

## GNI Statement on Protecting and Respecting Freedom of Expression and Privacy in the Context of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

GNI joins the broader global community in expressing shock, opprobrium, and deep dismay about the unjustified Russian invasion of Ukraine. In addition to the physical attacks being perpetrated against Ukraine, the Russian government has taken active steps to undermine and restrict access to accurate information in Ukraine and Russia, as well as spreading disinformation and propaganda. GNI condemns all violations of the rights to freedom of expression unequivocally.

**As governments and other actors respond to the Russian government's aggression, including by issuing sanctions and attempting to address Russian government disinformation and propaganda, GNI calls on them to ensure that any restrictions on freedom of expression are consistent with democratic values and human rights principles.** Unnecessary or disproportionate responses may have unintended consequences, contribute to fragmentation of global communications networks, and undermine the moral consensus supporting widespread condemnation of Russia's actions.

GNI is deeply alarmed, but unfortunately not surprised by the Russian government's significant restrictions on freedom of expression, which are the culmination of its long running, [escalating pressure](#) on ICT companies. Major Russian media outlets have [closed down](#) after an update to the media law included penalties of up to 15 years in jail for publishing "fake" news about the conflict (as solely determined by Russian authorities). The government has also [ordered](#) ISPs to block major communications platforms in Russia, following weeks of companies' grappling with an increasing number of blocking orders that fail to meet domestic and international law standards to remove or otherwise restrict access to content.

GNI supports efforts to sanction and hold accountable Russian government actors, as well as those abetting its aggression. However, some governments have been calling for retaliatory measures that are [overly broad](#) and would have unnecessary and disproportionate impacts on freedom of expression. GNI also notes with concern that well intentioned sanctions measures, as well as private and [public campaigns](#), are exerting significant pressure on companies to withdraw products and services that help maintain information and communications network connectivity in Russia.

**To the extent possible, it is critical to maintain infrastructure interconnection between Russian networks and the global Internet, as well as to preserve access for people in Russia to open platforms and services, so that they can continue to find spaces to organize in opposition to the war, report and share information about conditions in Russia, and have access to sources that are not controlled or restricted by Russian government censorship.**

GNI is also deeply concerned about the potential permanence of restrictive approaches, which further entrench the restricted Internet environment in Russia, cutting off access to essential services, and may raise questions and concerns among those outside Russia as to the sustainability and resilience of our collective commitment to global, open, interoperable, and secure networks.

GNI calls on all actors considering steps that could restrict freedom expression to carefully calibrate those efforts, clearly articulate their basis in international and domestic law, as well as their justification, engage with experts and civil society stakeholders in their design, and continuously monitor their implementation and impacts so that they may be adjusted as necessary to be proportionate. Companies taking such steps, whether voluntarily or pursuant to orders or sanctions, should seek to understand and mitigate their impacts, according to the framework set out in the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#).

Looking ahead, it is critical that governments and companies take focused, time-bound, necessary, and proportionate responses to ongoing and escalating Russian aggression, in order to effectively protect universal human rights and effectively counter the Russian governments' efforts to restrict the information space domestically and shift blame, divide allies, and spread disinformation externally. Ultimately, as governments and the international community condemn further restrictions on digital rights and access to accurate information in Russia, it is essential to model good practice, implement clear, legitimate and necessary restrictions, and provide public and evidence-based justifications for those restrictions in order to ensure respect for universal human rights in the short and long term.