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Ilya Yablokov & Vasily Gatov

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Broadcasting through the (New) Iron Curtain: Practices, Challenges, and Legacies of Russia's Independent Media in Exile

Ilya Yablokov[a] and Vasily Gatov[b]

[a]School of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK; [b]USC Annenberg, Los Angeles, USA

ABSTRACT

The Russo-Ukrainian war and the Kremlin's military censorship have made independent reporting from within Russia impossible. After a few weeks of the conflict, all institutional journalism was forced into exile. Funding sources, access to informants, and the ability to provide objective conflict coverage quickly vanished. Now in exile, Russian journalists have become entirely reliant on donor funding to sustain operations and on new technologies to reach audiences inside Russia. Over 18 months in exile, we conducted more than 50 interviews with editors-in-chief, senior correspondents, and individual journalists adapting to these new circumstances. We asked about audience access, funding opportunities, reliance on new technologies, and organisational challenges within newsrooms. This paper argues that these new conditions have underscored pre-existing issues within Russian media while introducing challenges brought about by the war and exile. However, in a global context, these issues closely mirror those faced by exiled journalists worldwide.

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Introduction

The first weeks of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February–March 2022 not only marked the beginning of the largest conflict in Europe since WWII but also the moment when all institutional journalism operating independently of the Kremlin went into exile. Two weeks into the war, the Kremlin passed the "Law on Discrediting the Army"—a form of military censorship where anyone sharing information about the war in Ukraine not approved by the Russian state could be punished with a prison term. This effectively outlawed all independent media. Within weeks, hundreds of journalists fled the country to avoid imprisonment.

Entire editorial teams rapidly relocated to the capitals of the Baltic states—Riga, Vilnius, and Tallinn—or to those of the South Caucasus republics—Tbilisi and Yerevan. These locations were closest to Russia, had existing infrastructure for broadcasting, and

CONTACT Ilya Yablokov i.yablokov@sheffield.ac.uk

offered relatively affordable accommodation and equipment rentals for newsrooms. Later, many media outlets moved from Tbilisi and Yerevan to the EU, seeking greater support and security. By the end of 2023, 93 Russian media organisations in exile were operational (JX Fund 2023).

The exodus of Russian independent journalists in 2022 and their relocation abroad presents a valuable opportunity to explore the challenges exiled journalists face immediately after expulsion from their home country. It offers a snapshot of the problems faced by this community and facilitates a study of exiled journalists' practices within transnational media work (Esther and Thomas 2024). This knowledge serves both academic and practical needs: authoritarian regimes are on the rise, and more exiled media from countries other than Russia will appear. Western politicians, governments, donor organisations clearly need better and deeper understanding what happens in the exiled professional communities.

Moreover, research on exiled media traditionally focuses on journalists from the Global South. Few examples of exiled journalistic communities exist in countries geographically associated with the Global North. As Zelizer (2015) noted, journalists "continue[s] to centre on challenges firmly rooted in the global North." The case of Russian media in exile thus represents a state of liminality. While culturally Russia can be viewed as a European country, it is rarely perceived as part of the Western world. Russia's current political direction frames it as a leading force in the global anti-Western movement (Snegovaya, Kimmage, and McGlynn 2023), placing the Russian media community in the position of refugees within the EU. This adds an additional element of novelty into the research on exiled journalists. This article provides an in-depth look at how (semi-) European journalists in exile strive to protect their profession and reinvent their personal and professional identities. It focuses on the factors that shape life within the community and interactions with external stakeholders.

Exiled Journalism and Renegotiation of Professional Identity

Skjerdal (2010) identifies exiled media as (1) those operating in exile due to repressive actions by their home governments, (2) favouring alternative journalism approaches, and (3) reaching a wider audience that transcends geographic borders. In a globalised world, exiled media represent an element of transnational media flow (Pidduck 2012), showcasing the intricate connections between internal affairs and external stakeholders who can influence the life of a seemingly isolated regime.

The map of countries whose independent media have gone into exile is expanding, with Hong Kong being the latest case (Koo 2022). Scholars traditionally concentrate on Africa (Esther and Thomas 2024; Frere 2017; Odindo 2021; Ogunyemi 2017; Skjerdal 2011), East Asia (Crete-Nishihata and Tsui 2023; Pidduck 2012), and the Middle East (Arafat 2021; Badran and Smets 2021; Porlezza and Arafat 2022), while comparative studies are also beginning to gain attention (Cook 2016; Dodds, Arafat, and Yeung 2024; O'Loughlin and Schafraad 2016). The professional community also pays attention to exiled media (Marston 2023), with major organisations providing tools and training for these journalists (e.g., NEMO, International Journalists' Network).

