TRANSCRIPT
Online Event
“Russia’s Crackdown on Independent Media and Access to Information Online”

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Good morning and welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. I'm Marti Flacks, director of the Human Rights Initiative and Khosravi Chair in Principled Internationalism. We are delighted to be co-hosting today's program with the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program.

The crackdown on independent media taking place in Russia right now is both symptomatic of a serious deterioration in the human rights and political situations inside Russia as well as a manifestation of a broader pattern of abuse that's taking place against journalists all over the world. In Russia, government repression of independent media has steadily worsened over the course of the pandemic, the return of Alexei Navalny, and the September 2021 Duma elections. The government has abused public health laws to shut down protests, labeled independent media as foreign agents, and targeted individual journalists for – and outlets for harassment and prosecution. But with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the situation has now become dire.

On March 4th, Putin signed into law a media bill that criminalizes objective reporting about the war in Ukraine; even the use of the word war in describing the situation is prohibited. And those who violate the law face up to 15 years in prison. In response, many independent media outlets have been forced to shut down, more than 150 local journalists are reported to have gone into exile. In an especially heartbreaking development yesterday, Novaya Gazeta, the independent paper founded and led by 2021 Nobel Peace Prize winner Dmitry Muratov, announced it would cease publication until the war ended, after receiving a warning about its reporting from the authorities. Even access to outside media sources have been blocked, with Russians unable to directly access the BBC, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, and other U.S. and European news sources.

The situation in Russia is emblematic of the types of attacks facing independent media all over the world. Freedom House has documented a significant global deterioration in media freedom over the past decade, with new avenues of repression deployed in both authoritarian and some democratic states. And this repression doesn't just manifest itself in laws and regulations that shut down newspapers and threaten journalists’ jobs, livelihoods, or even freedom. The Committee to Protect Journalists documented the killing of 45 journalists in 2021 and 18 already in 2022, including five this month in Ukraine. But the demonization of independent media and the labeling of journalists as foreign agents or enemies does something more subtle and far more insidious: It undermines trust both in the messenger and in the information. The 2021 Global Edelman Trust Barometer found that trust in all sources of news is at an all-time low around the world, with just half of respondents indicating they believe they can trust traditional media.
Freedom of expression is not just a fundamental human right, it’s the backbone of democracy. An independent media is absolutely critical to the creation and the strengthening of democratic institutions, which is exactly why journalists are targeted by authoritarian regimes. If Russians are to have any chance of having a government that is accountable to their needs and their interests, it starts with access to information and to independent media. That’s why I’m so glad that we’re having this discussion today to help us understand what these recent developments mean for the future of independent media in Russia, how citizens will respond to these new restrictions on access to information, and how the crackdown will affect the country’s political direction. And I’m also looking forward to hearing about what the United States and its partners and allies can do to support civil society and freedom of speech in Russia going forward.

So let me briefly introduce our fantastic lineup for today’s event.

Jamie Fly is president and chief executive officer of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Jamie previously served as a senior fellow and co-director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy and director of the Future of Geopolitics and Asia programs at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. He also served as Counselor for Foreign and National Security Affairs to Senator Marco Rubio, and in the Bush administration at the National Security Council and the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Maria Snegovaya is an adjunct senior fellow in the Transatlantic Security Program at the Center for New American Security, a postdoctoral fellow in Political Science at Virginia Tech University, and a visiting scholar in the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University, where she researches Russia’s domestic and foreign policy as well as democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe. She has a long history of collaboration and publication with too many think tanks and media outlets to name.

Daniel Baer is acting director of the Europe Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He previously served as a diplomatic fellow at the University of Denver’s Josef Korbel School of International Studies and served in Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper’s cabinet as executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education. Under President Obama he was U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and a deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor at the State Department.

And Vera Zakem is a senior associate with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program here at CSIS and a senior technology and policy adviser at the Institute for Security and Technology. She’s also the founder of Zakem Global
Strategies. She recently served as a member of the bipartisan Task Force on U.S. Strategy to Support Democracy and Counter Authoritarianism, formed by Freedom House, CSIS and the McCain Institute. She also previously led strategy and research at Twitter, leading in scaling initiatives to understand the impact of technology globally.

This is a fantastic lineup with so much insight. And with that introduction, I am so pleased to turn this discussion moderation over to Andrew Lohsen, a fellow in our CSIS Europe, Russia and Eurasia Program.

Andrew, over to you.

Andrew Lohsen: Thank you very much for the introduction, Marti.

At this point I’d like to turn to each of our speakers for some introductory remarks and how they view this unfolding situation.

And as a quick note to the audience, I’d also just like to point out, please feel free to submit any questions via the webpage. There should be a button that says Ask Live Questions Here on the CSIS.org event webpage. And we’ll do our best to answer your questions at the end of the event.

Let’s start with Jamie Fly at RFE/RL. Jamie, can you tell us about some of the restrictions that have been posed on the media – imposed on the media since the start of the war in Ukraine? How do they fit into the Kremlin’s longstanding campaign against free speech and independent journalism? And what is your organization doing in response to these latest attempts to muzzle independent media?

Jamie Fly: Sure. Thanks, Andrew. And it’s great to be with all of you.

So we’ve been dealing with these sorts of restrictions for quite some time inside Russia. We’ve been operating with a formal presence in Moscow for 30 years. We were invited in by Putin’s predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, at a very different time, obviously, in Russia’s history. But even before the end of the Cold War, we were able to operate on the ground, working with freelancers. By some accounts, by the late ‘80s we had more than a hundred freelancers working with us, despite some of the legal restrictions.

