

Russia

Meduza is the most prominent independent Russian newsroom forced into exile. Founded in 2014 by former Lenta.ru journalists, it set up its headquarters in Riga to keep reporting freely as the Kremlin tightened its grip on the media. In the years since, Meduza has grown into a major Russian-language outlet with a global audience, publishing investigations, analysis, and breaking news in both Russian and English — even after being blocked at home and labeled an “undesirable organisation” by the Russian state.

At the center of this operation stands **Ivan Kolpakov**, Meduza’s editor-in-chief. Born in Perm and trained as a historian, Kolpakov worked in regional papers and later at Lenta.ru before becoming one of Meduza’s founding editors. Since 2019, he has led the newsroom through mounting pressure, operating from abroad while reporting on a country that has criminalized its work. Today, Kolpakov is one of the key voices on the future of Russian independent journalism — and the challenges of informing an audience behind a wall of censorship.

Could you share your vision for *Meduza* at the time the website was founded, and how that vision has evolved under your leadership?

We started in 2014. We founded Meduza simply because we wanted to keep doing journalism. Even then, it was obvious that journalism — especially political and social journalism — was no longer a smart or safe profession in Russia.

Before Meduza, I worked at Lenta.ru, the largest news website in Russia. It was effectively destroyed a few weeks before the annexation of Crimea. So the circumstances were sad, but we were young, optimistic, and full of energy. Our main motivation was the will to keep going.

We saw Meduza as a kind of refuge for ourselves — we called it a “small pirate ship.” It was tiny at first, only about 15 people, and we started it in Latvia. Many people in Russia were skeptical and asked: “No one is prosecuting you here yet, so why leave?” But for us, it was clear where the political situation was heading.

Recently, when I was moving apartments, I found an early presentation we made for potential investors. (We didn't find any.) It literally predicted everything that later happened: that journalism would become a forbidden profession, that we would be blocked, prosecuted, forced to work from abroad, and that we'd need technical solutions to bypass censorship. Almost everything in that document came true.

The only thing we didn't foresee was Meduza becoming the biggest independent media outlet. We genuinely didn't imagine that. We had just come from the biggest outlet, and we thought we would never experience anything like that again. We assumed this would be small and niche — but necessary. So the vision was ambitious, but we didn't expect the scale we eventually reached. It's still overwhelming.

Meduza has built a large following—what are your current estimates for readership? More recent data suggests around 10 million readers worldwide, approximately 7 million inside Russia, enabled by versatile platforms and technical solutions. Could you reflect on these numbers and any trends you're observing?

It is above 10 million. Before the war, it was enormous — possibly the biggest news website in Russian history, especially in the months before the full-scale invasion, when the demand for independent information was huge. We were foreign agents already, but still legal and not blocked.

After the war, the numbers dropped for various reasons, but we still have around 10–12 million unique monthly readers, which is huge.

Are there trends you're observing now?

The main trend is the rapid degradation of the Russian internet this year. When we started in 2014, the Russian authorities were incompetent in internet regulation — we used to call them “useless idiots.” But Russians learn fast, especially in engineering. Today Russia has one of the most sophisticated censorship systems in the world.

They can block anything — large platforms, foreign services, and even VPNs.

This year several major developments happened: Since last winter, Russia has begun to significantly slow down YouTube without ever officially announcing the measure. YouTube had long been the last remaining channel for relatively free information inside the country. At the same time, voice calls on WhatsApp and Telegram are now blocked: users can still exchange messages, but calls no longer work. This targeted blocking technology further isolates Russia from the outside world. In addition, regional mobile-internet shutdowns have been introduced, cutting off mobile access entirely in specific cities or regions. These shutdowns are not nationwide but highly selective — in some ways an even more troubling development — and are officially justified as a response to the widespread drone attacks across Russia. During such shutdowns, users are restricted to a small “white list” of allowed websites, such as taxi and delivery services or government portals. Everything else is blocked, and even our anti-blocking solutions cannot circumvent these restrictions.

Furthermore Russia has introduced a law criminalizing the search for “extremist” content. While we are not officially designated as “extremists” yet, the law penalizes people for seeking out such material, echoing the situation in Belarus, where all independent media are labeled extremist and simply reading them is a crime. In Russia, anything related to Meduza is prohibited — donating, working for us, commenting, or posting our links — though reading our content is still allowed, for now. The situation has changed dramatically this year. It has become completely dystopian, and perhaps the most frightening aspect is how quickly people begin to accept it as normal.

