

**Fighting Putin and the Kremlin's grip in neo-authoritarian Russia: the experience of liberal journalists**

**Abstract**

Russia is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists and the conflict with Ukraine and Russia's involvement in Syria present even further challenges for the future of Russian journalism. In addition to the financial pressures, physical attacks, abductions and harassment, liberal journalists now face an increasing threat to the democratising role they see themselves as playing. President Vladimir Putin's soaring popularity and the elaborate range of tactics used to suppress press freedom are forcing liberal media to rethink their mission(s) and identity(ies). This paper presents empirical evidence on the range of tactics used by Russian authorities as well as the coping strategies adopted by journalists. The study shows that some Russian media and journalists demonstrate a great degree of resilience in their efforts to expose wrongdoings and hold the powerful to account. The article questions the applicability of Western-centric normative media system theories because it shows that the breadth, depth, and mechanisms of control in modern-day Russia are very different from the ones used during Soviet times, and yet, Russian media and society do not appear to be on a linear journey from authoritarianism to democracy. The article presents the findings of a semi-ethnographic study of some of Russia's most influential liberal news outlets – *Novaya Gazeta*, *Radio Echo of Moscow* and *Radio Free Europe/Liberty*. The study was conducted in May 2014 in the midst of the conflict with Ukraine. It involved

observations of editorial meetings, documentary analysis and interviews with editors, deputy editors and journalists.

Keywords: liberal media, journalism, neo-authoritarianism, media systems, press freedom, Russia, Ukraine, Vladimir Putin

## **Introduction**

Russia is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists and the conflict with Ukraine and Russia's controversial role in Syria present even further challenges for the future of Russian journalism. Although Russia is not involved in an armed conflict within its territory, it has been ranked among the top 10 countries with the highest number of murdered journalists since 1992 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015; Azhgikhina, 2007). The country is classified as 'not free' by Freedom House.<sup>1</sup> President Vladimir Putin's tightening grip on Russian media includes a range of overt and covert practices of censorship, persecution and harassment of journalists who voice alternative views, and a great degree of self-censorship. In addition to the financial pressures, physical attacks, abductions and harassment, liberal journalists face an increasing threat to the democratising role they see themselves as playing. Freedom House (2015) states that 'Russia's occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine helped to drive an increase in propagandistic content' and 'tighter restrictions on dissenting views.' Only a few media outlets strive to voice critical concerns about the role of the state in this climate of propaganda and self-censorship but their efforts come at a price. Putin's soaring popularity and the elaborate range of tactics used to suppress press freedom are forcing liberal media to rethink their mission(s) and identity(ies). This study shows liberal journalists'

bravery and resilience in the face of multiple challenges. The article will focus on some of Russia's most influential liberal national news outlets – ‘the deadliest’ newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, ‘Russia’s last independent radio station’ *Radio Echo of Moscow (Ekho)* and US Congress-funded *Radio Free Europe/Liberty (Svoboda)*. The fieldwork was completed in May 2014 in the midst of the conflict with Ukraine. It involved observations of editorial meetings, documentary analysis and interviews with editors, deputy editors and journalists. Subsequent interviews were conducted at a time when Russia’s role on the world stage was becoming increasingly controversial. This paper presents empirical evidence on the main tactics used by Russian authorities as well as the coping strategies adopted by journalists. While events and developments in these outlets have attracted some patchy media coverage in the West, no known academic study provides an account of the recent challenges and pressures they face. Most studies about Russian media are based on textual analysis of newspaper articles (e.g. Heinrich & Tanaev, 2009; von Seth 2012) or discuss the role of state-run TV stations (e.g. Burrett, 2011; Oates, 2006) or the Internet (Oates, 2013). By contrast, this article offers a unique ethnographic insight into the daily pressures and challenges Russian liberal journalists face. It also questions the applicability of Western-centric normative media system theories by showing that ‘the breadth, depth, and mechanisms of control’ (Becker, 2014: 202) in modern-day Russia are different from the ones used during Soviet times, and yet, Russian media and society do not appear to be on a linear journey from authoritarianism to democracy. While a number of scholars, NGOs and activists have described the challenges Russian media face, very few, if any, studies provide journalists’ first-hand accounts or ethnographic observations of the difficulties experienced by media critical of the regime.

## **Russian media's thorny road to democratisation**

Russia is not involved in an armed conflict within its territory and yet the number of murdered journalists is very high. It has been ranked among the top 10 countries with the highest number of murdered journalists since 1992 and has a poor impunity record (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015). Key reasons are 'the lack of political will to investigate the murders' and the 'lack of coordination and cooperation' between editorial offices and the authorities (Azhgikhina, 2007: 1248). *Novaya Gazeta* is labelled as the deadliest newspaper with six murders, including the assassination of the famous investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya on Putin's birthday in 2006. The evidence suggests that Politkovskaya's murder was related to her investigations about Chechnya. Nonetheless, the President's reaction to her death was indicative of his attitude to liberal media. He said: 'Her death caused more damage to the country than her articles' (Azhgikhina, 2007: 1259).

