

# Russia: Media Freedom Coalition statement (October 2021)

The undersigned members of the Media Freedom Coalition express their deep concern about the Russian government's intensifying harassment of independent journalists and media outlets in Russia. Media freedom is vital to the effective functioning of free and open societies and is essential to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

This year has seen the Russian authorities systematically detain journalists and subject them to harsh treatment while they reported on protests in support of imprisoned opposition figure Aleksey Navalny. In April, the office of student journal DOXA was searched in relation to spurious charges and four editors were then subjected to severe restrictions on their freedom. On 29 June, Russian authorities raided the apartments of staff members of investigative news website Proekt on the same day the outlet published an investigation into alleged corrupt practices by Russia's Interior Minister. Proekt was added to Russia's list of "undesirable foreign organizations," the first media entity to receive that designation. In addition, Russian occupation authorities in Crimea have held Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reporter Vladislav Yesypenko since March and have reportedly tortured him in detention. On 15 July, Yesypenko was indicted on specious charges and faces up to 18 years' imprisonment. On 8 October, Russian authorities applied the label of "media foreign agent" to the international investigative journalism project Bellingcat, known for their investigation of the poisoning of Navalny.

In an unambiguous effort to suppress Russians' access to independent reporting, the Russian government introduced onerous labelling requirements for so-called "media foreign agents" last year. Since then, it has charged RFE/RL with more than 600 violations, resulting in fines totalling more than \$4.4 million. Russian authorities rejected RFE/RL's appeals of initial fines in March and froze the local bank accounts of RFE/RL's Moscow bureau on 14 May, placing the bureau at risk of bankruptcy. It increasingly appears the Russian government intends to force RFE/RL to end its decades-long presence in Russia, just as it has already forced the closure of several other independent media outlets in recent years.

In addition to RFE/RL, authorities have applied the "media foreign agent" label to independent Russian outlets operating within or near Russia's borders, Meduza, Important Stories, VTimes, The Insider, Mediazona, OVD-Info, Medium Orient, PASMI news, Moscow Digital Media and TV channel Dozhd, undercutting their ability to operate. As a result of this crackdown, VTimes was forced to announce its closure less than a month after its designation. Over the past few months, Russian authorities added dozens more Russian journalists to their "foreign agent" list. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 10 journalists are currently imprisoned in Russia simply for carrying out their work. We also note the Russian authorities' decision to expel BBC Journalist Sarah Rainsford – a retrograde step that further damages

the cause of media freedom in Russia.

The 17-19 September Duma elections in the Russian Federation were preceded by Russian government restrictions towards journalists and media workers. Journalists and media workers were threatened, forcibly expelled from the polling stations and force was being used against them. These actions contradict Russia's international commitments.

While concerns related to freedom of expression and the safety of journalists in Russia have intensified, they are not new. We stand in solidarity with independent Russian journalists who assume personal risk in carrying out their professional activities, and we honour the memory of those reporters whose intrepid work has cost them their lives, including Natalia Estemirova, Anna Politkovskaya, and Paul Klebnikov. We applaud Dmitry Muratov, editor-in-chief of Novaya Gazeta, for winning Nobel Peace Prize. This award underlines the important work all independent journalists and media workers in the Russian Federation have done for years, fighting for human rights, including freedom of expression.

We reiterate our condemnation of the Russian government's targeting and harassment of independent journalists and media outlets. We urge the Russian Federation to comply with its international human rights commitments and obligations and to respect and ensure media freedom and safety of journalists. We call on the Russian government to cease its repression of independent voices, end the politically motivated proceedings against journalists and media organizations, and release all those who have been unjustly detained.

Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States.