# Freedom of Expression in Russia's New Mediasphere

In recent years, the Russian government has dramatically expanded its restrictions on the internet, while simultaneously consolidating its grip on traditional media. The internet, however, because of its transnational configuration, continues to evade comprehensive state control and offers ever new opportunities for disseminating and consuming dissenting opinions. Drawing on a wide range of disciplines, including media law, human rights, political science, media and cultural studies, and the study of religion, this book examines the current state of the freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and media freedom in Russia, focusing on digital media and cross-media initiatives that bridge traditional and new media spheres. It assesses how the conditions for free speech are influenced by the dynamic development of Russian media, including the expansion of digital technologies, explores the interaction and transfer of practices, formats, stylistics and aesthetics between independent and state-owned media, and discusses how far traditional media co-opt strategies developed by and associated with independent media to mask their lack of free expression. Overall, the book provides a deep and rich understanding of the changing structures and practices of national and transnational Russian media and how they condition the boundaries of freedom of expression in Russia today.

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**Edited by**
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**Katja Lehtisaari**

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# Contents

# Preface

This book is the final outcome of the research project 'Russian Media Lab: Freedom of Speech and Critical Journalism in Russia', coordinated by the University of Helsinki's Aleksanteri Institute as part of the Russia HUB Helsinki activities and funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation (2016–2019). The editors would like to thank Peter Sowden, our commissioning editor at Routledge, for his enthusiasm for the project as well as Birgit Beumers and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback. We are particularly indebted to Janne Suutarinen, our research assistant, whose help in preparing the manuscript for publication made all the difference.

The transliteration of Russian follows the modified Library of Congress system throughout the book, while customary English spellings are maintained for familiar terms, places and personal names.

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# Introduction

## Freedom of expression in Russia's new mediasphere

*Mariëlle Wijermars and Katja Lehtisaari*

The Russian government has dramatically expanded its restrictions on the internet since the social media-powered protest movement of 2011–2013,[1] while consolidating its grip on traditional media. The internet, which long provided a space for alternative media and free speech, is restricted by a growing corpus of legislation and expanding state surveillance. With legally ill-defined prohibitions on, e.g., offending the feelings of religious believers, propagating 'non-traditional family values' and disseminating 'extremism', now in place (Johnson 2015; Nocetti 2015a; Sherstoboeva and Pavlenko 2018), freedom of expression in Russia is under threat. At the same time, because of its transnational configuration, the internet (often dubbed Runet when it concerns the Russian-language part of it) continues to evade comprehensive state control and offers ever new opportunities for disseminating and consuming dissenting opinions. The Russian media – ranging from 'traditional' media, struggling to adapt to this changed reality, to online media outlets – is developing rapidly, bringing forth innovative new forms of publication and participation ranging from the local to the global level.

This edited volume presents a multidisciplinary investigation of the freedom of expression in Russia today. The book interlaces its analyses of the freedom of expression with a critical study of Russia's transnational media environment and of the contestations between an increasingly authoritarian state, media industries and citizens. The meaning of the term 'new mediasphere'[2] in the book's title, therefore, is twofold. First, by placing an emphasis on the 'new', it draws attention to the transformation of the Russian media system as traditional forms of publication and broadcasting give way to social media and user-produced content. Second, it indicates the volume's focus on freedom of expression as it is manifested within the online sphere of new media.

We understand freedom of expression as it is defined in the European Convention on Human Rights, which Russia ratified in 1998 after acceding to the Council of Europe two years earlier. Article 10 of the convention stipulates that freedom of expression includes the 'freedom to hold opinions

and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers'. The right is not limitless; it comes with exceptions:

> [it] may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as […] are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.

The fact that the Russian authorities consistently invoke these terms – national security, public safety and morality – to demonstrate the necessity for legislative measures that restrict online freedoms is therefore no surprise. At the same time, the tendency to view any restriction placed on freedom of expression negatively when it concerns Russia may fail to appreciate those instances where limitations indeed are in the public interest.

The aim of the book is threefold. First, the contributions assess the current state of freedom of expression in Russia, focusing on online media. Second, the authors analyse the limits on and opportunities for free speech provided by online and social media. Here, we examine the extent to which the expansion of digital technologies and the transition of Russia's media system in the era of horizontal, peer-to-peer communications through social media opens up new pathways of expression that circumvent or challenge state control. Finally, the volume examines how state-aligned media disseminate their content online and adopt new formats to keep audiences engaged. While the conflict between state control and media freedom features extensively in the analyses, the book adopts a broader interpretation of freedom of expression. Going beyond an analysis of state control, this volume examines the experiences of citizens as well as those of media organisations and professionals. Contrary to most studies of the Russian media, the authors also look beyond news media to, for example, entertainment.

The chapters draw upon a broad spectrum of academic disciplines, ranging from media law, human rights and political science to media and cultural studies and the study of religion. Combined, the 12 contributions make an important intervention in our understanding of the changing structures and practices of national and transnational Russian media and how they condition the boundaries of freedom of expression in Russia today.

## Freedom of expression and the rise of new media in Russia

Annual international rankings and freedom indicators report a steady decline in freedom of expression in Russia over the past two decades. The most visible element of this decline has been expanding state control over

the media.[3] The transfer of media ownership – accompanied to a greater or lesser extent by political pressure – has been the primary tool for regaining (indirect) state influence following the period of economic liberalisation and journalistic freedom of the 1990s (Kiriya 2019; Vartanova 2019). Intimidation and violence against outspoken journalists, of which the murder of *Novaya Gazeta*'s journalist Anna Politkovskaia in 2006 is the most well-known example, have left their mark on the profession by reinforcing self-censorship.[4] The expanding body of media law, for its part, has made it difficult for smaller, alternative media outlets to operate, e.g., because of high penalties for the violation of anti-extremist legislation[5] and the limits set on the percentage of foreign ownership of media companies (Kiriya 2017; Sherstoboeva and Pavlenko 2018).

