Democracy and Media in Central and Eastern Europe 25 Years On



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A passion for Robin Hood: a case study of journalistic (in)dependence in Russia

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Abstract: Western monitoring identifies Russia in the 21st century as non-democratic country with restrictions on freedom of speech in offline and online media. While the internet in Russia is party free, the press is fully controlled. This chapter investigates one case of journalistic independent media online with the aim of clarifying how independent journalists understand freedom of media and how they practice it. The detailed study of one case helps us to address general burning issues on the agenda of Russian journalism, namely journalistic values, professional and personal ethics of journalists taken in the context of the present media-state-business-society relations. The study is based on expert interviews with heads of the media industry, the government, education and civil institutions (10) and in-depth interviews with journalists from independent online media outlets conducted by the author in October 2013. The data gathered draw the conclusion from the analysis of one region of the Urals complemented by the analysis of open source press and online publications.

Keywords: journalistic start-up, media freedom, journalistic values, center, region.

Introduction

Media freedom in Russia is not merely a question of the international interest in the quality of democracy and freedom across the globe (see for instance reports by The World Audit, Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and Transparency International). Rather, media freedom in Russia is a question of national concern, because there is no consensus regarding how to understand and practice media freedom. In other words, media freedom is not protected against abuse by any entity, whether it be market, oligarch, government, or even journalist. Many journalists today believe that free media is only a Western myth and an unattainable ideal. Their lives and professional experiences testify that the media serves the interests of its founders, be it the state or private capital. Media freedom is not the scope of authority of the journalist – the employee; it is the scope of authority of the media owner. In other words, freedom of the particular media is always defined by the boundaries of editorial policy, which is in keeping with the interests of the founder. The editor-in-chief, as the top manager, controls the boundaries of editorial policy.

The post-Soviet journalist, as distinct from the Soviet party-driven state employee, is still a 'free artist' in the labor market who chooses where to work, whether in the private or state-owned media, state-private media or advertising, or the public relations service. This study shows that the post-Soviet journalist has a rich choice of employment due to the emergence of new media professions. In addition, a journalist actively combines basic work (as a rule, this is a permanent form of employment for staff members in media outlets) with additional employment (work for other media, public relations services, advertising agencies, or departments of journalism at universities). A survey of journalists, carried out in late 2008, showed that in large cities (one million and more inhabitants), every second journalist had a second job, and in small towns (up to 200,000), every third journalist had a second job (Pasti, Chernysh, and Svitich 2012: 274). Earlier research in St.Petersburg proved that in 1999, every third journalist combined primary and second jobs (Pasti, 2004: 110). That is to say, in the journalistic profession, having a second job is a post-Soviet trend. It appears that in the 1990s, for economic reasons, many media outlets were losing state funding and were unable to find sufficient sources of income in a newly emerging market due to the general economic transition to market principles. The media could not pay regular salaries to reporters, who, in turn, sought earnings outside of the media realm to survive. Similar situations have also occurred in other professions.

In the 2000s, many journalists in Russia continued to combine their basic work with a second job. This became an established habit and was not done solely to earn money. Such an example of the mobility of senior colleagues was perceived as the norm by younger journalists. On the one hand, a second job contributed to the growth of their social and cultural capital. On the other hand, it eroded their devotion to the basic media outlet and led to the formation of a new identity - the mobile freelancer - who valued personal freedom in the profession more than institutional media freedom. The majority of journalists surveyed in 2008 were satisfied with their profession, despite the fact that they recognized the major constraints in their work. This included local power pressure (external constraint) and the editorial policy of the media (internal constraint) (Pasti, Chernysh, and Svitich, 2012: 276). At the same time, the level of satisfaction was primarily due to editorial autonomy (opportunity to decide what and how to write) and the editorial policy of their media outlet. That is to say, personal decisions by journalists regarding "what and how to write" mentally conformed to the editorial line of their media outlet. Among them, the younger generation of post-2000 journalists were the happiest and the most optimistic in the profession (Pasti, Chernysh, and Svitich, 2012: 275-276).

