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## **From Perestroika to Putin – Independent Journalism in Russia**

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Independence – *nezavisimost'* in Russian – was, in the dying days of the Soviet Union, a word which helped to describe some of the head-spinning changes which hastened the end of a superpower. It took its place alongside *perestroika* (usually translated as ‘restructuring’) and *glasnost* ‘openness’: the key words of the reforms launched by Mikhail Gorbachev after he became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985. He was, of course, to be the last to hold that title. It disappeared in the same historical storm which swept away the USSR itself. From the wreckage of the “indestructible Union of Free Republics”<sup>1</sup>, as the Soviet anthem so boldly described it, there arose fifteen new independent states. Ideas of ‘independence’, therefore, began to influence all aspects of late Soviet life, not just the political sphere. Co-operative cafés; joint ventures with companies from the capitalist world; small businesses – all began to appear where once there had only been the state-run economy. For the Russian news media, it was the biggest period of change and opportunity certainly since the advent of Soviet power, and possibly, given the speed with which it happened, since the birth of Russian journalism itself.

The purpose of this essay is to try to analyse what has followed from the opportunities of that era. Perhaps it did not seem so at the time, but, with hindsight, those hybrid forms of economic activity outlined above could almost be seen to anticipate the compromises which Russian journalists would come to make in the world which awaited them. For though this was an era when ideas of political independence took centre stage – even Russia itself, despite having been the heart of the Soviet Union considers that it too became independent at this time<sup>2</sup> -- this essay will seek to show that journalism’s independence (in the socio-political sense defined by James Bennett in the introduction to this volume) did not last long.

I argue that developments in Russian journalism, and therefore ideas of Russian journalism's independence, are inseparable from the political environment in which they occurred. Given that one of Russian journalism's tasks, as in any country, has been to chronicle and reflect upon political, economic, and social change, any idea of 'independence' has that limitation. That being the case, this essay will try to consider the extent to which Russian journalism has been able to act independently in editorial terms, in the 'industrial' and 'formal' senses of 'independence' defined for the purposes of this book. What kind of angles has Russian journalism pursued, what proprietorial or political constraints has it been forced to accept? (Here there are perhaps parallels with the challenges, outlined elsewhere in this volume by Allen and Jukes, facing the British press). I will conclude by raising the possibility of a new kind of 'industrial' independence for Russian journalism, which may in turn lead to a renewed 'socio-political' independence.

The approach will be to consider three broad periods of Russia's post-Soviet history: first the immediate post-Soviet period of the 1990s; then the beginning of Vladimir Putin's time at the summit of Russian politics, in the first decade of this century; and, finally, Russian journalism of more recent years. Has the spread of digital media, and social networking, given rise to a new kind of independent journalism at the fringes of the news media, if not in the mainstream? My research for this essay has consisted principally of four semi-structured interviews with journalists who have worked in the Russian news media. The contributors were selected on the basis of the length of their experience in Russian journalism (they began their careers in the 1990s, and continue to work today); the breadth of their experience (they have worked for both Russian and for western/ international news media); and, in order to achieve something of a gender balance, even in such a small sample, the interviewees are two women and two men. My interest in the subject is largely inspired by the long periods I spent working in Russia as a journalist from 1991 to 2009. During that time, I completed three

postings to Moscow – one for Reuters Television, and two for BBC News – as well as numerous other, shorter, assignments.

### **First steps: the end of the USSR and the early post-Soviet period**

“In the unsteady progress towards something that might be called democracy, there is no guarantee that one of its principle supports, a free press and broadcasting system, will remain unconstrained. Neither post-Gorbachev Russia, nor post-Rafsanjani Iran, have managed to sustain what their predecessors were able to achieve,” wrote Roger Silverstone in *Media and Morality* (Silverstone 2007, 176). Still, Gorbachev’s Russia, if not the Russia which followed it, definitely marked a new departure for journalism. Brian McNair, in 1991, described “the development of new outlets for critical campaigning journalism” (McNair 1991, 59) and that, “The new approach to coverage of the economy is also evident in photojournalism.” (McNair 1991, 60). Newspaper photographers were allowed to cover subjects which portrayed life as it was, not as it was supposed to be: in one example which McNair considers, a “near panic-stricken mob [is pictured] scrambling for the opportunity to buy some scarce commodity or other.” (ibid). “Scarce commodit(ies)” may have been the reality of Soviet shopping, especially in later years when the system began to creak and crack ahead of its collapse. Words or pictures illustrating or discussing such scarcities, however, were absent from the official media – which is why their appearance was rightly noted by McNair as a significant “new approach”. This era was also characterized by an unprecedented attempt to come to terms with the bloodier, more brutal, periods of the Soviet past. The weekly magazine *Ognoyok* – its name means ‘little flame’ in Russian – was the torch which lit the way. Here, one of their reporters, Ales Adamovich, reflects on the realization that mass graves containing the remains of victims of Stalin’s murderous purges in the 1930s could be found near big cities, not just in the frozen wastes of the far north.

