



MAY: In the Soviet Union, all media were controlled by the state, and foreign correspondents were severely restricted. Those of us who hoped and perhaps believed that freedom of speech and freedom of the press would be guaranteed to the people of post-Soviet Russia have been disappointed. Not least the Kremlin has been hostile towards journalists reporting for Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, RFE/RL, media outlets of the U.S. government.

To discuss what President Vladimir Putin is doing and intends to do to further control reporting from Russia, we're joined by Jamie Fly, President and CEO of RFE/RL. Jamie has previously worked at the German Marshall Fund, and served as a Senior Staffer in the U.S. Congress, the National Security Council, and the Defense Department. Also, with us is Andrey Shary, the Director of RFE/RL's Russian Service. I'm Cliff May, and it's my pleasure to have you with us too, for this conversation here on *Foreign Podicy*.

Jamie, it's good to talk to you again. Andrey, nice to virtually meet you. You know, we should provide a bit of background for those who may not know a lot about RFE/RL. So, Jamie, start with how these two organizations began and what their mission is.

FLY: Thanks Cliff, it's great to be with you and great to be on your podcast with Andrey. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is now a combined entity of what were originally two radio stations that started during the Cold War with the mission of broadcasting objective news and information to people behind the Iron Curtain. Radio Free Europe broadcast to the Warsaw Pact countries in Eastern Europe, Radio Liberty broadcast to the Soviet Union. And now today in the 21st century, RFE/RL is a multimedia news organization. Very similar to many private news organizations, but it's different in the sense that it's an international public broadcaster funded by the U.S. Congress with the mission of providing independent news and information in societies where it otherwise is difficult for citizens to get. These are societies where freedom of the press does not exist or has not been fully established. And the media are often under direct pressure from the governments in question. And so, RFE/RL tries to provide that news and information that otherwise those citizens would not be able to get in their societies. And we do that in 23 countries, in 27 languages currently including still in Russia.

MAY: And maybe just so people know, the difference – people have heard of Voice of America, it's probably more famous than RFE/RL. What is the distinction between the missions of Voice of America and RFE/RL?

FLY: RFE/RL does what we call surrogate journalism. So we are trying to help model the work of an independent press in the societies where we operate. Our journalists are often and as much as possible, also forward deployed. So out in the countries that they're reporting on, side by side with the audience that they are serving. Voice of America does some of that, but voice of America throughout its existence as a federal U.S. government news network has had the additional role of telling America's story, describing what's going on in the United States and outlining U.S. policy to the world. And so it's one of our sister networks, but there's a fundamental difference in our approach and the service that we provide to our audiences.

MAY: Got it. And Andre, how would you characterize the situation for Russian media? Inside the country, newspaper, TV, radio, internet and social media. Are there any independent outlets anymore? For example, as I recall "nezavisimaya gazeta," which translates as independent newspaper, was an important and fairly independent newspaper in the early post-Soviet period. I know there's – I don't know a lot about it, there's "dozhd'," which means rain, which is an independent Russian online TV channel. So is there still such a thing as independent media in Russia?



SHARY: Hello, everybody. Hello, Cliff. Hello, Jamie. It depends on what is the line of your comparison? So if you compare it to the Soviet Union, it's still better than it used to be. And I remember myself as a young listener of Radio Slobodna, Radio Liberty. It was 40 years ago, and I was sitting in my room and trying through the German Gulf Radio to understand what was going on in Moscow during Olympic games of 1980. Yes, which were blocked by U.S. due to Russian Soviet invasion to Afghanistan.

If it compares with that time, of course Russia is not Soviet Union or still is not as Soviet Union used to be. But from Zaza point of view for example, nezavisimaya gazeta, an independent newspaper is not independent anymore because it's heavily dependent from Kremlin. Right, a bunch of independent or semi-independent media outlets are still in Russia. And I think that Radio Slobodna leads these bunch of journalistic teams who try to provide to their audience a balanced and transcendent news.

You mentioned TV Rain, it's okay. You can mention also exo moskva, a once very famous radio station which emerged during Yeltsin's time, Boris Yeltsin's time. It's not so independent anymore, because it's somehow connected with Gazprom or other oligarch circles close to Vladimir Putin. But on the several media outlets, some of them are based outside Russia, like from Meduza. It's an independent website which is based in Latvia.

You can name several websites; you can name several Telegram channels. But their space for freedom of press, for free press is unfortunately smaller and smaller in Russia during the last decade of Vladimir Putin governance. And you can cite a whole set of legislation, which prevents journalists of doing their job professionally and being independent. Of course, we are hoping for the better, but frankly speaking, we are under tremendous pressure from Russian government, and our future in Russia is not very clear now.