Russian media's road to democratisation has not only been thorny but also appears to have taken a turn for the worse. Although 'freedom of speech was the first and perhaps the only real achievement of perestroika', it was later 'shaken, and then lost' (Azhgikhina, 2007: 1249). The Kremlin has a tight grip on most broadcast media, especially TV. The main national TV networks are under state control and the state 'has also found "administrative means" to get a grip on the coverage' of private stations, so 'all TV stations now carefully adhere to the official line, and hear very quickly from the Kremlin if they wander off message' (Brenton, 2011: 35). The press has 'more latitude, largely because they are seen as less important' and while 'there is no formal censorship, Kremlin "guidance" is abundantly available' (Brenton, 2011: 35). Most newspapers are owned by major companies such as the state gas giant Gazprom, which are 'heavily dependent on

their links with the Kremlin for their day-to-day activities, and will be careful that their journalistic protégés do not endanger those links' (Brenton, 2011, 36). The Kremlin also notoriously closed down or hacked a few opposition websites recently. Despite much speculation about the potential role of the Russian Internet (Runet), the title of Oates's (2013) book tellingly describes its current state: *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere*. While Runet provides a platform for alternative voices, it gives 'faint hope for online mobilization in Russia' (Oates, 2017).

In this environment of censorship and self-censorship, only a few media strive to remain independent from state influence and voice critical concerns about the authorities. It is, therefore, very important to explore the role of influential liberal media. *Novaya Gazeta* is famous for its investigations of corruption practices and strong criticism of Putin and the Kremlin. Brenton (2011) argues that it is 'the most effective of the opposition newspapers' (p. 37). Brown (2009, 48) claims it is 'the most independent and boldly critical of Moscow newspapers'. Similarly, *Ekho* is given as an example of the only 'free radio station' that is 'allowed to survive as a glorious reminder of the openness and disputatiousness that Russian broadcasting enjoyed at its zenith' (Brenton, 2011: 35). What makes the radio 'unique' is its editorial independence and its 'history of antagonistic relations with Kremlin rulers' (Baysha, 2014). Putin was quoted as saying to the editor-in-chief Alexey Venediktov: 'You pour diarrhoea over me day and night' (Baysha, 2014). Baysha (2014) also argues that *Ekho's* independence 'appears paradoxical when one considers that Echo is owned by Gazprom'. A German journalist explains: 1. 'The Kremlin can point to Echo whenever countries in the West criticize press freedoms in Russia.' 2. 'Even as the station is held in high regard by the country's intelligentsia, it has little influence over the voting

masses' (Baysha, 2014). Similar claims are made about *Novaya Gazeta* and *Svoboda*. From broadcasting illegally during communism, the US-funded radio station is now allowed to officially operate – their headquarters are still in Prague but they have a big office in the centre of Moscow. *Svoboda* played an important ideological role during the Cold War. Puddington (2000: ix) writes that it 'was arguably the most influential politically oriented international radio station in history'. While the radio station withdrew its operations from most East European countries, Russia remains a priority. Despite its clear ideological agenda, it appeared to have played a democratizing role during communism (Johnson, 2010).

Free media are indeed a backbone of any democracy so a country's journey to democracy cannot be complete without the development of strong independent media. A key question this paper addresses is: to what extent do Russian authorities allow journalists who strive towards editorial independence from the state to freely operate and what range of techniques do they use? A follow-up question is: what coping strategies do journalists resort to? Although they share similar values, the three media outlets differ significantly in some aspects – especially in terms of ownership and funding. The inclusion of different media will allow us to better capture the range of mechanisms of media control and management and the respective coping techniques.

### **Towards a conceptualization of the Russian media system**

Although there have been a few notable attempts towards operationalization of the Russian media system (de Smaele, 1999, 2009; Koltsova, 2006; Becker, 2014; Oates, 2006; 2013; Vartanova, 2012), as Rollberg (2014: 175) argues, it is very hard, 'if not impossible to arrive at a lasting analytical consensus about the post-Soviet media

sphere', because 'media in post-Soviet societies are a moving target, influenced by technological, geopolitical, and cultural developments'. This difficulty is in large part due to the fact that researchers often use Western concepts and theories (Koltsova, 2006). The 'undifferentiated use' of terms such as censorship, self-censorship and transition is problematic because of two key reasons (Rollberg, 2014). First, they reinforce the Cold War dichotomy between the East and the West, democratic countries and totalitarian regimes (Burrett, 2011; Rollberg, 2014). This reinforcement is based on the assumption that after 1989/1990 Russian society and media have been in a period of transition from communism/ authoritarianism to democracy (Burrett, 2011; Rollberg, 2014). Even if this was indeed the case during and shortly after the perestroika and glasnost years, recent developments show this is hardly the case anymore. Both Koltsova (2006) and Oates (2013) question the extent to which Russian society and media were ever on a linear journey towards democratization. Koltsova (2006) claims that the Russian experience demonstrates that 'the authoritarianism-democracy axis is not the only one along which societies can change' (p. 5). She proposes a move away from normative theories of democracy to an agency-focused approach whereby 'the struggle between different power centres' is investigated in more depth by focusing on 'power agents, resources, strategies and rules' (Koltsova, 2006: 5-6, 227).

