News



A journalist walks near residential buildings heavily damaged during a Russian military attack, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in the front-line town of Chasiv Yar Sept. 2, 2024. Lilia Kovalyk-Vasiuta, editor-in-chief of the Religious Information Service of Ukraine shared with OSV News Oct. 16 how she and her colleagues continue their mission of Catholic journalism, despite Russia's attacks, a ban by Russia and a lack of funding. (OSV News/Petrasiuk/Press Service of the 24th King Danylo Separate Mechanized Brigade of the Ukrainian Armed Forces via Reuters)

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Lviv, Ukraine — October 22, 2024
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Russia's latest blockage of Western religious websites and social media accounts tightens the Kremlin's chokehold on Russian residents' information access, the editor of a Ukrainian religious news outlet told OSV News.

"An information bubble has long been created in Russia, and according to the wishes of the Kremlin authorities, the Russian reader must receive only the information they need, i.e., virtually no truth," said Lilia Kovalyk-Vasiuta, chief editor of the Religious Information Service of Ukraine, which was founded by Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv.

On Oct. 4, Forum 18 — a news service that partners with the Norwegian Helsinki Committee in defending freedom of religion, thought and conscience — posted an updated list of affected sites, which confirmed RISU's blockage starting in March 2022, and which included recently added targets, such the the Belarusian Katolik.Life site.

"I think it illustrates the Russian authorities' … obsessions, if you like, in blocking what they call extremist content," Felix Corley, Forum 18 editor and researcher, told OSV News, noting that the bans are also operative in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.

"Information from Ukraine provided in Russian that contradicts Russian propaganda is particularly dangerous for (their information) bubble," said Kovalyk-Vasiuta, who in an Oct. 16 email to OSV News noted that Russia's targeting of RISU was far from a surprise.

"We assumed this might happen after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as the number of readers from Russia suddenly dropped," she said.

Prior to attacking Ukraine in February 2022, Russia was "the top second or third country" of the more than 100 countries from which RISU readers hail, accounting "for 3-4% of audience" traffic — on par with site traffic from the U.S., she said.

Yet years before launching its full-scale war on Ukraine — which continues aggression launched in 2014, and which has been declared a genocide in two joint reports from the New Lines Institute and the Raoul Wallenberg Center for Human Rights — Russia was working to systematically lock down access to external media, while steadily suppressing domestic dissent.

Since its founding in 2008, the Russian agency Roskomnadzor, the country’s internet and media regulator, has been tasked with blocking and censoring an ever-increasing number of websites that challenge the strict narratives of the Kremlin under President Vladimir Putin.

"From the very beginning of its existence, RISU has been fighting Russian information manipulations, fakes, etc.," Kovalyk-Vasiuta told OSV News.

In 2001, ahead of St. John Paul II's visit to Ukraine, the decision to create RISU was taken in order "to create a nondenominational information portal about religion in Ukraine that does not represent any church or religious organization, to objectively and impartially represent religious life in Ukraine," said Kovalyk-Vasiuta.

A few years later, the RISU team realized that its publications were "being disseminated in a limited and often distorted way in the Russian media," especially by the Russian Orthodox Church — and so RISU launched a Russian-language version of its site, she said.

"We decided to inform the Russian-speaking audience ourselves, which led to an increased number of readers from Russia and Central Asia," Kovalyk-Vasiuta said.

She noted that RISU has battled hackers "since the Orange Revolution of 2004," when the newly independent Ukraine dramatically rejected a return to Moscow's rule — a popular uprising that RISU covered by highlighting how various churches and religious organizations engaged with the sociopolitical movement.

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"At that time, we actively presented the involvement of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate in supporting the pro-Russian (presidential) candidate (Viktor) Yanukovych, in election fraud and manipulation, diocesan administrations, monasteries, and parishes of the UOC-MP in Ukraine becoming centers of illegal political propaganda, spreading Kremlin fakes, etc.," said Kovalyk-Vasiuta. "That is why hackers tried to take down our website."

RISU's willingness to feature the pro-Ukrainian wing within the UOC-MP clashed with that church's own official media, which "was controlled by Moscow agents," Kovalyk-Vasiuta told OSV News.

During Bartholomew's actual visit to Ukraine in July 2008, RISU's website was rendered inaccessible due to DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks, she said.

Kovalyk-Vasiuta said RISU was on the radar of Russian special services when "fully pro-Russian President Yanukovych" was in office from 2010-2014, as the outlet wrote openly about Moscow supporting religious groups that "engaged in socially subversive and anti-state activities in Ukraine" — such as the Dognal group, led by Czech citizen and excommunicated Roman Catholic priest Antonin Dognal.

"Although they filed a lawsuit against our journalist, he won the case," she said, adding that she "personally had several incidents of heated discussions with these sectarians, often acting as an expert on the matter, as their activities attracted media attention."

During Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity (also known as the Maidan or Euromaidan Revolution) — when Ukrainians firmly, and at the cost of more than 100 lives, rejected Yanukovych and his pro-Moscow path — RISU experienced "new waves of attacks," said Kovalyk-Vasiuta.

"In the fall of 2014, our portal ended up (being) blocked for nearly a week due to a massive cyberattack by hackers from the CyberBerkut group," she said.

A decade later, "smaller attacks have been carried out and continue to this day, including after the launch of the new portal in 2020," she said.

Yet despite Moscow's efforts to shut out RISU, "Russian readers continue to access RISU's website in various ways," thanks to open VPNs (virtual private networks), she said.

Now, "100-200 people" in Russia are reading RISU daily, placing that nation back in the top 10 countries that visit the site, she noted.

She assumes the rebound "can be explained by the growth in traffic from East Asian countries (for example, Indonesia), where we did not have many readers before.

"Additionally, they can read our materials in the Telegram channels distributing them," said Kovalyk-Vasiuta.

As Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine approaches its third year, Kovalyk-Vasiuta and the RISU team, who operate with "minimal funding" and rely on donors, are determined to persist in their mission.

"The 'love' the Russian authorities express for RISU encourages us to be ever more active in informing people and seeking funding to continue doing so," she said.

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.