While state control over federal TV channels was effectuated early in the new millennium (Hutchings and Rulyova 2009), the rise of online and social media provided a parallel space where journalism could be practised freely and where other forms of expression, including political criticism, could exist. Internet penetration rates increased rapidly: while, in 2008, 25.4 per cent of Russians over 16 used the internet, this percentage had risen to 72.8 per cent by 2017 (GfK 2018). Among the younger generation (16–29 years), the percentage of internet users reached 98 per cent (GfK 2018). While internet penetration in Russia continues to lag behind Western Europe (e.g. 95 per cent in the United Kingdom) and the United States (96 per cent), it is similar to Poland (73 per cent) and exceeds the level of internet penetration in some countries in Eastern Europe, such as Bulgaria (60 per cent) (Newman et al. 2018, 6). This – by now massive – online audience has access to an abundance of Russian and Russian-language online media, platforms and resources. What started out with a handful of internet pioneers in the 1990s[6] has grown into a profitable online media industry. It is an industry, moreover, that sets itself apart by the popularity of its 'native' platforms: the conglomerate of services offered by Yandex continues to outrival its international competitor Google, while Facebook is outperformed by social networking site Vkontakte (or 'VK'). Yet, the strategy of 'control through ownership' that was mentioned earlier in relation to television was also applied to online media (Vendil Pallin 2017). It was done quite successfully: a change in ownership of online publications was often followed by a (forced) change in editorial policies or the removal of the editor-in-chief and, as a result, changes in the content, scope and tone of publications (Fredheim 2017). Similar to both the US and China, Russia has a domestic 'platform ecology' that occupies a dominant market position (van Dijck et al. 2018, 26). Yet unlike China, state control over Russian internet corporations is more opaque and foreign services (American, Chinese, etc.) – for now – have relatively unrestricted access to its market.[7]

Following the initial blossoming of the Russian 'blogosphere' (in particular on the blog platform *LiveJournal*, see Podshibiakin 2010), the percentage of Russian adults active on social networking sites expanded quickly

from 35 to 56 per cent between 2011 and 2013, and it reached 63 per cent by 2018 (Levada Centre 2018a, 2018b). Similar to internet usage more generally, there are clear generational differences in social media activity: among those 30–49 years of age, 88 per cent are active on social media, while for the younger generation (18–29), this percentage is 97 (Levada Centre 2018b). The role that blogs and social media played in mobilising mass protests in response to mass fraud in the parliamentary elections of December 2011 – from sharing videos documenting vote rigging to calling upon people to join in the series of demonstrations in subsequent months through, e.g., Facebook – appeared to confirm the optimism about the potential of the internet to act as a facilitator of democratisation (Castells 2012; Green 2013). The structural outcomes of the protests, or rather the lack thereof, have since tempered this enthusiasm. The fate of the 'Twitter' and 'Facebook revolutions' elsewhere, such as the Arab Spring, has guided a more general re-evaluation of social media's potential to bring about sustained political change (Davies et al. 2016).

Political and academic attention has now shifted to the potential dangers that online communications pose to societal stability and national security – also in Western democracies. While these threats range from hate speech, political extremism and the facilitation of terrorist groups to the need to protect children from harmful content (O'Callaghan et al. 2015; Bennett and Livingston 2018; Conway et al. 2019), the proposed solutions are similar: increased prerogatives for security services to access private digital communications, legal limitations to internet freedom and pressure on IT companies, such as Facebook, to 'cleanse' their platforms of undesirable content. The Russian interference in the American presidential elections through, among other things, the dissemination of false or misleading information through Facebook ads heightened awareness about the vulnerability of social media to being manipulated for alternate ends (Howard et al. 2018; Lazer et al. 2018). There are clear limitations to the concept of 'information warfare' that is often used in this context, as it suggests both coordinated planning behind and a high degree of effectiveness of Russia's information campaigns, as is argued by Vitaly Kazakov and Stephen Hutchings in this volume.

The debate about how these vulnerabilities – many of which result from the IT companies' revenue models and the decentralised nature of the internet itself (Gorwa 2019) – can be addressed without placing disproportionate restrictions on privacy and freedom of speech is ongoing also outside Russia. While the European Union, in its approach to online intermediaries, has preferred self-regulation over regulation (among others, through the Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online, agreed in 2016), Germany was the first in Europe to introduce legislation (Schulz 2018). The Network Enforcement Act (commonly referred to as *NetzDG*), which came into force on 1 October 2017, requires social networking sites to have a functioning complaints system through which users can report unlawful content

(as defined by the German Penal Code). 'Evidently unlawful' content has to be removed within 24 hours. The Act was criticised for the infringements on human rights and, in particular, freedom of expression it may give rise to. As Wolfgang Schulz has pointed out, the 24-hour deadline for the removal of content is problematic since 'there is doubt whether obviously illegal content can be identified easily, given that context always has to be taken into account' (Schulz 2018, 8). The large number of potentially unlawful pieces of content means that proper assessment within this brief timeframe is difficult and 'it seems rational for a provider to take down any flagged content if in doubt, just to save costs' (Schulz 2018, 8). Such overmoderation by platforms in response to governmental pressures and legal requirements is a constant cause for concern. An alternative approach to content moderation through upload filters reliant on the use of artificial intelligence, as is already widely used to prevent the dissemination of, e.g., terrorist propaganda and copyrighted materials, equally carries the risk of disproportionally limiting freedom of speech. As Amélie Pia Heldt argues,

> [u]pload-filters still lack the ability to understand content in context or to identify satire in videos, which means that content is often filtered and deleted before being published or made visible to other users even though it might not violate any laws or third-party rights (i.e. legal content).
>
> (Heldt 2019, 63)

In such cases, the removal of content can therefore be seen as a form of collateral censorship since 'public authorities force intermediaries to control their users' communication' (Heldt 2019, 58).