Second, the terminology is problematic because 'the exact meaning of these notions can no longer be "taken for granted"' since they 'originated from totalitarian society models"' (Rollberg, 2014: 176). Rollberg (2014) demonstrates that none of Siebert et al.'s (1956) four theories of the press fully operationalises the situation in Russia. Although on the surface it appears that post-Soviet media have undergone an evolution from a Social Responsibility model to an Authoritarian model in the early 2000s, 'even in the most liberal years of glasnost,

Soviet media retained essential features of what Siebert called 'the Soviet model,' and even in the most intrusive years of the Putin presidency (2002-2003, after 2012), the Authoritarian model contains libertarian and consumer-driven features' (Rollberg, 2014: 175). Oates (2013: 12) adds that Siebert et al.'s (1956) Soviet model explained well how the media worked in Soviet times but even during the glasnost years, the media 'failed to transform itself from a platform for political players to a voice of the citizens.' While diversity developed, 'the idea of the media as objective or balanced has never been widely adopted' (Oates, 2013: 12).

This suggests that developments in Russia should not be interpreted through Western lenses and with existing (predominantly normative) Western theories and concepts. Instead, commentators (Becker, 2014; Pomerantsev, 2014) claim that Russia has embarked on a slightly different journey. Koltsova's (2006) power-focused model goes some way towards explaining who the key actors in the process are. Becker (2014: 191) concludes that Russia has 'adopted a neo-authoritarian media system that has more in common with similar non-democratic systems around the world than with the Soviet system'. Similarly, Pomerantsev (2014: 42) argues that 'this isn't a country in transition but some form of postmodern dictatorship that uses the language and institutions of democratic capitalism for authoritarian ends'. de Smaele (1999: 186) says that due to its unique geographical position and the relevant cultural implications, the Russian model might be interpreted as a Eurasian model. However, in later work she (de Smaele, 2009) suggests that although the Russian media model cannot be classified under any existing models, it is 'within reach' of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) Polarised Pluralist Model. Vartanova (2012: 140-142) also writes of a 'synergy of Western and Asian elements' and labels the Russian media system as 'statist



commercialized' because of the centrality of the state and the growing commercialisation.

A few notable features of the contemporary Russian media system are of relevance: 1. The types of control and the role of ideology. 2. The role of journalists and audiences' expectations. The role of ideology significantly diminished in the post-Soviet years and 'sanctioned diversity' was allowed, namely the ruling elite tolerated the existence of critical press content (Becker, 2004: 55). Overall, the types of control in modern-day Russia are very different from the Soviet era (Becker, 2014). While journalists have much more freedom to 'speak out against the state or political leadership in some media...the center of political power has employed a wider array of techniques to gradually reclaim control' (Becker, 2014: 202). Moreover, this system of control is very 'chaotic' so it is not always clear what the consequences of speaking out will be, which leads to an overall uncertainty that 'creates significant disincentives for journalists to challenge the state or press the limits of what it (or anxious owners) will tolerate' (Becker, 2014: 202). This 'institutionalized uncertainty' is coupled up with market pressures, which did not exist during communism (Becker, 2014: 202). This study presents empirical evidence on the controls and restrictions that Russian liberal journalists face and it investigates the extent to which Becker (2014) is right in claiming that 'the breadth, depth, and mechanisms of control' (p. 202) are different. However, it is important to recognize that the state continues to play a key role in the suppression of press freedom, which precludes the potential for drawing meaningful parallels with democratic countries. In Becker's (2014: 203) view, 'there may be a variety of sources of power, but the state retains the greatest potential to encroach upon media autonomy, limit pluralism, unleash violence, and turn the media into a tool of

political manipulation'. This places journalists and citizens in 'a disadvantageous position' (Becker, 2014: 203).

Having said that, Kolstova (2006) advises against viewing media representatives as innocent victims at the hands of the state because they are 'no less power maximizers than anybody else'. Oates (2013: 12) argues that 'all segments of Russian society, from politicians to the public to the journalists themselves, perceive the mass media as a political player rather than as a watchdog that can provide a check on political power for the interest of citizens.' She claims that Russia has never been 'a developing democracy', because it has not developed genuine democratic institutions nor a fourth estate in the media (Oates, 2013: 13). Oates's (2006; 2013) and Kolstova (2006)'s studies suggest the majority of journalists do not strive to be watchdogs and their attitude has been 'most destructive' (Oates, 2006: 192). Similarly, Schimpfossel and Yablokov (2014: 295) show that those TV journalists 'who are involved in the direct promotion of Kremlin positions usually have consciously and deliberately chosen to do so.' This article also reveals whether liberal journalists see themselves as political players.