Those of us who live in or around Minsk have only recently discovered that throughout the thirties people weren't only dying on the Arctic Circle, but on our own back doorstep. At first there were the 'social aliens,' and then the 'kulaks,' and then whole professions – engineers, teachers, soldiers, veterans and party workers – in the general category of 'enemies of the people.' (Adamovich 1990, 9).

Stories such as these made a huge impression – one which it is hard to imagine now – when first they were published. As a student visiting Moscow in the late 1980s, I went to see Tengiz Abuladze's film *Pokayanie* (Repentance). It tells the story of the effect a tyrannical mayor had on a small town where his word was law. The story is told in flashbacks at the trial of a woman accused of digging up the tyrant's corpse on the grounds that he did not deserve to rest in peace. The accused woman's parents were among those who had disappeared under his rule. It was not hard to substitute the small town for the world's largest country, the USSR, and substitute the fictional Varlam for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century dictator, Joseph Stalin. Many of the audience obviously did so. What I remember most from the screening was something I have never experienced before or since: members of a cinema audience gasping in disbelief, and possibly shock. Common enough in a cinema perhaps, but common because of an unexpected sudden violent event, or a breath-taking stunt, not, as happened here, because of the political content of a film. Newspaper stories such as Adamovich's, above, or those which McNair refers to, about shortages and other inconvenient truths, were similarly striking. Issues which people would once have hesitated to talk about even at home with members of their own families were now prominently discussed in the press. This, as Zassoursky has suggested, was an important part of the implementation of the reform process which Mikhail Gorbachev had launched. "A freed up (but still controlled) press was in essence the only reliable ally Gorbachev possessed in his struggle with conservative forces in the party apparatus." (Zassoursky 2004, 4). Russian journalists today look back on that era as a time

when the excitement and uncertainty of new times was reflected in journalism too. At this stage, as Zassoursky says, the press in Russia was ‘still controlled’ – by a Marxist-Leninist government, which, even if its leader was a reformer, still took decisions over the financing and distribution of news coverage – so it could not be considered independent. Relatively speaking, though, it must have felt at the time like a huge step in that direction. It was a time of new opportunities for reporters, and a time when audiences thirsted for what reporters could uncover and offer. As Leonid Ragozin – a Russian journalist who has worked as a correspondent and editor for the Russian edition of *Newsweek*, and for the BBC – puts it,

It was a great time – even when censorship still existed in the late 80s it was a great time – for journalists because there were huge, huge areas the audience wanted journalists to explore. People were interested in all sorts of stuff because they were starving for truth essentially, starving for information, after seventy years of communism. (Skype interview, 11/11/2013)<sup>3</sup>

What this era of uncertainty did not offer was a clear indication of what was to come: the complete collapse of a system whose leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, had intended only to reform it. With that system gone, a whole new era began – one which some Russian journalists today identify as an era of independent reporting. As Zoya Trunova, Editor of the BBC World Service’s Global Video Unit, reflects, “The end of the USSR was a massive life-changing moment for the Russian media, for journalists – because in the Soviet Union journalism as we understand it in the West didn’t exist.” (Interview, 11/14/2013)<sup>4</sup>. Of her own training, at Moscow State University in the late 1980s, she says, “we were trained to be ideologists, not journalists.” With the sudden collapse of the old system, there was parallel dramatic change

in the media landscape. “In the early 90s I believe there was genuinely the environment where in Russia there was independent journalism,” Trunova recalls now.

You would come to a place in Siberia – Krasnoyarsk, or Tomsk, or Novosibirsk – and you would get these people who were working in newly-founded independent television companies, and you would see how much appetite they had to learn how to do it, and how much enthusiasm these people had to actually produce news. And their owners at the time didn’t really get involved very much. (Interview, 11/14/2013).

Trunova’s last observation, that ‘owners at the time didn’t really get involved very much’ is perhaps especially useful in understanding the particular time she describes. The television companies she talks of were ‘independent’ in the socio-political sense that they were no longer subject to ideological editorial control, as TV journalists were in Soviet times. Journalists were also, perhaps, independent in the industrial sense although, as will be suggested below, that was not to last.

Similarly, Konstantin von Eggert echoes Trunova’s sense that the period was ‘life changing’; seminal; unpredictable – and sometimes dangerous (not least because criminal gangs seeking a slice of Russia’s new capitalist riches might settle scores in the street). Von Eggert began his journalistic career in 1990, “from the beginning of independent journalism,” (Email interview, 11/18/2013)<sup>5</sup> as he puts it now. He has been Diplomatic correspondent of *Izvestiya*; Editor-in-Chief of the BBC Russian Service’s Moscow bureau; and of the Radio Station Kommersant FM. He says now,

There was excitement and the feeling that your words count. One felt one was making history every day. We were not very well off moneywise, but still fairly decently paid

compared to many others. When one saw the nouveaux riches regularly killed in gangland wars one thought: “Maybe less money but more security”. There were elements of community spirit and solidarity among journalists. Although I would not say they do not exist today but there was visibly more corporate solidarity in the 1990s.

