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Post-Socialist Self-Censorship: Russia, Hungary and Latvia

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Abstract

This article argues that today in Central and Eastern Europe self-censorship, journalistic freedom and autonomy are just as severely affected by economic constraints, oligarchic influences and new authoritarianism as they are by their Communist pasts. Either way, journalists know exactly what to report, what to omit and how to advance their careers. This is reminiscent of *adekvatnost';* a distinct strategy employed by Russian journalists, who regard this skill as an expression of professionalism. It implies having a 'feel for the game' and the 'right instinct', which allows them to enjoy a certain level of freedom in their work and express their creativity. The authors' interviews with Latvian and Hungarian journalists, editors and producers examined the extent to which *adekvatnost'* might be a feature of journalism beyond Russia, in particular when a media system faces rising populism and oligarch-dominated ownership. As such, knowledge gained about journalistic practices in the countries under investigation might also be useful in understanding media development beyond the post-Communist space, including Western Europe.

Keywords: self-censorship, media control, journalism, media oligarchisation, Russia, Central and Eastern Europe

Introduction

Analysing self-censorship in post-socialist states, this article proposes a new conceptual tool with which to investigate journalistic practices against the background of media oligarchisation and tightened control. We argue that – rather than a historical legacy of state-led censorship – the specific type of self-censorship we see today in the region has been generated by media markets in crisis, paired with illiberal state interference. Liberalisation of media markets and oligarchic control over the media have become inseparable in many post-socialist countries (Balčytienė et al, 2015; Štětka, 2015, Dragomir, 2019). This means that self-censorship practices emanating from the state and those emanating from the market have merged.

After a post-2008-financial-crisis exodus of foreign investors, domestic businesses filled the empty spaces. These tycoons are on a range from highly loyal to outright submissive to the government (see, Štětka, 2015). Heightened economic difficulties and strengthened state-led control have given rise to precarious working conditions, a tight job market as well as time and budget constraints on newsrooms and editorials (Metykova & Cezarova, 2009; Štětka, 2016). Wherever populists are in power, freedom of speech has been attacked and restrictive media laws have been enacted (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014). These ingredients form the ideal breeding ground for a type of self-censorship which we term *adekvatnost'*, which can be understood as a 'feel for the game' (in a Bourdieusian sense) – manoeuvring skills that open up space for journalistic creativity and negotiated freedom of expression.

After introducing *adekvatnost'* in more detail, we test the concept on the cases of Hungary and Latvia. Self-censorship as a means to opening up new channels for creativity and professional expression is a phenomenon not limited to Central and Eastern Europe. All over

the globe, especially in (semi-)authoritarian contexts, we have seen similar endeavours and experiments, both in terms of the newly installed mechanisms of control as well as how journalists responded to them (see Bar-Tal, 2017; Festenstein, 2018). Many democracies are home to large privately-owned media empires. Especially those hosting strong populist movements or leaders have embraced authoritarian features (Krämer, 2018; Repucci, 2018). We, therefore, conclude that the phenomenon of *adekvatnost'* might sooner rather than later become relevant for Western Europe and the US. Such a scenario would mean that an examination of 'the East' will become highly instructive for media scholars and sociologists of journalism to understand what is about to happen in 'the West'.

Self-censorship and negotiated creativity

Self-censorship is a contested phenomenon, and scholars have not so far arrived at a universally accepted definition, either with regard to its theoretical implications, or to its empirical investigability (Rantanen, 2013). The most common approach is to perceive self-censorship as a milder form of censorship and as an inevitable side effect of faulty democracies (Simons and Strovsky, 2006; Kenny and Gross, 2008; Tapsell, 2012, Bunn, 2015). Some researchers deny the existence of self-censorship altogether, in the sense of acknowledging it as a distinct category, rather than simply consequence of external censorship (see, for example, Cook and Heilmann, 2010, 2013). As for Russia, most observers, including Castells (2009), consider self-censorship to be the dominant practice of media control, alongside the state-led production of fake news and the clamp down on disagreeable media outlets.