And I just mention that because I think it shows the rather bleak situation that Russia is facing now when it comes to independent media, where I think we’re even going back to a time before the period at the end of the Cold War where there are even more severe restrictions being imposed on independent media outlets.
We’ve been a target of the Kremlin pretty much since Vladimir Putin came to office. Over the years he’s stripped us of our ability to broadcast via traditional radio inside Russia. We lost access to TV relatively early on. And for many years, we were limited to providing news and information using digital means, which has been a growing area for us in recent years. We’ve had great success with digital audiences. And that was the final step that the Kremlin took, starting about a year and a half ago, was to try to impose restrictions on independent outlets operating in the digital space.

That culminated obviously in recent weeks with the blocking of websites, ours and many others, with the effort to block Western social-media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, prevent people from accessing Instagram. So it’s a slow closing of the information space over many years, with the final step playing out in quick succession because of the geopolitics related to the war and the Kremlin’s desire to retain control over any public conversation about the war inside Russia.

So we’re now facing a situation where we’ve had to suspend our physical operations at our bureau in Moscow because of the Kremlin starting bankruptcy proceedings against our Russian entity for our refusal to go along with some previous labeling that they were trying to impose on our content, especially our digital content, and then also the greater risk that any serious journalist faces trying to honestly report inside Russia right now where any real coverage of the war, unfortunately, any potential coverage of political issues, could lead you towards a treason charge and, possibly, 15 years in prison. And so, given that landscape, we had to make that tough decision to suspend our physical operations at our bureau. But what we’re doing is we’re still finding ways to engage with Russian audiences. We’ve relocated some of our journalists outside of the country to our other offices. We still have some contributors inside Russia who are finding ways to share news and information with us that we can then repackage and provide back to our Russian audiences.

And then on the technological front, we’re using advanced circumvention tools – VPNs, mirror websites – and the great thing is despite this blocking, at least in our case in recent weeks, our audiences inside Russia are still at record levels because there is extreme interest in what is going on in Ukraine and because, I think, Russians understand that they’re only getting a small sliver of the true picture.

And so we’ve seen significant adaptation of these circumvention technologies and more people putting in the extra work required now to still access our content online. But that’s going to be an ongoing challenge, I think, for us and any other outlet that is still trying to operate and wants to be able to maintain those ties to our Russian audiences.
Mr. Lohsen: Thanks so much, Jamie. I think that’s a really strong point about the importance of circumvention technologies and I’d like to come back to that at a point later in the discussion.

Let’s speak now to Maria Snegovaya. Maria, it seems that the latest crackdown on independent media and digital freedoms was meant not just to help the Kremlin control the narrative but also to help suppress expressions of dissent as Putin launched a war that seems to, potentially, be quite divisive among Russian citizens.

So, you know, as Putin continues to state that this special military operation is going to plan, we see that his offensive has stalled on several fronts. Casualties are rising. So how long can the Kremlin keep up this narrative before the general population starts to openly question it, and then what happens afterward? Would love to hear your remarks.

Maria Snegovaya: Political scientists are horrible with predicting anything – thank you very much for having me as part of this conversation – so whatever we’re going to be hypothesizing about the future, unfortunately, is likely not to be true.

The whole illustration is quite unprecedented, frankly, and to the extent that we have not faced such a large country ever for the last 80 years, right, committing such an overstep on the international stage but also facing such a serious rebuttal with the sanctions coming from the West so there’s a lot of unknowns here, and right now is not the best moment to forecast what’s going to happen since, for example, even economists – even serious economists are unable to predict all of the economic effects that are going to follow.

So, first of all, what we’re going to say is it’s true that in Russia there are some groups that protested against the war. Those, however, are found among the so-called usual suspects. That is, they’re a sort of smaller share of the Russian society, 15 (percent) to 20 percent that’s usually in opposition to Putin, and many of them supported Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader who’s currently in jail after the regime tried to kill him and poisoned him.

These groups are disproportionately younger, more educated, but they’re also a minority in the Russian society, unfortunately. So those were protesting in the streets of Russia when the war started, and even numbers of those arrested – approximately 20,000 people, according to the estimates – those are quite similar to the numbers that we’ve seen in January 2021 when Navalny was on his hunger strike in jail and people came out to protest. So it’s the same old in a lot of ways. Not much has changed, despite the atrocities that the regime has committed in Ukraine.
Now, what about the majority? The majority are probably 50 to 60 percent of the population in passive, not active – not actively mobilized, but, nonetheless, embrace of the war. You know, trust in polls is a highly debatable issue in Russia, another contested issue among the Russian liberals. They really don’t like – (laughs) – those issues for – to debate. But we’ve, first of all, written about the measures of this state of the Russian society. Second, multiple methodologies, multiple ways to poll the Russian population, different independent pollsters all returning more or less similar results.

Now is 50-60 percent big or not? That’s the question. And it appears while it’s still a majority of the Russian population, right? And that you can – 20 percent maximum, probably, actively disagree and protesting against the war, 50-60 percent in the subtle kind of interact embrace of the war, and then there is also about 20 percent of the population who are uncertain.

So it looks by the look at the Russian TV – Russian propaganda, everything that the previous presenters have already described. But also, almost nonstop propaganda brainwashing that’s coming from the government-funded TV channels. It appears that the Kremlin does not think that the current numbers are sufficient to sustain long-term support for this war. Since the war started, and especially since the regime has realized that the war is going to last must longer than expected, we actually see almost nonstop propaganda coverage on TV channels. All the entertainment content on major TV channels – I’m talking first TV channel and RTR, the second one – they almost nonstop are covering Ukraine situation.