The experience of exile disrupts the professional identity of journalists, forcing them to navigate a complex and contradictory terrain. For many, journalism is tied to the cultural,

social, and political fabric of their home countries and languages, where professional roles and identities are established. When journalists are exiled, this foundation is uprooted, and they must confront the challenge of redefining their professional identity in a foreign context (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). Although remote from their homeland, exiled media prioritise collecting information and influence changes within the country (Crete-Nishihata and Tsui 2023; Ogunyemi 2017). However, displacement often requires journalists to recalibrate their purpose. Reporting from exile often focuses on injustices, turning their work into resistance. While this advocacy draws attention to critical issues, it blurs boundaries between journalism and activism, challenging ideals of neutrality and impartiality (Sarıaslan 2020; Skjerdal 2011).

Exile adds complexity, forcing journalists to adapt practices and priorities of their day to day work (Deuze 2005). They face challenges balancing activism with professional standards. The loss of touch with realities inside their home country may compromise the quality of their content, especially if their home country is divided by conflict (Esther and Thomas 2024; Geybulla 2023). These issues challenge journalistic integrity, requiring journalists to grapple with ethical dilemmas and maintain professional identities in politically charged environments. Despite these risks to lose balance, exiled journalists largely maintain professional standards, avoiding activism (O'Loughlin and Schafraad 2016). Professional training strengthens their loyalty to their professional identity (Nel 2010; Sherwood and O'Donnell 2016), though they remain challenged by the need to stay relevant to their home countries (Frere 2017).

Finally, exiled media exist in precarious socioeconomic and political conditions worldwide (Badran and Smets 2021; Osman 2017; Paret and Gleeson 2016). They rely on donors and struggle with financial insecurity, facing challenges of working conditions, economic risks, and psychological pressures (Cook 2016; Kotisova and de Jong 2024). These factors amplify challenges to professional identity, as financial insecurity can undermine their ability to remain true to journalistic values.

All these issues of renegotiation of professionalism in the global context are surfacing in the interviews with Russian exiled media analysed below. Although briefly some of the press publications about Russian journalism cover the fates of Russian exiled journalists (Gessen 2023; Myklebost 2023; Proekt 2022; Yablokov 2022) this article provides a clear yet detailed snapshot of the state of these affairs in the first months of the war.

Russian Exiled Journalism before Expulsion

The first war in Ukraine (2014–2015) solidified the Kremlin's control over the media, turning it into a blend of propaganda and entertainment designed to draw neutral audiences into a pro-Kremlin environment (Tolz and Teper 2018; Zeveleva 2018). Hostile media takeovers, staff purges, and market pressures reduced the quality of content (Kovalev 2021). Self-censorship, clickbait, and fear of crossing undefined Kremlin lines became key elements of daily work (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, and Nigmatullina 2020; Schimpfossl and Yablokov 2014). The Kremlin also developed infrastructure to control independent media. RosKomNadzor, the state censorship watchdog, targeted dissenting media, blocking websites deemed dangerous (IStories 2023). The state influenced online news by altering search engine algorithms and pressuring providers to favour state interests. Additionally, the Kremlin forced out foreign investors by limiting foreign ownership

in Russian media and news aggregators. Laws on foreign agents and undesirable organisations made foreign funding the reason for closures.

These changes forced several Russian independent media organisations into exile. First, *The Insider*, which exposed key Kremlin machinations, including evidence regarding the downing of MH17, relocated its headquarters to Riga in 2013. They were followed by *Meduza* in 2014, whose team left their previous project after a hostile takeover. Finally, after independent journalists faced mounting state pressure, two leading investigative outlets, *IStories* and *Proekt*, registered their media in Latvia and the U.S. in the late 2010s.

In the first days of the war in 2022, Russian media continued their broadcasts as usual, providing as much information as possible about the battles in Ukraine and protests across the country. On 28 February, RosKomNadzor began ordering Russian independent media to stop posting "lies" on their websites and social networks. By the end of February 2022, all independent media were blocked within Russia and could only be accessed via VPN applications.

Two of Russia's oldest independent media outlets were shut down. Radio *Echo of Moscow* was closed almost immediately after the war began, and its influential editor-in-chief, Alexey Venediktov, was labelled a foreign agent (The Moscow Times 2022). The oldest independent and investigative newspaper still operating in Russia, *Novaya Gazeta*, led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dmitry Muratov, made the difficult decision to purge all articles that did not comply with military censorship requirements, leaving the word "war" blank in each article. On 28 March 2022, Muratov announced that *Novaya Gazeta* would halt operations until the war's end to retain its publishing licence. Despite this, the team continued to publish news on their website and in PDF format weekly, sending it via email to subscribers.

The threat of violence and imprisonment forced many journalists to flee; by 7 March 2023, approximately 150 journalists had left Russia (Proekt 2022). And many more were to follow them.

Methodology

Based on the issues experienced by global community of exiled journalists—lack of communication with target audiences, identity issues, shortage of funding, reassessment of working conditions—we have looked at the state of Russian independent journalism within the first 18 months since they left Russia. We had the privilege of accessing most of the exiled Russian media in this period, although we started the interviews two months before the war in Ukraine for another project. The war changed our plans, but constant communication with our first group of respondents who left the country straight after the war began, as well as the ability to quickly amend the questionnaire and extend the list of respondents, allowed us to have a clear snapshot of the state of the art in the community.

