors, producers, media managers). Delivering objective information to the public about the implementation of media reform (and what is to come) will be key to its success. Therefore, as noted earlier, at the preliminary stage reformers should

think this process through and develop mechanisms for tentative or long-term recruitment of independent professionals⁶⁶ without compromising their status.

Below is the primary list of professional independent media projects (this can be further expanded⁶⁷):

- 7x7 <https://7x7-journal.ru>
- Agentstvo <https://www.agents.media>⁶⁸
- Bumaga <https://paperpaper.ru>
- Important Stories <https://istories.media>
- TV Rain <https://tvrain.ru>
- MediaZona <https://zona.media>
- Meduza <https://meduza.io/>
- Novaya Gazeta <https://novayagazeta.ru>
- Pskovskaya Gubernia <http://gubernia.media>
- TV-2 <https://tv2.today>
- Fontanka <https://www.fontanka.ru>
- Holod <https://holod.media>
- The Bell <https://thebell.io>
- The Insider <https://theins.ru>
- Znak <https://www.znak.com>

At this stage, reformers can also support independent outlets (through subsidies or tax benefits⁶⁹) that have proved their competence, professionalism, and commitment to the ethical standards of journalism under the conditions of Russian authoritarianism.

65 “How *Vedomosti* ended up in Rosneft’s trap, and Demyan Kudryavtsev made 14 million euro on his deals with the newspaper. An investigation by *Meduza*, *Forbes*, *The Bell* and *Vedomosti*.” *Meduza*, May 12, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/05/12/kak-vedomosti-okazalis-v-lovushke-u-rosnefti-a-demyan-kudryavtsev-zarabotal-na-sdelkah-s-izdaniem-14-millionov-evro>

66 For example, the staff of independent television networks, such as CurrentTime, TV Rain, and others, can become the nucleus of the new teams. Content can be provided by independent YouTube channels: Redaktsiya by Andrei Pivovarov, VDud by Yuri Dud, documentary projects of Leonid Parfyonov, Andrei Loshak, etc.

67 For guidance, reformers can use the resources of the Independent Professional Union of Journalists and Media Professionals, as well as Redcollegia, an independent editorial award project.

68 Formerly known as Proekt (<https://www.proekt.media>).

69 Here reformers might be interested in the experiences of Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland), which traditionally rank high in press freedom indices. They have developed state mechanisms to support the media and secure its status as the “fourth estate.” For example, Sweden has had a system of media subsidies since the 1960s, allowing for lower entry barriers to circulation and distribution systems, implementing regular technological updates, developing regional journalism, and promoting diversity and pluralism within the media. See: “New media subsidy scheme suggested in Sweden,” The Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication Research, March 29, 2018. URL: <https://www.nordicom.gu.se/en/latest/news/new-media-subsidy-scheme-suggested-sweden>; GustafssonK., Örnebring H., Levy D. “Press Subsidies and Local News: The Swedish case,” Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2009. URL: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-11/Press%20Subsidies%20%26%20Local%20News%20the%20Swedish%20Case.pdf>

IV. THE SECOND STAGE OF MEDIA REFORM

Like any democratic transition, media reform in Russia will not be linear: its flow can be interrupted by flares of authoritarianism due to counterattacks from various interest groups trying to preserve the regime, by public resistance, and by reformers' own mistakes. Therefore, the following stages of media reform should be undertaken only once the results of the primary transition have been secured.

As part of the **secondary transition**, the implemented changes—legal, technical, professional, and political—need to be enhanced in order to expand political pluralism and public discourse. The recommended measures include: developing and adopting new normative and legal acts regulating media work; launching public television; launching informational and educational programs aimed to improve public media literacy; and establishing and implementing mechanisms of civic control over media work. These measures are more realistic as part of the “perestroika 2.0” and “building from the ground up” scenarios; under the “reform of the federal system” scenario, the first two of the aforementioned measures would be possible.

1. Develop new legislation to regulate the work of mass media

As in primary transition, at this stage, reformers will require the help of media law specialists and of the authoritative task force created specifically for this task and consisting of members of the independent media community, members of civil society, and media policy experts. It should be stressed again that changes ought to be synchronized with other political and institutional reforms. For example, it is necessary to ensure that international legal acts guaranteeing the freedom of expression ([European Convention on Human Rights](#), [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)) are implemented in Russia. This requires the repeal of the 2020 laws (and corresponding constitutional amendments) that established the priority of Russia's Basic Law⁷⁰ over international legislation—such measures can be carried out as part of the new constitutional reform.

