

European interview
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“In Russia today the whole media sphere has been destroyed.”

Katerina Abramova, Head of Communications at [Meduza](#).

What role does media play in informing the Russian population about the war in Ukraine?

I would like to emphasise that no problems can be solved until people realise that there is a problem. If independent media and independent journalists stop telling the truth about what is going on in Ukraine some people will just be left with state propaganda, others will just know nothing. Most governments thought the war would not last more than half a year. But it is far from being a short and victorious one as Moscow had planned, so people are starting to ask questions. Some analysts say that in the autumn ordinary citizens will start to feel some of the consequences, as they prepare, for example, their kids for school; they will have to pay more because of inflation and the effects of the sanctions. For the media it is simply very important to give people the opportunity to know what's going on.

You're in exile in Riga. Why did you choose Latvia as Meduza's place of exile?

We started our media in exile eight years ago, because even then it was clear that independent journalism was not and is still not welcome in Russia. For all these years we were preparing for the worst-case scenario but in the beginning, it didn't feel like exile: people were still free to come and go. Some reporters and specialists, who did not want to move, were still living in Russia. It looked like we had chosen to build a company in a European country for other reasons, such as sustainability for example. Proximity was also an important reason in choosing the location. Besides, it was much easier to work here because it is a Russian-speaking city: 40% of the citizens speak, or at least understand Russian. For example, if one of our reporters or specialists does not speak English, it is easier

for them to adapt to life here. It is a very beautiful place to live, easier than in a huge metropole.

Did you feel that freedom of speech had become restricted in Russia eight years ago already?

It became restricted after Putin became president. First, they started to rule against TV channels, then against other independent media. The sector was restricted slowly, step by step. It became increasingly obvious in the wake of the annexation of Crimea, and after the war in Eastern Ukraine began.

Now that you're in Riga, can you report freely, or do you feel that even in Riga Russian censorship is hindering you from doing your work properly?

Eight years ago, we thought that Russian repressive laws would not affect European media, but of course everything has changed. Last year we were labelled as foreign agents, and we lost all our advertising contracts in Russia because businesses were afraid of being associated with something political and undesirable. After the invasion of Ukraine started, censorship about the topic was imposed. We are no longer allowed to report inside Russia. The new law affects everyone. A lot of international media have moved their teams out of Russia, for example BBC and Deutsche Welle. It is no longer a question of where you are registered.

The most unpleasant thing is to be labelled an “undesirable organisation”. It can happen with any foundation or media, no matter if it is international or Russian. For example, for Russian media, it means that any freelance journalist, or even any expert who makes a comment, not necessarily about the war or about something political, even a journalist who writes about architecture, could be viewed as someone participating in the work of an

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undesirable organisation and it would become a criminal case. It has not happened yet, but we understand that it might happen, and this changes all your reporting and structure greatly.

Then of course, we are Russians, we have Russian passports, our relatives, families, and friends are inside the country. This affects us in an extremely personal manner.

Is this also part of Russia's hybrid war?

It is certainly part of the war against independent media. In Russia today the whole media sphere has been destroyed. There are some journalists who keep doing their job and resist, but if we are talking about the media market in general, it lies in ruins.

Could you give a little more detail about the current media landscape in Russia?

On March 4 Russia's parliament passed a law imposing a jail term of up to 15 years for spreading intentionally “fake” news about the military. Since then, the Ministry of Defence has been the only source considered viable regarding the war in Ukraine. For independent media it was the end. Different organizations made different decisions: some decided to go into exile and to continue their job; some decided to do the same, but they stopped publishing for a while, because they not only had to relocate their personnel but also rebuild their structure, to find money and ways of reporting. For example, Novaïa Gazeta, stopped publications in March and their licence was revoked last week. The team started a new media, Novay Gazeta Europe. For TV channels it is even more complicated because the operations are very expensive, they need a lot of equipment.

Some journalists have made the decision not to write about the war, but rather about its social impact, about other related topics, so that they can continue their job inside the country. I think that each of these decisions is hard and there is no ideal answer because the circumstances of each organization are different. I find it encouraging that many journalists and reporters are continuing to do their

job, sometimes anonymously.

Do you feel that there are still dissident voices in Russia?

Yes, there are people who really made the decision to stay inside the country and to do their job.

Does that work?

It is difficult and the risk of getting arrested is very high. We have the same example with independent politicians.

What are Meduza's techniques to tell the truth about the war in Ukraine, within Russia and elsewhere in the world?