Between December 2021 and September 2023, we conducted 52 interviews (12 before and 40 after February 2022). 34 semi-structured interviews were made face to face in the locations of the exiled media and the rest through the encrypted online messengers between July 2022 and March 2023. We employed a snowball sampling method to identify and recruit respondents within the exiled journalistic community. Given the dispersed and somewhat insular nature of this community, snowball sampling allowed us to

leverage initial connections to access a broader network of media professionals. This approach was particularly effective in fostering trust and securing referrals to additional respondents, ensuring a diversity of voices across various media formats and locations. By reaching journalists in different roles and settings, we were able to capture a more nuanced and comprehensive view of the challenges and trends experienced by the exiled professionals.

The choice of respondents was based on several criteria. The first criteria were professional role diversity. This diversity allowed us to explore a wide range of perspectives on adapting to exile, including decision-making challenges at the organisational level and practical difficulties faced by individual contributors. We spoke with editors-in-chief, senior correspondents, and individual journalists who found themselves in the new circumstances and were forced to navigate the new environment.

We also sought media type representation to include respondents from different formats and platforms, such as traditional television channels, social media, podcasts, and individual blogs and vlogs. This broad inclusion of media types enabled us to study the unique ways each format addresses audience engagement and content delivery outside of Russia.

Geographic accessibility guided our selection for in-person interviews, which were conducted in major hubs of exiled Russian media. For those in more remote locations or with logistical challenges, we conducted interviews via encrypted online messengers, ensuring both flexibility and data security. The interviews took place in Tbilisi and Yerevan (August 2022), Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, Prague, Riga and Vilnius (November 2022).

To ensure a balanced perspective, we incorporated gender diversity, aiming for a roughly equal gender split among respondents (45% female and 55% male).

At the preparatory stage, informed by the literature on exiled journalism, we have identified several umbrella themes that shaped our questionnaires: 1. Infrastructural issues 2. Financial issues 3. Content 4. Audience 5. Needs of the media in exile. The interview protocol focused on the following questions: What are the challenges, struggles and new opportunities of the independent media in exile? How efficient is their approach to communicate with audiences? What new approaches do they develop to be in touch with their audiences and attract new ones? How independent media in exile measure their audiences? What are the new tools that these media developed after 24 February? What are the immediate needs of the independent media in exile? What the new projects have appeared and how they differ from the previous media projects that were launched inside Russia? All interviews were conducted in Russian, recorded and transcribed by the authors. As all our respondents are public figures and often shared sensitive information with us, we have pseudonymised them, as well as at times changed gender and the profile of their media. We believe this is a sufficient way of protecting their identities.[1]

The interviews were analysed by the authors by the means of thematic analysis. We started with open coding to identify recurring ideas and develop themes directly from the data. Next, we re-read the transcripts, using a constant comparison process until no new themes surfaced. Through axial coding, we established new connections between categories defined in the initial phase, thereby enhancing theoretical understanding.

We acknowledge that some evidence originates from individual respondents; however, these insights illustrate trends echoed across multiple interviews. While potentially anecdotal alone, these accounts highlight recurring themes within the exiled media

community, offering concrete examples that reflect broader societal patterns. Where possible, we cross-referenced these accounts to ensure they represent larger dynamics rather than isolated cases.

Findings

Collapse of Traditional Business Models

Despite mounting pressures from the Russian state before the war, independent media learned to survive in a hostile environment. Some media fostered very loyal communities of readers who provided donations to support their operations. However, the rapid departure of journalists, along with Western sanctions isolating the Russian financial system, destroyed traditional business models and forced Russian exiled media to mostly rely on grants. For large and successful media outlets, grant funding covered about 50% of the annual budget, as they still had some funds in their bank accounts that they successfully transferred to foreign accounts. For smaller outlets, reliance on grants skyrocketed to 85% of the budget, with the rest covered by reader donations.

Unlike many of their exiled colleagues worldwide who struggle to make ends meet (Badran and Smets 2021; Esther and Thomas 2024), only a few Russian media experienced financial problems at the organisational level. Many received emergency funding from various international NGOs to assist with relocation, and extra funding was allocated to increase news output for Russian audiences. Ilya, editor-in-chief of an activist media initiative, admitted that the budget he planned to raise at the start of 2022 was two to three times lower than what he ultimately received that year. Other respondents shared similar experiences.

While the extra funding provided a temporary safety net, it quickly raised issues that their management had tried to foresee. For media with functional business models inside Russia, reliance on donor funding and the competition for it was frustrating.