There’s notorious talk shows where essentially state propagandists actually try to explain why Russia is doing everything right in Ukraine. And the interesting change that happened is that in the past, first of all, those shows would usually appear in late afternoon or in the evening. Right now, they start at 9:00 a.m. or 10:00 a.m. in the morning and continue nonstop, with small interruptions for news shows. Again, the news are, again, covering Ukraine all the way until after midnight. Now the interesting development is that we do not really see any opposition whatsoever. In the past, there used to be some liberal Russian speakers, some even Ukraine representatives occasionally appearing on those shows.

That’s no longer the case. It’s just nonstop propaganda. And that’s an indication that the regime probably does not believe things are going as well in Ukraine on the ground. Probably it also feels like there needs to be a stronger embrace of the war, or the so-called special operation in Ukraine, as the Kremlin once has to call it, among the Russian society. This brainwashing has spread beyond TV channels. We’ve already discussed that the main social networks have been banned, like Facebook or Twitter. There’s repressive laws against dissenters. You can no longer even support – even
call for peace. Even that at this point is considered to be in violation of the state laws.

But interestingly, the new development is a very intensified propaganda in schools, where one of the latest developments is that Maria Zakharova from the MFA and the editor in chief of RT Margarita Simonyan met with schoolteachers in Moscow over Zoom to explain to them how important it is to promote patriotism at this difficult political moment. So overall we see that the propaganda is reaching really, really high levels, probably not because of the regime feels very secure.

The problems, the downsides, right, the possible limitations in the future, to answer Andrew's question, is, first of all, there is a lack of very well-developed ideology, where a lot of this sort of propaganda would have fit, right? The Kremlin doesn't really have – offer to the Russian population a vision of the future. It's mostly a past-based ideology and revanchist ideology. Essentially, we're defending Russia against outside aggression, and we also sort of recollecting the USSR – although, that's not directly told, that's sort of implied. But that, of course, will create limitations in the future because there's nothing to offer to the Russian population here.

The second of all – the second point I wanted to make when it comes to limitations is that the regime actually fails to mobilize the society around this pro-war narratives. Russian society is generally passive. It's a characteristic of the society. It's hard to mobilize around any issues. But we don't really even see something that was during the Crimea campaign, when a lot of the society rallied around the flag and there were even volunteers willing to go to fight in Donbas. That's no longer the case. Instead, we see that general mobilization of people is extremely unpopular in Russia, and that will serve as a limitation for the regime. It will not be able to mobilize the Russian society to fight in this war, which will put another constraint.

And last but not the least, the economic well-being so far has been the strongest prediction of support for war. The better off people are and the less they think they will suffer from the war, the more supportive of the war – of the special operation – they appear to be in the polls. Sanctions are targeting this particular vulnerability of the regime. And so as sanctions essentially come into full effect, we are likely to see even this 50 to 60 percent of the Russian society starts doubting the war or the Russian participation in the war.

And I'll stop here. Thank you.

Mr. Lohsen: Thank you, Maria. There's certainly a lot of challenges ahead.
And I think at this point let’s see if we can go to Vera Zakem to tell us a little bit more about what’s happening with the digital space. Vera, I mean, as broadcasts and print media are closing up shop and suspending operations – they’re no longer covering the war due to some of the latest repressive measures – it seems like being able to access information online is becoming ever more critical for Russians who really want to know what’s happening in the world. So could you walk us through some of the changes that we’re seeing in the digital space, both in terms of some of the new limitations that are set up by the government but also more efforts that are being undertaken by Russian citizens to assess – to access objective information or critical coverage?

Vera Zakem: Absolutely, and thank you so much for having me.

You know, the first thing I actually want to just point out is – and other folks already have touched on this – is that one of the core cornerstones of a free and open society is the ability to have access to free, independent media and have access to credible information. Now, according to Freedom of the Net, as Marti mentioned earlier, Russia has already had very low scores regarding that. But I think what has happened with Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, the ability to access information both in mainstream and on digital platforms and on social media has become extraordinarily really, really challenging.

So what has happened, you’ve seen this on multiple fronts, right? Of course, on mainstream you have, as an example, like Novaya Gazeta, they just, you know, decided to close down because of multiple warnings by the Russian government. And what we have seen literally since the start of Russian invasion in Ukraine is a number of platforms, digital platforms – be it Meta/Facebook and Instagram, as well as Twitter and other platforms as well – that they’ve actually stopped, cut down service in Russia, or they have been forced to cut down service because of, for example, in recent weeks there’s been this fake news law that the Russian government has passed to really censor the information that Russian citizens have, and that is really, really troubling and, you know, some folks are really almost dubbing this as a digital Iron Curtain. And what it – what it really shows is the potential for a couple of things.
One is, as these laws are passed and folks in Russia have a very sort of narrow window into the type of information that they consume and they are completely surrounded by the propaganda inside Russia, is this kind of digital sovereignty and digital isolationism. And that is some of the trends that we have to be thinking about right now that may actually go beyond the war itself.

So what are – the Russian citizens are doing? We’ve seen already over the last number of years there have been a number of other platforms within Russia that have arose. Certainly, VKontakte is one example. Most recently since Instagram there’s – Instagram is very, very popular in Russia, and one of the ones that is kind of emerging right now is their version of – they’re calling it Rossgram, right, so it’s kind of a version of their Instagram.

Because there was kind of a vibrant – or there has been a vibrant community that wanted to just – not just share information, just be on social media. But the idea here is that, if you think about where folks get their information, they get it from mainstream news, they get it from social media, and they get it from their friends and family.

So, the filter bubbles are really forming and that kind of free and open space is really, really closing as a result of this war and Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, and the information the Kremlin really wants Russian citizens to see.

