

For Russia's Regional Journalism, RFE/RL's Closure a 'Catastrophe'

Though imperfect, the outlet has been a rare source of independent news for residents of Russia's regions and Indigenous communities.

By [Leyla Latypova](#)

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The Radio Liberty studio in Moscow in 2006. **Yuri Mashkov / TASS**

The U.S. government's decision to defund global broadcasters Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America has dealt yet another blow to Russian independent media after the Trump administration's earlier [freeze](#) on foreign aid.

But this time, the looming shutdown of RFE/RL's Russian bureau — which includes four regional newsrooms and two services in Indigenous languages — is likely to be acutely felt by millions of Russians in the country's ethnic republics and regions.

"This is *definitely* a catastrophe," said journalist Andrei Grigoryev, a freelance reporter and

photographer for Idel.Realii, RFE/RL's service covering Russia's Volga republics and regions.

Like other RFE/RL freelancers, Grigoryev received a work suspension order early last week — before Trump signed an executive order gutting RFE/RL's parent, the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM).

Grigoryev, who was named a “foreign agent” by Russia and has an [arrest warrant](#) against him, said he is now looking for a new job in Poland, where he and his wife immigrated in spring 2022.

“We more or less know the language, but there are still a lot of gaps. When it comes to working as a journalist, our Polish is not good enough yet — not even close,” he told The Moscow Times.

Layoffs at RFE/RL and VOA risk leaving hundreds of journalists without jobs. Both news structures have been designated as “undesirable” by the Kremlin, meaning their employees would face criminal punishment in Russia if forced to return.

“For now, all RFE/RL newsrooms continue to operate. However, it's unclear how the situation will develop from here. The mood among the colleagues differs, but of course, there is fear for the future,” said a journalist with RFE/RL's Tatar and Bashkir-language service, requesting anonymity due to the company's strict media engagement rules.

Related article: [‘Today We Celebrate’: Kremlin and Russian Propaganda Rejoice as Trump Guts RFE/RL, VOA](#)

Though RFE/RL [announced](#) on Tuesday that it had filed a lawsuit against USAGM and a few EU member states have [reportedly](#) pledged to seek out new ways to fund the outlet, its journalists who spoke to The Moscow Times remained largely pessimistic about its future.

Beyond the direct impact on staff, the possible shutdown of RFE/RL would also deepen the vacuum in reporting on Russia's regions.

Local media outlets [still operating](#) from inside Russia have nearly completely ceased reporting on social issues — “even the seemingly neutral ones like urban planning or ecology” — out of fear of upsetting officials and being shut down, according to journalist Grigoryev.

“In the field [of regional journalism] competition is not an obstacle. The more publications cover regional topics, the better. But now...we've lost yet another important one. As a result, this niche that RFE/RL was occupying will be simply left empty,” said Grigoryev.

“Of course, there are other good regional publications and projects such as [Govorit NeMoskva](#) ... but their reporting is still just a drop in the ocean,” he continued. “The number of needs, problems and complaints people in the regions have is many times greater than what they alone can cover.”

When the news of VOA and RFE/RL's funding cuts broke, [nemeses](#) and more sober critics alike were quick to point out that the broadcasters could have met a different fate had they more effectively adapted to the rapidly changing post-Cold-War media sector.

Though VOA's Russia coverage has faced the most criticism, RFE/RL's Russian regional services also received a fair share of reproof, with observers noting their inability to compete with younger, locally-made media.

A former employee of Kavkaz.Realii, RFE/RL's regional service covering the North Caucasus, admitted in a conversation with The Moscow Times that the outlet's coverage "does not always reflect the real situation" in the region.

"At times it seems that the outlet is [Chechen leader] Ramzan Kadyrov's press service, with a significant portion of the news being dedicated solely to his activities. At the same time, the coverage of events in other republics, such as Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and North Ossetia, remains insufficient," said the former Kavkaz.Realii employee, who requested anonymity to speak freely.

