

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/russia-sochi-winter-olympics-freedom-of-06-02-2014,45829.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Russia

## Another game being played Sochi Winter Olympics – freedom of information left out in the cold

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As the world's media descend on Sochi to cover the Winter Olympics, Reporters Without Borders points out that this sports event has come at a turning point for freedom of information in Russia.

"Behind the glitzy façade on show in Sochi, a complete picture of Russia cannot overlook the tenacious battle being fought by the country's independent journalists, who are exposed to growing government censorship and efforts to bring them into line," said Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Christophe Deloire.

"Faced by a civil society that is more determined than ever to assert its rights, the Russian authorities are cracking down hard and are using all possible means to reduce the space for freely-reported news and information.

"Instead of being used by the authorities as a Potemkin village to conceal a fight that is crucial for the country's future, these Olympic Games must be seized by the international community as a unique opportunity to register its presence, send a clear message to the government and provide Russian civil society with concrete support"

### Journalists from all over the world, go to Sochi!

A Norwegian TV crew [detained six times in three days and questioned about its sources](#), Czech reporters subjected to [a similar ordeal](#), journalists [banned from entering the country](#) – in the weeks prior to the games, the most critical foreign journalists were made clearly unwelcome in Russia.

But the international media should not be intimidated. For the most part, they have little to fear by going to Russia. On the contrary, Reporters Without Borders urges as many journalists as possible to go to Sochi to meet local civil society representatives, activists and independent journalists. They are subject to many different kinds of harassment, but talking to foreign reporters will not create additional problems for them and could even, by raising their profile, provide them with a degree of protection.

On the other hand, foreign journalists should realize that they, like the athletes and the general public, [will be subject to constant surveillance](#). All their email and phone calls will be monitored, registered and stored. Russia has many of the NSA surveillance capabilities that [Edward Snowden](#) revealed last summer.

If they want to keep their sources confidential, foreign journalists visiting Sochi should keep this in mind and take strict precautions. To help them, Reporters Without Borders has made a "[Digital Survival Kit](#)" available on its special website for combatting cyber-censorship, [WeFightCensorship.org](#).

### Turning point for freedom of information in Russia

The unprecedented wave of protests of 2011 and 2012 helped to loosen tongues and weaken self-censorship. But, in response, the Kremlin has for the past two years been waging an all-out offensive against civil society's most combative sectors – opposition politicians, NGOs and independent journalists.

Russia is ranked 148th out of 179 countries in the [2013 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

Since [Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin](#) in May 2012, a spate of repressive laws have restricted the space for freedom of information. The authorities now have a draconian legislative arsenal ready to be deployed when the time comes.

It includes a [blacklist of websites that are blocked without reference to the courts](#) on the basis of criteria that are constantly expanding and now [include calls to participate in unauthorized demonstrations](#).

Defamation has been [criminalized again](#). The definitions of "state secrets" and "high treason" have been [expanded dangerously](#). Expressing separatist views in the media is now [punishable by five years in prison](#).

The state keeps on reducing the field of permissible expression in the name of protecting morality and children. "[Homosexual propaganda](#)" and "[offending religious beliefs](#)" have been [criminalized](#). A draft law currently being considered would criminalize "offending patriotic feelings." Under another, news media receiving funding from abroad would be treated as "foreign agents" just as NGOs have since 2012.

The national TV stations, the Russian public's main source of news, are [mostly controlled by the authorities](#).

*Dozhd*, an independent TV station that is outspoken and gives space to opposition views to a degree that no other station does, [may have to close](#) after being deprived of 80 per cent of its viewers at the end of last month when it was arbitrarily dropped by most of the national cable and satellite TV providers. *Dozhd* is also being investigated by the state prosecutor's office and is the target of a score of lawsuits.

There is more pluralism in the national print media and Internet but they are much less influential.

The high-profile release of well-known activists and government opponents in late December should not allow us to forget that at least two journalists are currently detained in connection with their work. They are [Sergei Reznik and Alexander Tolmachev](#), independent journalists based in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don who covered local administrative and judicial corruption.

At least 30 journalists have been murdered in connection with their work since 2000, and [most of their deaths are still unpunished](#).

Last month, the deputy mayor of the Siberian town of Tulun was sentenced to just 22 months of "limitation of freedom" for [independent journalist Alexander Khodzinski's murder](#) in 2012. The court ruled out any link between the murder and the victim's work as a journalist, although it was highly likely.

## **Sochi's controlled media**

Last October, Reporters Without Borders published an [investigative report on freedom of information in Sochi](#) and the surrounding region. It found that, although Sochi has many privately-owned media and an active blogosphere, there is much self-censorship and pluralism is limited.

This paradox is due to the fact that the media are largely dependent on the local authorities and are subject to intimidation. Almost all of them receive major subsidies from the municipal or regional governments and these subsidies give the authorities a great deal of say in editorial content.

Independent journalism is possible in Sochi but it is a combat sport that requires total commitment and is likely to have serious consequences that include judicial harassment, a lack of economic security and prospects, and pressure on family members.

As in the rest of the country, independent journalists in Sochi are defenceless against powerful local figures and an often-biased judicial system. [Nikolai Yarst](#), an independent journalist who was investigating a case of alleged police corruption, has been the victim of trumped-up charges of drug possession since May 2013.

After six months of house arrest, he was finally granted a supervised release in December. The charges are so absurd that the prosecutor's office has ordered additional investigations three times. But they have yet to be dropped.

*(Photo: Morry Gash / Pool / AFP)*

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