If journalists such as von Eggert felt they were ‘making history every day’, it was because Russia itself was undergoing unprecedented and unpredictable change: change which shaped the journalism which chronicled it. The country’s first post-Soviet leader was Boris Yeltsin. Coming himself from the Communist political establishment, he had become its critic. He had been elected to the newly-created post of Russian President in June 1991 (on the day now remembered as Russia’s ‘Independence Day’). He cemented his position as President of Russia, and his already considerable popularity, by his open opposition to the coup d’état which hard line Soviet Communists launched against Mikhail Gorbachev’s administration in August 1991. Muscovites will long remember Mr Yeltsin’s standing on a tank to make public his refusal to accept the authority of the ‘State Emergency Committee’ as the coup leaders described themselves. His show of defiance was instrumental in the coup’s collapse (Service 2003, 500). Mr Yeltsin’s desire to break with the past affected the way that political power interacted with the news media. Von Eggert has a telling story about an incident which would once have landed him in deep trouble. Under Mr Yeltsin, things had obviously changed and, then at least, the occupants of the Kremlin did not expect to have the final say on what was written about them.

I remember one particular moment from my *Izvestiya* days. It must have been in 1993. President Yeltsin cancelled a scheduled visit to Japan, and I wrote quite a sarcastic piece about him letting down the Japanese and delaying indefinitely the solution to the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan. Boris Yeltsin called my Editor-in-Chief [who] thought that the president will demand that he fire me. Instead Yeltsin said: “I do



not mind criticism. It is just the satirical tone of the piece that I found tasteless and out of place. We know the author. He is a young journalist and he will, hopefully, learn”. With that he said goodbye and hung up. (Email response, 11/18/2013)

Von Eggert clearly feels that his personal experience is symbolic of a time without precedent in his country’s history

The 1990s were the golden age of Russian free speech and free media, not without faults, but still exceptional in Russian history, all things considered.

It was time of boundless enthusiasm and idealism of many journalists who were seen as heroes by the society which was keen on change and transformation. But by the mid-1990s wariness and disillusionment set in due to general tiredness with reforms and instability. (Email interview, 11/18/2013)

Whilst that ‘boundless enthusiasm and idealism’ was finally going flat – and Rantanen and Vartanova speak of “disillusionment with politics and loss of readers’ trust” (Rantanen and Vartanova 2003, 152) – other significant changes were underway: changes which would very much affect the independence of Russian journalism in the industrial and socio-political senses, as defined for the purposes of this volume. Maria Aslamazyan has worked for Internews, “an international development organisation specialising in supporting independent media, freedom of information and free expression around the globe” (Internews 2013) since the early 1990s. In her role, she has worked with countless Russian journalists over the past two decades. She remembers the early 1990s as a time of huge and rapid expansion for journalism, “After many years of government propaganda, these private channels start to open very fast: every day, every month, new media, new newspaper, new TV station, new radio station – a lot. It was a very interesting time,” (Skype interview, 11/13/2013)<sup>6</sup>.

However, Aslamazyan suggests that as the decade wore on, the mood began to change; the

excitement seemed to be on the wane. She echoes Von Eggert's sense that "wariness and disillusionment set in"

In 93, 94, 95 this *romantizm*<sup>7</sup> that we are independent slowly was going down because people had understood to do the media, you need to get money. And this money, how you can get that? Definitely advertising, but also owner. In the meantime the people who has become richer – we don't have such a big oligarch in 94-95, but we still have rich people – and they start to recognize 'ok, this is a very good tool for influence'. And they start to pay attention to these small, independent, semi-independent stations, I mean they go to each other. Media are looking for money, and people are looking for influence. And the distance between journalists and big money becomes closer and closer and closer. (Skype interview, 11/13/2013).

This, I would argue, is the beginning of a trend which was to have a profound effect on Russian journalism's idea of its own independence. Journalism's need to be financed, and the recognition by Russia's new rich that the the news media could be a 'very good tool for influence,' were two factors which foreshadowed the way that money, politics, and the press would interact during Russia's first post-Soviet presidential election, in 1996. The way that relationship would develop was further influenced by the way in which Russian journalists would cover the bloodiest episode in Russia's post-Soviet history.

A sense of anticipation and opportunity carried much of Russian society, and its newly-independent news media, through the immediate post-Soviet period. Yet the massive changes, and plummeting living standards – not to mention the organized crime referred to by Von Eggert, above – meant that the optimism of the end of the Soviet period soon gave way to deep pessimism and cynicism among the electorate. The candidate who had won so convincingly Russia's first Presidential poll in the summer of 1991 looked all but unelectable