We aim to conceptually advance debates in the sociology of journalism, media control and oligarchisation. We contest the idea that self-censorship is necessarily coercively imposed on individuals and a direct result of explicit political pressure, interference or fear (Vartanova, 2011; Kenny & Gross, Clark & Grech, 2017, Human Rights House Foundation, 2006; for a critique of this assumption, see Lee & Chan, 2009; Litvinenko & Toepfl 2019). Instead, we claim that self-censorship can spring from a range of motivations and can have a range of effects, both productive and prohibitive (see also Burt, 1998). Research on journalism in authoritarian states has suggested that self-censorship can, in fact, foster media freedom. As Tong claims in relation to China, this is because the art of skilled self-censoring helps journalists bypass minefields and therefore increases the chances of them being able to publish material that is less explosive and yet highly topical, and sometimes even politically sensitive (2009: 594).

We further argue that journalists often respond to self-censorship craftily and creatively, transforming self-censoring from something imposed by fear or coercion into something they perceive to be productive and something they practice effortlessly, without requiring any identifiable censor. The routinisation of self-censorship is also reminiscent of a process described by Norbert Elias (1982): most of what we perceive as voluntary compliance was once exposed to external coercion and constraints (*Fremdzwänge*), before becoming internalised and seemingly self-imposed normative behaviour (*Selbstzwänge*). Once practices are perceived as self-imposed, they easily become part of a journalist's professional identity.

Such voluntary obedience is reminiscent of what Max Weber (1978 [1922]) referred to as occurring under charismatic, patrimonial rule, an essential part of which is reciprocity: those demonstrating unquestioned devotion get rewarded, whereas those who are defiant are punished. A liberating effect is achieved by those journalists who do not struggle with obedience and subordination and simultaneously know how to harness the rules of the game to pursue their professional goals and express their creativity.

Russian journalists have a name for such expressions of self-censorship; they call it *adekvatnost',* a noun deriving from the adjective *adekvatnyi*, which translates into English as

appropriate or *reasonable*, in our context as 'a feel for the game' or 'a sense of proportion'. We first encountered *adekvatnost'* in 2013 when interviewing Russian federal television reporters at various levels, from journalists at the bottom end of the hierarchy to famous media celebrities (Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2014). Nobody at that time could have anticipated the turbulent events of 2014: the annexation of Crimea, the war in Eastern Ukraine and the rouble crisis of December 2014, all of which had dramatic repercussions for Russia's media (Lipman, 2014; Kiriya, 2017; Malyutina, 2017). The timing of our first research turned out to be serendipitous: 2013 was the last year when journalists were likely to proactively narrate their ideas about *adekvatnost'* rather than talk about the political events of the day and the immediate impact they had on their work.[1]

Most of our respondents saw *adekvatnost'* as a mandatory quality of anybody who aspires to become a top journalist. That is, journalists might be highly professional in their craft, but *adekvatnost'* distinguished the 'best' of them (Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2017b). As with Boyer's observations regarding East Germany (2003: 529), this is partly due to the expectation that top journalists quickly understand, 'in the best spirit of professional ethics', which questions are not to be asked and which sentences not to be written, without requiring any detailed instructions (see also Lee and Chan, 2009: 127).

This a 'sense for the game' is not unlike what Pierre Bourdieu called the 'right' habitus – the physical embodiment of habits and skills, grounded in an individual's life experience and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984; for post-Soviet specifics of habitus see Eyal et al., 1998). It is difficult to teach oneself an 'appropriate' habitus; the best ones have it internalised, seemingly 'instinctively', like a 'second nature'. At the lower end of the *adekvatnost'* ranking sit those who toe the line too anxiously and do everything necessary to get things right. Too stringent self-censorship stifles creativity and makes media products lame and boring.[2]What distinguishes *adekvatnost'* from habitus, however, is that the former requires, even encourages, a certain level of agency – things change too quickly in Russia. In other words, an outstanding journalist might be daring, flamboyant and quirky, but, in best traditions of Weberian patrimonial reciprocity, clearly knows how far to go, as overdoing such things or getting them wrong would be highly risky in the ever-changing political climate.