## State control over Runet: towards 'cyber sovereignty'?

The Russian government long refrained from establishing a level of control over the internet comparable to its hold over traditional media. Writing in 2010, Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski argued that internet regulation in Russia, as well as in several other countries of the former Soviet Union, was in fact distinctly different from elsewhere in the world. Instead of relying on internet filtering – the so-called 'first generation cyberspace controls' – Russia employed 'control strategies [that] tend to be more subtle and sophisticated and designed to *shape and affect* when and how information is received by users, rather than denying access outright' (Deibert and Rohozinski 2010, 16. Emphasis in the original). Internet governance in Russia, they found, combined legal and normative pressures – defined as 'second generation' controls – with 'third generation' control strategies, such as warrantless surveillance and directed information campaigns (Deibert and Rohozinski 2010, 23).[8] There are divergent interpretations of the motives behind this approach. It may have been simply the 'result of the

technological inability of the State institutions to enact effective control' or, rather, the result of a more conscious 'strategy to use the Runet as a kind of […] safety valve, where users can freely articulate their discontent without transforming it into "real", offline political action' (Konradova and Schmidt 2014, 47).

As will be discussed in further detail in the chapter by Lonkila, Shpakovskaya and Torchinsky in this volume, the state's approach to controlling the internet shifted from 2012 onwards and state interference is now much more extensive. For example, the level of internet filtering – the automated restriction of access to particular websites – is characterised by Zittrain et al. as 'substantial' for political content and internet tools (such as anonymisers that enable one to circumvent website blocking), and 'pervasive' when it concerns social content[9] and issues of conflict and security (Zittrain et al. 2017, 7). In this respect, Russia is less restrictive than, for example, Iran and United Arab Emirates, that filter pervasively on all four categories, and China, that filters pervasively on all topics except for social content, concerning which the degree of filtering is substantial (Zittrain et al. 2017, 7). Internet legislation, combined with various forms of political pressure, has significantly impacted what can and cannot be said on Runet. As is examined by Van der Vet in his chapter, the persecution of activists and other unsuspecting citizens for sharing and liking content on social media, for example, has served to reinforce individuals' restraint in speaking out online. The LGBTQ community has been one of the targets of legal restrictions as well as of online and offline harassment by groups and individuals with unclear ties to the authorities. The adoption in 2013 of a law that criminalised 'propaganda for non-traditional sexual relations among minors' (commonly referred to as the 'anti-gay propaganda law'), and the media campaign that accompanied it, aimed 'to delimit queer visibility in the public sphere' (Edenborg 2017, 76–77). Its limitations extend directly into the online media domain and social media and have significantly impacted LGBTQ activism (Andreevskikh 2018).

The concentration of ownership of the most popular online and social media in the hands of large media holdings (e.g. Mail.ru Group, the owner of Vkontakte) and businessmen loyal to the current regime is an additional factor in the performance of control. It has given rise to a situation in which '[e]conomic and political power structures are so closely intertwined that serious media challenges to the ruling establishments are the exception' (Rollberg and Laruelle 2018, 9). In the case of Russia's leading social networking site, the change of hands in 2014 that made it possible for Mail.ru Group to become the company's majority shareholder and, within several months, its sole proprietor appears to have been politically motivated: Vkontakte's founder, Pavel Durov, was forced to sell his shares and resigned as the company's CEO following his continued refusal to cooperate with the Russian authorities by sharing user information (Lunden 2014).

In the West, the debate concerning the necessity and permissibility of online state surveillance and how it infringes upon citizens' right to privacy

gained momentum after the Snowden leaks in 2013. The intelligence leaked by Edward Snowden, a former National Security Agency (NSA) operative, revealed how security agencies, including the NSA and the British Government Communications Headquarters, were involved in 'state-corporate surveillance programs based on the interception of Internet traffic and "bulk" collection and analysis of metadata' (Dencik and Cable 2017, 763). In addition to uncovering 'instances of business and political espionage or forms of targeted surveillance of particular actors', it demonstrated how, in Western democracies, security services executed a 'general and widespread monitoring of everyday communication among normal citizens' (Dencik and Cable 2017, 763). Notwithstanding the significance of the surveillance programmes that were exposed in the leaks for citizens' right to privacy, newspaper coverage in the United Kingdom was found to 'normalize surveillance with reference to concerns over national security and minimize the attention given to the surveillance of citizens' (Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2017, 741). As Lina Dencik and Jonathan Cable demonstrate, the public response to the revelations in the UK evidenced 'surveillance realism', a condition in which

> lack of transparency and knowledge in conjunction with the active normalization of surveillance through discursive practices and institutional sanctions manifested in its ubiquity comes to negate prominent concerns, ultimately limiting possibilities for alternative imaginations of organizing society.
>
> (Dencik and Cable 2017, 777)

A similar condition appears to exist in Russia. Empirical research on the public perception of the internet in Russia suggests that regime support and an information diet that predominantly consists of federal TV channels are both associated with perceiving the internet as a (national security) risk and supporting governmental interference in this domain (e.g. online censorship) (Nisbet et al. 2017, 966–967).

In their analysis of the history of Runet, Natalya Konradova and Henrike Schmidt identified two key turning points in its development. Around the turn of the millennium, it 'changed from a free space of creative articulation into a fully-fledged mass medium of national significance' (Konradova and Schmidt 2014, 36). The commercialisation of the internet and its expanding audience soon attracted political interest, which definitively signalled the transformation of Runet into a 'political battlefield':

> […] as Putin has gradually re-established a hierarchical structure in the social and media systems, the once autonomous Runet has turned into a strategic field of action for both sides – official authorities and opposition forces.
>
> (Konradova and Schmidt 2014, 49)

Draft legislation suggests that we may be approaching another turning point, namely Runet's isolation from the global internet. In February 2019, the Russian parliament approved in its first reading a draft law for the creation of a 'sovereign internet'. The aim of the law is to be able to disconnect the Russian segment of the internet from the global web in the event of a cyberattack that threatens its integrity. It proposes a series of measures, including the rerouting of internet traffic through centralised exchange points and the limiting of transnational traffic flows, to make it technically possible for Runet to function independently from the global internet. The law also grants the federal agency in charge (i.e. Roskomnadzor, see Sivetc's chapter) the authority to flip the switch. While it remains to be seen what form the final law will take – the draft was fiercely criticised – and how fast it can be implemented, it sets the tone for what to expect in the near future. In the global arena, Russia is furthermore not alone in its appeals for establishing 'cyber sovereignty', and it actively promotes this agenda internationally (Nocetti 2015b; Thussu 2015). The continued validity of Peter Rollberg and Marlène Laruelle's assertion that 'as much as post-Soviet establishments may try, and as much as large segments of the population may be willing to accept it, the state control over media can never fully eliminate the emancipatory potential of the growing and diversifying global media' (Rollberg and Laruelle 2018, 13) is now being questioned.