MAY: Yeah. And I'm going to get to that, and talk about specifically what's happening to RFE/RL under the Putin government. But we'll get to them, and I want to do a little more in the background. And also, I want to introduce this personal note. I was an undergrad exchange student many years ago in the Soviet Union, and then I visited Russia again in the early post-Soviet period for a meeting between American and Russian journalists. I was a full-time journalist myself at that point, and I can remember long discussions about how to establish freedom of the press in Russia.

People were very excited about this conversation and about the possibilities. Everyone I'd say was very hopeful. And eventually what was produced was Article 29 of the Russian constitution, and that was adopted in 1993, two years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. And it's just five sentences. I think it's interesting to hear what's in the constitution, whether or not these rights are guaranteed. What Article 29 says is, "Everyone shall be guaranteed the freedom of ideas and speech." Sounds awful good. Two, "The propaganda or agitation, instigating, social, racial, national or religious hatred and strife shall not be allowed. The propaganda of social, racial, national religious, or linguist supremacy shall be banned." Could be open to interpretation. "No one may be forced to express his views and convictions or to reject them. Everyone shall have the right to freely look for, receive, transmit, produce, and distribute information and by any legal way, the list of data comprising state secrets shall be determined by a federal law." Finally, "The freedom of mass communication shall be guaranteed. Censorship shall be banned." I think it's fair to say that Putin, who came to power seven years later in 2000, clearly did not consider any of that binding on him. Jamie, maybe you start, and Andre will have to have something to say about that, I'm sure.

FLY: Yeah, I think that's correct. And I think in our case and Radio Slobodna, Radio Liberty's experience in post '91 Russia, we've seen that trajectory that you outlined. We obviously operated even at a minimal level prior to 1991. I'm told that we even at one point in the late Gorbachev era, had a hundred freelancers working with us, even though we



didn't have an official presence inside the Soviet Union at that point. Fast-forward to Yeltsin was the Russian president who actually invited Slobodna to set up an office in Moscow, actually 30 years ago this year was someone who had been interviewed by our team before we had that official presence.

He even, when he invited us in said that his quote was, "I've not been allergic to you for a long time. I don't feel mistrust towards your radio station. I always respond to your request to be interviewed." And actually, he spoke very favorably about our work, invited us to set up this office 30 years ago, and then, to be blunt, ever since it's kind of been downhill from there in terms of the restrictions that have been imposed on us. Putin repealed the decree that invited us in and in the last several years, we've started to see a steady increase into direct pressure on our ability to operate inside the country, which Andrey was referencing earlier.

MAY: And Andrey, if I'm correct on this, since Putin came to power, at least 25 Russian journalists, not RFE/RL, but Russian journalists have died or been murdered, or missing in mysterious circumstances. Is that correct?

SHARY: Yes, yes, yes. And if it's correct, maybe even more. As a paradox that in today's Russia, this constitution you cited, you have been cited, still exists. And precisely we say this constitution now, when we defend our position in Russian courts, who fines us for doing kind of a professional job in Russia. So, it's the same as the new legislation enables us to control our content one hundred percent. That's why I appealing to the courts against fines, which are imposed by the Russian government.

So, it's more and more difficult for journalists to be independent in today's Russia. We can cite examples from '90s where Radio Slobodna was on one equal fifths popularity. And now it's another, because our popularity during the last 24 months has get duplicated. So it does mean that Russian audiences needs our information and they perceive it to be truthful, to be balanced and to be important for them.

It does mean that a Russian state sponsored propaganda does not provide a hundred percent, a hundred percent honest and balanced news. So at the same time, so we feel this pressure on a daily basis from government, Putanists, on us and our journalists were more than once jeopardized by Russian police, by security forces and for each journalist who now operates in Russia, not only in Moscow, but outside Moscow, in remote regions, it's more and more physically dangerous to produce a quality reporting from the field because the legislation is so rigid that it's balanced a lot of things, which for normal journalists like air like fresh air, you should just do it just to be able to produce quality reporting.

MAY: So, Jamie, be a little specific now. How many journalists do you have still managing to work there? What's the situation in terms of getting visas? What's their work conditions? Are they being threatened? And what else is, in larger, is Putin doing to try to prevent RFE/RL from working? Are they trying to actually, are they trying to actually push you out of the country entirely, hopefully they'll just make it so inconvenient that you just give up?