Below is a primary list of normative and legal acts regulating the work of mass media that are recommended for reform at this stage (the full list should be prepared by mass media law specialists).

Laws regulating the work of mass media:

- Law “[On mass media](#)”
- Federal Law “[On the order of covering the state organs activity in the state mass media](#)”

Laws regulating information relationships, networks, advertising, copyright:

- Federal Law “[On the state language of the Russian Federation](#)”
- Federal Law “[On information, information technologies, and information security](#)”
- Federal Law “[On advertising](#)”
- Federal Law “[On networks](#)”
- Federal Law “[On personal data](#)”
- Federal Law “[On the state civil service of the Russian Federation](#)”
- Federal Law “[On state secrets](#)”
- Federal Law “[On commercial secrets](#)”
- Civil Code of the Russian Federation ([Part 4. Rights to the results of intellectual activities and means of individuation](#))

Laws on covering political activity:

- Federal Constitutional Law “[On the referendum of the Russian Federation](#)”
- Federal Law “[On political parties](#)”
- Federal Law “[On public associations](#)”
- Federal Law “[On election of Deputies of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation](#)”
- Federal Law “[On election of the President of the Russian Federation](#)”
- Federal Law “[On general principles of local self-government in the Russian Federation](#)”

70 Gunkel, Y. “Putin signed the laws that prioritize the [Russian] Constitution over international legislation.” *Deutsche Welle*, December 8, 2020 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/putin-podpisal-zakony-o-prioritete-konstitucii-nad-mezhdunarodnym-pravom/a-55872285>

Laws on coverage of emergency situations:

- Federal Constitutional Law “[On state of emergency](#)”
- Federal constitutional law “[On martial law](#)”
- Federal law “[On countering terrorism](#)”
- Federal law “[On countering extremist activities](#)”

Other laws indirectly touching upon the work of mass media can be subjected to review as well, in particular the federal law “[On national and cultural autonomy](#),” the federal law “[On the state policy of the Russian Federation in respect to compatriots abroad](#),” etc., as well as sections of Russia’s codes concerning media operations: e.g., Civil Code, Subsection 3, “[Objects of civil rights](#)”; Criminal Code, Section VII, “[Crimes against persons](#)”; Code of Administrative Offenses, [Section II](#), etc.

As in other stages of media reform, all legislative changes must be implemented on principles of transparency, public oversight, pluralism, and inclusivity—through expert and public discussion involving journalists, human rights activists, media scholars, and members of civil society. Such discussions should not be conducted for the sake of discussion: the goal is to find optimal consensual solutions that account for the interests of all significant social groups.

2. Launch an independent public TV and radio channel

The creation of an independent public channel can play a crucial role in the course of not just media reform, but also other institutional reforms of the democratic transition. An effective model can complete several tasks at once: provide Russian citizens with objective information on crucial social and political events, serve as a national platform for public discourse on the country’s most pressing problems, facilitate the development of social unity, solidarity, and common values, and stimulate civic consciousness

and political participation.

While the idea of public television came under fire in the West in the early 2000s, with some experts arguing that this model is in decline,⁷¹ the success of networks such as BBC (U.K.) and PBS (U.S.) in terms of economic solvency, content quality, and audience trust suggests that these criticisms were exaggerated. In any case, given the weakness of Russia’s political system, media system, and civil society, any democratic transition might be difficult without independent public television.

The BBC model

BBC, or the British Broadcasting Corporation, was officially launched in 1922 by its founder and first general manager John Reith, who stated that the company’s mission was to “inform, educate, and entertain.” BBC’s key principle is to provide a public service, and the network has been following this principle for nearly a hundred years, serving around 90% of the U.K. public today.

The extended structure of BBC includes 10 national television channels, regional television programs, internet services, 10 national and 40 regional radio stations, as well as a powerful online platform.⁷²

The main portion of BBC’s budget is formed by annual licensing fees paid by U.K. households, companies, and other organizations connected to the corporation’s television network.⁷³ According to the official report, its 2020 budget stood at \$4.7 billion. In 2021, the annual fee for BBC services paid by a single household was £159 (\$213).⁷⁴ The fee size is determined by the British government (BBC is established by a royal charter and operates according to a special agreement with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) and approved by Parliament. Around half of the total sum of the fees is used to finance television, slightly above 15% to finance radio, and 10% is allocated for international broadcasting (BBC World).