Case studies: Hungary and Latvia

By and large, we can observe two slightly diverging developments within Central and Eastern Europe. In one set of countries (among them, Hungary, Poland, Belarus and Russia), once populist leaders have secured power, they have expanded their monopoly over the media. Another group of countries (for example, the Baltic states, and to a certain extent the Czech Republic and Slovakia) have so far proven to be less vulnerable to populism. In these countries, publicly-controlled media remain intact and allow for reasonably healthy political competition. The cases we have chosen – Hungary for the first group and Latvia for the second – are characteristic of their respective group's development. Notwithstanding this, they share a number of similarities, in particular when it comes to their twentieth-century histories. Both countries experienced Soviet occupation during and after the Second World War. Subsequently, Latvia was incorporated into the Soviet Union and Hungary into the USSR-controlled Eastern Bloc.

After 1989, both countries, but particularly Hungary, were initially celebrated as showcases of democratisation (Magyar, 2016). Hungary held the first 'proper' elections in 1990 and in the early 1990s Budapest became the home of the European offices of several international organisations. Latvia too transformed its political institutions immediately after it proclaimed independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. In those years of rapid change, state-led censorship became a thing of the past. Journalists proactively shaped the new media

landscapes, some working for the newly created independent outlets, others for the modernised successors of the previous giants (Rožukalne, 2013b). Despite these similarities, there were also clear differences in how their media sectors developed (see Jakubowicz and Sükösd, 2008; Metykova and Cisarova, 2009; Štětka, 2012; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013). Soon after Latvia gained independence from the Soviet Union, it began to absorb many elements of the Scandinavian media model. In Hungary, however, after a brief period of media freedom in the 1990s and early 2000s, the state imposed stricter control over the media.

The two countries' trajectories most apparently diverged with the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, which hit both of them heavily and drove out advertisers and foreign investors. This opened up opportunities for regional and local owners to buy up struggling media outlets at bargain prices (Urban, 2015). Under the pretext of market pressure, many previously dynamic media gave in to political pressure and commercially lucrative approaches, however low in quality, such as clickbait (Balčytienė et al., 2015; Lauk and Harro-Loit, 2016). Latvia's public broadcaster has nevertheless preserved its high standards, and a reasonable number of independent media as well as high-quality journalism have survived (Rožukalne, 2013b). In Hungary, meanwhile, the media landscape acquired oligarchic traits, and the relationships between owners and employees became patrimonial (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017b).

Recent authoritarian tendencies in Hungary resemble in many respects those which emerged in Russia a decade earlier (Agh, 2016; Oates, 2013; Vendil Pallin, 2017; Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2017b). This is less the case, however, with the ways in which journalistic communities in both countries responded to the new circumstances. Our previous research has shown that Russian journalists demonstrate a great level of creativity when elaborating strategies to circumvent the constraining side-effects which result from heightened censorship and self-censorship (Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2014; Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2017b).

Journalist interviews

An investigation of individual practices and day-to-day dynamics required a journalist-focused angle in our empirical approach; however, not necessarily in form of qualitative interviews. When researching a potentially sensitive and, in some respects, intangible topic, a mixed range of methods would have been the preferred route to collect material, not least to catch things unsaid (Ho, 2008). Interviews alone might only scratch the surface, especially where there is an audience that is highly suspicious of self-censoring journalists and, thus, prevents them from talking openly about their practices (Kohut, 2000). Despite this, how we initially encountered *adekvatnost'* was by pure chance, in the context of a project concerned with television content, rather than journalism (Hutchings and Tolz, 2015). The richest accounts in our latest interviews with Hungarian and Latvian journalists were again in many cases from those who responded to questions other than those directly related to self-censorship.

Besides self-censorship, the interviews raised questions about the current political and social climate and how this affects the media in general. This included working conditions and unionisation; how economic troubles impact journalists and their work; and how editorial boards interact with their owners. We conducted semi-structured interviews, 15 in Hungary (in December 2017) and 14 in Latvia (in April 2018). When sampling, we recruited journalists from different outlets; state and non-state, public and private, conservative and liberal as well as print, TV, radio and online media.[3]

In the analysis, we categorised the material into several themes. First, we identified the main elements that pointed to how, when and why journalists might censor themselves, according to their own narratives. Those statements appeared most frequently in answers relating to newsroom hierarchies, political influence on the daily work of journalists, and

financial pressures. Next, we explored the origins and causes of current phenomena, as experienced by our interviewees.