FLY: Yeah. So we have a sizeable presence in Russia, and it's important to mention, as you mentioned, visas, that RFE/RL employs Russian nationals in Russia, for the most part. So these are Russian citizens who are reporting on issues of interest to their country. And so these are not Westerners who are being sent in to cover what's going on in Russia. But many of these are people who, many of them have never lived or worked outside of their country. And they now work for RFE/RL and do their journalistic work in Moscow or elsewhere. We've got about 50 people in Moscow and we have several hundred freelancers that we work with across Russia. And Andrey mentioned the pressure, the



unique pressures that they are often under, especially in smaller towns and villages and more remote areas where they sometimes – it's easier for them to be harassed by local security forces.

So, it's an extensive network. We believe one of the, if not the largest independent news network of journalists inside Russia. And so we believe that they're doing essential work for a Russian public, which is increasingly facing a dwindling number of choices when it comes to the media landscape that they have access to. And what we've seen in recent years as the Kremlin's own insecurities have grown, our efforts to target us by citing the fact that we are funded by the U.S. Congress designating us as foreign agent media and imposing a set of requirements on foreign agent media, trying to operate inside Russia.

Those requirements initially just were administrative and bureaucratic requiring certain types of registration inside the country, some high level labeling of us and our content as foreign agent, but that all took a very different turn starting last fall in the wake of protests in Belarus, in the wake of ongoing unrest inside Russia, when the Kremlin imposed invasive labeling requirements on foreign agent media, most notably RFE/RL, and we as a company have refused to comply with that invasive labeling, including things like 15 second trailers prior to every social media video, because we believe that it essentially puts the Kremlin into our newsroom and is providing the Kremlin with the opportunity to make editorial decisions about how to display our content to the Russian audience, which we find unacceptable.

And because we're refusing to comply as Andrey noted, we are now being fined currently to the tune of a \$1.5 million. And those fines are growing, sometimes on a weekly basis because every single time we publish a new piece of content without those required labels, we are again violating the law,

MAY: So, you are challenging these fines, as I understand it in court. You are able to find attorneys in Russia who are independent enough to represent you and try to say the law does not establish that you can do this to a foreign company.

FLY: So, we are appealing at all levels possible. We've begun to lose those appeals in the Russian judicial system, but we are appealing to higher levels. Ultimately we plan to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights as well, because as Andrey noted, we believe that these requirements actually violate the Russian constitution itself. And so, we plan to pursue all legal avenues possible, and yes, we have lawyers who have been working with us. But we're entering a phase here in the next several months where we could face potential criminal violations for our failure to comply, where some of our Russian staff could be targeted for criminal prosecution, and when they could even try to force us out of the country by closing our bank accounts and even raiding our office in Moscow, and seizing equipment. And so, we're reaching a critical phase in this confrontation with the Kremlin, which as far as we can tell appears at this point to have the intent of forcing us out of the country, and making it impossible for us to do our day-to-day journalism from the ground inside Russia.

MAY: One thing I wonder about Andrey, so it's great to have Russian reporters on the ground in Russia reporting for this service, somebody who lives in Omsk, knows Omsk well, knows what's going on there. But it's also pretty easy for the authorities to say to that person, "You know, you and Grandma and your friends, you're putting yourself in a lot of jeopardy with what you're saying. Let me tell you what the truth is that you should be reporting, and we'll be watching to see if you do, and there will be consequences if you don't." Doesn't that – I've got to imagine that happens.



SHARY: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I'd like to pin on what you asked Jamie before, what is the key difference between us and Voice of America? We do have and we always used to have very heavy presence in Russia, in every major city. We have a family of websites, which are devoted especially to certain regions of Russia, Siberia, Northwest, Northern Caucasus, Volga Region. So, it's very close to people, and these websites does not tell the story of Putin. They do tell the story of common people who lives on the ground, who understand what's going on with their daily burdens, daily problems, and our reporters are just inside these Russian people.

That's why we are not foreign agency licensed. We are Russian people doing a professional job. We are thankful for – And I am Russian national also. We are thankful to U.S. people and to U.S. taxpayers who help us to do our job, because it's the interest of democracy in Russia. And we are independent because our editorial policy is defended by U.S. law. We do take all editorial decisions independently, and we do not know what is blacklist like in Kremlin, when you can't talk about it, or you can't interview certain person because it's not up to what they want to hear from this person.

And of course, all journalists, a lot of journalists who are situated in the ground in small cities, they are subjects of daily or weekly attacks from Security Service, from local authorities. They are blamed as foreign agents, U.S. spies, by pro-Kremlin media. We somehow are acquainted to it, and it's just a way of doing things in Russia. And I'm proud that I am one of these bunch of brave journalists whom I do not know personally every one of them, because there are hundreds of them. But they go on with doing their job, which is essential for Russia.