In the early 1990s, many journalists sought to secure jobs in the new private media because the Soviet state system of media collapsed, and the liberalization of the labor market and legislation (the Constitution of 1993; Media Law, 1991; and the Law on NGOs, 1991) presented new perspectives for them, including the idea of establishing their own media outlets. The former state-owned media also underwent a process of privatization in the early 1990s and became joint-stock companies, of which the journalistic teams had their share of ownership. Since the beginning of 2000, the trend has been the opposite; many journalists now tend toward joining state-owned media. It has become prestigious to secure a job in the state service, which opens the way to political and professional careers; it provides journalists with economic, social, and professional protection; and enables them to have white wages¹, access to various ranking officials, accreditation at press conferences, and other privileges that the state-run media enjoys.

The State takes up media in the sphere of its strategic interests. The current relationship that exists between the media and the authorities is characterized by their indivisibility and is very similar to the way it was in Soviet times. Most municipal newspapers are funded by local budgets. Their main function is propaganda—that is, "(...) to inform the public about the decisions of the authorities, to cover their activities, publish documents and provide the most important news" (FARMC, 2012: 68). In the last decade, regional governments have established no separate media outlets; whole media holdings already include all types of media: newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and online media. It is cheaper and easier for regional governments to have their own media than to buy services from private media. The government takes care of their media, launches special programs for their development, and increases maintenance costs (FARMC, 2012: 70). The media, in turn, is afraid of losing the state's care, as is typically the case when living in nonmarket conditions. The private media in the regions compete with each other with regard to their loyalty to the government in order to obtain government grants and other subsidies that help them to remain afloat. The media's political and economic dependence on authority supersedes the freedom stipulated in the new laws mentioned above. This "umbilical cord" is not easy to cut, which is primarily because of the lack of development of the real media market. This is, in turn, due to the lack of fair competition and incentives for the

White official salaries are paid, usually in state organizations. With white wages, all required taxes are paid to the State, including tax on insurance and tax to the pension fund for their workers. Private companies, including private media, lower their tax base to pay their employees so-called gray (or black) unofficial wages in envelopes or other means. They pay no taxes on the wages of grey, which in size is higher than white wages from which all taxes are paid. Grey wages are part of the shadow economy in the country (Domcheva, 2013).

media themselves and the journalists who are satisfied with state care. As a result, this leads to a low demand for media freedom in the assembled triumvirate of media, state, and business.

The relationship between media and society is described as a broken dialogue. Fomicheva (2000), in particular, defines it as a communicative crisis. She claims that during the 1990s, the media gradually lost its communicative function in society. Two main factors led to the rupture of the media and society. The first was that the media as a means of communication became unavailable to various segments of society. Budget intellectuals - state employees in education, medicine, social services and other state organizations could not afford to subscribe to the all-Russian newspapers. Regions and towns were cut off from the national press because the cost of delivery exceeded the cost of publication. Due to financial difficulties, most national newspapers were unable to create their own extensive network of correspondents in the regions, and former Soviet culture, which included readers' letters, was not preserved. The special newsrooms for work with the letters from readers were eliminated. As a result, ordinary people could only receive information from the media but could not participate in its transmission as it was before, when they wrote about problems to the newspapers. Another reason for the crisis of communication was seen in the content of newspapers not meeting the needs and expectations of citizens. Fomicheva writes:

"From the Soviet red tape and boredom, newspapers rushed to the other extreme – pap, 'horror,' own journalistic monologues, which, as shown by analysis of the content composed 75 per cent on average of the publications of nationwide newspapers." (2000)

In a situation in which the media loses interest in society and becomes unavailable to citizens, the latter, in turn, gradually cease to worry about media freedom. A poll conducted by the Levada Center in 2012 showed that the majority of citizens believe that business, media, parliament, and the courts depended on power. Citizens' level of trust in all government institutions, with the exception of the president, was quite low: 71 per cent of respondents believed that the federal media depended on the presidential administration and the government, while 72 per cent of respondents believed that the State Duma and the Council of Federation depended on the administration of the president. No less than 60 per cent of Russians wanted to make presidential power more monolithic and censorship more rigid (Ivanov, 2012). Another study found that Russians would like to see media freedom. The only exemption from this freedom is that 53 per cent of respondents shared common moral values, suggesting a ban on sexual propaganda, violence, and so on. Eighteen per cent of respondents supported varying degrees of censorship, although 10 years ago, this figure was slightly lower than 13 per cent (ISRAS, 2011: 186).