Hungary

The rising authoritarianism in Hungary has shown strong parallels with Russia (see, for instance, Krastev, 2018). More than a decade earlier, Vladimir Putin's rise to power was closely tied to attacks on the largest commercial television channel, NTV (Mickievicz, 2008: 242-264). When international investors retreated from Hungary in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, businessmen close to Viktor Orbán purchased struggling media outlets (Urban, 2016), a process Bajomi-Lázár (2014) calls 'media colonisation'. The subsequent oligarch-state dominance provided Orbán with a powerful base for self-promotion, something that was hugely decisive for his party's election victory in 2010 (Magyar, 2016). In addition, Orbán's government passed changes to the media law which now allows for even more state pressure on the independent media (Polyak and Nagy, 2015).

As was the case with Russia's journalistic community a decade earlier, in Hungary it has also became sharply polarised, with state- and oligarch-owned media counterposing oppositional media. Journalists who supported Orbán or were employed by outlets loyal to his regime quickly learned how to vociferously oppose those who were critically-minded. Things became more complicated when some oligarchs fell out with Orbán, as was the case with Lajos Simicska in 2015. The journalistic crews had to follow their owners' sudden U-turns. After Orbán's next election victory in 2014, any remaining trust among journalists eroded. Self-censorship was on the rise. According to a study by Urban (2017: 147), in 2015, a third of Hungarian journalists concealed or distorted information to protect their jobs. They also began to hold back information that might have negative repercussions and be at odds with the consensus in their camp in order to prevent the other side obtaining material that could be used against them. In some respects, journalism in Hungary is reminiscent of that in Turkey where self-censorship may be well-rehearsed but is nevertheless closely and painfully coupled with coercion and the fear of punishment (see Yesil, 2014), which is very close to what Elias called *Fremdzwänge*, that is, externally imposed.

Such gagging orders – some of them self-imposed, others ordered from above – have led to innovative practices. A number of journalists told us that they occasionally pass on material to colleagues from other outlets if they cannot publish them themselves. Among them was Viktor who works for a liberal online medium: 'When I have a story I really care about and I know for sure I can't get it out through my outlet, I'd rather have it published by a colleague elsewhere.' László, another liberal journalist, elaborated further: 'If you have a very valuable and exclusive source that you don't want to lose, the safest option is to pass on the material to someone in another outlet. That secures you this source for the future.'

Patrimonial relationships

Patrimonialism – in a Weberian sense – in media management not only affects journalists, but also the relationships between editors-in-chief and owners (Roudakova, 2017; Andersson and Wiik, 2013; Waisbord, 2013). Several of our interviewees referred us to the story of Gergely Dudás, the former editor-in-chief of *Index.hu,* a high-profile media owned by the oligarch Zoltán Spéder. Spéder was a close friend and confident of Viktor Orbán, from whom he regularly received highly lucrative state contracts, until the two fell out in 2015. Until then, Hungary's media did not touch Spéder, nor scrutinise his business empire; nor did Dudás in his role as the editor-in-chief of one of the media outlets owned by Spéder. Now a scandal ensued, and Dudás was taken to task over why he had never looked into Spéder's businesses.

Dudás defended himself in several op-eds, referring to his obligation to maintain impartiality. Had he not done so, he argued, this would have put his staff at risk. In addition, he had felt the need to show loyalty to Spéder (Dudás, 2016).

Some of the journalists we interviewed defended Dudás. Tiberiu, a former senior editor of an oligarch-owned media outlet, made it clear that he dislikes restricting both his own and his journalists' freedom of speech ('it's really disgusting, but that's just what it is'), but he feels obliged to do so to protect his staff and maintain his outlet's viability. Tiberiu explained that censorship and self-censorship are straightforward: 'It comes from the top, the owner, and then is passed down – first by myself.' Tiberiu defends such measures as principled: 'If you have moral problems with the owner, then you should never start working for them.' Such passionate loyalty is not unlike the situation observed by researchers in Asian countries, among them Malaysia and Indonesia (Tapsell, 2012: 299). It had taken Tiberiu some time, however, to develop such pragmatism. At first, he felt very uneasy when he received an interfering phone call from 'above': 'I used to simply say "no" when they called. But then I went back to the material, looked at it again and, more often than not, changed one thing or another, replaced a photo, changed the title, things like that.'