## **Methods**

This is a qualitative study based on 20 long interviews with journalists, editors and deputy editors, ethnographic observations of editorial meetings and documentary analysis. Most of the fieldwork was completed in Moscow in May 2014 but interviews were conducted before and after that as well. All interviews were fully transcribed and thematically analysed, namely 'the data are read for analytical themes' (Fielding, 2001: 159). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is one of the most flexible and widely-used qualitative methods. They praise the method for its theoretical freedom and the fact that it

provides 'a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 78). A grounded theory approach - the constant bottom-up comparison method - was adopted (Glaser 1965, Dye et al., 2000). The analysis consisted of 'at least two phases: initial and focused coding' (Charmaz, 2006: 42). In the first stage, 'fragments of data – words, lines, segments, and incidents' were examined 'closely for their analytical import' (Charmaz, 2006: 42). After the initial identification of emerging themes, decisions were made 'about which initial codes make the most analytical sense to categorise' the 'data incisively and completely' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). These initial themes were therefore further refined and categorized under broader categories.

The three media outlets were chosen because they are among the most prominent and influential liberal media in Russia. Access was easily arranged to *Novaya Gazeta* and *Svoboda* but it was more difficult to get access to *Ekho*. I was allowed to interview any journalists of my choice in *Novaya Gazeta* and *Svoboda* and to attend all meetings (formal and informal), but the editor-in-chief of *Ekho* pre-arranged all interviews for me and I was not allowed to freely move in the building. I aimed for a theoretical sample with both senior and junior journalists and at least one editor or deputy editor in each medium. My research was constrained by time and staff availability but I achieved a fairly varied sample at *Novaya Gazeta* and *Radio Liberty*. Given the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study, I was not aiming for representativeness. Moreover, the empirical work was conducted at an eventful time, namely at the peak of the conflict in Ukraine, so while the interviews covered a range of general questions, the coverage of Ukraine dominated the agenda of the meetings observed. Participants were given the option to remain anonymous but most of them (bar one) waived their anonymity (or in fact strongly objected against it). Some of the interviews were conducted in

English and some in Russian. The original wording of the interviews conducted in English has been preserved. The project received ethical approval both from my institution and from the Moscow Lomonosov State University.

### **Tactics used to suppress liberal media**

The evidence suggest that journalists are not allowed to freely operate in the country and three main types of tactics are used to suppress their work: business pressures, threats and attacks, and legal measures.

#### *Business pressures*

The business pressures are either ownership-related or market-related, including pressure on advertisers. The ownership-related pressures apply to *Novaya Gazeta* and *Ekho* because the US Congress funds *Svoboda*. *Novaya Gazeta* was founded by a group of journalists and the majority shares (51%) are in the hands of the editorial staff (Prusenkova, 2014, personal communication). Russian oligarch Alexander Lebedev, who also owns *The Independent* and *The London Evening Standard*, is a main shareholder (39%). Former President Mikhail Gorbachev owns the final 10%.

At the time of fieldwork most journalists reported that Lebedev had announced he would no longer fund the paper after his troubles with the authorities. The Head of Press Service Nadezhda Prusenkova (2014, personal communication) explained that Lebedev's bank was embroiled in a corruption scandal involving the Federal Service Bureau (previously KGB): 'It was a big scandal and he lost his business. It was a story of revenge on the side of the secret service'. Lebedev is a former KGB agent.

Lebedev announced in a press interview that he would remain a shareholder, but he would stop 'bankrolling' the paper because 'of the expense and the strain'. He explained to *The Times* (2015) he wanted 'some respite', 'some time with the kids' and that he had been 'left alone' after withdrawing his financial support. This withdrawal exacerbated the newspaper's financial situation and led to an unprecedented announcement by its editor that they might have to stop issuing the print edition.

Prusenkova (2014, personal communication) recalled a time when Lebedev 'saved' the newspaper. 'He supported us at a time when we were on the ground. He saved us. He really saved us.' The other shareholder – Gorbachev – has also financially helped them on a few occasions. Journalists recalled how he paid their salaries and bought new computers. However, Gorbachev's health condition had deteriorated and he does not currently support the newspaper.

The financial and personal woes of the newspaper owners are not the only problem. A key contributing factor is the lack of advertising. Prusenkova showed me the most recent edition with only one advertisement in it. She claimed they could not attract any advertising because they were 'independent.' The situation was different during Dmitry Medvedev's Presidency. The first interview he gave as President was for *Novaya Gazeta* and big business saw this 'as a sign': 'There are always signs and after this sign we had many, many commercials' (Prusenkova, 2014, personal communication). By contrast, when Putin embarked on his second term as President, he immediately convened a meeting with 'big business representatives.' 'They were told there were a few media they are not allowed to advertise in. And we were at the important first place – always first place', Prusenkova said. She gave an example of a drinks' company they had

signed a one-year contract with. After the meeting with Putin, the company decided to withdraw any future advertisements without asking for a refund. Prusenkova (2014, personal communication) claimed most companies 'want a positive context' and 'fear to connect with us'.