MAY: Are you reaching most of your audience on the internet, or social media, or shortwave radio? How are most people accessing RFE/RL at this point?

SHARY: I presume that our first platform and by far most popular is internet. We have a family of websites, and not only we as a Russian service, because we have during the last years, we have very strong TV channel, which is called Current Time, Nastoyashcheye Vremya in Russian who is one of our – It's our colleagues who works together with us in Moscow, in Prague and other cities, and they provide more digital journalism that we do. We are traditionally strong with analytics, with text, with social videos.

With radio, we are still radio with 7/24 broadcasting, we have 7/24 broadcasting through internet. We have several hours of AM broadcasting from frequencies in Lithuania. But nevertheless, social media and internet are our main platforms. And by the way, they are one of the current targets by the Russian government, because this legislation about how and what you can put on internet and what you cannot is much and much, more and more rigid in Russia than it used to be a couple of years ago.

MAY: Jamie, how complicated would it be for the government to block you and others on the internet, to take more control of the internet, like I believe the Chinese have? Technologically, isn't that a capability, and aren't you concerned that they will use it? Why haven't they used it?

FLY: Yeah, it's a constant concern. The Kremlin has been very vocal about their desire to have some sort of system similar to the Chinese, and they've talked about a Russian internet that would be indigenous and would allow them to block access to Western platforms and Western content. We haven't seen them deploy that on a wide scale yet. They've said it various times that they're testing such a system. And that would be concerning obviously to us, because as Andrey noted, in recent years, most of our audience is interacting with our content online. We've had significant growth through those online platforms.



Our audience inside Russia has almost doubled over the last five years, when you add up all of the people who are coming to the local regional sites that Andrey talked about, the young Russians who are interacting with our social media content, our live protest coverage, our coverage of live events, like Navalny's return to Russia. That is where people are coming to access news and information, not just from us, but from other sources as well. And I think as Andrey noted, we're just part of the bigger picture, because the Kremlin is not just aiming at us, they've also talked about blocking entire Western social media platforms. They've tried to pick fights with Twitter, and they've made threatening noises about YouTube, which is incredibly popular inside Russia.

And so, I think everyone who's producing content for the Russian audience needs to be concerned. If we face that challenge, we'll be able to come up with ways to circumvent. We have to deal with this in other countries, like Iran, or some places in Central Asia where our sites are blocked by authoritarian regimes. There are technological ways that you can provide workarounds for your audience. And audiences usually adapt. If they really want to access the content, they will find ways to use VPNs or other means of accessing sites that are blocked. But it is a concerning development writ large, because it appears that the Kremlin, because of its insecurity, is trying to close the information space generally, and to further narrow the choices that are available to the Russian people.

MAY: And Andrey, we were just talking about Russian journalists being intimidated, threatened. Tell me if I'm wrong, I think some have actually been detained under difficult circumstances, beaten. Have some of the RFE/RL journalists even been killed?

SHARY: I don't think that we have Russians in the Russian Service experience such kind of events. We collaborated with a couple of journalists who were unfortunately killed in '90s when it was an era of this wild capitalism in Russia, but not during the last days, the last years. But now, as the situation continues to be very alarming, and the pressure is rising up, and yes our journalists, some of them are under direct physical threat from the authorities. Some of them are contacted by Secret Services, and they'll ask them, "Why do you violate us? You collaborate with Americans," and so on and so forth. So, I would say, it's a common thing for, especially for Russian regions. In Russia, in Moscow and St. Pete situation could be a little bit better, but nevertheless, the sailing is now down and down from year to year. And we can expect that possibilities, this has shaken political situation and deteriorating image of Russia in the outer world, our job will be even more tighter than it used to be.

MAY: Jamie, there are Russian journalists in Washington, probably other places in the U.S. representing TASS, maybe Izvestia, Pravda. These are all government controlled media outlets. I'm guessing you've discussed with people in the State Department and maybe the administration, the possibility that, okay, we can make this reciprocal. If they're going to restrict American journalists, we can restrict Russian journalists. We know the Russian journalists in the United States are not independent. So let's talk about reciprocity.

FLY: Yeah, that's an issue that's often raised certainly when I meet with members of Congress and it's come up in recent congressional hearings, it's a challenging issue because the Russians obviously don't believe us when we say this, but RFE/RL is actually editorially independent of the U.S. government, despite the fact that we're funded by the U.S. Congress. As Andrey noted, that independence is enshrined in U.S. law. No one has any doubts about RT and Sputnik and who they take their orders from. And so, the direct comparison is flawed from that sense, in that RFE/RL is out there trying to do independent journalism where RT and Sputnik are propaganda outlets, who are trying to do –

MAY: RT used to be called Russia Today. Just so people know.



