

Britain bans RT

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Britain's Office of Communications (Ofcom) stripped Russian state news channel RT of its license to broadcast last Friday. Ofcom ruled that RT was not "fit and proper" to broadcast in the UK and that failure to revoke its license risked "undermining audiences' trust in regulated broadcast news".

RT has been off-air in the UK since March 2, after European Union (EU) sanctions against RT and Sputnik cut its feed from satellite companies in France and Luxembourg to Britain's Sky, Freesat and Freeview. The EU's sanctions also cancelled RT from social media platforms Twitter, Facebook, Tik Tok and Google's YouTube and Google News search.

The British government has seized on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, provoked by NATO's expansion to Russia's border, to ramp-up state censorship and anti-Russia hysteria. Ofcom's ban is the culmination of efforts to strip RT of its license since the channel was first aired in 2010 (its first breach, while licensed to Information TV, was in 2011).

RT is a state-funded media outlet promoting the views and aims of Russia's capitalist oligarchic government. The WSWS holds no brief for the Putin regime and opposes its invasion of Ukraine that divides the Russian and Ukrainian working class and plays into the hands of NATO. But RT's closure by Britain, the US and EU is a reactionary measure stoking anti-Russia sentiment, demonising the Russian people and laying the ground for war.

On February 23, one day before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Prime Minister Boris Johnson called on Ofcom to investigate RT. He did so at the urging of Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer who denounced RT in parliament, demanding "will the Prime Minister now ask Ofcom to review its licence?"

Johnson replied that Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries had written to Ofcom to review the matter, "but we live in a democracy and a country that believes in free speech. I think it is important that we leave it to Ofcom to decide which media organisations to ban, rather than

politicians—that is what Russia does."

Ofcom, whose CEO Melanie Dawes was appointed by Secretary of State Priti Patel in January, moved swiftly. On February 28 it announced it was investigating 15 complaints about RT's Ukraine war coverage. By March 2, it was investigating 14 more.

Ofcom's March 18 notice cancelling all three broadcast licenses held by RT's owner, ANO TV Novosti, was couched in the language of "impartiality" and "freedom". The 12-page notice cites "due impartiality" 29 times and "freedom of expression" or "freedom of opinion" 12 times. It is a document that reeks of hypocrisy and is a new milestone in wartime censorship, establishing a precedent to instantly close down media organisations which challenge British foreign policy.

Ofcom said its "expedited process" for banning RT was justified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, citing the UN General Assembly's March 2 resolution condemning Russian aggression, and sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union, UK, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Switzerland.

Needless to say, Ofcom did not strip the BBC, CNN or hundreds of other media outlets of their broadcast license for promoting state propaganda in support of the US-led invasion and military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. These war crimes under international law led to one million deaths but did not trigger sanctions or a UN resolution condemning US-British military aggression.

In further justification of its expedited ban, Ofcom cited repressive new laws introduced by the Russian government making "Public dissemination of deliberately false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" punishable by imprisonment for up to three years or a fine of up to 1.5 million rubles; or up to 15 years if such false information results in "grave consequences".

What then of Julian Assange, who has already spent 10 years arbitrarily detained in the UK and faces 175 years in a US federal prison under the Espionage Act (1917) for publishing true information exposing war crimes, secret

rendition, torture and illegal mass surveillance by the US, British and allied governments? Home Secretary Priti Patel is currently preparing to sign his US extradition warrant.

ANO TV Novosti was denied even the semblance of due process. Its ban was announced despite Ofcom admitting it had concluded none of its investigations into complaints about RT's war coverage. Novosti was initially given just two days to respond to Ofcom's allegations that it was not "fit and proper" to hold a license, and the regulator refused to allow RT the time it requested to access legal representation in the UK.

Britain's anti-Russia juggernaut was proceeding full speed. On March 15, Margarita Simonyan, RT's Editor-in-Chief, was subject to UK sanctions banning her travel and freezing her personal assets.

Not only had RT failed to meet the "due partiality" requirements of the Communications Act (2003), Ofcom explained, but its reporting on Ukraine had breached the Act's more stringent "special impartiality" obligations in "matters of political and industrial controversy and matters relating to current public policy".

Ofcom's ban has shut down a news channel with a quarterly viewership of 2.5 million people—a decision made "to protect audiences from harm". John Pilger, George Galloway and Ken Livingstone are among those who made regular appearances on RT, their criticisms of Britain's neo-colonial wars long since expunged from the BBC and other major networks.

Ofcom's March 18 notice reviewed ANO TV Novosti's "compliance history" in Britain, including 15 breaches of its Broadcasting Code between 2012 and 2017. Seven of these involved alleged breaches of due impartiality and/or due accuracy. RT was in fact sanctioned for airing material that contradicted British/NATO war propaganda, including:

Russia Today, 21 August 2011, claimed that Libyan rebels opposing Muammar Gaddafi lacked popular support and that NATO's airborne campaign in Libya was being accompanied by efforts to manufacture mass consent for regime change.

RT's Syrian Diary, March 2013, exposed sectarian atrocities committed by Syria's Islamist opposition groups who were being universally hailed as "freedom fighters" by the US and British press.

RT's The Truthseeker: Genocide of Eastern Ukraine, July 2014, depicted mass repression and displacement of civilians in Eastern Ukraine by the Ukrainian military and far-right militias. RT's programme cited United Nation's

sources on the scale of the refugee crisis.

In 2018, RT was hit with further sanctions after it ridiculed lurid allegations that Russia ordered the "novichok" poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Canterbury, England. The unsubstantiated claims were parroted by the entire British press, unleashing a tidal wave of anti-Russian jingoism and giving succour to NATO's military build-up in the East.

Ofcom says it had "considerable engagement" with RT over its "section 5" breaches between 2012 and 2017, including "several meetings" with Ofcom's Orwellian "Standards and Audience Protection team". Novosti argued that Ofcom should consider RT's publicly stated aim of "providing an alternative perspective on major global events". Its appeals were ignored.

Of course, RT's coverage of global events generally bears the clumsy stamp of the Russian government. The channel promotes all manner of far-right movements, including the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Nigel Farage in Britain, reflecting the nationalist outlook of the Russian state. But GB News and Fox promote similar views and neither channel is under the slightest threat from Ofcom.

It is symptomatic of the war-fever gripping the upper middle class that not a word of protest has been heard from a single prominent intellectual or journalist condemning the state ban on RT. The editorial staff at the *Guardian* are the surest reflection of this social layer, lacking even a scintilla of democratic instinct and eager to ingratiate themselves with Britain's military and intelligence agencies whenever and wherever possible.

"Will Ofcom's decision to ban RT stop Kremlin message reaching UK audiences?" the *Guardian*'s headline demanded last Friday. Its conformist, pro-imperialist journalists, including Luke Harding, Carole Cadwalladr and Jonathan Freedland have been unceasing in their efforts to pollute public consciousness.

The ban on RT is a serious warning of things to come. It must be opposed by a genuine anti-war movement of the international working class.



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