71 Tacey, M. *The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

72 “What do I need to know about the BBC?” BBC website, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/academy-guides/what-do-i-need-to-know-about-the-bbc>

73 “BBC Annual Report 2019-20,” BBC Media Center. URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2020/bbc-annual-report-2019-20>

74 “BBC licence fee to rise by £1.50 to £159 from April,” BBC, April 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-55981697>

The PBS model

Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) was founded in 1969 by the government-funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting. PBS mainly focuses on producing and broadcasting educational and cultural programs. Polls from 2020 show that for 17 consecutive years, PBS has been viewed by Americans as the most trusted channel.⁷⁵

The PBS model is largely different from the BBC. It is set up as a nonprofit organization and is financed by member fees paid by television and radio stations that are part of the PBS network (around 350), funds from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (a noncommercial corporation created in 1967 to promote public television and funded by American taxpayers), as well as donations from private foundations and individuals. PBS funding is organized in a way that allows its editorial work to remain fully independent from sponsor influence. The budget is determined by the U.S. Congress; in 2020, it amounted to \$600 million.

There are other countries with strong public television traditions (such as Germany and Finland⁷⁶) whose experiences can be considered over the course of media reform in Russia. However, as noted earlier, the Russian model should not copy or imitate Western examples that developed in political and historical conditions specific to these countries. Still, reformers can learn from best practices when they develop Russia's own public television model, which will reflect Russian realities.

Channel One's technical infrastructure can serve as the basis for the new public television network, given its popularity and wide audience reach. Implementation of this project should involve independent experts, civil society members, and professional television journalists, producers, and managers—not just from the capital but also from Russian regions. Among other necessary components of this process should be organization of a broad dialogue on creating public television that will “inform, educate, and entertain,” including the idea that the public will pay for this service with their tax money.

3. Launch educational campaigns to increase public media literacy

Media activism and movements in support of free and independent media are crucial for promoting media reform and engaging members of civil society in public discussion. Media activists in developed democracies are involved in various campaigns to defend freedom of speech, accessible internet, public TV and radio broadcasting, and transparency of media ownership, and to fight against internet censorship, cyber surveillance, and unethical journalism.⁷⁷ This stage of media reform can be coordinated with other social reforms and justice movements; activists can circulate each other's ideas and strengthen the reforms' common message.

Russia also needs campaigns for better media literacy among the public, which for many years has been subjected to powerful propaganda and disinformation. In this report, media literacy is defined as the ability to analyze and critically evaluate information received from various sources and communication platforms. Media literacy programs will allow Russia to join a global movement: organizations aiming to teach media literacy and include it in the school curriculum are active in many countries today. Similar initiatives of the European Union, UNESCO, and numerous U.S. organizations whose goal is to build a more informed society (e.g., Media Literacy Now! and the National Association for Media Literacy Education) testify to the significance of media literacy skills in the modern world.

Here are some initial steps that reformers can make:

- organize open discussions on what freedom of speech and free and independent media mean for Russian society, involving independent journalists and media scholars;
- develop obligatory educational programs on media literacy for schools and universities;
- organize seminars, workshops, and online courses on media literacy, bringing in specialists from other countries.

75 “For 17th Consecutive Year, Americans Name PBS and Member Stations as Most Trusted Institution,” PBS Publicity, August 17, 2020. URL: <https://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/blogs/news/for-17th-consecutive-year-americans-name-pbs-and-member-stations-as-most-trusted-institution/>

76 Herzog C., Karppinen K. “Policy streams and public service media funding reforms in Germany and Finland.” *European Journal of Communication*, Vol 29, Issue 4, 2014.

77 Freedman, D., Obar, J. A., Martens, C., & McChesney, R. W. (Eds.). *Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspectives*. Fordham University Press, 2016.

4. Create control mechanisms for the work of mass media

Along with encouraging media activism and improving public literacy, reformers should work on developing mechanisms for public and professional control over the work of mass media. While in the early stages of reform, democratizing government institutions and revising legal mechanisms play a crucial part in reforming the media system and preventing an authoritarian backslide, in subsequent stages, it is important to bring in civic and professional media organizations to refine the newly developed media system. Without their active participation, further democratization will be challenging.

Reformers might be interested in the experiences of organizations such as [FAIR](#) (Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting, U.S.) and [Media Lens](#) (U.K.).

