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Information under fire: Russia's push to silence Europe

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Russia uses various hybrid tactics to silence critical reporting in Europe. Instead of censoring stories outright, it pressures journalists, researchers, and human rights defenders by making their work risky, difficult, or too costly – stopping information before it can even be published.

Summary

Russia uses a range of methods to weaken independent journalism and critical voices in Europe without relying on open censorship. One approach is personal intimidation: journalists, researchers, and activists face online harassment, smear campaigns, threats, and reputational attacks designed to exhaust and discredit them. These pressures can extend offline through surveillance and, in some cases, violence. Legal tools are also used strategically. Costly defamation and data-protection lawsuits – known as SLAPPs – drag reporters into long, expensive court battles that discourage further investigation. Cyber operations add another layer, with hacking, DDoS attacks, and "hack-and-leak" campaigns disrupting news production and damaging trust. Economic pressure works more quietly, as Kremlin-linked business networks acquire stakes in media outlets or create financial dependence that encourages softer coverage. Finally, visa and accreditation controls restrict who can report at all, turning access into a tool of influence. Together, these tactics gradually narrow the space for independent reporting and public debate across Europe.

Key Messages

- This is not classic censorship. Russia rarely bans stories outright. Instead, it makes journalism risky, expensive, and exhausting so that critical reporting never happens in the first place.
- People are targeted personally. Journalists and researchers face harassment, smear campaigns, threats, and intimidation designed to damage their reputations and push them into silence.
- Lawsuits are used as weapons. Costly SLAPP cases drag reporters into long legal battles, draining time and money even when the claims are weak.
- Cyberattacks disrupt and discredit. Hacking, website shutdowns, and "hack-and-leak" operations interfere with reporting and undermine public trust.
- Money and ownership shape the media. Kremlin-linked business networks buy influence or create financial dependence, encouraging softer coverage without openly censoring content.
- Access is controlled. Visa denials and press accreditation rules decide who gets to report at all, quietly shrinking the space for independent journalism and weakening public debate across Europe.

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Context

Information suppression techniques combine legal pressure, physical intimidation, cyberattacks, and economic coercion to silence critics. These efforts are often carried out by Russian state-linked actors such as military intelligence (GRU), the Federal Security Service (FSB), affiliated proxies, or coordinated disinformation networks. The goal is to weaken independent journalism, push pro-Russian narratives, and strain EU and NATO unity by creating fear and encouraging self-censorship. Over time, this makes it harder for Europe to challenge Russian propaganda and maintain strong support for Ukraine. The result is fewer diverse voices in the media, less investigative reporting on Russian activities, and greater vulnerability to manipulation, as journalists and researchers face relocation, financial pressure, or costly legal disputes.

How pressure replaces censorship

Russia's efforts to curb critical reporting in Europe rarely look like old-fashioned censorship. Instead of simply banning stories, the strategy is more subtle and far-reaching.[1] It targets the people, platforms, finances, and access that make journalism possible. By applying pressure across multiple fronts – personal intimidation, lawsuits, cyberattacks, financial leverage, and visa controls – these tactics make independent reporting risky, exhausting, and expensive. The result is not always visible repression, but a gradual tightening of the space in which journalists, researchers, and civil society actors can operate.

Targeting the personal

Russia uses psychological pressure, smear campaigns, and intimidation to silence critics and independent voices.[2] The goal is not just to argue against journalists, researchers, or activists, but to wear them down personally and professionally. Online harassment – trolling, threats, doxxing, stalking, and coordinated smear campaigns – seeks to discredit targets and exhaust them. Pro-Kremlin media and troll networks amplify conspiracy theories, labelling critics as "NATO agents," "Russophobes," or extremists to damage their reputations.[3]

These tactics often move offline as well, including surveillance, intimidation, and in some cases violence or suspected assassination plots. Russian intelligence operations have monitored and threatened exiled journalists and activists across Europe, reinforcing the message that distance does not guarantee safety. By shifting attention from the facts of a person's work to attacks on their character, these methods create fear and self-censorship. Editors, universities, and funders may distance themselves to avoid controversy, narrowing the space for independent reporting and weakening public debate.[4]

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[1] Hedling, E., and Ördén, H. (2025). Disinformation, deterrence and the politics of attribution. International Affairs, 101(3), 967-986.