Young journalists had an ambivalent perception of media freedom. On the one hand, for them, it was a bitter concept. This is seen in the context of their criticism of journalism education. Their main claim, as evidenced by a survey of journalists conducted between 2012 and 2014 as part of the BRICS project (2012–2016), is that education remains cut off from life. They are taught to "seek the ideal" in the profession and serve in the public interest —not a rigid reality that forces them to conform to the "master" (the media founder and serve in his particular interests). When they enter the media world, they have to learn the profession anew. On the other hand, for them, media freedom is a 'sweet' concept. They have grown up with internet freedom and want economic, political, and professional independence as well. The most ambitious among them are leaving the traditional media and establishing their online media. They want to avoid state control. Therefore, many independent journalists do not register their sites as media. This is possible due to the current legislation, which does not require registration of journalistic websites, producing journalistic content (news and analysis) as internet media.

In search for independent media

The Western ideal of democracy and the role of the media is clearly presented in the formula developed by Galtung (1999). According to him the universal formula of all modern societies includes three pillars: the state, capital, and civil society. He argues that the relationship among them can define the nature of the society. According to Galtung (1999: 21), "the essence of democracy is transparent dialogue as a prologue to decisions for social transformation." The task of the media as a vehicle of communication, being somewhere between these three pillars, is to arrange for such transparent dialogue to take place in society. To fulfill its function, the media must become strong and independent; in this case, "they could, according to Galtung, assume the status of a fourth pillar in the social power structure" (Nordenstreng, 1997: 18).

Russian scholars have not stopped debating ways to develop since the collapse of the Soviet Union. One example has been the annual international symposiums held by the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, organized since 1994 (http://www.msses.ru/about/). The school publishes its annual collection of articles in "The Paths of Russia". On the level of regions and cities, change is characterized in terms of subnational authoritarianism (Gelman, 2010: 3). This presupposes the localization of policy and management and the monopoly control of local elites over the political process. Gelman distinguishes between two fundamentally different stages of development of subnational authoritarianism in Russia. The 1990s saw a spontaneous transfer of authority from the center to the

regions and municipalities and the rise of regional and local "political machines." These monopolies lean on social groups of state employees and retirees who are dependent on government business and organized crime groups connected with the government. They have become quite independent from the center (Moscow). The 2000s is seen as a transition from a decentralized to a centralized subnational authoritarianism when these disparate political machines of the regions are being built into one common national column. There was an integration of these local monopolies in the "United Russia," the all-Russian party of power; the elimination of gubernatorial elections in the regions, in some cities, and for mayors; and other key institutional changes. This model of centralized subnational authoritarianism is reminiscent of what was typical 30 to 50 years ago for regional and local governments in the Soviet period (Gelman, 2010: 7).

The media is embroiled in a struggle for power, as it was in Soviet times. Its rapprochement with the government over the last 20 years occurred in two ways: through commercialization and etatization. Commercialization started at the beginning of the 1990s with the advent of capitalism in the media market. It had an impact on the professional behavior and mindset of journalists (profit orientation). Since the middle of the 1990s, etatization has gradually taken root in two ways: through increasing state property in the media market and through the omnipresent practice of the regular information service contracts made between the state office and non-state media outlets. Thus, the state performs two roles: the owner of the media (as in Soviet times) and the buyer of journalists' services, which the journalist implements in the frame of the informational service contract made between the government and the private media. For instance, the journalist regularly during the year provides positive coverage of the department of culture of the government according to the contract, whereas the government transfers money to the private media for these journalist's services done for the government.

A policy of etatization is like a bridge that connects the pluralistic market-driven present with the Soviet state hierarchical past. One might presuppose that the present media system provides psychological comfort to its workers by combining the old culture of socialism and state subsidies (often provoking nostalgia among old journalists). A new capitalist business culture aimed at cost recovery and profit (attractive to the young generation which strives for commercial journalism). Commercialization and etatization do not conflict with each other and have different effects. Etatization has a negative impact on media freedom in that it leads to economic and political dependence of the media on the authorities. However, it also has a positive impact in that it protects media outlets against market uncertainty and bankruptcy when feeding the media

budgets; state subsidies and state money to private media for information service contracts are made between the government and private media. At the same time, etatization welcomes the commercial practices of the media and the profit orientation of journalists (Pasti and Nordenstreng, 2013: 251–252). The typical journalist in the traditional media is a satisfied journalist who has two identities: a loyal staff employee and a journalist with a second job (market freelancer) (Pasti, Chernysh, and Svitich, 2012: 279–280). Vartanova (2012: 141–142) defines the Russian media system as a statist commercialized model, with the state "as the main driving force in media policy" and "the emergence of the market in the media industry."