> We constantly submit funding applications, but it takes a long time, or we simply can't write them [correctly] … . Some funders suggest that we don't need funding immediately; others suggest we should switch to hard news [instead of society and culture shows], says Marina

from a podcast studio that was profitable before the war. Another respondent, Olga, head of a small media outlet focused on Russian policy analysis, said that the six-month delay in grant application outcomes significantly slowed their work and future planning.

Donor funding is often tied to specific programmes or topics that media promise to develop and publish. For large media outlets with multiple staff members, this was manageable, but for small teams, program-tied funding presented a serious challenge. They stretched editorial resources to fulfil commitments while simultaneously funding core operations from the same grants. This rush to stay relevant for core audiences and use project funding to cover operational costs led many Russian media professionals to experience burnout.

> Short thematic grants are a nightmare. I spent three hours [yesterday] trying to figure out how to make ends meet. We took any money available on the market to pay our permanent staff. Some project funding ends abruptly, so I have to look for new funding at least three months before it runs out

admitted Lada, head of a popular news website. Added to this is the increased taxation in EU countries, which very few media professionals factored into their grant applications during their stays in Georgia and Armenia. Almost all respondents shared a common impression of the grant system: funders' applications are very detached from the reality in which Russian independent media operate. Some respondents were baffled by equality requirements. "There are many weird, highly bureaucratic, and strange elements [in the applications]. I always feel strange describing how this grant will impact gender relations inside Russia, regardless of the grant's focus," says Kirill, from a cross-platform digital media outlet. Others were shocked by grant funders' requests for invoices for every payment to freelancers inside Russia. One editor-in-chief recalled how a Swedish organisation offered a grant but requested a full audit of payments. "We have people inside Russia who work with us. We need to camouflage them [for safety]. We'll never pay them directly. Grant organisations rarely understand that … they come to the Russian market without understanding how it operates."

In anticipation of donor fatigue, which often affects exiled media after an initial growth period (Pidduck 2012; Woicjeszak, Brouilette, and Smith 2013), some entrepreneurial media found ways to diversify their income streams. Some focused on English-speaking audiences to generate donations from those without connections—and thus no fear of Russian state repression. Others launched book publishing ventures, and one respondent opened a new business in a country with a large influx of Russians. The sizable Russian-speaking diaspora in Georgia, Armenia, and Latvia became a small income source for newly founded outlets that turned their Telegram channels into the main source of news in Russian about their new countries of residence. These media professionals saw donor funding as a temporary, potentially addictive, and damaging solution for their businesses. "We saw our colleagues getting addicted to grants," says Alina, head of a regional online media outlet. "Honestly, we'd love to return to a commercial model. We see these grants as non-refundable investments."

However, very few media displayed similar entrepreneurial skills; as of August 2023, many Russian exiled media still relied on donor funding to survive until the end of the war (JX Fund 2023). By 2023, when some outlets we interviewed at the start of the war were denied funding, the mood had changed. "You can't write about political prisoners, because if you do, you'll get 500 views. You must write about mobilised conscripts' riots," complains Alexander, editor-in-chief of a human rights-focused media outlet. He and several others expressed concerns that the exiled media agenda is becoming sensationalised, while those who adhere to professional journalistic values receive less funding from donors who prioritise views, clicks, and shares. Stories on Putin's health or Kremlin intrigue receive many clicks, leading international donors to view these as successful investments. Consequently, media outlets seeking donor support are often pressured to sensationalise their content and thus risk jeopardising their professional ethics.

Audience Access and Interaction

Staying relevant and useful to target audiences in the host country is essential for all exiled media (Frere 2017; Odindo 2021). Maintaining close contact with loyal audiences is the primary purpose of exiled media's existence. As interviews showed, this was also a concern for Russian exiled media.

All respondents confirmed that a large portion of their audience remains in Russia despite mass conscription, repressive laws, and waves of emigration. Readers access independent media content via apps, websites, and various social networks.

Contrary to the common perception that the audiences of Russian independent media are primarily in capital cities, respondents claimed that most of their readers are in small and mid-sized towns across Russia, as far as they could tell from limited polls and YouTube metrics. Thus, staying relevant to these audiences is a top priority for exiled media, especially those previously based outside Moscow who aim to retain their core audience and expand to new ones.

> We were a regional media with a regional news agenda. All our news was tied to one region. My 30 years of experience were relevant to the audience there; I understand their problems. Now, I find myself in a completely new environment, shared Kirill.

His concerns were echoed by many of his colleagues. Some, like Marina, feared becoming *exiled* media without shared interests with people in Russia. Others, like Alina, showed resilience, distributing news across all available platforms. She emphasised that reaching all potential audiences was essential for her and her media outlet.

For exiled media, finding news stories that resonate with audiences in Russia is crucial. Many respondents emphasised that engaging regional audiences is mandatory to stay relevant and maintain loyalty. Dmitry, head of an investigative media outlet, proudly admitted that their content on mobilised men was viewed by 9 million people, 85% from the regions. "We need to find stories that resonate with the audience. After mobilisation began, we realised that many people have relatives on the front lines. This struck a chord."