## Structure of the book

The book is divided into four parts. The chapters in the first part provide an overview of recent developments in the legal frameworks that affect freedom of speech and media in Russia and the complexities of the policy-making process. In the opening chapter, Markku Lonkila, Larisa Shpakovskaya and Philip Torchinsky map out the regulatory actions through which the Russian government has substantially tightened its grip on the internet in the wake of the opposition protests of 2011–2012. This process, which the authors refer to as the 'occupation of Runet', should be seen as part of a more general trend towards restraining Russian civil society the authors conclude. The chapter by Liudmila Sivetc examines the practice of website blocking, the so-called blacklisting mechanism, in further detail. Reviewing relevant legislation, case law and official statistics, she demonstrates that, although digital technologies have made it easier for the state to censor online content by blocking websites, this technology-enabled censorship involves collateral damages that surpass the intentions of the legislator. She argues that these side-effects, namely over-blocking and malicious blocking, risk undermining the mechanism of website blocking itself. Sivetc also draws attention to how the blacklisting mechanisms require internet service providers to become implicated in enforcing acts of censorship. The chapter by Katja Lehtisaari, for its part, looks into the formation of media policy in Russia, taking the so-called 'Iarovaia law' (2016) as its case study. This package

of anti-terrorism legislation has granted, among other things, the Federal Security Service (FSB) expanded prerogatives in carrying out surveillance activities. Analysing the roles of various actors in the public discourse concerning the law, the chapter helps us understand the processes that underlie the seemingly unpredictable regulations developed in this sphere.

The second part of the book, entitled 'Reinventing Media Formats, Platforms and Networks', examines how traditional media and 'digital-born' media outlets are adapting to the changing realities of the media landscape. Saara Ratilainen examines the emerging media genre of locally oriented urban online magazines and their collaboration with cultural institutions. Ratilainen asks how this networked structure, covering both the on- and offline worlds, may positively contribute to the civic climate of a given locality. She asks, to what extent do local creative industries have the potential to become information centres of national significance? Shifting attention to television, the chapter by Ekaterina Lapina-Kratasyuk examines the increased interest on the part of Russian federal broadcasters in 'transmedia storytelling' – a multi-platform and digitally oriented way of storytelling that involves interactive components and other forms of audience engagement. As television viewers are switching to watching (international) video streaming services and video content on social media, is transmedia storytelling a way to regain TV's audience appeal? Analysing the example of *Sasha Sokolov. The Last Russian Writer* (Channel One), Lapina-Kratasyuk finds that the project's producers offered limited participatory opportunities. She argues that, in Russia, contemporary media technologies and storytelling strategies are used to expand the number of viewers, but not to initiate public discussion. In the final chapter of this part, Dmitry Yagodin provides a comparative analysis of two social media-based projects commemorating the Russian Revolution: Project '1917 – Free History', produced by Mikhail Zygar, and #1917Live, produced by the state-funded international broadcaster RT. The projects are analysed within the framework of affective theory, which describes a shift from structural and events-based history towards the primacy of emotion and personal experiences in public history. Yagodin demonstrates how, in the studied cases, conventional structural readings of history influenced the projects' propensity to affect.

The third part of the book shifts the attention from media production to media consumption and the fragmentation of national and international Russian-language audiences. Vitaly Kazakov and Stephen Hutchings analyse Russian-language Twitter responses to the Eurovision Song Contest final in Kiev in 2017 – from which Russia's entrant was banned from participating – in order to question the 'information war' paradigm. The authors expose the heterogeneity of audience responses; the responses challenge the assumed dividing lines among Russophone online audiences (e.g. Russian vs. Ukrainian) and the ability of Russian broadcasters to influence international audiences. The linearity implied in the information war paradigm, therefore, is mistaken, the authors argue. The chapter by Mārtiņš Kaprāns

and Jānis Juzefovičs adds further evidence that the assumption of direct influence of Russian media abroad is in need of re-evaluation. Turning their attention to Russophone media audiences in Latvia, the authors ask to what extent the audiences' media preferences – e.g. consumption of Russian and/or Latvian media – are connected to their geopolitical orientations. Based on survey data, the authors demonstrate the diversity of media consumption patterns among Latvian Russian-speakers as well as of the motives behind these preferences. Exposure to Russian media, they argue, is insufficient for understanding the geopolitical orientation of Russophones in Latvia; other factors, such as socio-demographic indicators, need to be accounted for in equal measures. In the concluding chapter of this part, Jussi Lassila examines *Sputnik i Pogrom* (SiP) – a right-wing online platform that was blocked in Russia in 2018. He analyses SiP, which gained notoriety for its nationalist rhetoric and critical stance towards the political establishment, in the context of (English-language) alt-right forums. As Lassila shows, Russian and Western extreme right groups share many of the same opinions. However, there is one important (and somewhat paradoxical) point on which they disagree: while the Western alt-right is generally assumed to have pro-Putin attitudes, SiP's critique takes an aim *against* the Russian government.