FAIR was created in 1986 as a nonprofit organization to promote the First Amendment (on freedom of speech) and resistance to censorship and prejudice in the media. This organization monitors the work of the U.S. media and identifies cases when stories of significant public interest, relevant to disenfranchised groups or promoting oppositional points of view, were ignored by reporters. FAIR does not just critique the media; it also defends journalists if they are threatened or face obstructions in their professional activi-

ty. Being a progressive organization, FAIR fights the concentration of media assets in the hands of large corporations and promotes the ideas of independent public broadcasting and noncommercial journalism. The organization has up to 50,000 active members.

The British organization **Media Lens**, which positions itself as a “media watchdog,” operates on a smaller scale. Its founders David Cromwell and David Edwards state that their mission is to inform the public on how media corporations systematically violate journalistic standards of honest and thorough coverage of important events. Over 20 years of its work, Media Lens has become an influential source of media critique (although it was itself criticized for left-leaning liberal attitudes), fact-checking mainstream media, publishing its own research, and interacting with readers, who are encouraged to issue the final verdict on the work of both the mainstream media and MediaLens.

Examples of the work done by these organizations testify that even in developed democracies, journalists and media activists have to fight for freedom of speech and exercise social and professional control over the work of mass media (especially mainstream media and media corporations). Countries that only strive to become democracies need to apply much more effort to achieve results.

V. FURTHER STEPS (MATURE PERIOD)

This stage of democratic transition can be considered as part of the first two scenarios (“perestroika 2.0” and “building from the ground up”), but even within the third scenario (“reform of the federal system”) implementation of some measures outlined below remains possible (e.g., reforming the Russian Union of Journalists).

Also, it is noteworthy that even at the mature stage, the risk of an authoritarian backslide is still present, especially if previous reforms were not sufficiently effective. Adjustments to realities on the ground can take as long as necessary so that a public consensus on the parameters of the new political and media systems is reached. The main objective of this

stage is to resolve long-term issues of Russian media system development by reforming professional organizations and journalism education.

Reform of the Russian Union of Journalists

At this stage, reformers can launch a reform of the [Russian Union of Journalists](#) (RUJ), the largest union of journalists in Europe with around 70,000 members, 82 regional organizations, and more than 40 creative associations, according to its own data.

The need for reforming RUJ was voiced back in 2008 by its former general secretary Igor Yakovenko. In his words, “the Russian Union of Journalists in its current form expired in the last century.”⁷⁸ Ya-

78 Igor Yakovenko: ‘There is a need for reform of the Russian Union of Journalists’.” *Lenizdat*, April 22, 2008 (in Russian). URL: <https://lenizdat.ru/articles/1061426/>

kovenko later described the work of the organization as “being a parasite on the body of the state.” RUJ’s history began back in 1918 with the creation of the Russian Union of Soviet Journalists, whose honorary chairmen were Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The organization ceased functioning for a while but was revived in the form of the Union of USSR Journalists in 1959 and succeeded by the RUJ in 1992. For nearly its entire history, the RUJ was closely connected to the state and subordinate to its interests, and therefore it is hardly surprising that following a short-lived democratization in the 1990s, this institution returned to collaborating with the ruling regime.

Kommersant’s 2012 investigation into the RUJ showed that employees of leading national media outlets were not eager to join its ranks and do not consider the organization to be a voice for their professional interests.⁷⁹ The reason journalists (especially in the regions) still join the RUJ is likely the opportunity to receive an international press card, which grants free access to museums and other benefits (the RUJ is a member of the International Federation of Journalists, the world’s largest organization of professional media workers). The “uncontrollable issuing” of press cards became a lucrative business for the RUJ back in the 1990s. Over the past few years, the union has lost whatever remained of its reputation in the eyes of Russian journalists.⁸⁰

The [Independent Professional Union of Journalists and Media Employees](#)⁸¹ could serve as a potential platform for the relaunch of a professional journalism association in Russia. It was created in 2016 and currently lists around 600 active members, mostly working for independent media in around 40 Russian regions. In 2019, this union was accepted into the European Federation of Journalists. The organization actively campaigns in support of Russian journalists, including the persecuted [Svetlana Prokopyeva](#), [Ivan Golunov](#) and [Ivan Safronov](#).

Following one of the principles of media re-

form—that it should not be handed down “from above” but rather be a product of public discussion involving all interested stakeholders—reformers should delegate the task of developing an independent professional union to the Russian journalism community, while maintaining an arbiter role during the transition until the new organization fully matures and becomes capable of self-regulating according to democratic values. To preserve its independent status, funding should come from membership fees, private donations, and crowdfunding.