By late 2023, most respondents claimed they understood their core audience, relying largely on pre-war research. They reported they could identify stories likely to generate engagement, which would then be shared with donors as evidence of success. This link between audience loyalty and engagement metrics reported to donors posed a challenge and became an inevitable part of the new reality for exiled media.

Highly dependent on donors' quantitative success metrics, many exiled media confessed that they were hesitant to experiment with topics or new ways of covering certain stories.

> If we change the message, our old audience won't read us, and new audiences won't find us. Few media outlets are willing to take this risk. I don't want to either. I don't even have tools to reach new audiences [inside Russia] … and authorities constantly make us invisible to new audiences, admitted Alexander.

To meet donors' expectations, some media began adding sensationalist content. Several respondents expressed concern about this. "It's hard to be popular without tabloid methods, yet keep the quality … You could report on Ramzan Kadyrov's death regularly and do fine click-wise, but our media can't use clickbait," continued Alexander. His media outlet, which reports on human rights abuses in Russia, maintains open communication channels with its audience. They produce YouTube shows, have dedicated follower groups, and Alexander has a large social media presence. Yet, he feels somewhat disconnected from how his colleagues maintain audience relationships.

Respondents also noted that echo chambers hurt their popularity, making it hard to expand beyond them from foreign locations. Although echo chambers are a broader

phenomenon of the social media age (Arguedas et al. 2022), polarisation in Russia is further fuelled by state propaganda and the elitist nature of much liberal media, which has historically focused on readers in major cities and favoured opposition politicians. Consequently, the market for exiled media's news is often limited to the most loyal audiences.

Finally, many Russian media recognised that their status as exiled outlets made them vulnerable to criticism from local communities in host countries. In December 2022, the major Russian television channel *TV Rain* found itself at the centre of a scandal when one of its anchors made misleading on-air comments, suggesting that some reports helped Russian mobilised soldiers improve frontline conditions (Roth 2022). Latvian authorities immediately revoked the channel's broadcasting licence, and *TV Rain* staff lost visas and work permits. Although the channel successfully relocated to Amsterdam with the support of the Dutch media tycoon Derk Sauer, the quick escalation and cyberbullying faced by Russian journalists in the Baltic states prompted exiled media to carefully choose their words, reporting angles, and guest speakers.

Globally, carefully curating loyal audiences has proven a successful survival strategy for exiled media (Dodds, Arafat, and Yeung 2024). It's not just the source of income, but the strategic move to solidify the core of audience and engage them into the news production cycle. Russian exiled media are no exception.

Most of the media we interviewed work closely with their audiences, fostering community. They use Telegram bots, email subscriptions, and direct messages on social media to avoid state censorship mechanisms, interacting with audiences to secure financial support, fact-check, or gather additional details for ongoing projects. Similar to exiled Tibetan media that use "communicators" to gather facts (Crete-Nishihata and Tsui 2023), Russian exiled media rely on their most loyal readers to help maintain community hubs inside Russia and share news, as well as to assist human rights activists in communicating their struggles to the world.

Some respondents noted that audience members often reach out to share information, knowing they can trust the media. "There's a growing demand for community. People want support, and we want to provide that," says Liza, head of an investigative media outlet.

> We started as a neutral media, distanced from activism, but now is the time to take action. Everyone needs community and the chance to work together. Pure news media isn't enough. If it's safe, the audience will join in on collaborative work.

Content Issues

Meeting donors' expectations with clickbait stories is just one of the challenges faced by exiled Russian media. Deciding which news to cover and how to package it for audiences both inside and outside Russia amidst the war and digital censorship has also become increasingly difficult. Additionally, operating from exile dramatically increases the risk of biased reporting, which could jeopardise relations with audiences and lead to editorial mistakes (Frere 2017). Moreover, after 18 months of war, both audiences and journalists have developed "war fatigue."

All our respondents noted that war-related content has been receiving fewer clicks, even from core audiences. "The war has become routine," said the editor-in-chief of a

medium-sized media outlet, who admitted they had found a way to maintain interest. They made the war in Ukraine a central element of their media interface, providing daily updates on the front page for readers seeking quick information about major developments. Other media professionals shared that the first drone attacks on Moscow generated hundreds of thousands of clicks, but soon dropped to almost zero. The brief spike in interest following Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny in June 2023 and his sudden death in a plane crash later that year quickly faded within a week.

Keeping audiences engaged amidst an ongoing war and bleak prospects for Russia's future under Putin remains a key challenge for all Russian exiled media. One type of war-related content that still attracts audience interest is human-centred stories, particularly personal narratives with positive outcomes. Some respondents noted that stories of returned soldiers, acts of mutual support, or reports of fallen conscripts from specific regions significantly drive viewership.

