FOREF: When Truth Becomes a Crime - Putin's War on the Free Press

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When Truth Becomes a Crime: Putin’s War on the Free Press

From Soviet samizdat and Solzhenitsyn to Anna Politkovskaya and Nobel laureate Dmitry Muratov: How Russia has systematically silenced independent journalism—and why the democratic world may need a S

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The faces of Russia’s struggle for press freedom: Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dmitry Muratov, murdered investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya, and the Moscow offices of Novaya Gazeta—a newspaper that has paid an extraordinary price for exposing corruption, human rights abuses, and the Kremlin’s repression of dissent.

In a remarkable BBC interview with correspondent Steve Rosenberg, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dmitry Muratov offered a disturbing portrait of Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Speaking from Moscow, Muratov described a country where independent newspapers have been silenced, political opponents imprisoned, and ordinary citizens have learned to express their opinions in whispers.

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Muratov is not an exile commenting from the safety of London or Berlin. He remains in Russia, where he helped establish **Novaya Gazeta** in 1993, one of the country’s most courageous independent newspapers. **Six of its journalists and contributors have been murdered.** Its printing operations have been shut down, its media registration revoked, and its remaining journalists subjected to investigations, raids, and intimidation.

Yet Muratov refuses to surrender.

During the interview, he compared Russian society to a bridge whose structural weaknesses are detected by sensors. In a functioning democracy, independent media, public demonstrations, opposition parties, and civil society provide those warning signals. **In Putin's Russia, almost all those sensors have been switched off.**

How can a government understand its own society when it systematically destroys every institution capable of telling it the truth?

Muratov's assessment of Putin's war against Ukraine was equally uncompromising: **"You can destroy it, but you cannot conquer it."**

For Muratov, the immense human losses on both sides have already made any meaningful victory impossible. He expressed particular horror that society has become accustomed to the deaths and suffering of hundreds of thousands of people.

The interview deserves to be watched in full. It is not merely a discussion about Ukraine. It is a warning about what happens when a nation loses the freedom to tell itself the truth.

BBC interview:



Dmitry Muratov speaks with BBC correspondent Steve Rosenberg in Moscow,2026.

A Newspaper That Paid for the Truth in Blood

When **Novaya Gazeta** was founded in 1993, Russia appeared to have an opportunity to escape its authoritarian past. The Soviet Union had collapsed, censorship had loosened, and independent journalism was flourishing.

The newspaper soon earned international recognition for investigating corruption, organized crime, abuses by security services, and atrocities committed during Russia's wars in Chechnya.

But its journalists paid a terrible price.

In May 2000, investigative journalist **Igor Domnikov** was brutally attacked outside his Moscow apartment. He died two months later. In July 2003, **Yuri Shchekochikhin**, who investigated high-level corruption, died after a mysterious illness. His colleagues suspected poisoning, although the circumstances were never conclusively established.

The most internationally recognized victim was Anna Politkovskaya, whose courageous reporting exposed torture, disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and atrocities committed against civilians in Chechnya.



Anna Politkovskaya (1958–2006), the courageous Novaya Gazeta journalist who exposed human rights abuses in Chechnya and was murdered in Moscow.
On 7 October 2006, Putin's 54th birthday, Politkovskaya was shot dead in the elevator of her Moscow apartment building. She was 48. Several perpetrators were convicted, but those who ordered her murder have never been definitively identified.

In January 2009, Novaya Gazeta journalist **Anastasia Baburova** was murdered alongside human rights lawyer **Stanislav Markelov** in central Moscow. Six months later, **Natalia Estemirova**, a prominent human rights investigator working closely with the newspaper, was abducted and murdered in Chechnya.

These were not isolated tragedies. They occurred within an increasingly dangerous environment for journalists investigating powerful political and security interests.

When Muratov received the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, jointly with Filipino journalist Maria Ressa, he dedicated his award to his murdered colleagues.