In the early 2000s, with the growth of the internet and social networks, there has been a new phenomenon - the growth of independent online media that appears to extend beyond the power of the mainstream media, an integral part of a vertical power structure, known in Russia as 'vertical of power.' These independent online media appear from the bottom - from journalistic initiatives and active citizens. As evidenced by the protests in 2008 and from 2011 to 2012, these new independent internet media presented an alternative agenda emerging from their close interaction with civil society, as distinct from the official picture painted in the traditional media. These new independent outlets, together with social networks, have played an important role in mobilizing protests. The protests were the most disturbing moments in the political history of the country during the transmission of power to a successor: from Putin to Medvedev in 2008 and from Medvedev to Putin in 2012. The most important question related to the transfer of power has not yet been resolved in Russia (in the West, the transfer of power is through free elections). Therefore, any elections, the time of the transfer of power in Russia, are always unsettling and unpredictable. In periods when there is not this moment - hence, elections, there are no political protests.

Starting from Galtung's (1999) ideas on the structure of modern society and the position of the media, we can portray Russia after 2011 as being divided into two parts. In the first part, the traditional media is a component of the inseparable alliance between the state and capital. In the second part, new online media appears independently and in conjunction with civil society.

Research questions. Methodology. The case study

The chapter puts an emphasis on the new independent media that has appeared on the internet in Russia as journalistic start-up projects. They are on the rise, but still not explored. This case study was part of an empirical survey of 72 media outlets in four Russian cities between 2012–2014.

The salient questions to be addressed are:

RQ1: What is this new type of media?

RQ2: What are the journalistic values and practices which support freedom of the independent media?

The case study approach seems to be the most productive because it allows the researcher to discern the subject of the study from a close distance. This chapter is about a new journalist who established her independent media online, came into conflict with the authorities, was adjudicated, was deprived of the right to engage in journalism, and then received the court's permission to pursue journalism. It examines in detail this case of journalistic independence in a particular region, which, like any specific personal story, is unique and original. However, conversely, it provides insights that highlight general questions related to media freedom and qualitative changes in post-Soviet journalism. This story has moved beyond its region of origin, split the professional community of journalists through the center (Moscow) and the region, where this split professional generations, and was eventually omitted from discussion in the profession.

Inquiring into a notorious case

In 2006, Journalist A., established with her husband an independent online media outlet in the capital of the Federal District (okrug). Here she graduated from the Journalism Department of the local university. Prior to that, she worked for one Federal online media and was head of the newsroom, which supplies news and highlights the developments in this Federal District. This online media was, in fact, an informal agency of the presidential administration. Unlike the official mainstream media, it had been launched with the aim of receiving alternative information. This online media operated under the leadership of a famous Kremlin political strategist. Journalist A. obtained useful work experience online and established professional and personal contacts with Moscow and other regions.

Her online media has become the most influential and promoted not only in her city but also throughout the entire region. It was a part of the 50 most widely read online media in Russia. Before the parliamentary elections of 2011, local businesses close to the newly Moscow-appointed governor bought a controlling stake in her journalistic start-up for 5 million US dollars. The new governor needed the popular media to conduct his policy in the region, as well as for self-affirmation and to promote his image. To sell a controlling stake, Journalist A. retained her 49 per cent of the shares owned by the start-up and continued to work as the chief editor there. After a change of ownership, the media outlet turned into a public relations

agency of the new governor. Before the upcoming elections in the city, the new governor came into conflict with a local entrepreneur, who was going to run for mayor in the elections. In this conflict between the governor, who was appointed by Moscow, and the local entrepreneur, Journalist A. took the side of the local entrepreneur. In retaliation for this "betrayal," the governor approved the investigation of complaints against Journalist A. that had accumulated in the prosecutor's office, and then financial inspections of the media and the trial began. In response, Journalist A. established a new online newspaper, which engaged in harsh criticism of the governor. This led to an escalation of the conflict between the journalist and the governor and the institution of criminal proceedings against the journalist.