five years later. In addition to the severe economic hardship – unpaid wages, deeply uncertain employment prospects where once the Soviet system had guaranteed lifetime job security – Mr Yeltsin’s administration launched a military campaign in the separatist southern region of Chechnya. Some of the reporting of this campaign may also be considered independent, in that it was characterized by coverage sharply critical of the decisions taken by Mr Yeltsin’s administration, and the actions which followed. As Robert Service writes, “Moscow TV stations and newspapers had reporters in Chechnya who told of the Russian Army’s incompetence and the atrocities carried out by its troops.” (Service 2003, 533). Zassoursky (2004) offers a summary of subsequent scholarly debate on the nature of this critical reporting, which, he suggests, some saw as an example of a healthy fourth estate, others as an example of the news media being too sympathetic to “terrorists”, as Russian officials described the separatists. Among journalists working in what seemed like an exciting new age of media freedom and independence, the war presented a dilemma: many of them, as will be discussed in greater detail below, were staunch supporters of Boris Yeltsin’s administration. Still, reporting “the Russian Army’s incompetence and atrocities” was a journalistic duty – one which Mr Yeltsin’s administration did not try to make it difficult to fulfil. Even media under the control of the state contributed to the critical coverage. As Von Eggert recalls, “The Kremlin under Yeltsin rarely interfered in media affairs to the extent that one of the most vocal critics of the first war in Chechnya was the government owned Channel Two of Russian TV (RTR).” Yet as citizens, and journalists who enjoyed the new political climate, some were reluctant to be too critical. Aslamazyan’s memory of this time is one in which journalistic ideas of balance were actually compromised: compromised and clouded by journalists’ own feelings towards Mr Yeltsin and his administration. She seems to suggest that, alongside those covering the “Russian Army’s incompetence and atrocities,” there were those – she appears to include herself – whose political sympathies put them in a difficult

situation as journalists. “We love this new democratic power. We really would like to support them. We really understand they bring democracy in our country,” she recalls now. “It was very difficult to really criticize, to really try to be balanced, in this situation.” In effect, Russian journalists at this time were beginning to compromise their independence from political authority because they largely sympathized with the ruling administration. As the idealism of the immediate post-Soviet period had ebbed away, the realization had grown that compromise was likely to be the reality of Russia’s new journalistic landscape. This trend was to continue. The next milestone in the story of Russian journalism and independence also occurs at this period.

### **Working for freedom? Journalism and the 1996 Russian Presidential Election**

In parliamentary elections held in December 1995, candidates allied with Mr Yeltsin had not had anything like the success enjoyed by his Communist opponents, led by Gennady Zyuganov (Service 2003, 530). The ‘general tiredness with reforms and instability’ described by Von Eggert, above, had left Mr Yeltsin in a weak position in the polls – as the strong showing by his political rivals in the December vote had seemed to confirm. Despite this apparently massive disadvantage, Mr Yeltsin won a second term, thanks, as Service has argued, “to money, patronage and a brilliant media campaign.” (Service 2003, 531). It is the last of those three points, the “brilliant media campaign” which is of most interest for this essay. Coming to Russia in the summer of 1996 as part of the BBC News team sent to cover the election, I got the sense that many Russian journalists had taken the decision that, on the basis that their professional and personal lives were better than they had been under the Soviet system, they had no desire to return to it – an impression supported by Aslamazyan’s reflections, above, on the period. Journalists therefore took the decision to lend their support to Boris Yeltsin for fear that a victory for Gennady Zyuganov would mean a return to the Soviet system, or at least something close to it. Zassoursky (2004) seems to contend that is

too simplistic an interpretation. Having argued, with reference to the parliamentary elections of December 1995, “Mere control over the mass media was clearly not enough to ensure victory’ (2004, 65), he goes on to say of the Presidential election of the following summer, “Instead of ‘supporting’ Boris Yeltsin (as can be seen from campaign documents, the mere support by television was considered inadequate) television, and in particular news broadcasts, became a fundamental campaign tool.’ (70). Based on my experience of covering the election – I remember, for example, TV pictures of Mr Yeltsin dancing energetically at a campaign rally at a time when his health was not actually good – I take this to mean that Mr Yeltsin’s advisers consciously built their strategy to include television, rather than just expecting it to be supportive. Zassoursky makes his persuasive case with reference to strategy documents prepared for Mr Yeltsin’s campaign. Trunova and Aslamazyan, though, remember something closer to support. Trunova uses a Russian phrase “administrativniye resoursy” (literally ‘administrative resources’) to try to describe the way the news media were employed. The phrase is generally describes the Russian political establishment’s exploitation, during election campaigns, of the means at their disposal – means which they control thanks to their management of the public sector. These might include, for example, providing transport for campaign workers; they extended to using access to the news media in an attempt to persuade the electorate to favour one particular candidate or party. Mr Yeltsin’s campaign team, Trunova recalls,

Really had to use all *administrativniye resoursy* – administrative resources – to get him to win. That was the first time that Russian media became just one of the resources. They certainly didn’t want Zyuganov to win this election because everybody was expecting if the Communists came to power, we would be back to the Soviet Union.