The key objectives of the new professional union should be to:

- develop a new code of professional ethics and norms of conduct, both formal and informal;
- create mechanisms for internal regulation of the profession (through membership procedures, professional dispute mediation, interaction with foreign colleagues, etc.)
- create mechanisms to protect journalists’ interests in the modern environment (e.g., mediation in labor disputes and in cases involving threats, pressure, etc.)
- build horizontal connections among regional journalists and create networks between Russian and foreign professional organizations.

If an independent professional union movement succeeds, additional professional associations and organizations may emerge in Russia. For example, in the U.K., about ten other organizations exist besides the National Union of Journalists: the British Association of Journalists, the London Press Club, the Foreign Press Association, Women in Journalism, etc.

Furthermore, reformers can also stimulate horizontal connections and collaborations between independent Russian journalists and media organizations that focus on protecting press freedom, freedom of speech on the internet, safety for journalists, etc.⁸²

79 Vinokurova, E. “Complete press-house.” *Kommersant-Vlast*, No. 29, July 23, 2012 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1981954>. In 2016, a dozen Znak.com reporters publicly left the RUJ, proclaiming that the organization “functions in the worst traditions of Soviet ‘creative entities,’ showing disrespect for regular journalists, subservience and fawning for government officials.” See: Komarov, D. “The Znak.com staff left the Union of Journalists due to disagreements with the new administration.” *Kommersant*, September 1, 2016 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3077885>.

80 “Reporters are leaving the Union of Journalists. Why? The organization claimed it is conducting a ‘reset,’ but things only became worse.” *Meduza*, September 2, 2016 (in Russian). URL: <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/09/02/chto-proishodit-s-soyuzom-zhurnalistov-rossii-korotko>

81 Koval, I. “Unite and fight: a professional union of journalists is being created in Russia.” *DeutscheWelle*, March 26, 2016 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/объединяй-и-борись-в-россии-создают-профсоюз-журналистов/a-19143229>

82 “Journalistic organizations,” Committee to Protect Journalists website. URL: <https://cpj.org/ru/2014/01/appendix-e->

Journalism education reform

Media reform will not be complete without reforming journalism education. Today, the Russian media market employs around 500,000 people,⁸³ and 140,000–150,000⁸⁴ of those are journalists (up to 70% are women⁸⁵). At the same time, half of these journalists do not have a professional degree. The lack of well-trained professionals is a key problem of the field.

However, the number of Russian universities that offer journalism degrees keeps growing and today stands at 150, producing annually up to 4,000 graduates with bachelor's degrees.⁸⁶ Despite this, journalism professors have been lamenting the wanting quality of Russian journalism education for a while.⁸⁷ Historically, a journalism degree in Russia focused on the humanities, which until recently made up 80% of the curriculum, whereas only 20% was dedicated to teaching professional skills (this ratio has somewhat improved over the past few years).

The conceptual problem that reformers must solve before they embark on this stretch of media reform is the meaning and purpose of journalism education in Russia. To make matters more difficult, there is a lack of consensus among journalism professors on that issue: is it a trade based on practical skills, a theory of communication and media critique, an exercise in new technologies and internet journalism, media management, or, after all, a classic degree in the humanities? The task is further complicated by the fact that the Russian public does not possess a clear understanding of the role of journalism in society: it is viewed as “a business, a tool of propaganda, a carrier of advertising, a means of informing the public, a means of distracting the masses from problems—a

means of relaxation, a nuisance, etc.”⁸⁸ That is why, as repeatedly stated above, a powerful informational and educational campaign is needed to educate the public and improve public media literacy, as well as to hold a broad public discourse on the media's role as a crucial democratic institution.

Development and implementation of this part of the reform should involve not just professors, but also independent journalists, Russian and foreign media scholars, media law specialists, etc. Through this collective effort, they will have to find answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of journalism education in Russia and adapt best educational practices to Russian conditions.

The following approaches⁸⁹ are recommended for integration into the new system of journalism education:

- a systematic and fundamental approach (teaching a profound understanding of the profession at a theoretical level);
- a practical and technological approach (editorial internships, teaching new technologies and skills);
- a combination of universal and specialized training.