It should be noted that the specifics of any Russian regional center is that the city has two branches of power: regional and city power. The political status of the governor in the regional center is higher than the mayor because he leads the region and is appointed by Moscow. The newly- appointed governor as a rule is not a member of the local elite. The mayor's status is lower than that of the governor, but the mayor is elected by the residents of the city and is, as a rule, integrated into the local political–business elite. The conflict between the governor and the mayor in the regional capital with two governments (regional and city) is a rather familiar situation. Both officials form their own political–economic groups, which include the media. When the governor and the mayor are in conflict, the media are "called" to an information war, which can cause the professional community of journalists to be divided into two hostile camps.

The split between the center and the region

When the prosecutor's office began its investigation against Journalist A., the federal liberal-oriented media immediately came to the defense of the journalist. In its publications, the media represented the journalist as a fighter for the truth and someone against whom criminal proceedings had been instituted because the journalist had criticized the governor. On the contrary, the city journalists described Journalist A. as a black public relations worker who used her online media as a handy tool to destroy the reputation of certain officials commissioned by higher officials. They also wrote that this journalistic media extorted money from officials and businesses – that is to say, for a fee, it wrote favorable articles or wrote nothing at all and, as Russian journalists say, put a "block on the negative" information about its clients. The investigation instigated against Journalist A. split journalists into two conflicting camps: the federal center (Moscow) – and the region. Not only the professional community of journalists but also the readers were faced with a dilemma regarding who to believe. On the one hand, one wanted to believe the

federal liberal-democratic media, which is supposed to be the independent and alternative media that fights for freedom of speech. It also employed well-known investigative journalists. On the other hand, the local journalists lived and worked side by side with Journalist A., thus, they knew more about the matter than those who lived in faraway Moscow.

To understand what happened and why the independent journalist came under investigation, I went to this city. Before the trip, I had formulated a working hypothesis for the study, taking the side of the federal liberal-democratic media. The hypothesis was advanced as follows:

H: The governor used the judiciary as a tool in the fight against independent Journalist A.

I conducted the expert inquiry with ten representatives of the media industry, the regional government and the city administration, and professional organizations, as well as with educators at the local university and civil society members. I met with journalists who worked with Journalist A. and who worked in other independent online media. What surprised me was the fact that all the respondents told me about the unethical practices of her media outlet. The local experts from these organizations were also distressed by the federal liberal media's bias toward Journalist A. Some in Moscow even compared her to the famous journalist and human rights activist Anna Politkovskaya, who was killed in the yard outside her house in 2006. The federal liberal media romanticized this story by showing its heroine, the independent journalist who took the side of the local entrepreneur in his conflict with the new governor. Journalist A. in fact led his election propaganda in her independent media and helped him win the election for mayor. Both (Journalist A and a new mayor) were positive heroes in this story based on the version put forward by the federal media. One Moscow journalist even wrote a book about the new mayor, calling him a local Robin Hood (Nazarets, 2014).

To consider the differing views, I used the data from my interviews and the opinions of Journalist A., which were taken from open sources, including recent publications. From taped interviews, which lasted from forty minutes to two hours, the interviewees' opinions are presented here.

Results: The experts' voices

In Regional government

The financial success of her media outlet was achieved through blackmail. Many clients paid them out of fear. Her representative came to the company and said that if you do not want to be vilified, make a contract with us for information services.

Depending on the size of the company, there was a set amount for payment. In 2006 to 2007, they were confident in their power and impunity. Now there is a criminal case against them [Expert 1].

In the City administration

The city became home to an information racket. This made it easier for journalists to establish their own online media and come to businessmen or to the authorities and say: "We are ready to write negatively about you but are willing not to, in exchange for a certain amount of money." We are now observing the trial of Journalist A., who was one of those who built this system of coercion to such contracts. The journalistic profession is popular in the city because everybody sees it as an opportunity to earn without working. Imagine the local media but with the monthly salary of a journalist being 600,000 rubles (15,000 EUR at the current exchange rate). This has led to an increase in the number of media outlets, but their influence has decreased dramatically [Expert 2].

In the NGO

Here the practice of information racketeering arose. This is a typical situation of extortion, when journalists come and say to you, "For [X] money, we will write positively about you or we will not write negatively about you." Some shout – her place is in prison, while others defend her (Journalist A) as a beacon of democracy and as one of the best journalists in Russia. Both extremes have little relation in reality and lead us away from the principal conversation – the quality of the present media [Expert 3].