She compares the overall effect to a loss of innocence. “I think they themselves were happy to do that, but it was an orchestrated campaign. It wasn’t independent journalism, and

Russian independent journalism lost its virginity at that moment.” Aslamazyan places the 1996 Presidential election alongside Chechnya as a missed opportunity for independent reporting. It is, she suggests, “very easy today to tell that this was big mistake for Russian media, because a few times they lose the opportunity to be really balanced, to really criticize the government, even though they like the government, and criticize the people which they like. Media lose this opportunity.” It seems to have been at this time that Russian journalism experienced the harsh reality that working with their new-found freedom also meant taking difficult decisions, and living with what followed. The consequence, Aslamazyan argues, was a loss of journalistic independence. “When you become so close to this government, you start to support it, you lose the opportunity to see the big picture.” Von Eggert, who was then working for the respected daily *Izvestiya*, makes a strong case that the way in which Russian journalists responded to the political climate during the election campaign has to be understood in the context of the time. This is how he describes the role of the news media

It was very significant if not decisive in mobilizing support for Yeltsin. It is easy to pontificate today about these events as the moment free media died in Russia. But one has to see the situation as it was then. 99% of journalists were for Yeltsin not because a lot of money was spent on buying them (actually very few top editors benefited from the Kremlin cash flow directly) but because the communists were really using a lot of revanchist rhetoric and threatened the media with reprisals after their win. We had the reds picketing *Izvestiya*, carrying slogans like “You, dirty Yids, our time is coming soon”<sup>8</sup>. We supported Yeltsin because we knew that for him media freedom is essential. I have no regrets and repent nothing.

The 1996 Presidential election, then, was pivotal because it ensured that Russia would not try to turn back the clock to an era of Soviet style communism. The abusive, anti-Semitic, demonstrators who picketed the offices of *Izvestiya* did not get their way. It was pivotal too

for journalism because the news media had become an integral part of the post-Soviet political process. They were not used simply to exhort people to vote for candidates whose success was all but ensured, as in Soviet times, or as an instrument of communicating the message of reform, as during Gorbachev's *perestroika* period. They were used as a means of broadcasting campaign events of the kind tried and tested in capitalist countries, but then still new in the post-Soviet space. Whether or not Russia's journalists actively supported Boris Yeltsin, or whether they were used 'a fundamental campaign tool' it can be argued that, just five years after the collapse of the Soviet system, journalistic independence – while it had blossomed and flourished in the years after the end of the USSR – had at best altered, at worst disappeared. As almost unquestioning enthusiasm for the new times had evaporated, idealism had given way to pragmatism. Journalistic independence, especially in James Bennett's socio-political sense of "journalism acting as a watchdog on the government of the day," had been crucially compromised by the experience the 1996 election (see introduction to this volume).

### **The end of the Yeltsin era, the dawn of the Putin era**

It was not only journalists who threw their weight behind Boris Yeltsin's re-election campaign. Powerful business tycoons – the 'oligarchs' grown rich on the proceeds of Russia's murky sell-off of Soviet state industries<sup>9</sup> – had also become players on the Russian media scene. The owners who 'didn't really get involved very much' were now keen to see what kind of influence their media holdings could have. Journalists encountered the constrained reality of working the new political 'freedom'. If this was a loss of, or at least a reduction in, journalistic independence it was nevertheless not a return to what had gone before, in Soviet times. That had presumably been avoided with the electoral defeat of Gennady Zyuganov, the Communist candidate in that 1996 election. Yet, as Ragozin says of the period

I would be cautious about calling it ‘independent’. It was not as independent as the western press is, and even in the West there are issues with the independence of the press. So it was much freer than in the Soviet times, and most importantly, instead of being controlled by one party, it was controlled by different financial and political groups. So there was a lot of pluralism in the press [...] but it could not really be described as ‘independent’.

In political life, Mr Yeltsin’s victory in the 1996 election did not translate into anything like the popularity he had once enjoyed. He resigned three and a half years later, going on television on New Year’s Eve – the last day of the millennium – to announce his unexpected decision. According to the terms of the Russian constitution, the Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, became acting President until elections could be held. When they duly were, in March 2000, Mr Putin’s position at the top of Russian politics at the top of Russian politics was consolidated -- and he remains at the top today. If Russian journalism’s independence had already started to decline during the first Chechen War, and the 1996 Presidential election, Mr Putin’s coming to the Presidency marked the beginning of a new era of caution. Mr Putin’s critics have argued that he has presided over a decline in freedom of expression. The country report on Russia compiled by the organization *Reporters Without Borders* summarizes some of that criticism:

Centralized control of the regions, the creation of something close to a one-party system and draconian excesses in the course of combating terrorism are the main features of a government with little tolerance of criticism.

Although most of the Russian population gets its news from TV, there is a glaring lack of diversity in the broadcast media. As for the print media, just a few national newspapers led by *Novaya Gazeta* escape control and ensure a minimum of pluralism. Radio *Ekho*



*Moskvy* and *Radio Svoboda*<sup>10</sup> are other examples of independent news outlets. (Reporters Without Borders 2011)

Although it does go on to note, ‘At the local level, the situation is more varied.’ (ibid). This ‘glaring lack of diversity’ is a far cry from the world which Russian journalists say they remember from the 1990s, but to suggest that some kind of new iron curtain descended with Mr Putin’s taking up office in 2000 would be to misrepresent the situation. Even so, there is no doubt it marked a change. Early in the Putin era, Rantanen wrote of the new President’s ‘attack on Russian media’ (Rantanen 2002, 135). Trunova argues that editors’ response was to draw on their experience of the time before Russian journalism’s era of independence in the early 1990s.