Liberal journalists tend to regard those who work for media which are owned by pro-government oligarchs as little more than propaganda soldiers. The latter are almost as critical of their liberal colleagues. 'What is the point of being unbiased if they are all selling themselves out to some kind of Soros, or the European Union?' asked Gábor rhetorically. Before switching to the state-owned newspaper *Magyar Idők,* this senior journalist held a high position in a liberal media outlet. 'Everyone is bad,' he said. 'He who owns the media will play the music; there cannot be any independent journalism.' Fatalist attitudes of this sort are not far off conspiratorial thinking, an important feature of authoritarian regimes (on conspiracy theories, see Yablokov, 2018). Such views were not confined to Gábor. Many other interviewees voiced the suspicion that there must be someone secretly pulling the strings in the background and pursuing a hidden agenda, especially when it came to scandalous revelations.

Attila's strategy: dulling down

Attila started his career in a conservative newspaper in 1990, just after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and has been there ever since. He assured us that back then, in the 1990s, nobody would have changed a single word in a text, certainly not without having first discussed it with the author:

> Today they do this all the time, without consulting you. Of course, when you experience such things day in day out, you start adapting to it and censoring yourself. I've come to understand that they don't mean it personally; it's just what they have to do. It is also implicit that, if I want to keep my job, I'd better play along. That doesn't mean that they gag you completely. I could say what I think, but we all know that it's pointless.

For Attila, things are particularly awkward because he has a passion for Russia which is not shared by the owner of his outlet. Attila would love to write more stories about Russia, but the owner's dislike of the country is so strong that he would never allow anything to be published which did not paint Russia in a very grim light. This is obviously not what Attila wants.

Attila's solution is curious: when he writes about Russia, he produces texts that are utterly boring and have the most uninspiring titles. This seems somewhat ironic if we compare the situation with that of journalists in the West, and what they give as the major reason for

censorship and self-censorship: they often do not follow up on a story they deem newsworthy because they think their editors will find it too boring or complicated and hence not commercially viable (Kohut, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2000). For Attila, apparently boring journalism is his main chance to get a text he really cares about pass through unnoticed. 'It is a lame compromise, but at least the text will be published. But it is probably better than trying to be a revolutionary – and as a result not be published at all.'

Anticipatory obedience

Like their Russian colleagues, Hungary's journalists have been exposed to numerous rapid changes in ownership and editorial instructions. As long as the oligarch Simicska was friends with Orbán, his newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* was completely accepted by the government. 'We used to read every word from Orbán's lips and like autopilots attacked the opposition', remembered Máté, one of the paper's junior writers: 'Once Simicska and Orbán didn't get along anymore, everything was turned upside-down. Now Simicska is in love with [the far-right party] *Jobbik* and starting from page 2 we only cover news about them.'

A consequence of having to keep pace with permanent changes is anticipatory obedience, which is the key for developing *adekvatnost'*. The freelance journalist Ferenc socialises with journalists from both opposition and state-aligned media. He thinks that many journalists from both sides massively exaggerate the level of risk they could potentially face if they fell a little out of line. Almost the only topic Hungarian authorities are seriously bothered about, Ferenc said, is shady financial deals. ('True, if you write about anything like that, this could really backfire and destroy not only you, but your whole outlet.'). Otherwise, he thinks journalists could be much more daring, especially state-aligned journalists: 'They would get away with a lot. Our government has a strong authoritarian touch, but they have never crossed a certain line. They rarely fire someone.'

Self-censorship is truly crucial for survival where one probably least expects it: in the opposition media. The reason for this is not political, but market-related. While state-loyal media receive government support, many of opposition media outlets depend on the loyalty of their audiences. Given Hungary's small population of 10 million, and that the complexity of the Hungarian language means that it is spoken by few foreigners, these are by definition limited in numbers. Accordingly, as noted by Bajomi-Lázár (2017a: 57), private media in Hungary generally promote and reinforce their audiences' views. Audiences with oppositional views expect distinct political approaches and are unlikely to forgive journalists who break with these. This is not unlike how Lee and Lin (2006) describe press journalism in Hong Kong. Readers expect journalists to monitor those in power. They see newspapers as a platform for public debate. The print media market in Hong Kong is highly competitive, and so media outlets must meet readers' expectations. For similar reasons, Hungary's opposition journalists and editors, especially those of small outlets, are very anxious about how to tailor their content in order not to upset their core readers and viewers.