The final part of the book is dedicated to 'Tactics of Control and Subversion'. Freek van der Vet examines how legislation against the dissemination of 'extremist' information has been (mis)used 'to arbitrarily prosecute Russian citizens for what they say and do online'. Examining a sample of more than 80 court cases that were brought against Russian citizens for posting, sharing or liking content on social media between 2012 and 2017, he seeks to explain the state's motivation behind such prosecutions. In addition to pointing out that the 'criminal prosecution of online behaviour is not specific to Russia or other authoritarian contexts', van der Vet shows how the increased number of prosecutions may be the perverse outcome of competition within Russia's secret services and the justice system's bias towards convictions. The chapter by Vera Zvereva then dives into pro-Kremlin internet organisations, online groups and trolls, and explores their role in the Russian government's attempt 'to shape Runet into an instrument of propaganda and counter-propaganda, aimed at users both in Russia and abroad'. Examining this 'grey zone' of online communications, where true allegiances and identities as well as the separation between official and non-official sources are difficult to establish, she uncovers how pro-government messaging is optimised for the digital media environment. In the final chapter, Hanna Staehle turns to another powerful institution: the Russian Orthodox Church. She examines how the Moscow Patriarchate has sought to influence the debate on the freedom of expression, in particular by promoting the need to protect 'traditional moral values' and the 'feelings of religious believers'. She shows how the Church's rhetoric, echoing the government's neo-conservative discourse, has given shape to the understanding of internet freedom as a threat to society and national security.

# Notes

1 For a comprehensive analysis of the protests, see Gabowitsch (2017).
2 With the term mediasphere, we refer to the collective of media operating in and/ or available to audiences within a particular national or alternatively defined geographical context.
3 For an analysis of the development of freedom of speech and journalistic practices in Russia from the late Soviet period to the present, see Roudakova (2017); Skillen (2017); and the annual reports of Reporters without borders (https:// rsf.org/en/russia) and Freedom House (https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/ freedom-press).
4 On self-censorship of Russian media professionals, see Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2014).
5 As Sherstoboeva and Pavlenko (2018, 10) explain: 'Violations of anti-extremist law may lead to the closure of media outlet. The procedure is initiated by the Russian media regulating body Roskomnadzor or the Russian General Prosecutor. If an outlet gets two warnings within a year's time or fails to remedy the violation, it can be shut down. Such sanctions, as temporary or permanent closures of media outlets, are too severe and incompatible with the CoE [Council of Europe] standards'.
6 Among others, the late Anton Nosik. See Konradova and Schmidt (2014).
7 There are several laws in place that could be used as the legal basis for blocking access to foreign websites and applications, most notably the data localization requirement (storage of Russian citizens' personal data on servers located on the territory of the Russian Federation). Yet, their enforcement has been limited and selective. Online professional networking site LinkedIn has been banned, while major international platforms have thus far received only (minor) fines for their failure to comply with the legal requirement.
8 On the development of surveillance technologies used by the FSB from the 1990s onwards (including the so-called SORM systems that enable communications tapping), see Soldatov and Borogan (2015).
9 The authors define this category as follows: 'Social filtering is focused on topics that go against a country's accepted societal norms, including pornography, gambling, alcohol and drugs, LGBTQ content, and online dating' (Zittrain et al. 2017, 9).
1 We use the nickname Runet to refer to "the segment of the internet where the Russian language and Cyrillic letters are used predominantly, and the domain addresses of which end in '.ru', or at times '.su' or 'рф'" (cf. Franke and Pallin 2012; Pallin 2017). Runet is, however, more of a cultural than a technical phenomenon consisting of a set of social media platforms (such as VKontakte) and web services (such as Telegram) which have content in Russian language, and are popular among people who live in Russia.
2 We use the metaphor of occupation to refer to the intense efforts by government agencies to regulate Russian citizens' use of the internet, in contrast to its much weaker regulation in the past.
3 About application of the article 282, FZ-63 see Russian Blogger Receives One Year of Suspended Sentence for a Comment (2008). http://www.sova-center.ru/ en/xenophobia/news-releases/2008/07/d13746/.
4 In August 2018, The European Court of Human Rights held unanimously that Terentyev's freedom of expression had been violated.
5 In this section, we will draw, among other sources, from the publication of the 'Foundation Inostrannyi Agent' which lists 22 such laws dated between June 2012 and October 2014 (Foundation Inostrannyi Agent 2014), see also *Human Rights Watch* (2013) and *Freedom on the Net* (2011, 2012, 2013).

6 Legal rights owners who discover a violation of their rights can appeal to a court requesting access to the relevant platform to be restricted. *Roskomnadzor* will determine the corresponding intermediary (e.g. hosting provider) and send a notice of infringement within three working days. The intermediary is further required to inform the owner of the (online) information resource of this notice and the latter has to remove the illegal contents within one working day. If the information intermediary fails to apply such enforcement measures, the telecom operator concerned, upon the authorisation of *Roskomnadzor*, is required to block access to the information resource within 24 hours (Alexandrov and Medvedev 2017).

7 The ban on alcohol advertising was lifted in 2014 until the end of 2018 when Russia hosts World cup in football.

8 DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) denotes overloading a website with huge amount of simultaneous requests.

9 It is interesting to note the parallels and contacts related to internet regulation between Russia and China; many of the measures introduced in Runet follow the pattern previously implemented by China. An example of such measures is the practice of identifying users with a mobile phone when creating an internet connection, for example, at airports or cafes. Russia and China are also co-operating in lobbying internationally for the development of internet governance in a more state-orientated direction. Technically, Runet is connected to the global internet mainly via the state-controlled *Rostelekom*, which has the capability to isolate Russia from the rest of the world. However, the infrastructure, applications and user culture of Runet were able to develop freely until 2012, and, unlike China, it was not isolated by a firewall or monitored strictly by an army of state-employed censors.

10 At the moment, one can freely put up a website in Russia without registering it in a state-owned register – unlike, for example, in China.

1 The official name of the register is: *Edinyi reestr domennykh imen, ukazatelei stranits saitov v informatsionno-telekommunikatsionnoi seti "Internet" i setevykh adresov, pozvoliaiushchikh identifitsirovat' saity v informatsionno-telekommunikatsionnoi seti "Internet," soderzhashchikh informatsiiu, pasprostranenie kotoroi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii zapreshcheno.* In the text, the register is referred to as Blacklist, *Chernyi Spisok* in Russian.