Russians, they’ve lived through the Soviet times, we can read between the lines, and we can figure things out relatively quickly. So you wouldn’t wait and say, ‘OK, well, we wonder what he’s going to be like.’ You’d try to figure out what he’s going to be like because your life as say a newspaper editor, or a TV editor, would depend on that. And I think what happened is Putin came with his own background – ex-KGB man, ex-military man, and lots of people would immediately adjust to his expectations. So he might not have expressed it immediately – though actually later on he did, on many occasions – but I think at the beginning it was almost like well, we apply that self-censorship just in case and then we’ll see how it goes. Well it never went away, really.

Aslamazyan definitely sees 2000 as a turning point – a time when political authority began to reclaim some of the control which it had ceded during the first decade of Russia’s Post-Soviet history.

There was some hope in the 1990s. Even people were not so much optimistic – but the words of democracy, words of independence, words of the media was not bad words at that time. But since 2000, I would say the government start to take control.

Not surprisingly, she sees this as a time when journalistic independence was further compromised – although not entirely due to the will of the political authorities. Perhaps in the same way that they decided not to criticize Boris Yeltsin as he ran for re-election, journalists working in the Russia of Mr Yeltsin’s successor joined their compatriots in embracing the easier life which came with an improving economy. If the “words of democracy, words of independence”, which Aslamazyan remembers as being ‘not bad’ in the 1990s, had not actually become bad, they were laughable. Maybe the excitement which had come with the early post-Soviet period – and the ideals of freedom and independence which had accompanied it – were also too closely associated with hardship and uncertainty. Times had changed, so had attitudes, and so, argues Aslamazyan, had many journalists’ attitudes to their independence.

People start to get better money, and cynicism becomes the most important mood in Russian society. Journalists were infected with this cynicism and the situation about independence – people started to laugh about independence. What does that mean? Independence means be poor, be not influential.

For many Russians, the Putin did come to be associated with ‘better money’, especially as the revenues from rising oil and gas prices saw consumer goods and foreign travel become more accessible than ever before. Still, the consequences of the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union were still present – in their bloodiest form. From the autumn of 1999, Russia launched a renewed military campaign in Chechnya. The uneasy truce agreed in 1996 had not settled the region’s long term status. In the late summer of 1999, there were a

series of bombings of apartment buildings in Moscow and elsewhere. The attacks caused hundreds of civilian casualties, and, as Service writes, “were blamed on Chechnya. Lessons had been learned. The government closely controlled news reporting.” (2003, 541).

‘Controlled’ is also the word I chose to describe the reporting of this conflict when writing of it elsewhere (Rodgers 2012, 32-5), in comparison to coverage of the First War, which I termed ‘open’ to reflect the almost total lack of constraint under which reporters then found themselves. Then, journalists were free to arrive in the area without special permission. They were free to travel where they wished, to the extent that some even had the rare experience of encountering combatants from opposing sides in the same day. Travelling into Grozny – the region’s main city – reporters would encounter Russian troops. In the city centre, they met their enemies. A sense of danger, in fact, was the main restriction. Journalists could go as far as they felt the likely coverage merited the risk. In the Second War, access was limited. Special permission was required to report from inside Chechnya itself. This was rarely granted except where journalists were accompanying officials. Reporters– especially foreign ones – seeking to evade the restrictions were sent back whence they came. There were some journalists, most notably Anna Politkovskaya, who still succeeded in providing unforgettable coverage of the conflict. Politkovskaya, though, was an exception – as was the small circulation newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta* for which she was working. Her work on Chechnya ended when she was shot dead in October 2006. At the time of writing, April 2014, the trial continues of five men charged with involvement in her death. There have been delays due to appeals and changes to the jury<sup>11</sup>. Whoever is or is not finally held responsible, the killers’ bullets meant that one of Russian journalism’s truly challenging reporters would write no more.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever Mr Putin’s plans for the news media when he came to power, the Russian journalists interviewed for this chapter seem to agree that his time in office has been a time of

declining media freedom. Controls have been tightened, with a corresponding reduction in media independence, certainly in the socio-political and industrial senses. In response to a question as to whether the journalistic environment had changed since 2000 (when Mr Putin was first elected President), Von Eggert echoed Trunova's observations on self-censorship, and Aslamazyan's on cynicism,

Very much so. TV – Russia's most important and effective medium – slipped out of the hands of the oligarchs and came under direct or indirect control of the state. The liveliness of the media scene gave way to uniformity, dreariness, and propaganda. Also the government perfected the economic tools of pressuring the media into submission. The outreach of the state bureaucracy is such that it can block advertising for any publication and thus strangle it without a hint of direct censorship. Most journalists know what is and what is not permissible – self-censorship really rules and is the most effective tool of the government. I myself felt and practised it. Government and pro-government media spread cynicism as a way of controlling the society, keeping it atomized, fragmented, devoid of civic responsibility and pride. In these circumstances it is hard to convince anyone that there could be honest journalism and honest debate in the society in general.