In the Union of Journalists

Four years ago, we (The Union of Journalists – author's comment) dealt with similar complaints from two banks and one industrial enterprise that were being extorted by an Internet news agency. Journalist A attended a meeting about this and was interested in the story. I do not know which of these media outlets was the first to implement this financial business (extortion scheme –author's comment), but she (Journalist A. – author's comment) has reached such heights (in the techniques of extortion and profit – author's comment). Her case has divided journalists in the country, and much-respected journalists in Moscow have supported her. At the site of the Russian Union of Journalists, an appeal was made to the authorities and the judiciary in support of Journalist A. When it happened, our local chairman of the Union of Journalists called to the head of the Federal Union of Journalists in Moscow and asked why they did not ask the opinion of regional journalists who

clearly did not support her because they felt that she had brought down the ethical standards of the profession [Expert 4].

In the State news agency ITAR-TASS

In the West, these journalists are called the "yellow press," and they occupy their own niche. Maybe, these media do not engage in blackmail so openly in the West, but people do pay them off. How is one to survive the private media in the market, where officials are forcing advertisers to advertise in the state-owned media? The problem is not related to how these journalists earn; rather, the trouble is that they (the private media) want to be close to those in power and want to feed off the state. The bad thing is that these journalists have become role models for other journalists, they are paid hefty salaries [Expert 5].

Journalists' voices

In Journalist A.'s start-up

Our media has been a source of insider information about what is happening in government and business circles. Information service contracts are now nonexistent, although in the past, they were commonplace. Journalist A. suffered when she violated the generally accepted rules: The contract with the client requires a block on negative information, but she did not comply with this, and she published negative information and thus gained several enemies. Her logic was, why do I alone know about this? Everybody should know about this [R 1].

In other independent online media

There was one way to earn, and that was Black PR² with the aim of blackmail: it was an elementary scheme. Take a company that has money and fork out to pay journalists. Invent a negative story about it. The positive traits of the company (which is an object of journalistic blackmail –author's comment) are disappearing. Take all the negatives and issue them as honest information. Some companies

² Black PR – activities (PR) focused on the deterioration of the image of some object. The term "Black PR" is of Russian origins. The term appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s to describe the political and commercial information available through custom media publications and leaflets, paid informally. Often this term in Russia represents the spread of compromising information or negatively affects the image of a person or object.

say, "Remove the text, and we will pay you." Many are in this just to make money, and so they write positive texts, or as Journalist A. did, they write nothing. [R 3]

Interviewer: How many of these media in the city earned money through blackmail? 50 per cent?

I think about 99 per cent. How do you survive as a journalist and online news agency? The state media is somehow sponsored by the state and others ... no. [R 3]

Journalist A

About journalism

We write about what is interesting to us. We not only write but shape reality. This summer, for example, we painted the faces of the officials who are responsible for road maintenance around the pits and potholes. This is not journalism in its purest form. We are not passive witnesses but active participants (*Urals, drank, in prison*, 2012).

What makes me support R. (Robin Hood- author's comment)? For 13 years, on a daily basis, he has struggled with addiction, and not at the expense of the state, but giving his money. I know many people he helped, and I do not know whether he does the right thing or not, but I'm sure there is no other way (human rights activists and journalists accused his relief fund, "City Without Drugs," of using cruel and ineffective methods to treat drug addiction). Yes, he takes over the functions of the state, and I'm taking over the functions of the state! We do so not because of a good life, but vice versa, from an unfortunate (*Urals, drank, in prison*, 2012).

There are no objective texts; this is misleading. All journalism is subjective. Someone like you may be more subjective and someone less, and with this matter nothing can be done, and "there is need to do anything". Journalists are ordinary living people (*Urals, drank, in prison*, 2012).

About the business model

We have no subsidies, we are not *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*; we have to find the money ourselves in order to exist, to pay taxes, and to seek advertisers. But I have online media. Advertising in RuNet does not work. Banner advertising brings us about 30 per cent of our revenue. There are "information service contracts," which exist in all media, the so-called "contracts" with the authorities, with some companies, and even with some individuals. They secretly exist in all media (...) it is also in the federal mass media (...) This is a contract in which you promise the customer that you will not do something for him or that something will be done for him

(...) often it is not written anywhere that it is a commercial text done as advertising (...) such paid publications make up 20–30 per cent of all our publications (*Priezhai ko mne v turjmu*, 2013).