*Ekho's* story is not dissimilar. The radio station was also founded by journalists and has long been renowned for giving voice to critical views about Putin and the Kremlin. The majority shares were eventually bought by Gazprom-Media and ever since numerous attempts have been made to tone down any critical coverage. The remaining shares are collectively owned by the editorial staff. The last few years have been especially turbulent. The long-serving CEO (since 1992) Yuri Fedutinov was replaced in 2014 by Yekaterina Pavlova – a journalist who had previously worked for the state *Voice of Russia* radio and was allegedly close to the Kremlin (BBC News 2014). *Ekho's* editor-in-chief called the decision 'unjust' and 'totally political'. Pavlova herself resigned in October 2014 and in December 2014 was replaced by Mikhail Demin – the former PR director of the Sochi Olympic Games Organizing Committee. Demin was dismissed in March 2015 and replaced by Pavlova. This 'show' (as the editor-in-chief called it) was only the tip of the iceberg in the long-running attempts to influence editorial policy. Deputy Editor-in-chief Tatyana Felgengauer (2014, personal communication) explained:

I know too well how hard it is for us to maintain our positions. There are constant attempts to control us. The example with the new CEO is a case in point. Nobody explained to us why this was necessary. The pressures are constantly there. That's the process of monopolisation and the attempts to fully control the mass media. It's not a very recent process but it's much more pronounced and visible.

Most attempts have been unsuccessful because the editor-in-chief has been holding the fort due to a clever clause in the radio's constitution that stipulates that journalists elect their editor.

One incident that illustrates the tension between the editor-in-chief and Gazprom-Media was the CEO's dismissal of presenter Alexander Plushev in November 2014 for posting an 'offensive' tweet about the death of the son of Putin's chief of staff. The editor protested against the decision. This led to a heated meeting between Mikhail Lesin, chairman of the board of Gazprom-Media and *Ekho's* editorial staff at which Lesin admitted that he did not communicate well with the editor (*The Interpreter*, 2014).

Another issue that journalists at *Novaya Gazeta* and *Ekho* mentioned was low pay. This was more of an issue for *Novaya Gazeta's* journalists where all interviewees said their salaries were very low and they often did not receive their salaries or cash advance on time. In the interviews, most journalists put on a brave face and claimed this was not a problem because: 'It's not only job, it's a way of life. It's a way of thinking' (Prusenkova, 2014, personal communication). A reporter summed up the prevalent sentiment: 'The salaries here are not as high as in many other newspapers but that's in a way a compensation for the satisfaction we feel that we cannot feel in other places.' Some of the informal conversations revealed a slightly different story. A young reporter was concerned he had not been paid on time. He shared an anecdote with his colleague that illustrated the gravity of the situation. He had gone shopping with his son the previous day and had been so careful not to exceed his budget that when his son grabbed a chocolate spread at the counter, he had to 'break his heart'. 'I realised I did not have enough money to pay for it. In fact, I did not have any money and if they don't pay me my cash advance today, I will remain penniless.'

### *Threats and attacks*

All journalists in my sample have either received threats and/or have been physically attacked or kidnapped. *Novaya Gazeta's* journalists have experienced the most brutal attacks. The editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov argued that all murders and physical attacks were linked to investigations on three topics: corruption in the special services, the North Caucasus and neo-Nazis. 'These are the most dangerous topics' (Muratov, 2014, personal communication). The most high-profile murder was of Anna Politkovskaya.

After the death of Anna Politkovskaya I wanted to close down the newspaper because it was dangerous for the journalists who worked in it. The editorial collegiate and the shareholders (Gorbachev and Lebedev) did not agree. I had to fulfill my contractual obligations although I didn't feel like it. Journalists still experience dangers but at least in the last four years we haven't lost any lives so it's better in that respect. (Muratov, 2014, personal communication)

Muratov also told me that his deputy editor Sergey Sokolov (who oversees the investigations' department) was recently robbed and brutally attacked, resulting in a head injury. The attack was linked to his professional activities because the thieves stole important files from him.

I personally witnessed some of the dangers journalists face. My first interviews were cancelled because one of *Novaya Gazeta's* Ukrainian correspondents was kidnapped the night before.

When they kidnapped our colleague on Monday, the first thing we did is to start negotiating with his abductors. We were ready; I flew to Kiev



prepared to pay a ransom for him because I wanted to save his life. When terrorists are concerned, if you don't pay, they will kill him (Muratov, 2014, personal communication).

He had not yet reached the airport when news came that the abductors had released the journalist. Muratov used the services of 'a mediator' from a political party to secure the release. The kidnapped journalist Pavel Kanygin (2014) later told his story in an article. He was taken to a basement where 14 other captives (five journalists) were kept by militants. His abductors demanded a ransom of ca. 30 000 USD. 'This is not a ransom, it's your contribution into our war', they told him. Prior to that he was beaten by a crowd of 50 people who accused him of being a spy and said this was 'revenge for our sons who were dying for freedom.'