[2] Darczewska, J., & Żochowski, P. (2015). *Russophobia in the Kremlin's Strategy. A Weapon of Mass Destruction*. Point of View, No.26. Center for Eastern Studies, Poland; Hellman, M. (2024). *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden* (p. 293). Springer Nature.

[3] Darczewska, J., & Żochowski, P. (2015). *Russophobia in the Kremlin's Strategy. A Weapon of Mass Destruction*. Point of View, No.26. Center for Eastern Studies, Poland

[4] Costa-Kostritsky, V. (2016). We are journalists, not terrorists: How reporters around Europe are being silenced by accusations that their work threatens national security. *Index on Censorship*, *45*(2), 11-14.; Cordell, R., & Medhi, K. (2024). Transnational Repression: International Cooperation in Silencing Dissent. *International Studies Quarterly*, 68(3), sqae108.

SLAPP or lawfare

An increasingly common way to silence critical journalism is by filing costly defamation or data-protection lawsuits, often known as SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation).[5] These cases are usually not about winning in court. Instead, they are designed to drag journalists, authors, and publishers through long and expensive legal battles that drain their money, time, and energy. Even if reporters ultimately win, the process itself can be punishing enough to discourage further investigation.[6]

In Europe, these lawsuits have often been filed in countries seen as friendly to plaintiffs – historically including the United Kingdom, where defamation laws have made it easier for wealthy individuals to sue. The plaintiffs are frequently Russian oligarchs or companies linked to the state. This setup allows the Kremlin to distance itself formally, while still benefiting from the chilling effect: critical reporting becomes riskier, more expensive, and less attractive to pursue.[7]

Cyber operations

Cyberattacks are increasingly used to silence independent journalists and civil society groups by targeting the digital tools that make their work possible. Hackers break into email accounts and newsroom systems, crash websites with DDoS attacks, delete or alter data, or carry out "hack-and-leak" campaigns – stealing private material and releasing it in ways designed to embarrass or discredit the target.[8]

These attacks are not just about spying. By disrupting websites and internal systems, attackers can stop reporting at crucial moments, such as during elections, political crises, or major investigations. Stolen emails or documents can be published selectively, twisted out of context, or mixed with fake material to damage reputations and sow doubt. Because it is often hard to prove exactly who is behind these operations, those responsible can deny involvement while still achieving their goal: slowing down, discrediting, or silencing critical reporting.[9]

Economic control of media

Economic pressure offers another means of control without over censorship. Instead of shutting outlets down, Kremlin-friendly oligarchs or business networks buy stakes in TV channels, newspapers, and online platforms – often through complex and unclear ownership structures.

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[5] Pech, L. (2022). The Rule of Law as a Weapon? Authoritarian Lawfare and Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(4), 128-142; Vandekerckhove, M. (2021). SLAPPs in the EU Context: Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation as a Threat to Democracy. *European Human Rights Law Review*, *26*(2), 123-139.; Baldwin, C. (2017). Libel Tourism and the Global Threat to Free Speech. *Journal of Media Law*, *9*(1), 1-24.

[6] Coe, P., Moosavian, R., & Wragg, P. (2025). Addressing strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs): a critical interrogation of legislative, and judicial responses. *Journal of Media Law*, *17*(1), 103-142.

[7] Kanellis, G. (2025, August 10). The Rule of Law Under Siege: SLAPPs and the Chilling of Democratic Participation in Europe. dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5386254.

[8] Rid, T. (2020). *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.; Deibert, R.J. (2019). The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(1), 25-39.