> Stories like "Mariia Ivanovna raised funds to pay the fine for anti-war protests," anti-war or anti-bureaucrat activism, regional identity, and efforts to survive amid the war [all drive clicks]. People in Russia aren't pretending the war isn't happening. It's all bleak, but people can't keep building their lives around it after 18 months, said Elena

the founder of a regional media outlet.

Being in exile means that core audiences within Russia could lose touch with these media outlets. Therefore, exiled media management puts extra effort into maintaining connections with journalists on the ground, who can supply stories or verify facts.

At the same time, operating from exile allows reporters to speak freely without fear of imprisonment. As one experienced journalist from a remote Russian region recalled:

> It was psychologically difficult working inside Russia [recently]. I was worried that my journalists could say something that might land them in jail … Now, I don't need anyone's permission for content. My freedom is limited only by my resources and the risks faced by those who work for me inside Russia. And, of course, the risks to our respondents, which we must never forget.

Exile has also reduced the pressure on journalists to self-censor regarding Russian politics—an issue that has haunted them for the past two decades as they catered to Kremlin interests or those of media owners (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2020). For many editors-in-chief, exile has fostered creativity and boldness. As one editor recalled, "If I were in Russia, I wouldn't have been able to send out a newsletter with an op-ed calling for military commissariats to be set on fire … In that regard, our relocation has had a positive effect on our creativity."

The Big Tech's Impact on Russia's Exiled Journalism

A few days into the war with Ukraine, the Russian government launched widespread censorship, blocking domestic access to independent media websites. This move was predictable as the Kremlin faced unexpected casualties and losses of manpower in Ukraine. However, what independent Russian journalists did not expect was the purge of Russian independent media by Western tech companies, which cut off services, putting at risk media operations and their connection to audiences at a crucial historical moment. Software companies refused to serve Russian users and shut down email

subscription apps. Google halted payments for YouTube views, cutting off a significant portion of income (Sky 2022). Big Tech did block Kremlin-affiliated media on major social platforms, but it also indiscriminately restricted war-related content produced by Russian users, affecting both state-affiliated accounts and accounts of exiled Russian media (Antoniuk 2022). "This is a curse. It's like hitting yourself over the head. During the Cold War, 'enemy voices' were jammed inside the Soviet Union; now, 'the voices' are jamming themselves. It's nonsense," says Tatyana, head of a Germany-based YouTube channel.

The loss of control over news distribution raised concerns among journalists. Some media outlets switched to email subscriptions to ensure that their messages reached their core audiences. However, the reliance on social media channels—when all websites are blocked—led to constant worry about the role of algorithms in content distribution. Many independent media chose Instagram as their primary social network for two main reasons. First, light-touch lifestyle content attracted audiences previously uninterested in current affairs, and journalists hoped Instagram's algorithms would help them reach these audiences, thereby expanding their reach. Second, Instagram's 10-image carousel posts allowed for a mix of visuals and text, delivering both graphic and informative content to as many viewers as possible. However, algorithms ultimately let Russian media down.

The algorithmic distribution of news in an environment where every click or share of news could be punished by state repression significantly reduced the reach of Russian independent media. The Kremlin's policy of labelling independent media as "foreign agents" or "undesired organisations" led many Russians to adopt "stealth mode," consuming news without engaging publicly.

Russia-based users stopped interacting with these outlets' content because every click or share could lead to a prison term or a hefty fine (Vandoorne and Bell 2023). Lower engagement rates meant that posts were less likely to appear in users' newsfeeds or in search engine results.

> Formally, Google indexes us, but we don't know how its algorithms work … We don't exist on this platform. We were never extremely popular, like *Meduza*, because the more popular you are, the more visible you are. After everything that's happened, Google doesn't bring any visitors to us, says Alexander.

As a result, many Russian media, though technically accessible, ended up effectively shadow-banned from their potential audience.

The Kremlin's troll factories further compounded the challenges that many exiled media faced with Big Tech.

> The Kremlin sent trolls to block us on Facebook and Google. Our ads became hidden. We're online, but no one can see us. We published an investigation into genocide in Ukraine, and if we had ads, it would have been seen by millions on YouTube, but Google listened to the Kremlin trolls' complaints, says Lada.

Technological measures and legislative actions—broadly termed digital authoritarianism—have severed exiled media from their audiences (Yablokov and Solovyeva 2022). Websites were blocked by state censorship watchdog and internet providers, while severe penalties for engaging with opposition media content diminished their online popularity, which, in turn, hurt their social media presence. To protect readers from

Kremlin laws, many Russian exiled media turned off comments or likes on social media posts. As a result, social media algorithms failed to detect their popularity and demoted their visibility. All respondents claimed they lost at least a third of their pre-war audience.

Intracommunity Issues

The Kremlin and Big Tech are not the only forces disrupting the Russian exiled media community. The personal trauma of relocation, along with conflicts within the media community, negatively impacts the psychological well-being of exiled media professionals worldwide (Kotisova and de Jong 2024). The Russian case follows a similar pattern.