Latvia

After 1991, Scandinavia sought to establish influence in the Baltic region. To bring the region's media infrastructure up-to-date, media businesses and NGOs from the Scandinavian countries provided know-how, learning technologies, media training and investments (Balčytienė, 2009). A few of our respondents were critical of this interference and saw the Scandinavians' main agenda as profit-making rather than investing (Balčytienė and Lauk, 2005; Štětka, 2012). Most, however, assessed their engagement rather positively. Marta used to work for the daily newspaper *Diena*, then owned by the Swedish Bonnier group. Until 2008, *Diena* was the

flagship media outlet in the market of commercial quality journalism. Marta appreciated the training courses *Diena* ran and the high ethical standards they introduced. Emilija, a journalist now working for the finance newspaper *Ir*, remarked that 'we had Nordic media trainers before we got Nordic banks. They taught us everything: from basic ethics to storytelling and specific examples of business writing.'

After the 2008 financial crisis, Latvian journalists found themselves in a similar situation to their Hungarian colleagues: their outlets were purchased by domestic oligarchs who soon came to use their new assets for their own economic and political goals. International investors retreated (see, for example, Rožukalne, 2012b, 2013b). In 2009, Bonnier sold *Diena* to an unnamed company registered offshore. Later it was revealed that the buyers were Latvian business tycoons with a highly dubious reputation (The American Latvian Organization, 2012). Their lack of ethics was soon apparent in simple journalistic everyday life. A range of practices re-appeared which had long been thought to be features of the past, among them hidden advertising.

The Russian question

Almost all of our respondents mentioned the difficulties they experienced when covering Russia-related topics and trying not to alienate the large Russian-speaking minority who make up one third of Latvia's population. For centuries there has been a small minority of ethnic Russians in Latvia, mostly consisting of political and religious exiles. The number more than tripled during the Soviet occupation from 1944 to 1948, and many stayed on after the war. Unlike in Lithuania, where the large Russian community has been successfully integrated, the Latvian authorities are still anxious about the loyalty of ethnic Russians to Moscow and their potential to stir up domestic conflict.

This situation requires great sensitivity from those engaged in agenda-setting, particularly in public media (Petrova, 2017; on Eastern Europe in general, see Voltmer, 2013). During the time of our fieldwork in Latvia, the public media's advisory board criticised a team of reporters for allegedly exerting 'Russian propaganda'. The contentious issue was a photograph illustrating a report on the MH17 plane which was hit by a rocket over the Donbass region in July 2014. The reporters wanted a photograph depicting the plane's black box. The best image they could find was from the Russian state-aligned news agency *Sputnik*, a source which the advisory board deemed unacceptable. The incident left all sides disgruntled.

Conflict lines between Russians and Latvians are particularly stark when media products touch upon Latvia's traumatic twentieth-century history. A particularly emotional date in the calendar of the Russian-speaking population is the 9th of May, the day on which Russians commemorate Soviet victory in the Second World War. Every year crowds of Russian speakers gather around the Soviet-built liberator statue (a memorial which actually pre-dates not only May 1945, but also the 1944 occupation of Latvia by Soviet forces). Many of those commemorating the event share Russia's nationalist attitudes. Elvita described some of the many challenging issues she encounters year after year when covering the commemoration:

> I have to weigh every word and have to think hard about ways to approach the coverage without offending anybody's feelings. After all, some of the people who join the gathering at the memorial might even have experienced those times. Then again, we mustn't forget that Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union, so for many 9 May triggers very traumatic memories. All this leaves public TV (and me as the senior editor) with the tricky task of doing justice to all these emotions. Along the way I might easily censor myself.

Commercial pressure

Self-censoring practices were most clearly manifested in interviews with journalists who work in the commercial sector. Areas that generate solid profits for local businessmen as well as benefits for politicians are particularly affected by such pressures (Šulmane, 2011). Dzintara, previously a television reporter at a private channel, told us about her experience when producing a programme about shockingly low sanitary standards in a large supermarket chain (which is reminiscent of an incident reported by Tapsell for Indonesia, 2012: 239). Dzintara knew perfectly well that the chain was one of the channel's main advertisers, but that did not hold her back. The management responded sharply and without delay. They first froze Dzintara's and her colleagues' salaries for a couple of weeks. Eventually they shut down the programme. Dzintara was dismissed and became a persona non-grata on Latvia's media job market for a couple of years.