[9] Weedon, J., et al. (2018). Russian Strategic Cyber Operations and Information Warfare. In *Beyond 'Cyber War': Perspectives on Cyber Conflict*, NATO CCDCOE; Heickerö, R. (2019). Emerging Cyber Threats and Russian Views on Information Warfare and Information Operations. In K. Geers (Ed.), *Cyber Warfare in Perspective: A Practitioner's View* (pp. 237-252). NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE)

Struggling media organisations may also become dependent on cheap syndicated content, friendly advertising deals, or generous funding arrangements that tie them financially to these networks.[10]

Over time, this creates a quiet but lasting influence. Outlets may avoid certain topics or soften their tone to protect their income. Regulatory loopholes – and regulators willing to look the other way – can further shield or favour these media groups. On digital platforms, pressure can take subtler forms: critical voices may lose advertising revenue through demonetisation or see their reach reduced by algorithmic changes. The result is not loud censorship, but a gradual narrowing of independent and critical reporting.

Diplomatic and access restrictions

Visa and press credential rules can be powerful tools for silencing reporting.[11] They do not change what journalists write – they control whether journalists can work at all. When a government decides who gets a visa, whose press pass is renewed, and which outlets are allowed into official briefings, it controls access to sources and events. Without access, there is no firsthand reporting.

Scholars sometimes call this the "privilege paradox." Systems meant to manage press access can turn into systems of control when authorities selectively grant or deny permission to report.[12]

This often happens through visa denials, delayed renewals, or refusing accreditation to outlets labelled "unfriendly." At the same time, more compliant media may receive easier access. Over time, access becomes a reward system: supportive outlets stay inside the room, while critical ones face delays, obstacles, or removal. When professional status depends on government approval, the state can quietly shrink the number of journalists able to report in the first place.[13]

Taken together, these methods create a coordinated campaign to weaken independent voices. Some tactics attack individuals directly; others exploit courts, digital systems, markets, or bureaucratic rules. Each may seem manageable on its own, but combined, they create a climate of fear, financial strain, and uncertainty that discourages investigation and critical debate. The effect is not necessarily to silence every journalist outright, but to make speaking up harder, costlier, and less sustainable – slowly narrowing the space for free and independent reporting across Europe.[14]

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[10] Štětka, V., & Hájek, R. (2021). *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor 2021 in the European Union*. European University Institute; Yalamov, T. (2018). Russian Influence, Trust in Media and Media Capture. In O. Shentov, R. Stefanov, & M. Vladimirov, *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 43-65). Routledge; Global Analytics (2021). *Countering the Kremlin's Media Influence in Europe*. https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Countering-Kremlins-Media-Influence-in-Europe.pdf

[11] Transcontinental times (2021). Expulsion of Senior BBC Journalist From Russia – Direct Assault on Media Freedom. https://www.transcontinentaltimes.com/expulsion-of-senior-bbc-journalist-from-russia-direct-assault-on-media-freedom/; Lim, L. (2025). Foreign Correspondence in China: Authoritarian Media Control and Journalistic Responses. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612251379585

[12] Reuters (2024, March 21). Russia declines to renew visa of Spanish reporter for El Mundo. www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-declines-renew-visa-spanish-reporter-el-mundo-2024-03-21/.

[13] Tambini, D. (2021). What Is Journalism? The Paradox of Media Privilege. *European Human Rights Law Review* (5), 523-539.

[14] Alieva, Iu., & Bluth, N. (2023). Framing the U.S. and Russia Coverage: The Limited Agency of Foreign Correspondents and the Reproduction of Bias in the News. *Journalism Studies*, 24(16), 2036-2052.

Policy Recommendations

- **Protect journalists from abusive lawsuits:** Strengthen anti-SLAPP laws so powerful actors cannot use the courts to intimidate and bankrupt reporters.
- **Boost digital security skills:** Give journalists and civil society practical cybersecurity training and rapid tech support to withstand hacking and online attacks.
- **Build cross-border solidarity mechanisms:** Build shared legal funds and solidarity networks so reporters are not left alone when facing pressure or threats.
- **Increase media ownership transparency:** Require clear disclosure of who owns and funds media outlets to prevent hidden political or foreign influence.
- **Safeguard fair access:** Ensure visa and press accreditation systems cannot be used to quietly block critical journalists.
- **Support independent funding:** Expand public-interest journalism funds and diversified income models to reduce financial pressure.
- **Strengthen media literacy:** Help citizens recognise smear campaigns and disinformation to build societal resilience.
- **Coordinate civilian resilience efforts:** Connect government, media, and community actors to protect the information space during crises.

About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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