So, I think there’s – what I think right now what we’re seeing is a really dangerous precedent for the years ahead that I think the impact of this will be long – much further than the current conflict.

Mr. Lohsen: Thank you. Very well noted about the challenge of closing spaces in Russia.

And I’d like to turn to Dan Baer, who can tell us a little bit more about some of the policy options that are available to the United States and to international organizations, the international community broadly, to, you know, contend with this new challenge. Dan is a former deputy assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, a former ambassador from the United States to OSCE. What do you think of as a potential policy response that can be undertaken to help promote these free and open spaces and to support freedom of speech and digital freedoms in Russia?

Dan Baer: Thanks, Andrew. It’s always challenging to come at the end of a such a distinguished panel, and it’s great to be here with Maria, Vera, and Jamie, and to see you all. You always get in the position of saying everything’s been said already, but not by me. But I’m glad to be here.
You know, I was thinking about the policy responses, and unfortunately – I was saying before we got on air – this is a really difficult moment. We’re kind of in between the immediate and the kind of near-term policy responses, and so, I find myself stuck at, kind of, the urgent and the long-term horizon. And I thought I would just frame up kind of five questions that I’ve been thinking on – and I don’t pretend to have the wisest answers to them – but things that I’ve been trying to figure out as I sort through the situation in my mind.

And the first is, kind of, how we think about the problem, and I think thinking about the problem that we’re discussing today it can be important to separate out free media and media freedom from free expression because they are actually separate problems, although deeply linked, of course. And I actually think the prospects for free media are pretty dire in the near-term. But I think free expression, there may be opportunities for creative tapping into expression in Russia in the coming months, and time will tell.

I think it’s also important to point out that freedom of expression is not just about government accountability or criticizing or protesting government, it’s also about telling people that they’re not alone. And in losing so much of the intelligentsia in the last few weeks, as people have fled Moscow and St. Petersburg and elsewhere in Russia, you know, a country has lost its conscience, and that is a deep and profound and lasting loss that I think we’ll be seeing the effects of for quite a long time to come.

Which leads me to how we think about the future – and here I mean long-term future. I guess the bad news is I don’t see any real prospect. As others have highlighted, this is the continuation of a trend – a huge exacerbation – but the continuation of a trend that has been ongoing, and I don’t see any prospect for improvements – real improvements in media freedom in Russia until a post-Putin perestroika. And that doesn’t mean immediately post-Putin – or I’m not naïve in thinking what comes after Putin is necessarily better. But I think it’s hard to imagine progress under the tenure of this leader, and so, I think we have to acknowledge that.

But I think we should look forward to that progress because I think life and history are long, and we should expect that Russia will be part of the international community. We should want that day, and we should be preparing for that day. And we should recognize that that is going to – between where we are now and where we want to be there, there’s a huge psychological challenge.

You know, Maria’s account of kind of where the Russian people are – one of the things that repression does is protect the psychological well-being of people who have bought into a regime that is now committing war crimes, that is now killing people who just a few weeks ago the president was saying were a fraternal people. You know, to move from supporting to condemning
that regime is to admit one’s own complicity. And I think we should recognize that there’s quite a long psychological journey for a lot of people to make between here and some kind of freer society in the future.

The third question is kind of how do we get creative in the near term? And all of the stuff that Jamie and Vera have mentioned in terms of opportunities to use technology. I think here too Masha Gessen’s wonderful book, titled “The Future is History,” it’s time to get creative in kind of some old-fashioned ways. And I don’t think the Russians are going to shut – I don’t think Putin’s going to shut down email, for example. I think we should be using email lists. We should be compiling them – particularly of people who have left the country. We should be compiling them from people who are fleeing Ukraine who know people in Russia and sending information about what’s happening on the ground in via email.

I think exploring how we can – how we can support any kinds of campaigns – you know, one of the challenges with freedom of expression, protesting in Russia requires an extraordinary amount of courage. I think it’s worth thinking about whether there are other ways for people to tell each other that they’re not alone that don’t require going out into the streets and holding a sign. Looking for micro-expressions and opportunities to build campaigns around micro-expressions. And we should be supporting the journalists who have fled and making sure that they can continue to tell – to speak with an authoritarian – authoritative voice about what’s happening on the ground in Ukraine, and to comment on what they see and hear from inside Russia.

The fourth question is kind of how we think about the U.S. role, or the role of the – and I think it is important for the U.S. to work through international organizations wherever possible. But I think it’s really important that while we be conscious of the fact that Putin has a special neuralgia, a paranoia – a paranoia and neuralgia about the United States, we shouldn’t let that stop us from doing what’s right. We should be attentive to it and not purposefully provoke, but we should do what’s right in terms of supporting freedom of expression and the free media.

And the last question – the last thing I’ve been thinking about is how we frame the problem. And one of the things that I think we should do is make sure that we’re not only framing this as a human rights problem. The costs that companies are incurring because of the sanctions are directly tied to this long-term trajectory of repression in Russia. It is the internal repression that Putin had cultivated overt the last two decades is directly linked to his external aggression. It is a reason for it.

And we should point out – we should make sure that as we describe the economic costs that responding to Putin’s aggression has imposed not only
on people inside Russia but also in Europe and in the United States, that those costs are connected to long-term unaddressed failures of governance, including violations of human rights, including restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the media. And so we should point out that in other places, where we do take a stand on freedom of expression and free media, we are actually protecting the international order, which is also the order that international commerce depends upon. So those are a few thoughts to finish out the tour de table.

Mr. Lohsen:

Thank you so much, Dan. I think you raised some really excellent points there. And as we turn more to the moderated discussion, a bit more engagement among the panelists, I’d just like to remind the folks who are tuning in to please feel free to use the “ask a question” button and let us know what you’re thinking of, what you’d like to have the panelists discuss further.