2 According to the Shanghai Convention, which Russia ratified in 2010, extremism 'is an act aimed at seizing or keeping power through the use of violence or at violent change of the constitutional order of the State, as well as a violent encroachment on public security…'. Russian laws do not contain a general definition of extremism. Instead, Section 1(1) of Federal Law No. 114-FZ (2012) provides for a list of 13 extremist activities which appears to broaden the scope of the concept. For instance, the law prohibits 'making a public, knowingly false accusation against individuals holding a state office of the Russian Federation'. This approach has been criticised by the European Commission for Democracy through Law (the Venice Commission). For more information on legal definitions of extremism and concerns expressed by the Venice Commission, see the case *Mariya Alekhina and Others v. Russia*, paras 90–102.

3 The way extremism is interpreted appears to share characteristics with the concept internationally referred to as hate speech. Hate speech is 'the advocacy […] of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons […] on the ground of "race", colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, age, disability,

language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and other personal characteristics or status' (ECRI General Policy Recommendation 2015). This definition is close to an extremist activity defined by Section 1(1) of Federal Law No. 114-FZ (2012) as 'propaganda about the exceptional nature, superiority or deficiency of persons on the basis of their social, racial, ethnic, religious or linguistic affiliation or attitude to religion'.

4 See also indicative figures in annual reports by Roskomnadzor.

5 'Recreated' content means that the content as a whole or part of it has been copied and published on another website. 'Mirrored' content means that the copy of an entire blacklisted website has been created under a new domain name.

6 The official name of the system is: *Avtomatizirovannaia informatsionnaia sistema priema i obrabotki soobshchenii o protivopravnom kontente*. It works in the following manner. When courts or federal agencies have sent all necessary information, Roskomnadzor includes the relevant website on the Blacklist within 24 hours (Rules on the Blacklist 2017, para 9). Yet, when the Prosecutor General's Office sends a notification, Roskomnadzor includes a notified website on the Blacklist immediately, although after checking whether notified content is still present on a page indicated in the notification (Order on the Unified Information System 2015, para 37). The process is different if an internet user sends a notification. In those cases, Roskomnadzor can add a notified website on the Blacklist only after examination. Who conducts this examination depends on the type of content placed on a notified website. If this type falls under competence of one of the federal agencies, Roskomnadzor forwards a notification to the relevant agency within 24 hours via the Special Information System of Immediate Interaction (Temporary Regulations 2012, paras 14, 17). The relevant agency is obliged to respond within 24 hours (Rules on the Blacklist 2017, paras 7, 8). When a positive assessment from the relevant agency has come, Roskomnadzor adopts a decision on including in the Blacklist within 24 hours (Temporary Regulations 2012, paras 23, 25).

7 This function was executed by the Federal Drug Control Service until November 15, 2016.

8 See also the organisation's website at http://www.ligainternet.ru/.

9 See also the organisation's website at http://www.rfs-rf.ru/grfc/.

10 I have studied cases lodged with Tagansky District Court of Moscow. This court corresponds to the place of Roskomnadzor's domicile and consequently decides on claims regarding unlawful blocking. The case-study was conducted on July 25, 2018 by making searches in two databases: the databases on the website of the Court of Moscow City and the database on the website www.consultant.ru. The study revealed ten cases: (1) regarding accidental blocking of digital-books. ru, decided on July 19, 2013; (2) blocking of grani.ru by the court ruling of May 6, 2015; (3) blocking of vulcanoclub.com for illegal gambling by the court ruling of October 12, 2015; (4) blocking of magister.msk.ru for extremist materials by the court ruling of March 20, 2015; (5) blocking of golosislama.com for extremist materials (the date of the court ruling is concealed in the document); (6) four cases regarding blocking information connected with Navalny's activities (see note 11); and (7) the court ruling in the case lodged by Panova (the name of the website and dates of proceeding are concealed in the document).

11 These cases include, first, the case lodged by Navalny and decided on February 18, 2015 (the name of the blocked website is concealed in the document); second, the case lodged by Mediafocus regarding blocking of mirrored content on pages placed on facebook.com and ej.ru (the date of the court ruling is concealed in the document); third, the case decided on February 20, 2018 regarding blocking of navalny.com; fourth, the case decided on February 26, 2018 regarding blocking of two pages of znak.com for information on Navalny's activities.

12 Tagansky Raionnyi Sud goroda Moskvy, Delo No. 2-1343/2014, May 6, 2015.

13 According to Twitter (2015), the company withheld content promoting suicide and materials published by Right Sector, an organisation involved in the war against pro-Russian forces in Ukraine. Yet, the company did not follow notifications regarding, for instance, the Charlie Hebdo Twitter account, Tweets supporting Pussy Riot, Tweets linking to YouTube videos disapproving of the Russian government.

14 *'Kureniie kannabisa'.*

15 On April 16, 2018, a court ordered to block Telegram, a popular messenger, due to incompliance with anti-terrorist legislation known as 'Iaarovaia's Law'. To evade blocking, the company started changing IP addresses connected to the servers of companies such as Google and Amazon. As not only Telegram, but other websites used the same IP addresses, accidental blocking caused an avalanche of collateral damage. Yet, because the Telegram blocking was implemented on a legal basis other than the blacklisting mechanism analysed in this chapter, the Telegram example is not discussed in detail.

16 *Kharitonov v. Russia,* Application no. 10795/14, still pending in June of 2019 before the European Court of Human Rights.

17 On July 19, 2013, Kharitonov lost in Taganskiy District Court of Moscow. On September 12, 2013, Moscow City Court dismissed his appeal. The courts stated that Roskomnadzor did not breach the blacklist legislation and therefore was not liable for over-blocking.