The abrupt relocation from Russia left many reporters feeling isolated within the bubbles of the Russian media diaspora—people they knew in their previous lives in Russia. Shared experiences of relocation and the intense work required in the first year of war created strong bonds among small groups within the exiled media diaspora. However, these bonds rarely extended to the wider community of exiled Russian journalists. They trusted their friends but seldom their colleagues.

Many respondents expressed frustration over the lack of solidarity and mutual support; few were willing to share skills, resources, or even mention the names of other media outlets in their reports.

> I can see there's a stop list for my name and my media in some Russian exiled media … They think we are young and don't trust our work. But in fact, they're not confident about competing with us, Lada shares.

The two European cities hosting the most Russian exiled media—Riga and Vilnius—showcase the segmentation within this community. Several respondents noted that they were part of isolated bubbles with little intention to collaborate with other local media. "In Riga, everyone sits in bubbles. There's no such thing in Vilnius. We're all friends here. However, everyone hates Meduza for various reasons," says Alexander, who is based in Vilnius. When asked about using *Reforum*, a newly opened venue in Vilnius offering a free recording studio, a small conference space, and coworking facilities, Alexander responded sceptically. He prefers to pay to use the Belarusian diaspora centre's studio, avoiding interactions with other Russian media professionals based in Vilnius.

This lack of solidarity among Russian media professionals is not new. It has characterised the profession in Russia for decades, with journalists often favouring individual strategies for survival, career advancement, and coping with authoritarianism (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2017) Rare attempts of solidarity appeared (Slavtcheva-Petkova 2018) but rarely had a massive impact on the community. Attempts to form a professional union or establish a unified code of ethics repeatedly failed. When the war began, each editorial team evacuated independently, with no assistance from other journalistic teams already operating abroad in Eastern Europe or the South Caucasus (e.g., Tbilisi).

In exile, many journalists faced financial, legal, and identity crises. Despite financial support from donors and governments directed at media organisations, individual journalists experienced precarious work conditions similar to their peers in other countries (Badran and Smets 2021; Rick and Hanitzsch 2024). To survive, many took on multiple

jobs to make ends meet. "The daily routine—which is essentially your work—isolates you from others: you don't speak to anyone, you just try to make enough money to pay for the damn flat," says Irina, a solo journalist who runs her YouTube vlog and appears as an anchor on other YouTube shows.

The intense workload in 2022—transferring from Moscow, constantly chasing donations and grants, and juggling grant applications, new living arrangements, and visas to avoid a return to Russia—led many journalists, like Irina, to burn out. By 2023, as the war became routine and clicks and views dropped dramatically, many journalists faced a morale crisis. As Svetlana, the founder of an online news outlet, shared, some of her staff were exhausted from publishing war-related news amidst the stalemate between Ukrainian and Russian armies. They searched for meaning in their work and took every mention of their media by colleagues or stakeholders as praise.

A recurring concern among respondents was their legal status in host countries, highlighting the profession's precarity (Lori 2017). The initial move of many exiled media to South Caucasus countries was straightforward at first due to a lack of visa requirements. However, as months passed, many respondents expressed heightened concerns for their safety. With thousands of new immigrants from Russia, these countries became hotspots for intelligence agencies monitoring Russian opposition, including the independent media.

Midway through our fieldwork, we observed a gradual relocation of our respondents to the EU—Berlin, Paris, and Amsterdam—where governments issued humanitarian visas and adopted relatively welcoming policies toward Russians. However, the transfer from Tbilisi and Yerevan to the EU was far from smooth, with many journalists waiting for months, often without passports or visas. This uncertainty created tensions, as authorities in Georgia and Armenia could potentially collaborate with the Russian government to arrest and deport these journalists.

Several senior media managers noted that after 18 months in exile and ongoing bureaucratic pressures from local authorities, their staff began to feel nostalgic for their past lives in Russia.

> Many want the same quality of life they had in Moscow. But very few realize there's no Moscow as they knew and loved. The loss [of home], the distance from family—these have a huge impact on our staff; it's painful. Yet few realize they live in a new reality, says Sergey

a senior media manager.

At the same time, individual journalists found themselves bound to exile: working for exiled media organisations turned many of them into criminals in Russia, effectively barring them from returning. Simultaneously, their work status in the EU was tied to their employer, leading them to show loyalty to their managers and editorial decisions, even when they disagreed with them.

Nostalgia, coupled with local criticisms and anti-Russian sentiments within political and intellectual elites, even led to the resurgence of imperialist attitudes within some Russian exiled newsrooms—a trend that management sought to quickly counter. Yet the inconsistency in Baltic government policies toward Russians and scandals involving corrupt business dealings among Baltic politicians, according to interviews, left many exiled journalists bitter about the choice they made in leaving Russia (Hülsemann 2023).