FLY: Yes.

MAY: I think it's still available on cable TV and all of that. Yeah, go ahead.

FLY: Yeah. So they take their direction from the Kremlin, both Russia Today and Sputnik. The challenge as well is, they've been able to access Americans through pretty much every platform imaginable. There on any cable package you may get or satellite package in the United States. They even have some radio licenses with local radio stations in the Midwest and elsewhere. Whereas, as the Kremlin has increased its pressure on U.S. funded media in recent years, all of that has been deprived of RFE/RL. We've lost our radio licenses years ago. We haven't been able to get access on satellite packages.

And so, we already, even prior to the current pressure on RFE/RL, we've already been in a situation where RT and Sputnik have much greater ability to access the American audience than RFE/RL has the ability to access the Russian audience. And so it's already an unbalanced comparison, even if you could compare them, given the editorial differences. So, I think it's something that is going to be debated by policy makers in Washington and not just debated when it comes to Russia, but there's also been much discussion about Chinese funded media in the U.S. and that's an area where the prior administration, the Trump administration, actually put some controls in place, but that has not happened yet on Russian media in the U.S.

MAY: Is there anything else that the U.S. government, that the Congress or the administration should be thinking of as a way to try to lift or reduce these restrictions and understanding that we're talking about a trend here, not a one-time thing?

FLY: I think, for me, given the way that it appears that the Russians are intent on pushing us out of the country, the real question will be is the U.S. Congress, is the Biden administration, are they committed to continuing to support independent media in Russia? Not just the work of RFE/RL, which obviously I believe is essential. And we will do that work from outside of the country if we need to. We did that for decades during the Cold War. So, we're not going to abandon the Russian audience, but we may need additional resources to do that effectively if we don't have the ability to have as many people on the ground.

But also, I think the United States government, as well as allied governments in Europe, should really redouble their support for those smaller indigenous Russian outlets that are not supported by the U.S. government right now, and make sure that we continue to try to fight to allow that ecosystem to survive. Because as Andrey noted earlier on, we're not back in the Soviet era yet, but I increasingly fear that that's where we may be headed as they continue to tighten the screws on independent media and impose more and more restrictions on their ability to operate.

MAY: Yeah. I want to conclude by suggesting the problem is actually bigger than most people recognize, Jamie. You mentioned China where very difficult to report from China, which is why we don't know the basic facts about the virus that came from Wuhan, which we're told we should not call the Wuhan virus. If you publicly criticize Iran's rulers for their support of terrorism, their threats to their neighbors, their illicit nuclear weapons program, and argue that civilized nations should curtail economic relations with them, they're likely to threaten you as they have threatened FDD and some of our staff by name. And meanwhile, the economics of journalism have sharply deteriorated since the days when I was reporting from abroad.



So, there are just simply not that many people who can make their living as foreign correspondents these days, and particularly from authoritarian countries. If you have any thoughts on that, Andrey or Jamie, I'd be pleased to hear them.

SHARY: Look, I am listening to and I am thinking that the ugliest thing, which Mr. Putin wants to do with us is just to make journalists to be a part of dirty political game. I am against any kind of censorship. I am with all my heart for free flow of information, for balanced and fact checking journalism, which we are trying to do. What Kremlin is trying to do now is to say, it's tit for tat. You are bad and we are good. And don't touch Russia Today in U.S. or RFE/RL will be somehow shut down in Russia. It's a nightmare for every journalist. I'm doing journalist for 35 years already. And I know what journalism is, and I know how to behave in these situations, but for every journalist, the most important thing is to be a side of any kind of politician, whether it's Mr. Biden or Mr. Putin or Chinese leader or anybody else. We are here to provide facts based on independent journalism. So we know how to do it. And the only way to do it is to make some kind of free atmosphere for everybody, in every country.

MAY: Well, Andrey, Jamie, I can't say you left me more optimistic than I was when I began, but I didn't really expect you to. Freedom, I think, is clearly not advancing in the world today. And it's unlikely to, unless the leaders of what we used to call the free world, commit seriously to its defense and stop accommodating authoritarians and other tyrants.

Thanks for being with us. It was great to talk to you. I hope to talk to you again. And by the way, thanks to all of you out there in podcast land for joining us here today on *Foreign Podicy*.