Repressive measures of the sort Dzintara experienced are rare. This is partly because journalists do not often take such risks, but act in the spirit of *adekvatnost'*. Subsequently, owners do not usually feel they need to resort to active coercion and repression. This reinforces a patrimonial relationship as laid out by Max Weber. Paula is the editor-in chief of a specialist magazine in a highly lucrative business field. The board of trustees who sponsor the magazine have never intervened in her work. This has not been necessary, she said. Paula did not need an explanation of what we mean by *adekvatnost'*. She knows it inside out. For example, she would never write positively about her board members' competitors. Her staff have internalised all of the major informal rules as well as she has, without ever having required a briefing. 'Nobody needs to be told twice', Paula said, summarising the unspoken codes of practice around self-regulation and self-censorship. These, again, were not unlike those collected by Tapsell from Indonesian journalists, who have also never had to be reprimanded (2012: 240). the lightness of journalists' behaviour is so deeply internalised that it has long become a *Selbstzwang*, as Elias put it, something not perceived as externally imposed.

Latvia's business structure determines certain hierarchies with regards to self-censoring pressures. The country is in a key position to play an important and lucrative role in commercial transportation across the Baltic Sea and so the cargo business is high up in the hierarchy. Sofija, a journalist in her early thirties, told us: 'You have to be very careful what you say about transit-related issues. Trade cargo is a huge market and all oligarchs have stakes in this business.' Sofija was brought up as a Latvian speaker. Her English is fluent thanks to her school and university education. Given her youth, the Russian language has never played a role in her life, nor has learning it ever appealed to her. Towards the end of our interview, we mentioned how we initially became aware of *adekvatnost'*. Despite her very limited knowledge of Russian, Sofija got very agitated when she heard the term. She instantly understood all the nuances of the word. More importantly, she could very much relate to it. This did not mean that she had ever used *adekvatnost'* actively herself; rather, she felt that the term expressed so much of what she had experienced in her practice as a journalist, but what she never knew how to call.

Sofija then told us her own experience of *adekvatnost'*. For a time, she worked in a private media, a period in her life which she recalled as being both useful and painful. In a country as small as Latvia a journalist must know which politician has stakes in what business, she explained: 'With regards to them, you might make a mistake once, maybe twice, but after that never again.' After a dreadful experience when she was repeatedly intimidated so that she would refrain from reporting on a commercial scandal, Sofija left private media for a high-status job as presenter in public media (on commercialisation of Latvian media, see, for example, Rožukalne, 2012b). Although her work life became less frightening, she said that this skill – 'knowing the rules of the game' – had helped her ever since to avoid trouble, for example in such matters as libel cases. As if she had acquired the most suitable habitus in a Bourdieusian

sense, she knows perfectly well how to choose her topics pragmatically, what to say and what to discuss. The most important thing is to not become too confident in her seemingly powerful position and get carried away with experimentation. *Adekvatnost'* is part of her professional being. For example, when choosing guests for her show, she never takes great risks. Her assessment of the guests' capacity to be 'appropriate' and 'reasonable' [*adekvatnyi*] is the most decisive factor. Much of her judgment relies on 'gut feeling'.

Conclusion

One reason why Sofija responded so strongly to the term *adekvatnost'* might lie in her country's history. After the Soviet occupation of Latvia at the end of the Second World War, a large Russian population stayed on. This meant that Latvians had dealings with Russians on a daily basis (and still have), something of which Hungarians, who enjoyed more freedom in the Cold war period, had less experience. Given these circumstances, Sofija could have had substantial exposure to the Russian language, even though she never learned it. What contradicts this explanation is that *adekvatnost'* became Sofija's second nature – or habitus, to use Bourdieu's term – while she was working for a private media holding which traded almost exclusively with Europe. Sofija is in her early 30s, while the Hungarian journalists we interviewed are around a decade older. They were professionally socialised in the liberal climate of the 1990s. For them Orbán came as a massive shock, the consequences of which they still cannot quite deal with. Their journalism is intertwined with political activism (see Rantanen, 2013: 264). Their habitus is less 'mediating' habitus than the one embodied by Sofija (see Philpotts, 2012: 60), who perceives *adekvatnost'* as exactly the same as her Russian colleagues do: a 'sense for the game' which, when played correctly, allows for great freedom in one's day-to-day life as a journalist.