Conclusion

Almost two years of the war in Ukraine provide rich material into the practices and realities of work and life in exile of Russian media. Although the sample of interviews is rather limited, it provides a useful glimpse into the challenges and opportunities of that period. It proved that the wiliest, toughest, and most creative survive better, but even the best can't overcome the challenges of exile and the burden of legacies they brought from their home country. Many journalists are burned out, sceptical about a possible return home, and increasingly disillusioned with the West. The precarity of migrant life, complex bureaucracy, and the alienation felt as outsiders in their host countries leave a lasting impact on their professional and personal identities (Mpofu 2017). While initial donor funding had minimal effect on the lives of individual journalists, it has helped media organisations survive and continue their work.

Our interviews reveal two major, interconnected challenges faced by the Russian exiled media community: the nature of their profession and the ability to maintain communication with audiences within Russia. Firstly, the burden of exile and precarious work has led many exiled journalists to reassess their profession and reconsider the appropriateness of their role as impartial reporters at a time when their country needs change. This challenge echoes broader trends seen in other exiled media communities, where journalists must grapple with ethical dilemmas that arise from producing content based on fragmented or second-hand information while working under immense political and financial pressure. As many lose touch with realities on the ground, the tension between activism and objectivity intensifies, often pushing journalists to redefine their professional identity (Geybulla 2023; Skjerdal 2011).

Exile has pressed some reporters to cross the line between journalism and activism, prompting a redefinition of professional boundaries similar to that seen with other exiled media (Esther and Thomas 2024). In a sense, this is a natural process: exiled journalists worldwide either redefine their roles or create new ones to meet the needs of nations in conflict (Waisbord 2012). As Porlezza and Arafat (2022) show, these new roles developed by journalists working from a distance help those on the ground survive and persist. They also work to raise awareness of the conflict and mobilise support for victims of the regime.

Russian exiled media have learned by experience that reputation is crucial when engaging with audiences within Russia. Journalists are most effective when rallying public support for campaigns that could bring about positive change. They report on human rights violations and socioeconomic issues, and they serve as moral support for those living under Putin's regime. Some examples show positive experiences of this redefined journalistic role. For instance, Elena now conducts sociological polls to study audiences of exiled media within Russia, helping to fine-tune messages and expand the audience. Liza, meanwhile, finds purpose in uniting exiled colleagues to advocate for their interests with European donors and policymakers, thus acting as an agent of change for their community (Balasundaram 2019).

Secondly, the essential role of journalists as news gatherers and reporters is under stress in exile. Russian media outlets fear losing touch with the realities on the ground, yet few have made significant attempts to understand their readers and viewers better

to "stay local" and leverage their exile to their advantage. Some research suggests that in exile the journalistic quality stays similarly high. Seo's (2020) study on the limited foreign coverage of North Korea and Iran suggests that maintaining distance can improve reporting on authoritarian regimes. However, this distance also risks alienating journalists from their home audience, a challenge exacerbated by the financial and psychological pressures that often lead to burnout and fractured professional identities (Kotisova and de Jong 2024). Almost two years into exile, Russian exiled media still seem to struggle to fine-tune their messaging for a wider audience and acknowledge the diversity of Russian society and its reasons for defensive consolidation around the Kremlin (Morris 2022).

It would be inaccurate to claim that media management disregards feedback from Russia. Many exiled media outlets have reporters on the ground and even assert that they involve them in news production and agenda-setting. However, it's essential to consider the hierarchies within exiled media newsrooms and the degree to which the top-level editorial staff, based abroad, are open to input from reporters on the ground. Our interviews suggest that media outlets originating from Russian provinces face fewer difficulties in finding stories that resonate with their core audience. They tend to have a well-developed network of correspondents who serve as sources on the ground and who help them better represent their audience compared to media based in Moscow.

Another source of frustration is the need to show results to donors. Consistently achieving a certain level of engagement is critical to securing continued funding, which all exiled media need desperately. However, reliance on donor funding often leads to self-censorship—a challenge many exiled media faced back in Russia. In their new host environments, this self-censorship now revolves around ensuring their work aligns with donor expectations, while still addressing the needs of their target audience. This delicate balance reflects the broader pressures exiled journalists face as they try to maintain professional standards amidst economic and political constraints. Now, Russian exiled media are equally concerned about Kremlin repercussions and of the fragile environments in which they operate: they carefully choose their words to avoid alienating both audiences and funders.

The Russian case presents a striking, albeit not unique, example of the challenges faced by exiled media professionals. Financial instability, legal uncertainty in host countries, and the vast distance from their target audience can hinder the operations of exiled media. Nevertheless, the most resourceful and innovative among them manage to undertake joint projects with Russian and international media, demonstrating a willingness to reinvent their profession in new circumstances. As exiled media have a lot of common problems to deal with and cooperation is the most sensible way of their survival (Mugabo 2023), the expansion to the bigger world, beyond the Russian diaspora and towards cooperation with exiled media from other countries, seem to be the best way to re-shape Russian journalists in exile both as professionals and also as global citizens.

Note

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