Dan, I really appreciated what you had to say about folks having to acknowledge their own complicity in a regime. And I think there’s a – you know, there’s anecdotal evidence about this cognitive dissonance that you find with a lot of Russians who are consuming the news, who simply cannot believe what’s being reported in Ukraine. And sometimes they’ll even receive phone calls from relatives who are being shelled or bombed, and there’s still this refusal to believe what’s going on.

And so I think that’s a really excellent question to pose. And I’d like to hear some other panelists’ comments on that, is, you know, how do we grapple with this hardening of views? How do we grapple with the cognitive dissonance? And maybe, Jamie, we could turn to you here, how to essentially engage with these passive consumers of the news and try to increase that demand, and engaging skeptical audiences as well?

Mr. Fly:

Sure. I mean, that’s something that we’re debating here at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty on a daily basis across all of our various platforms that are engaging Russian audiences.

I’ll just say, from our experience – I mean, I think Maria noted the issues with the surveys, and I think there probably is a majority of citizens inside Russia that are at least passively supporting the Kremlin narrative. We have seen, through a diversity of opinions in the street interviews that we’re still able to do. This was easier, obviously, before the recent developments.

But if you look even – and we’ve published a lot of these, including with English subtitles – the natural response from most Russians we talk to, not just in cities but as we surveyed people across the country as the military buildup was occurring and as there was the talk of possible war against Ukraine, more often than not. the response was almost astonishment at the
prospect of war with Ukraine. People repeatedly would say similar things like why would we go to war against Ukraine? My cousin lives in Ukraine. My aunt or uncle live in Ukraine. I have this personal connection to Ukraine.

So I just – I mention that – that was just striking to us across Russia as we surveyed people in the early phase of this. We got a lot of that response. Now, we’ve also done a lot of other so-called vox pops where, even when presented with evidence of what is happening in Ukraine, people are just in absolute denial. They don’t want to engage. They don’t want to hear it.

And so I think there has been a hardening of public opinion amongst a certain segment of society. And then we’re also now dealing with that challenge which Dan highlighted, where we do have – we don’t have the exact estimates, but we have significant numbers of Russians just voting with their feet and leaving. And so that – many people who may have been open to a certain message may actually have just decided that it’s not worth it and they’re going to at least live out the next several months, if not the next few years, somewhere else, in a better situation for their families.

And so that, I think, requires all of us who do want to engage those who remain to rethink what our programming looks like, what messages that we are sharing with them. We can’t necessarily just do the same things that we’ve been doing in recent years. And so we’re taking a significant relook at what types of programming we make available to Russians inside Russia and trying to connect with them on a variety of levels.

The one thing I’ll highlight that has been successful for us in recent years is that there are always – in every society, even in democracies, there’s a certain segment of the public that don’t care about politics. They just want to live their lives. They do, though, care about topics that touch them on a daily basis, that interact with their families – the environment, health care, sometimes social policy, education policy. And we’ve had great success doing journalism related to those topics, which are not just involving a certain message about Vladimir Putin every day or Kremlin policy, but focusing on things that people care about in their day-to-day lives.

Now, some of that, I think, has been set aside just by the focus on the war in recent weeks. But I think we and others will likely need to return to that, because I think there are still ways that you can highlight the broader impacts of the war on Russia’s economy, the broader governance issues, which the Putin regime has struggled with for years in terms of actually resolving problems for people at a local level. And so that’s one area that we’ve had great success that I think we’ll want to do more of going forward.

Mr. Lohsen: Maria, maybe I could turn to you for a comment here. I’m curious. I mean, it seems that quite often the Russian government has depended on setting an
example of those who violate the law. I mean, we see this 15-year prison term that’s been introduced for those who may violate the law against so-called fake news about the Russian military operation, about the Russian defense sector.

I mean, should we be expecting some sort of example to be set, some criminal penalties to be levied against journalists who still dare to just talk about the situation in Ukraine objectively? Or has that – are we seeing a new shift in the way that Russia is approaching enforcement?

Dr. Snegovaya: I mean, we – it’s always left to selective impressions, right, the way the state government approaches this issue – the government approaches these issues. We’ve seen that back in 2014-15, that’s not fundamentally. We do not see a wider, like, scale of repression. That’s not a terror yet, but the dynamic is extremely unfavorable. But it’s also quite predictable, right, given everything that we’ve known about how this regime operates during these times.

I just wanted to add to something that’s been said before about the general state of the Russian society since I’ve written specifically recently about that and the cognitive dissonance that Russians have, even when presented with direct evidence. I think that Jamie has mentioned that. They refuse to believe it, even when that evidence comes from trusted sources like, for example, a father is presented this evidence from his daughters who live in Ukraine. And here, unfortunately, we’re facing a much more problematic situation. It’s not the lack of knowledge, like was the situation back in the Soviet times, for example; it’s active resistance to know because knowledge has too many implications that are unpleasant, that are painful, that take you out of your comfort zone, and also, to some extent, challenge your identity.

Right said, if you know that your country has committed atrocities in Ukraine, first of all, you are no longer the good, liberating Soviet soldier – like, representative of the Soviet, less Russian population that’s always right and always does the right deed, never questions of what it does. But it also puts some of the responsibility on you to act in some way, and that’s what the Russian society has been deliberately trying to avoid for many years. It’s a passive acceptance for a regime’s actions especially when it comes to something abstract, something that does not concern them personally, which came to be – primarily be associated to the realm of foreign policy.