Additionally, the following notions should be emphasized: the idea of journalism as a civic profession and its role as a democratic institution; special recognition of the importance of investigative journalism; a better understanding of innovative media technologies; the involvement of a larger number of practicing independent journalists as professors; re-training opportunities for currently employed reporters and journalism professors; and development of international exchange programs.

[journalism-organizations/](#)

83 “The Union of Journalists named the number of employees in the Russian mass media.” *Izvestia*, June 19, 2020 (in Russian), URL: <https://iz.ru/1025609/2020-06-19/v-soiuze-zhurnalistov-nazvali-chislo-rabotnikov-rossiiskikh-smi>

84 Richter A. “On several relevant problems of journalism and journalistic education/Journalistic education -improving the quality of education and new technologies.” OSCE: The Sixth South Caucasus Mass Media Conference. Tbilisi, Georgia, November 19–20, 2009.

85 “Experts shared how much time Russian journalists on average spend working per media outlet.” *RIA Novosti*, October 8, 2019 (in Russian). URL: <https://ria.ru/20191008/1559527704.html>

86 Vartanova E., Lukina M. (2017), Russian Journalism Education: Challenging Media Change and Educational Reform. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 2017, Vol. 72 (3).

87 “An employer always wants to start from the end” (an interview with Radik Batarshin, chair of business and political journalism at the Higher School of Economics). HSE's News. September 14, 2010 (in Russian). URL: <https://www.hse.ru/news/edu/23031804.html>

88 Richter, 2009.

89 Ibid.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report is a first attempt at interpreting the meaning and content of a reform of the Russian media system. This analysis is by no means exhaustive and serves as a starting point for further discussions. Media reform is a challenging problem not just in Russia. It is hard to define only as a set of instructions—it is rather a dynamic field of study closely connected with other paths of democratic transition.

Developers of and participants in a comprehensive media reform in Russia face serious challenges. Ideally, the existential goal would be to overcome the omnipresent cynicism surrounding in the media, which is actively encouraged by the ruling regime and is expressed in the government's sheer impunity and the public's resentful passivity. This cynicism is rooted in the postmodern ideas of moral relativism and the absence of objective truth, which strikes a blow to the main goal of journalism—to tell the truth. This challenge has a philosophical character, and overcoming it requires deep reflection by Russian experts and intellectuals, but these tasks lie outside of the focus of this report. However, without overcoming this challenge, without understanding the problem of cynicism that governs Russian society and seeps into the public field through language and other forms of communication, a Russian democratic transition will be much more difficult.

Considering the three transition scenarios (“perestroika 2.0,” “building from the ground up,” and “reform of the federal system”) at the onset of the reform, a modular approach will be optimal—that is, its plan and structure can be built from components

listed in this report in a way that addresses the real political challenges of the transition. Regardless of which scenario takes place in Russia and which “window of opportunity” opens, a number of the Russian media system's most pressing problems, such as ceasing the persecution of journalists, repealing the most repressive laws governing the work of the media, and curtailing the aggression of state propaganda, can still be resolved to a sufficient degree. Besides, at the preliminary stage reformers can set up a task force to launch a discussion on the Russian understanding of freedom of speech and the optimal ways to develop a future media model. This process can involve various media experts, specialists, scholars, journalists, and activists who are ready for a constructive dialogue on the future of Russian journalism.

Today the fact that, despite the Russian state's growing pressure on rights and freedoms, independent media manage to survive and even produce investigations whose quality can exceed the work of their best Western counterparts, offers cautious optimism. Reformers should place their bets on this particular segment of the Russian media—its participants, their values and professional standards.

In the future, when a real democratic transition finally becomes possible in Russia and allows for fundamental media reform, it must be conducted based on the key principles of transparency, openness, and inclusivity. Only a broad public consensus on the parameters of the developing media system will secure the reform's success and prevent an authoritarian backslide.

About the author



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On the Reform Project

The Reform project was founded in 2020. The format of the project is an online platform for expert discussions, comments, and publication of reports on positive changes in Russian society. Reform also conducts seminars and discussion sessions for experts.

The purpose of the project is to develop a roadmap of reforms for Russia. Reform is striving to create a positive agenda for Russian society, which could ignite interest among the majority number of its citizens

The project is open to collaboration with Russian academics and practicing social and political activists, living both in Russia and abroad. Project experts will suggest and discuss reforms possible either in the current political system or over the course of potential political transformations in the country.

The project exists and is supported by grants that it receives from non-profit organizations and does not have affiliation with any political figures, parties, or business representatives.