Sofija's familiarity with *adekvatnost'* challenges the commonly-held idea that in countries with a historical legacy of state-led censorship the main reasons for journalists to resort to self-censorship are illiberal oppression and the arbitrary application of repressive legislation (McNair, 1994; Becker, 2004; Pasti, 2005; Lipman, 2005; Simon, 2006; Lipman, 2014). Alongside all powerful media markets, the liberalisation of the economy and media oligarchisation have become inseparable in Hungary, Latvia and Russia – a dynamic not dissimilar to that in several highly developed, semi-authoritarian Asian economies (Tapsell, 2012: 229).

This pairing of state-led control and a media landscape dominated by media tycoons destroys two myths: first, that high marketisation and aggressive state interference are opposites, and second, that censorship is a binary phenomenon, either being generated through state repression or through commercial demands. Today, instead of suffering from the staggering transformation to liberal democracy, many post-socialist countries display the features of an advanced crony media market, dominated by government-loyal media tycoons. In Russia, this process started in the aftermath of the 1998 collapse of the rouble; in Hungary and Latvia it took place a decade later, with the onset of the 2008 economic crisis.

The dynamic of *adekvatnostisation* might have important implications for the study of media and press freedom well beyond Eastern Europe. Economic troubles loom large over the media markets in Western Europe and, politically, their liberal democracies are increasingly challenged by populism (Grattan, 2008). As a result, the study of censorship and self-censorship in (semi-)authoritarian countries with strong populist features (such as Hungary, Poland and Russia) and distinctive post-2008-crisis oligarchic dominance over the media market (such as The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Latvia) could provide insights into where journalism in many Western European countries, if not globally, may be heading. One feature to be studied could be the appearance of something similar to

adekvatnost' and dynamics of *adekvatnostisation*: that is, self-censoring practices among journalists which, with the allowances they make for individual creativity, are particularly difficult to break. Such a 'reversed' perspective on things – to look at 'the East' to understand what might be happening in 'the West' – would in many respects be a game changer for media studies, politics, sociology, area studies and beyond.

Endnotes

1 In a follow-up research project in 2015, we tested the concept of *adekvatnost'* on Russian media managers. Similarly, albeit on a different level of hierarchy and agency, they all turned out to have developed sophisticated strategies to handle and execute (informal, not articulated and often randomly changing) Kremlin policies, without having any guidelines to follow, and without the policies themselves being particularly clear (for a similar phenomenon outside Russia, see Lee and Chan, who researched self-censorship in Hong Kong, 2009: 124). Hardly any them felt seriously restricted in their freedom (Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2017a). Their role in the patrimonial system is 'mediating' (Philpotts, 2012); they are subordinated to the Kremlin and their owners but demand *adekvatnost'* from their editors and journalists (see also Skjerdal, 2010: 114).

2 To be engaging and entertaining is mandatory in a controlled industry such Russia's no less (Tolz and Teper, 2018). As with many authoritarian states (for China, see Tong, 2009: 596), Russian federal television channels are state-aligned, but not entirely state-funded. As they are competing for advertisers, they are reliant on being popular amongst viewers. Hence, it is crucial that the channels as a whole succumb to logic of Weberian patrimonialism and strike the right balance between political obedience and creativity. For the study of journalism this means that most media products in Russia are as much an expression of a journalist's personality and tastes as of the Kremlin's whims or those of the most powerful editors (Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2014).

3 All the interviewees in Hungary were acting journalists, and three had previously worked as editors-in-chief. Two of them worked in the state media, the others in media outlets which are either independent or owned by a media mogul. Eight respondents worked for online media, five for newspapers and two for television. Only one of our Hungarian interviewees was female, while two were under the age of 30. As for Latvia, two of our 14 interviewees had left their journalist careers behind and were now running non-governmental organisations. Of the remaining twelve, seven worked for public media and six were either acting or former editors-in chief. Three worked for the radio, four for television, three for newspapers and magazines, and two for online media. Nine were female and four were under the age of 30. We have changed all names to ensure their anonymity.

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