In Russia, Putin is not really credited with combating corruption or even achieving economic progress anymore, unlike what used to be the case in 2000s. Where he’s still given credit is in the realm of foreign policy, that he is able to make the Russia great again – make Russia great again and achieve all these great things on the international stage. There, ordinary Russians sort of delegate all of the responsibility for foreign policy realm to the president.
and does not really concern him or herself much with that. The state tends to be right in that regard. That’s also where Russians get the sense of unity, unlike Ukrainians, for example, where the nation comes from similar values shared by individuals, each and every individual. In Russia, it’s more that the state tends to unite the Russian society over this framework of the great Russia, and that’s where essentially Russia’s version of, if you will, post-imperial nationalism comes from.

So there’s a lot of deep problems sociologically and psychologically, serious deep issues associated to the way Russians view their – what the country does in the international stage, which makes it very hard to fight it by just trying to tell them the truth. They know the truth. They can access the truth. They just don’t want to know it.

And here, coming back to what has been said by Jamie, it really – where I think we have a chance to change the views is where the issues concern them personally. I already mentioned that the embrace for war tends to decrease dramatically among people who feel that they’re economically affected in an active way by war consequences. And I think there will be chance to specifically demonstrate to them how they’re personally affected by the bad decisions made by the government. That opportunity will come when they really feel the effect of the sanctions. Right now the sanctions work but – and the prices have been skyrocketed – have skyrocketed, but not fully, not to a large extent. It’s not really felt like a deep, serious crisis.

And this is where I have to agree: They will have to connect everything that’s going on to the matters that concern them personally. It’s the society that does not – is not going to – concern with some abstract sufferings of some, I don’t know, people somewhere, especially when this knowledge challenges their integrity, based on, as I said, these beliefs in Putin restoring Russia’s great-power status. So in a lot of ways this is a much, much more serious challenge and it might require some engagement with cognitive psychological approaches in order to be able to effectively reach to ordinary Russians and finally make them realize what is going on in Ukraine.

Thank you.

Mr. Lohsen: Maria, I think you raise a really, really strong point there, and I think that, you know, one thing that’s really striking to me is that it – we’re seeing this increase in harsh rhetoric from Putin himself about essentially splitting society into those who support the war and those who are “scum” or “traitors” or fifth columnists, and I’d really be curious to hear some of the panelists’ thoughts on, you know, what this means not only for the operating environment for journalists but also just kind of giving that cognitive space for Russians to start to think about politics in a different way.
Are we seeing this, you know, kind of enforcement of a closed space where we’re now having a certain opinion on the war is starting to come with very significant and, potentially, dangerous political baggage just for the ordinary Russian citizen?

Dan or Vera, I’d love to hear your thoughts on this, if you’d like to jump in.

Ms. Zakem:

Yeah. I’ll jump in just real quickly. You know, I think it’s extraordinarily dangerous for the Russian citizens and I think some of what Jamie and, you know, Maria also commented of the fact that there’s real fear. So even if folks, you know, do not agree with what Kremlin is doing there’s real fear in speaking up. So is the decision made to just kind of, like, ride out this period? Because, as you have mentioned, you know, there’s, potentially, if you’re a journalist or, quite frankly, it could be also a human rights defender or a dissident or anyone who speaks up someone can go to jail.

And so – and I think we do have, you know, this now opportunity to really try to reach – two things, to reach people in a creative way and to show them, try to get sort of the truth out to them but show them also – relate it to matters that really impact them, as folks have already said, right, whether it’s the health issues, it is the economy, and I think, over time, sanctions will definitely have its effect as well.

So I think it is trying to reach out, you know, sort of the creative way as well. So that is why I think that when we think about engagement, whether – you know, Dan, you rightly mentioned email, and then also other forms and mediums, different kind of strategic campaigns that we can do to show, you know, that what the Kremlin regime is doing, what the Kremlin is doing, this is – it’s not just a matter of this is not right but this is not really what’s going on, and what you’ve seen now is the international community is really, really strongly behind Ukraine.

So I think it’s really about a strategic engagement and very creative engagement to show people the truths and see the impact that this, potentially, already has and may have in the long run for the Russian citizens.

Dr. Baer:

Andrew, I just want to – two points there. On your point about kind of the change in rhetoric, I mean, I think that was, to me, the most striking thing about the speech that Putin gave on the eve of the war. Just – you know, I’m used to the Russian kind of foreign policy speeches that pervert and twist U.N. language to construct some kind of cynical legal justification for various things and, frankly, the complaints about NATO and stuff like that, and I think one of the things that that speech revealed is just how much of – that it’s only a slight exaggeration to say that NATO is a red herring in all of this and how much of this is much deeper.
The speech that he gave on the eve of the war was, clearly, directed at an older Russian audience. It was, clearly, rooted in history, and when I say history I don’t mean the 1990s. I mean the 1920s. And it was filled with deep loathing and derision for Ukraine and its right to exist and it was a different tone. I’m not saying that he’s never appealed to history before but it was just – it was seething, and I think that is very terrifying and it goes to, you know, part of what Maria was saying about the identity piece of this as well. And you know, if you’re rooted in that history and there’s some claim made and you’re – you’ve been told that an action is a validation of that history, then to give up support for that action is to invalidate your own history and, you know, that challenges people’s sense of identity. By the way, we see that in our own country in some of the debates around, say, CRT right now.

But the other piece about this is, I think, one of the things we haven’t mentioned so far – we’ve alluded to it – is that one of the things that we can do is continue to strengthen the sanctions. There has to be – the initial shock of the sanctions is starting to wear off. Markets are starting to price them in. They are going to have less effect over – sanctions always have less effect over – the effect of sanctions lessens over time as people figure out workarounds and substitutions, et cetera. And so it’s really important that the international community – and here it’s the United States, Europe, as well as other G-7 countries – that they continue to impose more sanctions. There should be more banks that are banned from SWIFT. There should be more consequences that are delivered that make the sanctions pinch in the lives of middle-class Russians so that they are spurred to rethink their support for this war.