Special correspondent Irina Gordienko was also abducted by local police (as she found out later) in 2008:

I didn't know where I was. They didn't tell me. I showed them my press card but they didn't leave me and they kidnapped me. They kept me for 24 hours. I spend a lot of time in the Caucasus. Russian law does not really work there. There is no legitimacy. It's dangerous because local forces and local police consider themselves to be above the law (Gordienko, 2014, personal communication).

When working in the North Caucasus she was frequently being followed or her phone was tapped. She is also used to receiving threatening emails. Similarly, *Ekho's* presenter Alexander Plushev (2014, personal communication) recalled how he was persecuted by a youth group – most likely the pro-Putin movement Nashi. 'They knew where I lived but they also disturbed me on the phone. They tried to damage my car. The most hilarious thing they did was gluing a toilet

brush to the roof of my car. And the glue was very good so I couldn't really do anything about it.' Plushev is also used to receiving threatening and/or insulting anti-Semitic notes: 'Echo of Moscow is somehow connected with the Jews in their mentality.'

*Svoboda's* news section editor Eugenia Nazarets (2014, personal communication) also remembered how during a meeting of Putin's party as soon as party members realised she worked for *Radio Liberty*, they started pushing her out. 'I wasn't hurt but it was dangerous. I just decided not to fight with them and stepped out.'

Similarly, Prusenkova (2014, personal communication) had experienced 'unpleasant' threats such as receiving a dead rat with a big knife or a real donkey's ears. Her car was once painted with swastika:

I have no fear. Maybe I'm not a normal common person. We are not suicidal, we are not crazy adrenaline maniacs. We are common people but my murdered colleagues did something exact and painful for society. This was the only way. If you can be killed because you do something very important, then it's very needed.

Even journalists who have not been physically attacked or harassed said that Russia was a dangerous country. 'You just cannot feel safe. You just don't have the feeling that the government is going to help you, to care about you. You can only rely on civil society – your friends, your colleagues, people you know' (Kurachyova, 2014, personal communication). All journalists reported they had either received threatening emails or letters or knew colleagues who had – from 'We will kill you' (Krotov, 2014, personal communication) to 'Go back to Israel. Russia for Russian people' (Plushev & Nasarets, 2014, personal communication).

## *Legal measures*

A range of legal and administrative measures also hinder journalists' work. While spared most of the business and harassment pressures, *Svoboda* had been at the receiving end of legal and administrative measures. They broadcast only on shortwaves and online. Editor at large Mark Krotov (2014, personal communication) said: 'It's practically impossible to catch these radio waves in Moscow but it's a bit better in the countryside where there are no buildings'. 10 years ago *Svoboda* (2015) broadcasted on AM and FM waves via almost 30 local affiliates but 'virtually all have stopped carrying its programmes as a result of political pressure'.

The future of *Svoboda* is uncertain after a new law was passed requiring media companies to cut their non-Russian ownership to 20% by 2016, which initially prompted CNN to announce that it would stop broadcasting in Russia. Journalists were unclear how this new law would affect them or whether they would be allowed to broadcast legally from Russia. Bureau chief Leonid Velekhov (2014, personal communication) said: 'I don't know what will happen. I hope that this won't happen. This relation is changing but it's changing in a bad way.' Nazarets (2014, personal communication) was worried about the new law and her mother feared she might have to move abroad. Krotov (personal communication, May 14, 2014) summed up the concerns:

We are not Russian media. We are a branch of American media. That's why this law is not about us. That's why we cannot get waves. Now the question is different – can we at least have an office in Moscow and will our website be blocked? That's what we are worried about now. If Putin goes further, if he tries to gain control over all Ukraine or other

Soviet republics, if he begins a real war, then who knows what will happen to us. Of course, if the situation deteriorates, I don't think we will have a possibility to work here in the centre of Moscow.

Even if *Svoboda* finds a legal loophole, another bill passed by the Russian Duma seriously threatens its future. It bans 'undesirable' foreign/international organizations defined as any organisation that 'presents a threat to the defensive capabilities or security of the state, to the public order, or to the health of the population.' Human rights activists claim this law would affect NGOs and commercial organisations, including *Svoboda*.

Moreover, the Russian state upped its efforts to tone down any critical coverage of their role in Ukraine. Both *Ekho* and *Novaya Gazeta* were served with warnings that their coverage was against the law. Thus, in November 2014 (Venediktov) the Russian telecom regulator Roskomnadzor warned *Ekho* that: 'Information is contained in the given programme which justifies the practice of war crimes.' The programme was hosted by presenter Alexander Plushev. His guests were two journalists who had eye witnessed the fighting for Donetsk airport. Roskomnadzor requested the transcript to be removed from the website and threatened to close down the website.

### **Coping strategies – editors as 'umbrellas'**

The outline of the challenges alluded to some coping strategies. First, both *Novaya Gazeta* and *Ekho* were founded by journalists and clever clauses in their constitutions hinder potential censorship attempts. Journalists are also shareholders – *Novaya Gazeta*'s staff holds the majority shares while the journalists in *Ekho* elect their editor-in-chief. Thus, the numerous attempts by the majority shareholder Gazprom-Media to tone down any critical coverage

have been largely futile because of the editor's resistance. In fact, in both organisations the editors play a key role.