 1 Integrum is a large database consisting of media texts and documents, including almost all contemporary Russian newspaper archives to date, materials from news agencies and central internet publications as well as the monitoring of TV and radio programmes (transcriptions of the programmes). I would like to thank Roosa Rytkönen for her help in collecting the research material from the database.

 1 The website and article archive are accessible but not updated with new content. The last update on the website is from June 19, 2017 (furfur.me).

 2 *Inde*, located in Kazan, has also created a strong profile in urban development and became one of the most successful new launches of Russian hyperlocal media. This has to do with the intensive reforms in the public space, and, as part of this process, Kazan has invested in a variety of (re-)building projects starting with the local exhibition hall "Kazan Expo Hall" and continuing through the tourism development campaign "Visit Kazan" and a number of public parks, which have acquired a modernized visual image through nation-wide designer competitions.

 1 Dennis et al. (2015) outline the debate around ethical considerations in disclosing the authorship of Twitter messages. In our study – given the controversial nature of several exchanges – we do not disclose the names or Twitter handles of individual users, unless they are public figures.

 2 These were users who did not appear to be journalists, government or commercial organisation representatives or others with any immediately identifiable professional, commercial or other agenda.

 3 These are messages whose content does not correspond to the link shared, hashtags used or context of the conversation.

 4 Other categories included non-gendered users such as media accounts, as well as users whose gender we could not predict with a high degree of certainty.

5 Audience groupings in this case were generated from the users' self-identifying profile descriptors. For example, LGBT community members were identified by the use of the rainbow emoji in their profile or by visual and discursive material of a homoerotic nature.

6 Spelled in Russian in both instances.

7 'Russia will be free', a slogan used by oppositional activists in Russia.

8 Two or more views might coexist in a single tweet (for example, concurrence with one opinion might be succeeded by a neutral acknowledgement of the validity of an opposing viewpoint).

9 Referring to Australia's participation in Eurovision 2017.

10 Military action between Ukrainian forces and Donbass separatists around Avdeevka village occurred shortly before the final and was referenced in several posts.

11 Meaning literally 'a cotton-padded jacket', this slang term refers to a patriot aligned with Kremlin policies.

12 This is a slang term for a pro-Kremlin Russian patriot, particularly in the context of the Ukraine conflict. It is associated with wearing the St George ribbon – a symbol of the Soviet Victory in WWII.

13 Russia's Federal Security Service.

1 The Russia–Ukraine conflict started in November 2013 when Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich refused to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. This provoked protests in Kiev and elsewhere in Ukraine, also known as the Euromaidan protests, which led to the annexation of Crimea and Russia's involvement in supporting separatists in the Donbas area of Eastern Ukraine.

2 Here and henceforth, *securitisation* is understood as a political discourse and specific decisions that have reframed Russian-language media and Russian-speaking audiences as a threat to Latvia's national security.

3 Here and henceforth, *strategic narrative* is understood as a structured multilayered communicative activity used by a state to explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable, and shape perceived interests. Hence, strategic narrative is 'a power resource setting out what characterises any state in the world, or how the world works' (Roselle et al. 2014, 76).

4 The Russian-speaking population in Latvia is approximately 37 per cent (Population Census 2011). Legally, the Russian language is defined as a minority language in Latvia, and the Latvian language is the only official state language.

5 In this chapter, we use categories 'Russian-speakers' and 'Russophones' interchangeably for analytical purposes to describe the segment of Latvian society whose native language is Russian or who identify themselves as Russians.

6 For a further overview of the Latvian Russian-language media sub-system, see Juzefovičs (2011, 2017).

7 The survey questionnaire uses the term 'analytical broadcasts' without any further definition of what kind of specific TV shows this refers to.

8 For further critique of the idea of two separate 'information spaces', see Juzefovičs 2017.

9 The regression analysis of the 2014 dataset includes seven socio-demographic variables, nine media variables and eight identity variables (see in Table 2 in Appendix 2). The regression analysis of the 2017 dataset includes five socio-demographic variables, thirteen media variables and twelve identity variables (see in Table 3 in Appendix 2).

10 The users of different media, as identified by the 2014 and 2017 surveys, do not necessarily represent mutually exclusive media audiences.

11 Like Estonia, Latvia still has a large group of non-citizens (214,000 people), people who moved to Latvia or were born in Latvia after the Soviet occupation that began on 17 June 1940 and who refused to go through naturalisation after 1991 or did not pass the naturalisation exam. Non-citizens are predominately a Russophone group; the majority of them are identified as ethnic Russians.

12 Perhaps such inconsistency can be explained by the overrepresentation of the youngest cohorts in the survey sample that increases the statistical significance of this group.

13 The regression on the 2014 data does not indicate statistically significant association between one's attachment to Europe and a perception of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. However, these data suggest that a weaker sense of belonging to Europe might also increase likelihood to support Russia (Sig. $p < 0.171$).

14 We have selected here various sources of national news as utilised by ethnic minority audiences to demonstrate how these particular news media outlets combine with other news media channels utilised for the same purpose. This has allowed us to identify three broader types of news media repertoires as exercised by these audiences. Of course, the repertoires presented here are not exhaustive but shall be rather seen as an illustration of the diverse nature of news media diets these audiences are involved in.

1 Domostroi is the traditional set of rules, instructions and advice related to various religious, social, domestic and family matters of Russian society from the 16th century. These were close to values that reinforced obedience and submission to God, Tsar and Church.

2 It is well known that the mainstream discourse in the West perceived the Kremlin's opportunity vis-à-vis Trump in highly negative terms while Russia's official discourse welcomed Trump's victory as an opportunity to bring about a major positive change for Russia's position in international relations. For instance, in Russia, the governmental daily *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* encapsulated these expectations well by interviewing a pro-Kremlin political commentator on 9 November 2016: 'Trump is completely different from Obama, for instance regarding events that unfolded in Crimea. That's why I think that the issue on sanctions against Russia will be reconsidered thoroughly' (Ermolaeva 2016).