Mr. Lohsen: Thanks, Dan. I think those are all excellent points.

And at this point, I would like to turn to some audience questions since we’re at about the 10-minute mark and we have a couple that have come in that are really excellent. One of the – I really like this one, which is from Joe Morley, asking essentially how – should we be focusing the messaging? Should the West, in its attempts to try to establish more objective information about what’s happening, should we also be focusing our messaging more on nonaligned countries or countries that are, you know, other than Russia – so, for example, India, African states – to try to correct some of the narratives that Russia has been propagating, fueling external support for the war?

Ms. Zakem: I can just jump in here for a second and then if –

Mr. Lohsen: Sure.
Ms. Zakem: You know, absolutely. I mean, we see the Kremlin playbook being used extensively all over the world, certainly in emerging markets, including, you know, Africa, including Latin America, including India to try to influence targeted populations both internally within those countries and externally as part of, if you will, the alliance and geopolitical alliance. So I think this is – as part of Dan was so rightly to point out how, you know, in terms of the importance of sanctions in part of building this broader and expanding that coalition, if you will, and this broader international community coalition. It’s sort of antiwar and supporting Ukraine. And in thinking about the messaging I think it’s really, really important that we also, the broader international community, engages with those countries as well, just because Russian government reach is far and wide and it goes much beyond Ukraine or Europe or the former Soviet Union states.

Mr. Lohsen: Maybe I’ll switch to another audience question now, which is from Sofia Hayes. She’s asking about the corporate role, noting that Twitter had announced in early March that they would comply with EU sanctions and restrict Russian state media in Europe. The question is: To what extent have these actions been effective at limiting disinformation in Europe? And what more could Twitter be doing to curb disinformation elsewhere?

Would also love to hear some additional thoughts on, you know, the future of these social media companies in Russia. Is there – is there a potential way for them to go back in a way that is responsible and not selling out the Russians’ right to free speech?

Jamie or Dan, maybe you guys could tackle this one.

Mr. Fly: I’m happy to start.

So I think from our perspective the social media platforms play an important role. You know, during the Cold War we used radio transmitters to access our audience, and I always say now that the social media platforms are essentially our modern radio transmitters. The problem is, with our radio transmitters for the most part we owned them, maintained them. We could adjust them as necessary to reach the audience in different ways. And with the social media platforms, yes, we can have great digital teams that have the right strategies, but the reality is we have very little control over the nuts and bolts of how we’re accessing and interacting with the audience because the social media platforms have such immense power as they design the algorithms and make policy decisions, then, in different markets.

So one challenge we have across the board – and Russia has been one of those countries where we occasionally have had concerns that the Kremlin has gamed the system to a certain extent. When all of the platforms were accessible inside Russia, they often would respond to various requests from
people inside Russia or complaints about our accounts. We’d occasionally get our accounts locked out, so that was a running challenge that we’ve had, and not just in Russia but in other countries as well.

I think it’s good that the platforms that were blocked took a stand. They, obviously, did not go along with the censorship. And the one that we’re all now watching is YouTube, which is the last major remaining Western platform that has yet to be blocked, although I think people have been predicting in the last couple weeks that it will be blocked at any moment. YouTube is a vital lifeline for us and many other news outlets to reach our audiences. It’s also wildly popular inside Russia, not just for news and information. So it’ll be interesting to see what happens there.

But I think the companies in general have taken the right stand in the last several weeks, and so given the broader environment that we’ve been discussing, I really don’t know how they will be able to return to the market anytime soon without fundamentally compromising the principles that they’ve now put out in response to these censorship demands. But they do play an important role. And I think anything they can do, as well as other tech companies in general, to support circumvention efforts, to make sure that circumvention tools work well with their platforms, that will be incredibly useful.

And I think the one good note I’d end on there is we’ve still seen with Facebook, Instagram – we’ve seen a lot of use continuing from Russia, even from those affiliated with the Kremlin who are still posting on their Instagram accounts despite the fact that it’s supposedly banned. And so I think anything that companies can do to further those efforts at circumvention and raise more awareness in Russian society about how to access blocked content, that would help us all.

Mr. Lohsen: All right. And then the final question that I’ll – that I’ll ask among the audience questions is from Adam Hilchesky (ph). He wants to know: Is there an effort to organize the Russian diaspora in a way that was done in Poland last year with – to support the continuing broadcast of the TVN channel? You know, is there – is that consolidating – are we seeing a move among – a movement among the Russians who have left and voted with their feet, and also long-standing diaspora communities to support the continued independence of free media, and to support in general the exchange of ideas?

Maria, perhaps I could turn to you here for this one.

Dr. Sengovaya: Yes, thank you. That’s an important question. Definitely there is such an effort. So Russian society suffers from lack of uniting values. I mentioned that in the past. And it's actually just to haunt Russian diaspora abroad as well. It was very hard to organize, because the people just really very much
disagreed in their vision of political social future for Russia. That’s no longer the case. If there’s anything positive to say about this current wave of immigration it’s that people who are fleeing they tend to be this pro-Western, liberal-minded pro-democracy Russians, who just don’t find that they have any future in Russia in the current situations anymore.

So in that regard, it’s easier to unite them. And there were a number of initiatives, including organizing some, I don’t know, media – some platforms where they could all connect. Or think tanks, like Free Russia Foundation, for example, that operate in the United States, but also Georgia, also Ukraine, attempted to do that. There is also an attempt by Navalny’s colleagues who have left the country and currently trying to create the – again, unite Russian diaspora. Many of them have met – they visited D.C., New York, and met with many people there.