About ethics and freedom

It is easy to argue that contracts for information service are jeansa³ and that it is shameless to take money for publications! And what is better? For the stateowned media every month, there is a guarantee to receive millions of rubles from the government and dance to their tune? Or private media feed due to their closeness to the governor or the oligarch, serving the interests of his political masters? I would argue that in the current environment, an "information service contract" model is the lesser of two evils, as it grants a relatively large degree of freedom to the regional media compared to other models. Under this model, journalists are free to choose what to write about and are free to decide whether to be silent or to speak. And, most importantly, such a media model is very difficult to deprive of funding and destroy. It is very handy for the government when popular media are stuffed into the government and commercial holdings, because in these cases, the media is easy to control. A small private media outlet that survives through decentralized funding from a variety of partners is the only threat to the state's monopoly in the media market. This is a nightmare for the government but for me, it is the only hope to save at least some freedom of speech in the regional media (Blog post, 2013).

Court adjudications

In January 2014, Journalist A. was convicted. The District Court found her guilty of extorting money from local businessmen and for abuse of office. She was sentenced to two years of conditional imprisonment and was banned from working in journalism for these two years (Lesovskykh 2014). However, in May 2014, the Regional Court commuted this sentence and allowed Journalist A. to resume practicing journalism. Her online newspaper is as ambitious as before and makes the news not only throughout the region but also the country (*Court allowed*, 2014).

Jeansa is a paid story in the interests of the customer but presented as journalistic publication. As a fact it is corrupt article because facts are distorted or invented in the interests of the customer, who pays money or some services this journalist or newsroom. It is one way of earnings in Russian journalism since the 1990s (Gurnov, 2015).

Summary

The journalist's online media outlet started as a family project (Journalist A. and her husband). It became politically influential and economically successful, specializing in circulating exclusive information among the elite circles of politics and business. As a result, it became an elite media outlet in terms of its working contacts, news sources, and the income of its journalists (the deputy chief editor draws a monthly salary of about 15,000 EUR, while a reporter's monthly salary is about 6,500 EUR). The local independent politician head of the regional electoral headquarters of the famous oppositionist Alexei Navalny, argues that her journalist's start-up was never an opposition media, serving instead as the then-governor's agitation leaflet (Nehezhin, 2013). With the change of the governor in the region, the journalist's start-up came under the wing of a new governor when Journalist A. sold the controlling stake of her media outlet for 5 million US dollars to local businesses, which were affiliated with the new governor, who had been appointed by the Kremlin. Journalist A. and the governor became close friends. However, in conflict between the governor and the local entrepreneur (Robin Hood), who was running for mayor, Journalist A. supported R. In retaliation, the governor subsequently assigned the prosecutor's office to investigate complaints against Journalist A. that accumulated in the prosecutor's office. Financial inspections began in the journalistic media outlet and the trial of Journalist A. In response, she began a new start-up online to criticize the governor and to help R. to win the mayoral election. A new working-personal alliance began between Journalist A. and the next mayor. These alliances between the journalist and both politicians show that there was no border between independent online journalism and the privacy of the journalist. The journalistic startup was at the heart of the elite circle and was involved in the conflict between the elites.

The hypothesis that the governor used the courts as a tool in the fight against the independent online media was proven true, but with a caveat: This independent online media outlet was independent from society but not from the local elite into which it was integrated, and played its important role in political games. The journalist's media was on the side of the state and capital – not society. This suggests that in the given case there is no fundamental difference between the old traditional media embedded in the vertical of power⁴ and this

So-called in Russia, Putin's policies in connection with the abolition of gubernatorial elections and the Kremlin appointed regional leaders (governors). In the development of this initiative it is also proposed to appoint not only governors, but also, respectively, heads of district administrations and so on, all the way down. In this way this initiative

new independent online media created by the professional journalist. Figure 1 shows the position of this journalistic start-up in the structure of society. The arrow from civil society symbolizes a potential challenge to the triumvirate (State, Capital and Old and New media), which is still far from the interests of society.

Conclusion

Who won and who lost in this story? What does it reveal about the specifics of understanding and practice of media freedom in Russia?