Dmitry Muratov, co-recipient of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize for defending freedom of expression.
In June 2022, he auctioned his Nobel medal for an extraordinary $103.5 million, donating the proceeds to UNICEF's humanitarian work for Ukrainian refugee children. It was a powerful statement of solidarity from a Russian journalist whose own government had launched the invasion.

Putin's Systematic Destruction of Independent Journalism

The assault on press freedom began long before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

An early turning point came in **April 2001**, when **Russia's independent NTV television network**, famous for its critical political reporting, was taken over by the state-controlled energy giant **Gazprom**. Other major television networks gradually came under government influence.

The Kremlin subsequently developed an increasingly sophisticated legal machinery for suppressing dissent.
The 2012 foreign agents law, initially targeting civil society organizations, was progressively expanded to media outlets, journalists, and individuals.
The 2015 undesirable organizations law made cooperation with designated organizations potentially punishable.

Following the **invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022**, repression accelerated dramatically. Within days, Russia introduced legislation imposing prison sentences of up to 15 years for disseminating what authorities considered false information about the armed forces.

Reporting independently on Russian military casualties, civilian deaths, or alleged war crimes became extraordinarily dangerous.

- **The independent radio station Ekho Moskvy was silenced.**
- **Television channel Dozhd (TV Rain) suspended its Russian operations.**
- **Novaya Gazeta halted its print publication in March 2022.**
- **Hundreds of journalists fled abroad.**

Independent outlets such as **Meduza, The Insider, The Moscow Times, and Novaya Gazeta Europe** continued reporting from exile, often facing website blocking, financial restrictions, and legal threats.



Independent Russian media outlets, including TV Rain, Meduza, and Ekho Moskvy, have faced closures, forced relocation, and increasingly severe restrictions.
The figures illustrate the magnitude of the crackdown: Russia ranked 172nd out of 180 countries in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index; around 50 journalists and media workers were reported imprisoned in October 2026; Muratov estimated more than 1,500 political prisoners; and wartime false-information charges carry sentences of up to 15 years. These numbers measure different categories and reporting periods.

Even digital escape routes are disappearing. Russian authorities have increasingly restricted **VPN services**, messaging applications, and access to independent websites. Censorship is becoming an increasingly comprehensive system of information control.

Irina Slavina: A Journalist Driven to Despair



Irina Slavina (1973–2020), Russian investigative journalist and editor of the independent *Koza Press* in Nizhny Novgorod. After years of pressure and harassment by authorities, she died in an act of desperate

protest on 2 October 2020, leaving a final message: “I ask you to blame the Russian Federation for my death.”
Not all victims of repression were internationally recognized journalists.

Irina Slavina, editor-in-chief of the independent regional news outlet **Koza Press** in **Nizhny Novgorod**, spent years investigating corruption and abuses of power.

On **1 October 2020**, police searched her apartment in connection with an investigation involving the opposition organization **Open Russia**. Investigators confiscated electronic equipment and searched through her personal belongings.

The following day, 2 October 2020, Slavina died after setting herself on fire outside the regional Interior Ministry headquarters. Shortly beforehand, she posted a devastating message on Facebook: *“I ask you to blame the Russian Federation for my death.”*

Her death was an act of desperate protest. While no outsider can know every factor behind her decision, the circumstances raised profound questions about the consequences of sustained intimidation and harassment.

Slavina’s tragedy reminds us that Russia’s repression extends far beyond Moscow, reaching local journalists whose only protection is their determination to report independently.

Political Prisoners: The Human Cost of Silence

In his BBC interview, Muratov expressed particular anguish over Russia’s political prisoners, many of whom have largely disappeared from international headlines.

He mentioned Moscow municipal deputy **Alexei Gorinov**, sentenced to seven years in prison in 2022 after criticizing the invasion of Ukraine during a local council meeting.