Given that *Meduza* journalists and readers are targeted by Russian authorities—labeled a “foreign agent” in 2021 and then declared “undesirable” in 2023, meaning that even sharing links can be prosecuted —how do you assess the risks that readers and collaborators still face inside Russia?

Currently, readers in Russia can legally access Meduza, but publicly admitting that they do so can be dangerous, and we advise against it. To help readers stay safe, we have implemented several measures. Our mobile app serves as the main anti-censorship tool, automatically switching between multiple technologies to maintain access without the need for a VPN, which is increasingly difficult to use in Russia due to widespread

blocks and payment restrictions for foreign services. Users can also camouflage the app icon so that Meduza is not visible on their phones, and we will soon release a new unbranded “safe mode” app — essentially Meduza without any visible branding — for those afraid to read it in public. On the editorial side, we follow extremely strict protocols with sources, comments, and publication content, prioritizing the safety of people inside Russia. Since 2022, we have no staff journalists in the country, as collaborating with us can carry prison sentences of up to six years, and in some cases, journalists have been charged with state treason, carrying penalties of 20 years or more. Instead, we work with incredibly brave freelancers under unique safety protocols built from scratch. While we have had minor incidents, thankfully no one has been imprisoned so far. Our co-founder and publisher, Galina Timchenko, has been criminally charged in Russia and is wanted there, illustrating the serious risks involved.

This ties into my next question. Something I found fascinating in your talk last summer was the collaboration Meduza has with journalists in other countries. As far as I know, it began after Ivan Golunov’s arrest, when you worked to complete his investigative work. Could you talk more about that ongoing collaboration — for example with Iran or Cuba — just to illustrate.

At some point, we realized that Meduza had always been a very innovative and forward-looking media organization. We were fortunate to start in 2014, during a pivotal time in journalism, and became pioneers in explanatory journalism, podcasting, YouTube videos, and even native advertising. From the beginning, we were very business-oriented, until being labeled a foreign agent disrupted our business model. We always sought to learn from the best media organizations worldwide, implementing their practices and introducing new storytelling methods to the Russian-speaking media industry. However, over time, we reached a point where Western experiences were no longer entirely relevant for us, as the realities of authoritarianism made normal journalistic approaches insufficient. We had to relearn how to produce quality journalism under these constraints, which was painful and disorienting at first. Eventually, we realized that we could learn from other media organizations facing similar circumstances, and we also recognized that the world of media in exile was growing rapidly. Each year, new regions become dangerous for journalists, such as Afghanistan or, increasingly, Georgia, where Russian-style media regulations are

being implemented. In response, in 2022 — shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine — we helped found NEMO, the Network of Media Outlets in Exile, together with teams from other countries, including Confidencial from Nicaragua, Medante from Azerbaijan, and Radio Zamane, which broadcasts to Iranians from Amsterdam. NEMO became the first global network representing media in exile, whereas before only regional organizations coordinated journalists fleeing authoritarian regimes. This network exemplifies solidarity and horizontal connections between media outlets worldwide, allowing us to share experiences, resistance strategies, censorship-bypassing technologies, and protocols. It has grown increasingly important as the challenges for journalists under authoritarian regimes continue to expand globally.

Final question: What is your view on Trump’s proposed peace plan for Ukraine?”

My feelings are that we are all desperately waiting for peace and demanding it as urgently as possible. First and foremost, peace is needed to stop the war and the killings of innocent people. At the same time, I believe that Putin remains a global threat, with or without peace — perhaps even more so if peace is achieved. Unfortunately, I am quite pessimistic. The regime is strong, and the economy is more resilient than many assume. While there are certainly problems at the moment, Russia still has substantial resources, much of which come from both domestic and international sources, including the West. Its trade and economic influence allow it to continue functioning as a threat and a significant player in the global economy. Regarding Putin’s objectives, it seems that many of the goals he might have sought — such as retaining control over certain territories like Crimea and preventing Ukraine from joining NATO — have largely been addressed. Yet even so, the situation remains complicated: Russia is not losing the war, nor is it decisively winning, and it can continue indefinitely. The geopolitical and political circumstances are currently unfavorable for Ukraine, and leaders like Zelensky face significant challenges. While some might argue that prolonging the war could lead to a “better peace,” I do not share that view. I firmly believe the war must be stopped as soon as possible.

Thank you for the interview.

The interview was conducted by Anne Schumacher, Arbeit an Europa e. V.