3 For instance, since 2015, migration and ethnic relations have been one of the least common topics in Russia's protest activities, in contrast to their significance between 2010 and 2014. See https://komitetgi.ru/analytics/3797/.

4 Scholars of Russian cyber warfare have argued that Russia already has the technological capacity to disconnect herself from the global internet (Ristolainen 2017); yet, it seems that domestic political and economic thresholds are still too high to take this step.

5 Following the nationalist euphoria in 2014 around the invasion of Crimea and the war in Donbass, several nationalist oppositional figures and organisations have faced indictments, and many of them have been arrested, jailed or forced into emigration. These include, for instance, Aleksander Belov, Dmitrii Demushkin, Daniil Konstantinov, Viacheslav Mal'tsev and Iuri Gorskii.

6 In his farewell letter to *SiP*'s readers, Prosvirnin mentions two projects that he plans to establish after *SiP*. The first aims to continue *SiP*'s tradition of publishing long, informative and chargeable articles on pre-revolutionary Russian aristocracy, while the second project aims to build a dialogical news portal (similar to LiveJournal), where the best explanations and answers will be chargeable (*SiP* 2018d).

7 Regularly published sections 'Russkii kalendar' and 'Den' v istorii' (*SiP* 2018a) describe these figures and events. The latter also comprises events from the Soviet era.

8 Dmitrii Galkovskii, a Russian writer and nationalist blogger whom Prosvirnin considers one of his major ideational paragons.

9 George Hawley clarifies that although the Breitbart forum (generally associated with Trump's ex-advisor Steven Bannon) had some connections to the alt-right, it has been labelled an 'alt-lite', closer to the conservative mainstream than the actual alt-right forums (Hawley 2017, 155–156).

10 The channel was established in 2015 and is financed by the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, known as a key sponsor of the Donbass insurgency as well as of various conservative and religious enterprises. For more information, see http://tsargrad.tv/.

11 Prosvirnin and *SiP* supported Naval'nyi in the Moscow mayoral election in 2013 and published a poster with a quotation of Aleksander Blok's poem *Retaliation* and the image of Naval'nyi seemingly pinpointing his white supremacy (*SiP* 2013).

12 The trigger for protests in Volokolamsk was an unbearable stench and one of the solutions for this problem that was discussed by authorities was to build a de-gasification system for dumps.

13 Interview was conducted on 13 June 2016.

14 This alleged 'ethnicisation' of the Kremlin's nationalism since 2014 has been a disputable topic among scholars of Russian nationalism. See, for instance, Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2016).

15 The current hymn of the Russian Federation is the same (yet with revisited lyrics) as in the Soviet Union.

16 A sarcastic reference to Putin and members of his inner circle around judo clubs where they met in Leningrad in the 1970s.

1 http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/d350878ee36f956a74c2c86830d066eafce20149/, accessed 29 September 2018.

2 For instance, the case against Svetlana Davydova. Davydova, a housewife with seven children, was put in pre-trial detention in the high-security Lefortovo Prison in Moscow. She had overheard Russian soldiers talking about military deployment in Ukraine. Davydova decided to phone the Ukrainian Embassy and was subsequently put in pre-trial detention in the high-security Lefortovo Prison in Moscow. She was released soon thereafter, after Team 29 launched a large-scale public campaign around her case and 20,000 people signed a petition for her release (Luhn 2015).

3 http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_34661/e3620d183bd6d1fe2ab8b0c912809857217325a2/, accessed 29 September 2018.

4 http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_34661/36f65566525347506c3bca47d7b5ddfc19731d6b/, accessed 29 September 2018.

5 The Ukrainian Right Sector: https://pravyysektor.info/, accessed 1 October 2018.

1 The Arab Spring refers to the wave of revolutions and protests (late 2010–mid 2012) in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Social media played a crucial role in the organising of protesters and spreading of this revolutionary wave (Skinner 2011).

2 https://mail.ru/.

3 https://www.livejournal.com/media.

4 @MID_RF.

5 https://www.facebook.com/maria.zakharova.167.
6 https://krispotupchik.livejournal.com/profile.
7 https://fritzmorgen.livejournal.com/profile.
8 https://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/profile.
9 https://rueconomics.ru/.
10 https://nation-news.ru/
11 https://polit.info/.
12 'MDK', over 10 million subscribers; 'Chotkie prikoly', 8 million subscribers, 'Ne poverish'', over 6 million subscribers; 'Uboinyi iumor', over 6 million subscribers; 'SSHA – sponsor mirovogo terrora', over 250,000 subscribers; 'Vezhlivye liudi', approx. 250,000 subscribers; and 'Rossia – nashu stranu ne pobedit', 194,000 subscribers. Available at: https://vk.com/mudakoff; https://vk.com/oroom; https://vk.com/ne.poverish; https://vk.com/fucking_humor; https://vk.com/anti_usa_news; https://vk.com/vegchelru; https://vk.com/rusmotivators.
13 According to the statistics of his Twitter account, '@ARTEM_KLYUSHIN has 1,005,339 followers on Twitter. This account is #1,380 in the worldwide rank of the most popular Twitter users'. Accessed 12 October 2018, https://twittercounter.com/ARTEM_KLYUSHIN.
14 Aleksei Navalny is a Russian political activist, a founder of the Anti-Corruption Foundation (created in 2011). He has risen to popularity on the Russian internet first through his blog, then on YouTube, Twitter and other internet platforms including his website https://navalny.com/ and the Foundation's site https://fbk.info/.
15 Russian derogatory word for Ukrainians.
16 Ukrainian derogatory word for Russians.
17 In recent years, the number of criminal cases against users who reposted or 'liked' internet memes has grown significantly. Despite such memes being qualified as 'extremist', legal proceedings are brought against them only inconsistently and they still circulate widely online. See Zotova (2018).
1 In 2016, 71.2 per cent of the Russian population trusted the Russian Orthodox Church (VTsIOM 2016).
1 The Russian Media Lab, a three-year project, which started in 2016, examines the execution of state control mechanisms, censorship and the remaining 'spaces' of independent reporting.

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