He spoke about pediatrician **Nadezhda Buyanova**, imprisoned after allegations that she made anti-war comments during a medical consultation, and engineer **Igor Baryshnikov**, whose imprisonment despite serious illness raised urgent humanitarian concerns.

Muratov also recalled pianist **Pavel Kushnir**, who died in custody in July 2024 after protesting against the war, and theater director **Evgenia Berkovich** and playwright **Svetlana Petriychuk**, sentenced to six years in prison in July 2024 in a widely criticized terrorism-related prosecution.



The human cost of Putin's repression: Moscow municipal deputy Alexei Gorinov (left), imprisoned for opposing the war in Ukraine; theater director Evgenia Berkovich (center), sentenced to six years in prison in a controversial terrorism-related case; and pianist Pavel Kushnir (right), who died in Russian custody in July 2024 after protesting against the invasion

The persecution continues today.

On 15 October 2026, just two days before this essay, Russian investigators searched the Moscow home of Novaya Gazeta editor-in-chief Sergei Sokolov and took him for questioning.

The investigation concerned journalist Oleg Roldugin, placed under house arrest in April over allegations involving personal data. Sokolov was released without charges.

Even a Nobel Prize-winning newspaper is not beyond the reach of Putin's machinery of repression.

From Soviet Samizdat to Putin's Digital Censorship

Russia has experienced this struggle before.

Under **Soviet communism**, the Communist Party monopolized newspapers, publishing houses, and broadcasting. Writers who challenged official ideology faced censorship, imprisonment, exile, or psychiatric confinement.

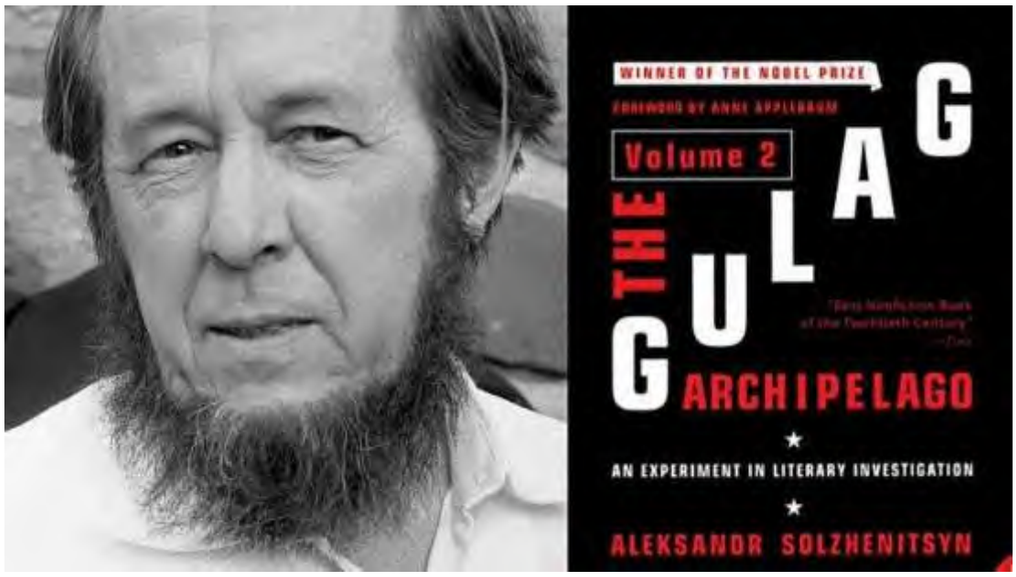
Yet an extraordinary underground movement emerged: samizdat, literally self-publishing.

Forbidden manuscripts were typed, copied, and secretly circulated. Readers became distributors, risking surveillance and arrest simply for sharing information.



Samizdat—the underground press that defied Soviet censorship. Forbidden manuscripts were secretly typed, copied, and circulated among dissidents, keeping independent thought alive despite KGB surveillance and the threat of imprisonment. A powerful historical precedent for a modern "Samizdat 2.0."

