

1.2.2 Russian media environment and impact on our approach

Thomson Reuters Foundation has been working with journalists and news organisations in Russia since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991. With colleagues from Reuters, TRF has witnessed and worked through the many changes to have taken place in the news ecosystem in the years since, from the early liberalisation and promotion of freedom of speech, to the relentless tightening of control and censorship from the state synonymous with the last 20 years. Much of the focus on Russian media in the West has concentrated on its outward dis-information initiatives through vehicles such as Sputnik, Russia Today and increasingly in social media and the fringe space.

Less time has been dedicated to analysing and responding to the internal pressures faced by Russian journalists, where the State has more opportunity to determine public discourse. TRF has been actively responding to the changing political environment in Russia over these years and has continued to provide support to the remaining independent journalists and media outlets in Russia through a variety of initiatives. These have included the Bosch-funded *Perspektivy* programme to address the lack of quality professional development since 2015, and the FCO-funded programme of press tours designed to raise journalistic standards in Russia since 2017.

Currently, most mainstream media in Russia is controlled by the state or state-run companies. Whilst independent media outlets still exist and operate in the country, and mostly online, they continue to be squeezed by the increasingly repressive legal environment. As Russian internet usage grows (up to 90 million monthly users by the end of 2018), the state has sought to exert more control. In April 2019, the internet 'isolation' law's third reading was passed in the Duma, which will allow the government to control and suppress online connections with the outside world, whilst the big Western technology companies have already bent their own policies to comply to laws concerning access to data by the national security services. Whilst legislators claim that these laws are in place to defend Russia's 'traditional values' critics complain that they are selectively used, creating a blurred and uncertain legal landscape. These have been further muddied with March 2019's law that imposes fines for Russians who spread what the authorities regard as fake news, or who show "blatant disrespect" for the state online. Such a regulated and restricted environment has resulted in some media outlets moving abroad and has seen journalists choosing to work exclusively with foreign media, or switching to cover non-political themes, leaving a dearth of critical coverage.

Furthermore, exposure to Western news sources and organisations is limited, whilst the values considered fundamental in the West, such as accuracy and impartiality, are downplayed. Coverage of international events are often framed to be in-line with official positions and are used as a method to control domestic opinion.

Having said all this, Russia is a huge country where standards, opinions and attitudes vary widely. For example, journalists working outside the main population centers tell TRF they often feel less scrutinised by the authorities and have more scope to provide impartial reporting. The feedback TRF has received from the 80 journalists who have engaged in the press tours of the last two years also provides strong indications on what they need in terms of professional development: an emphasis on fundamental reporting techniques, exposure to new, varied and previously unavailable sources combined with a real curiosity about how certain UK institutions and structures work differently than their Russian counterparts.

TRF's local understanding of the current Russian media environment is further underpinned by a number of elements. Under the *Perspektivy* programme, TRF convenes regular strategic meetings with an Advisory Board made up of domestic and international media practitioners and experts, academics, and international development specialists, in order to analyse the current and future needs of journalists. The latest Board also heard representations from the Moscow based Media Lawyers Collegium. Additionally, TRF's access to Reuters bureau chiefs, Reuters journalists, and the [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#) at Oxford University provides unique access to the latest analysis and trends of the media landscape in Russia, in the context of the wider economic and political situation. Finally, TRF has been implementing two FCO funded programmes to support independent media in Moldova and Belarus, gaining invaluable insight into how journalists and the public in general are exposed to Russian dis-information.

TRF understands the importance of providing support to the remaining independent journalists and media organisations in Russia, as they play a significant role not only in challenging the Russian government's dominating narrative in the domestic information space, but also in covering news that has international and national significance for the Russian audience, in a fair, accurate and informed way.