Such an atmosphere, like the chaotic freedom of the immediate Post-Soviet period, had its equivalent in the political sphere. Voters seemed pleased with the prosperity and relative stability over which Mr. Putin presided – the former due in no small part to rising global prices for the oil and gas which Russia possessed in abundance. That is not to say that there were not those who were concerned with the changes they witnessed, in, for example, the electoral process. International observers for the Russian Presidential election in 2008 either stayed away<sup>13</sup>, or expressed concern<sup>14</sup> at what they did see. As Mr. Putin's time in office continued<sup>15</sup>, some forms of political opposition did start to emerge. It took the form of rallies

– poorly attended, and with demonstrators sometimes seemingly outnumbered by riot police

– which were advertised by the organizers as “March of the Dissenters” (Russian *March nesoglasnykh*). The marchers were a disparate array of those who were dissatisfied with Mr. Putin’s administration: everyone from those, such as the former World Chess Champion, Garry Kasparov, who wanted to see Russia adopt a political system more similar to those of Western democracies, to extremist groups. Among the latter category, the National Bolsheviks, with their curious mixture of right-wing rhetoric and publicity stunts (not to mention their Nazi-like flag, where the hammer and sickle took the place of the swastika, but was still set on a white background surrounded by red) seemed uncomfortable company for Mr Kasparov and his liberal supporters. The demonstrations achieved little in concrete terms, but incidents such as the arrest of Mr. Kasparov (BBC 2007) did ensure international media coverage. Perhaps, though, the ‘Marches of the Dissenters’ did pave the way for another, larger, wave of protest. It was led by Alexey Navalny. Mr Navalny started as an anti-corruption blogger, and went on to play a central role in demonstrations against alleged irregularities in the conduct of the Russian Parliamentary elections in December 2011 “the biggest anti-government rally in Moscow since the fall of communism” (Rosenberg 2011). The movement has also given rise to a kind of journalistic activity. Noting the large number of followers Mr Navalny has on Twitter, Ragozin says

Alexey Navalny, the leader of the opposition, has almost half a million followers.<sup>16</sup> And what he does, his investigations of corrupt officials, it is in many ways genuine journalism. It is what Russian journalists don’t do, or can’t afford to do. But he does it. He breaks a lot of stories. He produces a lot of information. At the same time, he has a very clear anti-Putin agenda. He’s the leader of the opposition. So it’s all very muddled.

In other words, this is activism, more than it is journalism<sup>17</sup>. Nor does Mr Navalny pretend to be a journalist – it is just that, as Ragozin notes, he fulfils some of the roles of one. The key is the way in which he does it – by clever use of social media. Even a blog on the website of the *New York Times*, recounting the story of Mr Navalny's being arrested in 2011, made extensive use of videos posted on YouTube, and photographs posted on Twitter (Mackey 2011). It may be also that these platforms of activism offer opportunities for independent journalism unseen in Russia since the days of the 1990s. As Trunova suggests

The internet dramatically changed the way Russians consume news. And the Russian internet is a jungle, really. You have everything there, and generally Russians don't believe there are certain images you shouldn't show, they are certainly interested in new technologies and new ways of storytelling.

This is a continuing trend. Denied a platform in the mainstream news media, Russians have long embraced the internet as a means of expression<sup>18</sup>. As Lonkila noted of a well-known blogging site, 'Russian *Livejournal*, in addition to purely personal journals, contained a huge number of politically active communities,' (Lonkila 2008, 1141-2). Although Lonkila's study focused on anti-military activism, he also made reference (2008, 1135) to Kasparov's running an internet news site as part of his political campaign. It is hard to see how Mr Navalny could have drawn so many supporters onto the streets of Moscow in 2011 without social media and other websites. For Von Eggert, these other sources of information present a challenge to the news provided by state TV – Russia's most dominant news medium

At the end of Vladimir Putin's second presidential term if something did not exist on TV, it did not exist in life as far as the majority of the public was concerned. But today

Internet penetration is such that it impacts agenda setting even by the behemoths of state-controlled TV.

If one of the factors which compromised Russian journalism in the 1990s was, as Aslamazyan noted above, the need to make money (one of the challenges of working with freedom), then the internet may be starting to offer possibilities of financial, as well as editorial, independence. Not only is it having an influence on agenda setting, it is starting to manage to make money doing so. Ragozin points to the example of TV Rain (Telekanal Dozhd'), described by Shaun Walker on *The Guardian* website in 2014 as "the favourite source of news for the so-called 'creative class', who were at the centre of anti-Putin protests that swept Russia two years ago"<sup>19</sup>. TV Rain charges viewers to access its content through its site. 'Monetization actually seems to work,' Ragozin says.

The question now is if other media outlets can monetize themselves, because if they can, it wouldn't really matter whether they are still based in Russia, or whether their offices are based in a slightly more democratic country, somewhere in Latvia, or in Finland, or in Ukraine, so I think internet eventually, the developing monetization of mass media, will actually help to advance the cause of independent or at least more pluralistic journalism in Russia.

