

PUTIN, CHAMPION RED-CARD REF AND MATCH FIXER

President Vladimir Putin has never handed out so many red cards to the Russian media as now. Ranked 148th out of 180 in the latest World Press Freedom Index, Russia has fallen to a position that is without precedent since the Soviet Union's collapse. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) offers you a match summary.

THE KREMLIN TRANSFER SYSTEM

The Kremlin controls all the leading media. The federal TV channels, the Russian public's main source of news, have been brought under control since Putin took over as player selector. Not content with presenting the government's agenda and playing down bad news, they pump out propaganda in an increasingly shameless manner, fuelling hate and paranoia about civil society. The Kremlin's grip on the state media has tightened even more since December 2013, when they were regrouped in the *Rossiya Segodnya* consortium to present the Russian government position to the world.

INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM SENT OFF

It's an unfair match. Put on the defence, many media owners are forced to get rid of their best players or sell their outlets to pro-Kremlin businessmen. Some independent media outlets continue to provide high quality journalism and investigative reporting, but they have nothing like as many readers or viewers as the leading state-controlled media. And when one of these independent outlets gets near a goal, it is sent off the pitch, meaning satellite and cable operators drop it or the editors suddenly find themselves without a job.

CHANGING THE RULES

Putin stops at nothing to rig matches, including changing the rules. What with penalizing defamation and "offending the feelings of religious believers," the laws are getting more repressive all the time. And their broad and vague wording allows the referees to apply them in a selective and arbitrary manner. Press freedom NGOs are being criminalized and even foreign media are now under threat.

The Internet has been caught offside. Websites are blocked without reference to a judge, bloggers are monitored, search engines and news aggregators are censored, and VPNs are banned. By blocking the encrypted messaging network Telegram, despite enormous collateral damage, Moscow has joined a club that used to be reserved for China and Iran. More and more Internet users are being jailed for comments posted on social networks or even just for a "like."

MATCHES BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Putin's tactics are getting more and more offensive. More journalists and bloggers are in jail now than at any time since 1991. And no one ever gets a red card for tackling journalists from behind. From police violence to murders of journalists, impunity is the rule. At least 34 journalists have been killed in connection with their reporting in Russia since 2000. In the vast majority of these cases, the investigations went nowhere and the masterminds were never identified.

In Crimea (annexed in 2014) and Chechnya, no rules at all are enforced. With the Kremlin's blessing, these regions have been turned into matches behind closed doors.

FOOTBALL WORLD CUP



RUSSIA
2018

PERSECUTION CONTINUES DURING WORLD CUP



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FOOTBALL WORLD CUP



RUSSIA
2018

GROUP A: **RUSSIA (RUS)**

Journalists team imprisoned
because of their reporting

1

ALEXANDER SOKOLOV

Position: Investigative reporter for the independent media group RBC. He specializes in covering large-scale corruption.

History: Arrested in July 2015 after exposing embezzlement in a leading state construction project. Sentenced to three and a half years in prison on a charge of extremism.

2

IGOR RUDNIKOV

Position: Founder and editor of Noye Kolesa, the leading independent newspaper in the Kaliningrad region.

History: Major local figure. Survived two murder attempts. Jailed in November 2017 and accused of extortion by the local police chief, who had been the target of some of his investigative reporting.

3

ZHALAUDI GERIYEV

Position: A contributor to the independent news website Kavkazsky Uzel in Chechnya.

History: Arrested in April 2016 and sentenced to three years in prison on a cannabis possession charge. He was convicted on the basis of a "confession" extracted under torture and immediately retracted.



4

ALEXANDER TOLMACHEV

Position: Editor of two publications in the Rostov-on-Don region

History: Arrested in December 2011 and illegally maintained in pre-trial detention for nearly three years despite having serious health problems, and finally sentenced to nine years in a prison camp for allegedly extorting money from people he criticized in his reporting.

5

ALEXEI KUNGUROV

Position: A blogger based in Tyumen, in western Siberia.

History: Arrested in June 2016 and sentenced by a military court to 30 months in a prison camp for “justifying terrorism” in a blog post criticizing Russia’s military intervention in Syria.

7

ALEXEI NAZIMOV

Position: Editor of the opposition newspaper *Tvoya Gazeta* in Alushta, in Crimea (Ukrainian territory annexed by Russia in 2014).

History: Held since October 2016 and accused of extortion by the local branch of the ruling United Russia party, which he criticized in his articles.

6

ALEXANDER VALOV

Position: Editor of the Sochi-based Blog-Sochi online platform.

History: A critic of the local authorities, he has been held provisionally since January 2018 because a parliamentarian he criticized has accused him of extortion.

How many more journalists is Vladimir Putin going to select?