

***Tikhon Dzyadko, Editor-in-Chief of Russian Independent News Outlet TV Rain (Dozhd),
Keynotes the Human Security Law Center’s Symposium on Press Freedom Under Attack: 21st
Century Threats to Journalists—and Democracy.***

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On Friday, November 4, 2022, William & Mary Law School’s Human Security Law Center, in partnership with William & Mary’s Reves Center for International Studies and the Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism, WHRO, hosted a Symposium entitled *Press Freedom Under Attack: 21st Century Threats to Journalists—and Democracy*.

The Symposium centered on the current challenges that the press faces in the United States and other countries around the world. The Symposium also highlighted press freedom’s foundational role in democracy and, in turn, democracy’s foundational role in human rights. This article is the first of a three-part series about the Symposium’s featured panel events. The Symposium opened with a keynote address by Russian journalist Tikhon Dzyadko, with William & Mary Law student Rachel Sleiman, J.D. ’23, moderating.¹

Mr. Dzyadko is a Russian journalist and Editor-in-Chief of TV Rain, the only independent television news station in Russia. In an environment where press freedoms were deteriorating, and ultimately collapsed soon after the onset of the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, Mr. Dzyadko’s and his wife’s, Ekaterina Kotrikadze, critical commentary of the Russian government on TV Rain ultimately led to their exile from the country in March 2022.²

Mr. Dzyadko began his Keynote Address by describing the history of press freedom in post-Soviet Russia and President Vladimir Putin’s unceasing efforts to control and manipulate the news media since then. In the 1990s, Russia attempted to establish a true democracy. At the time, Vladimir Putin was vying for the Presidency, and he used the media as his main vehicle to consolidate political power. In a matter of months before the election, Putin went from being a relatively unknown candidate to the popular vote winner. However, as Putin assumed the presidency, he realized that not only had the media sparked his rise, but that the media just as easily could trigger his fall.

Striving to remain in power, Putin seized control of the media narrative by pressuring and ultimately destroying independent news media outlets that countered his objectives and propaganda. By 2010, independent news media had all but disappeared and were replaced by government-controlled outlets. Yet, the vacuum left behind by the government’s crackdown on the press inspired the creation of TV Rain, known as Dozhd in Russian, a media organization founded on the ideals of disseminating accurate, independent information and providing a “normal education” to Russian citizens, free of government misinformation. Every month, 18

¹ The Human Security Law Center & Reves Center for International Studies, *Tikhon Dzyadko, Editor-in-Chief of Dozhd TV: Keynote. “Press Freedom Under Attack,”* YOUTUBE (Nov. 4, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_FN9icVTbc.

² Gulnoza Said, *Dozhd TV Editor Tikhon Dzyadko on Why He Fled Russia and Shut His Broadcaster Down*, COMM. TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS (Mar. 3, 2022, 5:56 AM), <https://cpj.org/2022/03/dozhd-tv-editor-tikhon-dzyadko-on-why-he-fled-russia-and-shut-his-broadcaster-down/>.

million Russians tuned in to watch TV Rain, accounting for around 10% of Russia's total population. TV Rain's website also garnered 5 million monthly views. It was clear to Mr. Dzyadko that TV Rain was fulfilling a critical citizen demand and solidified his belief that Russian citizens longed for a free press.

Because of its popularity, however, TV Rain encountered resistance in pursuing its mission. In 2014, the Kremlin pressured cable and satellite companies to cut TV Rain from their main cable and satellite services, which reduced TV Rain's access to their audience by almost 90%.³ Seven years later, in August 2021, the Kremlin formally branded TV Rain a "foreign agent," effectively labeling the media organization a traitor to the Russian people and their government.⁴

But the final break came in early 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine.⁵ At the onset of the war, a Levada Center poll showed that 81% of Russian respondents either fully or mostly supported the actions of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine.⁶ Knowing that these statistics were skewed, TV Rain began reporting on the conflict, describing it as an invasion. Because TV Rain's reporting contradicted the Russian government's official statements, the Kremlin quickly blocked TV Rain and five thousand other unfavorable online platforms from Russian access, branding them as "fake news." Even more concerning, the Kremlin enacted legislation criminalizing the spreading of "fake" news about the military and threatening a 15-year term of imprisonment.⁷

Unwilling to choose between (1) disseminating the government's propaganda and (2) facing imprisonment for accurate reporting, TV Rain suspended its operations in Russia and left the country just weeks after the war began. Despite many obstacles, the station relaunched in July 2022 and currently fully operates in Latvia, Georgia, and the Netherlands. Stronger than ever, TV Rain has approximately 14 million Russian visitors and 25 million other visitors from all over the world. The station disseminates its reporting through its website,⁸ YouTube channel,⁹ and most recently, a YouTube channel in English.¹⁰ Through these means, TV Rain can, in Mr. Dzyadko's words, continue to "show [Russians who oppose the war] that they are not alone."

As Mr. Dzyadko addressed the Symposium's audience, the war looms on—continuing in its tenth month, with seemingly no end in sight. Yet, Mr. Dzyadko remains optimistic about press

³ Tikhon Dzyadko, *Triumph of the Will: Putin's War Against Russia's Last Independent Channel*, THE GUARDIAN (Apr. 10, 2014, 9:35 AM), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/10/putin-war-dozhd-russias-last-independent-tv-channel>.

⁴ Gleb Stolyarov & Vladimir Soldatkin, *Russia Declares Media Outlet TV Rain a 'Foreign Agent'* (Aug. 20, 2021, 2:37 PM), <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/russia-declares-media-outlet-tv-rain-foreign-agent-2021-08-20/>.

⁵ Andrew Osborn & Polina Nikolskaya, *Russia's Putin Authorises 'Special Military Operation' Against Ukraine* (Feb. 24, 2022, 12:47 AM), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-authorises-military-operations-donbass-domestic-media-2022-02-24/> (Feb. 24, 2022, 12:47 AM).

⁶ Denis Volkov & Andrei Kolesnikov, *Figure 1, My Country Right or Wrong: Russia Public Opinion on Ukraine 3*, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INT'L PEACE (2022), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202209-Volkov_Kolesnikov_War_Opinion1.pdf.

⁷ Elahe Izadi, *Russia's Independent Media, Long Under Siege, Teeters Under New Putin Crackdown*, WASH. POST (Mar. 5, 2022, 8:58 AM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2022/03/04/putin-media-law-russia-news/>.

⁸ TV Rain, <https://tvrain.tv> (Russ.).

⁹ TV Rain, YOUTUBE, <https://www.youtube.com/c/tvrain/> (Russ.).

¹⁰ TV Rain Newsroom, YOUTUBE, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNgfzTHUaFqKxby9UKwZzwQ/about>.

freedom in Russia in general and about TV Rain in particular. He and the rest of his TV Rain team are eager to return home, to a Russia that embraces a free and independent media and human rights for its people.