Among the most influential dissidents was **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**, whose The Gulag Archipelago, published abroad in 1973, exposed the Soviet system of forced labor camps and political terror. He was expelled from the Soviet Union in February 1974.



Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) and his landmark work The Gulag Archipelago, first published in 1973. Drawing on his own imprisonment and the testimonies of fellow prisoners, Solzhenitsyn exposed the vast machinery of Soviet repression, challenging communist propaganda and demonstrating the extraordinary power of the written word against totalitarianism.

Nuclear physicist **Andrei Sakharov,** writer **Vladimir Bukovsky,** and the editors of A Chronicle of Current Events, which documented political persecution from 1968 onward, helped preserve an independent record of Soviet reality.

Samizdat did not overthrow communism. But it prevented the state from achieving a complete monopoly over truth. That historical experience offers an important lesson for today.

Does Russia Need a Samizdat 2.0?

Digital technology has revolutionized the possibilities for underground communication. Independent websites, encrypted messaging, mirror platforms, and online publications can reach audiences Soviet dissidents could scarcely have imagined. But authoritarian surveillance has advanced as well.

Perhaps the time has come for a coordinated international Samizdat 2.0, designed to help independent Russian journalists continue their work and reach citizens inside Russia.

Such an initiative should strengthen existing Russian-led independent media, providing sustainable funding, secure communication technologies, legal assistance, investigative collaboration, and support for journalists working in exile.

European governments, press freedom organizations, universities, foundations, and public broadcasters could contribute.

There is already valuable experience to build upon. During the Cold War, **Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the BBC World Service,** and other international broadcasters provided alternative sources of information to audiences living under communist censorship. Today, independent Russian media are finding new ways to reach their audiences through digital platforms, video journalism, and cross-border investigations.



Radio Free Europe: Breaking through the Iron Curtain. Broadcasters at Radio Free Europe (RFE) in the 1950s helped bring independent news and uncensored information to millions living under communist rule—a powerful historical model for supporting independent journalism in Putin's Russia today.

Crucially, the objective must not be to replace Russian propaganda with Western propaganda. It must be to restore access to verified information and independent reporting.

A credible Samizdat 2.0 would need editorial independence, transparent funding, rigorous fact-checking, and meaningful protection for journalists and their sources.

It should also reach beyond the educated, internationally connected audiences who already follow independent media. Regional reporting, accessible formats, and the voices of ordinary Russian citizens would be essential.

Russia's future must ultimately be decided by its own citizens. But how can they make informed political choices when their government controls what they are allowed to know?

Without a Free Press, There Can Be No Democracy

Near the end of his BBC interview, Muratov made a moving observation. Despite the atmosphere of fear, people still approach him and his colleagues on Moscow's streets to express gratitude. They speak quietly, often in whispers.

Those whispers matter. They remind us that Putin's government and the Russian people are not synonymous.

For Europe, this is not a distant problem. A government that suppresses independent journalism at home also exports disinformation, manipulates historical narratives, and attempts to influence democratic debate abroad.

Supporting independent Russian journalism is therefore not merely an act of solidarity. It is an investment in Europe's security and the possibility of a different Russian future.

Muratov, Politkovskaya, **Slavina,** and countless less familiar journalists have demonstrated the extraordinary price some people are prepared to pay for the right to tell the truth.

The question is whether the democratic world is prepared to help them—before another journalist is murdered, imprisoned, or forced into exile.

Without a free press, there can be no informed public debate, no genuine accountability, and ultimately no functioning democracy.

Russia needs independent journalism. And independent Russian journalists need far more than our admiration. They need sustained, practical international support.

Perhaps a new generation of samizdat can help ensure that the whispers Muratov hears on Moscow's streets will one day become voices that no government can silence.

Sources and further reading

BBC interview:



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Novaya Gazeta Europe: novayagazeta,eu/

Meduza: meduza.io/en

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