For Journalist A., this story has a happy ending. She continues to run her new media outlet and to "shape reality" subjectively (in her opinion, objective journalism is impossible) as she sees fit. She plays the role of watchdog in journalism, but her perception of this role is idiosyncratic - to watch out for those officials and businesspersons with whom she, as a journalist, is not on friendly terms. But regarding those in government and business with whom she is friends, she collaborates and enters into contracts for information services, in fact making jeansa, in the interests of her clients. This is the most relevant way in her opinion to earn money for her media outlet and maintain the independence of journalism in the current conditions of Russia's non-free media. The readers themselves should be aware and understand that, where there is information, there is also disinformation and advertising presented as information. Her approach to the production of information is not unique but is rather quite common. Contracts for information services, which are made between media and the government, and media and business are common practices in almost all media. Under these contracts, journalists produce information in the interests of, and under orders from, their clients. These made-to-order publications were put on stream as a constant source of income for media outlets. Even Rossiiyskaya Gazeta had its fixed prices for similar publications. Their prices varied depending on the volume of the article and the location of the article in terms of the newspaper page (Fedotov, 2011: 16).

Such contracts for information services are a fact that is hidden from society done within the triumvirate: media, government, and business. It is at the heart of the evolution of the post-Soviet media system that combines two basic trends: commercialization and etatization. The state and capital buy journalists and their independent media, making these contracts with them. One might say that this has become a new legitimized business model in the nontransparent media economy. Gelman reminds us that the main strength of cementing the existing order of

of the President will be able to strengthen Russian statehood and to ensure its territorial integrity (Zaderei, 2015).

governance – vertical of power – is not associated with the threat of punishment but with positive incentives. He argues that, in a country in which rent extraction is the main goal, and the main content of public administration is to be part of the vertical of power, this is very profitable because this provides an opportunity for the personal enrichment of officials, enabling them to solve any problems related to various economic agents, etc. (Gelman, 2010: 7).

For the liberal press, the end of this story seems ambiguous. On the one hand, it is a happy ending because it helped to sway public opinion in favor of its heroine – Journalist A. On the other hand, it disappointed the readers because of its biased coverage. The readers were shown that media freedom is not the public domain. On the contrary, media freedom is about someone's wealth of power if it is the state-owned media, about journalists if it is the independent media, and about the oligarchy if it is the private media.

This case divided the professional community down the middle, including the younger and older generations of journalists, with older journalists condemning such non-ethical practices and younger journalists accepting the practices as a successful business model. The discussion of this case did not, and probably could not, happen when the self-regulation of journalists was on its last legs, personalized journalism triumphs offline and online, and the majority of journalists are tolerant of alternating illegal practices, such as extortion and *jeansa*. In his article about this case, a BBC journalist posed the following question: What is this independent journalism? His answer was the following– If it is *jeansa* (paid publications without any indication that they are advertising), but such a practice is prohibited by Russian media laws. Or independent journalism is extortion for the non-publication of critical articles? But in this case it is a criminal offense, punishable by up to 15 years in prison (Nehezin, 2013). But there is no consensus as to what it is; there is only approval or rejection among Russian journalists.

In trying to understand freedom in Russia, one might seek a more specific answer. In particular, sociologists note that the semantics of freedom in Russian society are significantly different from the liberal tradition of the West. For most, freedom means the "will" or ability to be one's own boss and to live without looking at external constraints. The ratio between those who hold such an understanding of freedom and the bearers of the liberal–legal consciousness over the years is almost 2:1, with no change in the proportion. The stability of this relationship suggests that it is one of the socio-cultural constants characterizing Russian society's specific characteristics on the scale of the so-called "long time" (ISRAS, 2011: 150–151).

Journalistic independent media is not always a prerequisite for democracy. As this case shows, it can be a part of the shadow economy and the hidden practices of violence and compulsion to make specific contracts for information services.

The free media can lower the principles of professional ethics and morals and does not carry any liability even to remain a role model to the younger journalists. Coercive practices based on threats and fear are not the exception in the society of authoritarian tradition, weak democracy, and high levels of corruption. The liberal democratic media in its subjectivity, based on its point of view on this story, differed little from the official media. This proves that the party press still triumphs in Russia (see Figure 1).

State Capital

Traditional Media

Civil Society

Figure 1: The journalistic startup's position in the structure of society

Source: Author.

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