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For Russia's Last Remaining Independent Media, April Was the Cruelest Month

By Damelya Aitkhozina

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DOXA magazine editors in Moscow Court. **Denis Kaminev / AP / TASS**

April was a terrible month for freedom of expression in Russia.

In early April, the authorities struck at Roman Anin, editor-in-chief of *iStories (Important Stories)*, a new outlet specializing in investigative journalism.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) raided Anin's home and *iStories*' office in connection with a 2016 criminal invasion of privacy case that had been dormant for more than four years concerning his reporting on a luxury yacht, owned by an off-shore company, on which the then-wife of Igor Sechin, head of the state oil corporation, Rosneft, took extended Mediterranean vacations. iStories did not even exist at the time. Following Sechin's successful defamation lawsuit, Novaya Gazeta, the newspaper that published the article had to publish a retraction.

Officials reopened the old case in late March, roughly two weeks Anin published an article in *iStories* with allegations about Sergey Korolev, the man Vladimir Putin had appointed as first deputy FSB director. In December 2020 iStories had also published an article revealing that Putin's former son-in-law had bought shares of the oil and gas company of which he was part of top management allegedly worth $380 million for $100. Putin did not refute the accuracy of the allegations, but instead reportedly implied that the authors were linked to US intelligence services and the State Department.

In a media interview, Anin has said that police questioning focused on, among other things, his fellowship at Stanford University, in the US, and that officials confiscated all of his documents in English. Currently, Anin is a witness in the criminal case, but as he pointed out in a media interview, it is a common tactic to keep a person as a witness in a case, then switch their status to a suspect or an accused, since people classified as witnesses have fewer procedural protections.

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Several days later, the Russian Investigative Committee filed a criminal case against the editorial team of *DOXA*, an independent university-level student magazine. The case is on charges of "involving minors in illegal activities". The authorities allege that the video they posted online entitled "They Cannot Defeat Youth" contained a call for teens to attend peaceful, albeit unauthorized pro-Navalny protests in January,

The video condemned attempts by university and school administrations to intimidate their students to prevent them from attending the protests. The video said the authorities try to instill fear in young people and cited ways that young people can act on their fundamental rights to free expression and peaceful assembly, including by volunteering for civic groups and opening independent media outlets.

There were also multiple incidents of police abuse against journalists covering protests. During the April 21 pro-Navalny protests, police detained at least 10 reporters, despite their compliance with the official requirements to wear the special jackets, badges and confirmation that they were on reporting assignment.

On April 26, police in Moscow region arrested and tried to charge a reporter with unlawful protesting on April 21. The next day police in Moscow city questioned at least six journalists for questioning regarding the April 21 protests, rounding up most of them from their homes. When asked about this, Putin's press secretary claimed this was necessary because some protesters may have pretended to be journalists, using phony credentials.

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And, the authorities continued to use Russia's notorious "foreign agents" legislation to retaliate against journalists who work for outlets that criticize the Kremlin, adding two more outlets to the special registry of "foreign agent media." On April 23, the authorities slapped the label on *Meduza*, a leading news outlet and *PASMI*, Russia's first media outlet dedicated

exclusively to fighting corruption.

In Russia "foreign agent" signifies "public enemy" or spy. It is really toxic and aims to humiliate, isolate, and punish critics. Meduza is now obligated to include the label on all of its publications, including all social media posts.

Meduza decried the move as an attempt "to kill Meduza." It is indeed an existential threat. If Meduza refuses to comply the authorities can levy massive fines, press felony charges against its editor-in-chief, and potentially block its content in Russia.

"Foreign agent" it is more than a nasty label. It's a tool to persecute critics. All of Meduza's writers and editors now risk being individually designated foreign agents, which entails burdensome obligations, including regular reporting on all their income and expenses to the Justice Ministry. This exposes them to potential risk of fines and even criminal prosecution if they fail to comply.

Meduza expects to lose a significant number of advertisers as well as key sources and access to leading experts, because the label could signal to them that it's dangerous to speak to Meduza.

Both Meduza and PASMI are complying with the labelling requirement. Meduza is accompanying the disclaimer imposed upon it with a triple facepalm emoji.

Their concerns about the implications of not complying are well-founded.

Earlier in April, the US broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, designated "foreign agent media" in 2017, reported that the fines they've incurred for refusing to comply had reached a total of $1 million. RFE/RL later estimated that the total could reach $33 million by year's end if continued at the current rate. The broadcaster appealed to the European Court of Human Rights, stating that enforcement of the fines could cause "irreversible harm."

The grip keeps tightening on independent journalists and free expression in Russia. Russian authorities should stop strangling media freedoms. They should end the harassment against Anin and the criminal investigation against DOXA and get rid of the disgraceful "foreign agents" law. They should simply let journalists do their work.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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