We have a really well-organised system whereby all these {interference} contacts are guided to the chief editor. What happens with them, quite frankly I don't know. If anybody ever tells me how I should do my job, I always say: Look, we have an editor-in-chief, please contact him. Anyone in this radio station will tell you the same thing. We are under an umbrella and the umbrella is Alexey Venediktov. What is happening with the umbrella – we don't know, no one tells us. I've worked here for 20 years and my 20-year experience has proven I can rely on him (Plushev, 2014, personal communication).

The deputy editor-in-chief confirmed that Venediktov was 'the personal protection of our radio station' (Felgengauer, 2014, personal communication).

Venediktov tweets regularly any plans discussed during editorial meetings (Plushev, 2014, personal communication), which some journalists find 'annoying' but they accept the rationale – it is yet another way of pre-empting censorship attempts particularly on controversial issues. *Novaya Gazeta's* editor Dmitry Muratov explained this was the most dangerous period for journalists – prior to publication/broadcast while the journalists were still working on their investigations.

Similarly, all participants at *Novaya Gazeta* said they always turned to their editor when in trouble because they felt 'protected' by him. Most claimed it was 'pointless' to contact the police because the situation might become 'worse' if they got involved – as Gordienko (2014, personal communication) put it, they 'can actually do nothing about it and probably won't do anything anyway.'

Journalists often tried solving their problems by contacting directly the people

who had threatened them. 'The best way is to try to contact these people to find where the threats are coming from: solve it eye-to-eye or find some connections in the Interior Ministry' (Gordienko, 2014, personal communication). Gordienko gave specific examples of cases when she had received threats and had tried to ascertain what the source of the threat was and what exactly they wanted from her. Using informal connections is indeed a key approach also evidenced by the use of a mediator in the abduction case I witnessed. *Novaya Gazeta's* editor is particularly experienced and he lost no time in this case. Phone calls were apparently made in the early hours and he travelled to Ukraine himself a few hours later in an attempt to resolve the issue swiftly. Other strategies included using pseudonyms when writing about the North Caucasus or not showing their press cards at some events or in some regions.

As far as their financial problems are concerned, some journalists looked for individual solutions. Plushev wrote technology articles for magazines or Internet editions or hosted social events or conferences. He did not see this as a potential conflict of interests: 'We are allowed to do that. Conflict of interests and independence of the work of my colleagues is judged by our attitude on air' (Plushev, 2014, personal communication). Other journalists explained that this was a common practice indeed.

## **Conclusion**

Liberal journalists in Russia experience a range of issues and challenges, which are overtly or covertly orchestrated or supported by the state: from physical attacks and murders that go unpunished to a range of financial pressures and laws that limit or endanger their activities. In some respects, a radio station such as *Svoboda* is in a more precarious position now than during communism.

Although officially allowed to broadcast in Russia, journalists are very limited – they broadcast on shortwaves and online only, they compete against a range of other liberal media that Russians more readily identify with because they are ‘Russian’, not ‘American’, and new laws threaten their future. Moreover, a lot of Russians see them as the ‘voice of the enemy’ (Kurachyova, 2014, personal communication). Nazarets (2014, personal communication) summed up:

Many people and even official organizations in Russia take us not as enemies but as something that Russia doesn’t need at all. We sometimes cannot do something as journalists because we are *Radio Liberty* journalists. Are we independent? Maybe yes. But our possibility to do more is limited by Russian life, Russian authorities, Russian laws and the relationship between Radio Liberty and the Russian authorities.

Other journalists at the radio station revealed that a lot had changed because they had been undergoing a process of ‘rebranding.’ The radio’s mission was much clearer during communism – its purpose was to promote democratic/Western values in countries where a free press was banned or not fully established. The bureau chief acknowledged the identity crisis: ‘Radio Svoboda was a very important instrument in Soviet times. Somebody even said that they had the same number of listeners as the most widely read newspaper Pravda. However, post-Soviet times their role changed. They had to look for a new role, a new place’ (Velekhov, 2014, personal communication). Putin’s second term presented further opportunities for the rebranding of *Svoboda*: ‘As Russia witnesses increasing control of the media by state authorities, Radio Svoboda has become a key forum for those who lack access to other means of free expression’ (Radio Svoboda, 2015).

*Novaya Gazeta* and *Ekho* also experience similar issues – *Ekho*'s editorial independence is constantly undermined by their majority shareholders and *Novaya Gazeta*'s financial plight threatens its future. Covering Ukraine in an objective way is especially challenging because they are often accused of not being 'patriotic' or being 'traitors'.