It’s not very clear what’s going to come out of it, because it’s also important to have some vision for the future, right? Right, so you have all these people, but what it is that they can do, right? Can they outreach to their relatives in Russia? Can they try and influence them? That’s, I think, the bigger challenge. So far we’ve got this antiwar committee where some of the Navalny’s team members, but also other opposition leaders like Garry Kasparov have joined and signed this antiwar statement. So this is all in development. And I think that’s one of the ways in which Russian civil society can move further.

Unfortunately, like, previous experience, it’s not very encouraging in this regard. But as I said, there’s also policy signs when it comes to at least the unity of values among these people that many of the previous waves of immigration lacked. Thank you.

Mr. Lohsen: Thanks, Maria. We’re running right up against the end of our time here, so maybe what I’ll do is just ask all the speakers to give a brief 20 to 30 seconds on what you’re watching next when it comes to the future of media and freedom of speech in Russia.

Dr. Baer: I’ll jump in. (Laughs.) I mean, I think I’m watching the future of the platforms in the very near term. And one of the things – I agree very much with what Jamie said. One of the things that I think we should think about from this experience is that the platforms themselves actually don’t want to be judge and jury on how to make these decisions. And we need better agreed principles about what they can use as external reference to make good, decent decisions about what to do in hard cases. This won’t be the last one. And I think a lot of them were flying by the seat of their pants looking for references in international law and stuff like that. And, you know, I think they have made good decisions, broadly speaking. But I think we should try to learn from this experience.
And then, you know, the second thing is, looking at whether or not those who have fled are able to become – those who have fled, the brain drain, are able to become – to maintain a role outside of their homeland as the conscience of a country, because I think it’s really important that that happens, because at some point the brain is going to have to go back. And we should all want that for Russia’s future.

Mr. Lohsen: Thank you, Dan.

I’ll leave this one as a jump ball if anybody else wants to jump in real quick and let us know what you’re watching next.

Ms. Zakem: Yeah, just a 10-second echo. I totally agree with Dan. I am very much watching – Jamie, also what you said – what’s going to happen with YouTube and how digital platforms are going to be dealing with this, first and foremost, because they have been a voice to provide, whether we think about, broadly speaking, sort of their – whether they’re countering disinformation or not. But they have been a voice in Russia and a lot of other states in the former Soviet Union and Europe.

So how that gets handled, whether they’re going to – for example, YouTube, in this case, is going to be shut down, how they’re going to be operating inside the country. It really, really remains to be seen; and then how, ultimately, at the end of the day, how we, as the international community, as the United States, also how can we really provide these kinds of creative campaigns and really foster these creative voices and creative campaigns to get the truth and to get credible information to the population.

Dr. Snegovaya: I think that it’s very important to see how the dynamic of the approval for the government actions change when the sanctions hit. So we’ve discussed the policies – people are afraid to answer maybe about the war at this point. But they – there will be subtle signs, indications, for example, of whether the country is moving in the right direction. And so far you see that the polls – the – first, the perceptions are improving so far.

The opening, as I said before, for outreach to the Russian population will come when they see decline starting to happen. And that’s probably unavoidable, given the scale of sanctions. Despite all the adjustments, right, there is a big blow that the Russian economy has suffered. And there will be this moment. At that time, it’s important to watch that situation.

And I have to say that despite all of the blockings of the social media that we’ve discussed here, the demand for knowledge is big. And you can see, like – like I say, they’ve locked Echo of Moscow, so now Echo of Moscow, every journalist – former Echo of Moscow journalist has his or her own show on YouTube, which has very large following. And, for example, Venediktov, the...
editor in chief of Echo of Moscow, had to block his Telegram account when he left Echo of Moscow, but he had to create new – a new Telegram account, which now has twice as many followers as his old account had.

So from that perspective there are current trends in the Russian society, not all of them necessarily negative. That’s a matter of really watching for these openings when they emerge and trying to sort of use them.

Thank you.

Mr. Lohsen: Thank you, Maria.

Jamie, any last words from you?

Mr. Fly: Yeah, just to echo Maria there. I mean, our experience over more than 70 years of broadcasting, including into the Russian audiences in the Soviet Union, is exactly what Maria said, that people are always hungry for information. Yes, they're susceptible to propaganda, but only to a certain extent. And over time, I think people eventually start to realize that something is off. They start to seek out other sources. And I think that’s the challenge the Kremlin is going to face, not just related to the messaging about the war, but also now the economic consequences of the war.

And so what I’m watching is will we be able to extend beyond the early adopters, especially of circumvention technology, the people who are already familiar with VPNs and how to access outside information that was blocked, and will we be able to reach broader segments of society over time who need to be educated about those tools and actually put in the effort now to seek out information? The early trends are very positive from that perspective, but I think that’s going to be the big challenge going forward for those of us who are committed to still providing the truth to the Russian people.

Mr. Lohsen: Thank you very much.

Jamie Fly, Dan Baer, Vera Zakem, Maria Snegovaya, all amazing comments. Thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your thoughts on this very important issue. That brings us to the end of our time, a little bit over it. Thank you very much for staying with us for an extra couple of minutes as we rounded off the discussion.

Always happy to see you here at CSIS. And for those of you who are still watching, on April the 12th CSIS will host another event on the implications of the war in Ukraine for the Caucasus and Central Asia. That’ll be hosted by Jeff Mankoff, senior associate here with CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program. Thank you so much for joining us, everybody, and have a nice day.