First, we have reporters in Ukraine, and we work with anonymous freelance journalists inside Russia. There still are Ukrainian journalists who are eager and ready to collaborate, but there are also some Russians who want to support us and to work together. We are still very much connected to Russia, and we are extremely lucky that the online means of communication are so mainstream today. Then, we pay a lot of attention to explanatory journalism, data review, and databased investigation. The war in Ukraine is a unique case, because it is highly digitalised: everything is on social media, there is a great deal of information, photos from space, etc. It is of course difficult to differentiate between what's fake and what is not. But we have access to a large quantity of data. For example, the reconstruction of the Bucha massacre minute by minute, step by step, is an experience that as journalists, we did not have before.

Now that the war has been going on for more than six months, do you feel that the Russian population has become more open to news beyond the Russian propaganda?

There are experts who say that the Russian people are now watching less TV. But I am not sure this is one of the reasons why people do not believe in propaganda any longer. I think that is mostly because it has been the summer and because people are tired of war-related news.

As journalists we know that people are tired. We even see it in our audience. For example, people inside Russia who want to know the truth, who have access to information, are exhausted, and they have their own individual worries.

At the same time, compared to the first weeks and months of the war, people no longer believe that everything has been victorious. Many people have contacts with refugees, some journals have published soldiers' eye-witness statements. They hear their stories, but even then, some of them still think that it is Ukrainian propaganda. A large part of the population still thinks that Russia is trying to save the Ukrainians. Then there are also those who do not believe in the media at all. It was the same during the Covid pandemic: it is not like they do not believe in independent media and believe in propaganda, nor that they do not believe in propaganda and trust independent media. They just do not trust any kind of media and information at all.

What is your impression of the way European media are reporting on the war in Ukraine?

I think there are a lot of good investigations. Many newspapers have great teams who are working on the topic and reporting from the field. There is a lot of coverage. Everything we are seeing is very professional. It is much more complicated with the coverage of Russia's internal situation. That was also the case, for example, at the beginning of the war with the coverage of economic sanctions. Many voices were saying that if you push hard, people in Russia will understand that something is wrong, and they will start a revolution and stop the war. But it does not work like this. Russia's internal situation is much more complicated.

In what ways are Russian citizens being impacted by the sanctions and how do the media in Russia report on this?

All Russian media are reporting a lot about sanctions, and if we are talking about independent media, they are reporting about the economic situation inside Russia. But to tell the truth the effects are not very visible yet. Prices are rising. Some products have disappeared. It is unpleasant, but not brutal, and people are going to survive

it. The real consequences will be felt in the future.

And how do you think that open and truthful journalism and free speech can be protected in a time of war and conflict?

That is a good question. I do not know how freedom of speech can be protected inside Russia. I think it is a bit too late. So now it is not about protection, it is about "playing hide and seek". If we focus on different solutions, everything is so digitalized and everyone is having access to the internet. I believe that there must be a digital solution for those inside Russia who want to receive information and for them have more sophisticated instruments to do so. There is also the issue of international support, and what people of different European countries do. There is a lot of support for people who leave the country, for those who try to continue their job in exile. And of course, I think it is also good to use information from the Russian media, if you trust the source.

European solidarity was highly visible at the beginning of the war but with upcoming challenges linked to the economy and energy sufficiency support might fail at some point. Do you think that objective journalism can help to keep solidarity up?

I think that this is not the task of journalism. It is the same complex problem. People in Europe are also tired of war. There is less enthusiasm in support of Ukraine. People want to be informed about other things too, and it is not only about Russian media, or Ukrainian media, it is about the whole situation. Journalists will just have to somehow figure out how to retain the interest of tired people in the war, because it is absolutely clear that it will last a long time.

Do you have the impression that Russian propaganda is also taking hold in European societies?

It really depends from one country to another. I can take the example of Latvia, where there is significant Russian speaking population, to illustrate how Russian propaganda is operating through the media industry. After independence, all the attention was on creating Latvian content, and of course, that is understandable.

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But Russian speaking citizens felt abandoned for a while, and they started to turn to what was produced in Russia. Not because they had a particular interest in the country. But because they wanted to consume content in Russian. And step by step, they got lost in Russian TV and then in Russian propaganda and now it is taking time to win them back. As journalists we must be careful to produce quality content for everybody, to find proper words, proper language, and proper forms, to prepare them to resist Russian propaganda.

What does the future hold for Russia's media landscape?

I believe that nothing will change for a long time. We will be in exile, and the next few years will not be very pleasant. And then, maybe, hopefully, there will be an opportunity to rebuild everything from the very beginning.

It will be a very long journey for the whole country. The most important thing and the scariest one for us, is not to lose contact with what is going on inside the country. Because we could very well write about something that we no longer know or understand. It is very important for us to keep in touch, and hopefully all the digital means of communication, and the fact that the world is much more connected, will help us in this mission.

Interview by Stefanie Buzmaniuk

Meduza is a Russian-language media outlet based in Riga. It was awarded the Franco-German Journalism Prize in the Special Award category in July 2022.

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