Liberal media are not really allowed to flourish and the fact they are permitted to legally operate does not mean that their job is easy. 'The authorities need us. We are still alive because when someone blames Russia that there is no freedom of speech, they can answer: Look, *Novaya Gazeta*. We are like a flag of independent media', *Novaya Gazeta*'s PR Prusenkova (2014, personal communication) said. This is only half the story. As *Ekho*'s deputy editor-in-chief put it, 'They don't just keep us for pleasure. There are constant attempts to control us.' Journalists give one main reason: their target audience is not ordinary Russians, it's liberal-minded people and decision-makers. Exposing some of the ulcers of society such as the widely-spread corruption in the regions, Kremlin's propaganda techniques and Russia's involvement in Ukraine is something the authorities want to prevent without explicitly banning it.

The increased attempts to tone down or stifle any critical coverage clearly indicate that these news outlets have a significant role to play in the process of democratisation. The Russian journalists in my sample showed an incredible degree of resilience in the face of ongoing challenges and pressures as well as the generally low interest in and support for what they do by the general public. This is a very important finding, because it suggests that there is at least a small group of liberal journalists who practice the kind of ideal journalism Western journalists pay lip service to – in the public interest with the aim of holding the powerful to account. It might be indeed the case that the majority of Russian journalists are not



powerless victims at the hands of the state but willing participants (Koltsova, 2006; Oates, 2013; Schimpfossel & Yablokov, 2014), but this study presents new academic evidence that suggests that this does not apply to all journalists. The journalists in my sample are members of a 'family' of liberal journalists who are prepared to risk their lives and/or accept a much lower standard of living than their colleagues working for state TV stations in the name of democracy. These journalists appear to have endorsed and internalized the principles of Russian democratic journalism whose seeds had been planted during the glasnost and perestroika years (Azhgikhina, 2007). Their role in that respect is different from Western journalists, because while most Western countries are established democracies, Russia is not, and those journalists are not detached watchdogs – they are 'fighting' for change (Oates, 2013). The use of the word family is not incidental. The majority of my interviewees in *Novaya Gazeta* and *Radio Ekho Moskvy* said not only that they knew their colleagues in other liberal media very well but in some cases their partners and/or extended family members were also journalists and understood the dangers well. The normalization of danger and the resilience techniques journalists resort to will be further investigated in future work (Anonymous).

This study made another important contribution by providing an ethnographic insight into some techniques used to control media and journalists' coping strategies. The findings demonstrate that the 'breadth, depth and mechanisms' (Becker, 2014: 202) of control in post-Soviet times are indeed different from Soviet times. While some of the challenges journalists experience are not directly orchestrated by the state, the state's inability and unwillingness to change key aspects of the political and judicial system contribute to the dire state of freedom of expression. The lack of 'heavy-handed' and 'well-orchestrated' (Becker, 2014: 202) ideological control does not make the working conditions of journalists

any easier but it at least provides some opportunities for them to ‘speak out’ and to contribute to the development of democracy. All journalists interviewed do indeed see themselves more as political actors than as detached watchdogs (Oates, 2013), because although they all define themselves as ‘independent’, they are clearly on a mission to improve accountability and democratize Russian society. However, they strongly objected to any claims that they were serving the interests of ‘the enemy’ (i.e. the USA) or indeed oppositional forces in Russia.

Further research as an outcome of this project will delve deeper into journalists’ role conceptions and the identity battles they face. This study was mainly of an exploratory empirical nature so it will also be worth developing a fully-fledged theoretical neo-authoritarian model to explain the situation in Russia and similar contexts. This study suggests that we do indeed appear to be witnessing ‘the emerging of an indigenous Russian (Eurasian?) media system instead of the simple “westification” or “Europeanization” of the Russian media system’ (de Smaele, 1999) but whether what we are witnessing in Russia is unique or similar to other neo-authoritarian contexts, as Becker (2004) claims, should be a subject of further research. As expected, rank-and-file journalists did not report direct Soviet-style interference by the state, but a range of commercial, legal and paralegal measures and threats which impeded their work. These threats are much more direct and wide-ranging since Putin’s return to the Presidency, and even more so after the conflict with Ukraine started. Russia’s importance cannot be underestimated because as Becker (2014: 206) points out, in many respects the Russian state ‘sets an example for new authoritarians everywhere’. The evidence so far suggests that despite the tightening grip on Russian media, it is unlikely that we will witness a full reversal from a statist commercialized neo-authoritarian model (Vartanova, 2012; Becker, 2014) to a Soviet-style totalitarian one. One question that

this paper cannot fully address is: Is Becker (2014) right in arguing that one of the main differences between the two models is the lack of ‘all-encompassing’ ideology underpinning the state’s approach to media management and control in post-Soviet Russia? While Russia’s current media system resembles the situation in some of its neighbouring countries or indeed in other Asian countries, it is hard to say based whether Russia will indeed lead the way in the establishment of a new media model or indeed a new ideology in the post-truth age? These questions cannot be answered until a full investigation is conducted into the media systems of Russia and similar contexts – a task beyond the scope of this study.

## Notes

1. Freedom House labels itself as ‘an independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world’. Some of its biggest donors are the US Department of State and the US Agency of International Development, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Google. However, Freedom House’s reports of Russia have been widely criticized by the Russian authorities and academics for their alleged lack of accuracy and partisanship (for a summary see Petro, 2013).

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