'More pluralistic' may be the best to which Russian journalism can aspire. For if the alternative voices are independent only to the extent that they disagree with the mainstream, and exist outside it, it could be argued that what they offer is in fact another kind of dependence. Trunova seeks this as an enduring characteristic of Russian reporting, 'Russian journalists don't generally believe they need to be neutral. Russian journalists generally believe that as a journalist you are a campaigner, that you really have to push for a certain idea.'<sup>20</sup> Aslamazyan welcomes the openings which the internet has brought, seeing a 'very

good opportunity to create good, independent, information flows around the country.’

However, she adds

two things worry me. First of all, if we are talking about journalism, last ten years when they learned how to be very cautious, how to be careful, how to not touch painful questions – this is not easy to recover. There has to be time for a new generation of journalists to come and change the agenda. This is number one. Number two, journalists these years, especially famous journalists, become really rich people. They get good salaries and they [...] learn how to go to all these expensive Moscow restaurants. I am not sure they are ready to lose all these things and start to work without any money. They would like the independence to be really well paid. And this really worries me.

Contemporary Russian journalism, then, is a product of two main trends: the country’s recent history, and changes in technology. The same could perhaps be said of any country, but Russia’s case is unique because of the massive social and political change it has undergone in the last quarter century. Journalistic independence flourished in the 1990s as never before. The idealism of those days was compromised by Russian journalists’ own political sympathies, and by the need to make money. The news media then suffered a collision with the political and commercial ambitions of their oligarch owners. In turn, the oligarchs’ grip was loosened by the more powerful political class of the Putin era. There are now, in the digital age, opportunities for journalistic independence to flourish anew.



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<sup>1</sup> This line is often translated, for example on the website of Marxists.org (<https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/sounds/lyrics/anthem.htm> accessed 4 March 2014) as ‘Unbreakable Union of freeborn Republics’, but this is presumably in order to make the translation scan with the music. I have preferred ‘indestructible’ for the Russian ‘nerushimy’ and the simple ‘free’ for ‘svobodny(kh)’.

<sup>2</sup> June 12<sup>th</sup> is a public holiday in Russia, officially described as, ‘Russia’s Independence Day, which commemorates the adoption in 1991 of the Declaration of Sovereignty of the Russian Federation’ (Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom 2013).

<sup>3</sup> This, and all subsequent citations from Ragozin, come from an interview conducted by Skype between Moscow and London on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> This, and all subsequent citations from Trunova, come from an interview conducted in London on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2013.

<sup>5</sup> This citation, and all subsequent citations from von Eggert, comes from email responses received on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2013 to questions emailed on 15 November 2013.

<sup>6</sup> This citation, and all subsequent ones from Aslamazyan, is taken from an interview conducted via Skype between London and Yerevan on 13 November 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Here Aslamazyan uses the Russian word for ‘romanticism’

<sup>8</sup> Many Stalinist/ Russian Nationalist demonstrators in the 1990s used anti-Semitic insults against those of whom they did not approve. I remember, on at least one occasion, such abuse being directed at western journalists covering a nationalist march. It did not seem to matter whether or not the targets of the abuse were themselves Jewish or not.

<sup>9</sup> Freeland, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Reporters Without Borders’ decision to give *Radio Svoboda* as an example of an ‘independent news outlet’ seems questionable. The station is the Russian language service of Radio Free Europe, which is funded by the United States Congress. (Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty 2013)

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, RIA Novosti ‘Five Jurors Dismissed from Politkovskaya Trial’, first published 27 January 2014, accessed 7 March 2014 (<http://en.ria.ru/crime/20140127/186954003/Five-Jurors-Dismissed-from-Politkovskaya-Trial.html> )

<sup>12</sup> Rodgers (2014)

<sup>13</sup> For example, observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> In the case of the Parliamentary Assembly for the Council of Europe.(Parliamentary Assembly for the Council of Europe, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Mr Putin served two terms as President from 2000-2008, then, not permitted by the Russian constitution to serve a third consecutive term, became Prime Minister from 2000-2012, when he returned to the Presidency – his political protégé Dmitry Medvedev having been President in the meantime.

<sup>16</sup> 426,594, according to his Twitter profile on 27 November 2013. The number continued to grow. On 4<sup>th</sup> March 2014, it was 571,496.

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<sup>17</sup> In some respects, the movement's journalistic activity are an example of Fuch's description of citizen journalists (2010, 178) as, 'individuals or groups, that are affected by certain problems, become journalists or at least the positive subject of journalism (concerned citizens). Such journalistic practice is frequently part of protest movement practices.'

<sup>18</sup> Internet access continues to grow. A survey published in Spring 2013 by Yandex, a leading Russian internet portal, suggested that internet access in the country as a whole had passed 50%, with the figure over 70% in both Moscow and St. Petersburg (Yandex 2013)

<sup>19</sup> I.e. those led by Alexy Navalny. TV Rain fell foul of the authorities in January 2014 as a result of a poll, which its critics deemed unpatriotic, about Leningrad during the Second World War (Walker 2014).

<sup>20</sup> There are echoes here of Platon and Deuze's description of Indymedia as 'not independent in the strictest sense of the word. Often the code and content of the news are made and regulated by people that are, in one way or another, affiliated with many movements providing their own content.' (Platon and Deuze 2003, 338)

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