"Most of the outlet's editorial staff are ethnic Russians from southern regions like Rostov, Krasnodar and Stavropol. There are almost no representatives from ethnic republics with knowledge of local languages," added the journalist. "The issue here is not the nationality of these individuals, but their superficial awareness of events occurring in ethnic republics... The content they put out is like a Russian view of the Caucasus."

Related article: [Freed U.S.-Russian Journalist Alsu Kurmasheva: 'Our Work Right Now Is to Be a Witness to History'](#)

Veteran dissident journalist and music critic Artemy Troitsky said that while RFE/RL and VOA "certainly may need some reforms to be more efficient and more modern," that alone is not enough of a reason to shut them down.

"The closure of Voice of America and Radio Free Europe is an extremely foolish decision by the Trump administration. It's a decision that benefits only Putin's Russia... These stations should be strengthened, not shut down," Troitsky told The Moscow Times.

Ksenia Turkova, a broadcast journalist at VOA who was laid off after the Trump administration dismantled USAGM, said it was misguided to measure the outlet's success based on its Russian service's metrics.

"VOA has more than 60 language services. Many of them were very popular in their broadcasting regions, some were the only source of [independent] news there. The Iranian service, a 24-hour Afghan TV channel, newly launched radio stations in Rwanda, multi-hour TV and radio shows in other African countries [that helped] counter Kremlin propaganda — all of this is also VOA," Turkova told The Moscow Times.

"So when people ask me, 'Why feel sorry? The news outlet wasn't that popular anyway,' I think the very premise of the question is flawed," she said.

VOA and RFE/RL hold deep sentimental meaning for generations of Soviet dissidents, especially those born in the 1950s and 1960s, who saw it as a breath of fresh air and a rare lifeline to Western pop culture amid censorship and propaganda.

"There is no strict official statistic on how many people in the U.S.S.R. listened to these so-

called 'enemy voices,' but rough estimates suggest that the numbers were huge — about 20–30 million people. It was a very popular activity," said Troitsky.

"Listeners in the Soviet Union didn't make much of a distinction between VOA, RFE and the BBC...They were all very popular, but slightly different in broadcasting style and the radicalism of their journalistic positions," he added. "Radio Free Europe was the most hard-hitting, the most anti-Soviet...[it] focused exclusively on political topics."

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Many listeners hailed from the Soviet periphery — including modern-day Russia's ethnic republics — where authorities were less diligent in jamming their signals.

A special place among RFE/RL's broadcasts was occupied by Azatlıq Radiosı, the station broadcasting in Tatar and Bashkir, the mutually intelligible Kipchak Turkic languages native to Russia's republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan that have over 4.7 million native speakers worldwide.

Since Azatlıq Radiosı first went on air from Washington in 1951 to bring uncensored news to Tatar-speaking listeners behind the Iron Curtain, it has remained an anomaly in an Indigenous-language media landscape overwhelmingly dominated by state-funded outlets.

"The closure of RFE/RL would deal an enormous, irreparable blow to Tatar journalism and the Tatar language," the journalist with Azatlıq Radiosı told The Moscow Times, noting that the service's closure would be catastrophic for its staff.

"A Tatar-speaking journalist covering topics tabooed in Russia is a rare phenomenon. Apart from RFE/RL's Tatar-Bashkir service, there are simply no other media outlets working in the Tatar language," they said.

With the number of Tatar and Bashkir speakers [in rapid decline](#), Azatlıq Radiosı also took on the burden of educating the next generation of speakers, launching the free interactive platform Äidä! Online.

"The entire republic of Tatarstan has failed to create a similar free platform for learning the language...The importance of this project for the Tatar people is impossible to overestimate," said the Azatlıq Radiosı journalist.

"If RFE/RL is shut down, materials on socio-political issues in Tatarstan and the Tatar world in the Tatar language will cease to exist," they added. "A 70-year history of independent Tatar journalism will end in one day."

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