

COERCION OR CONFORMISM? CENSORSHIP AND SELF- CENSORSHIP AMONG RUSSIAN MEDIA PERSONALITIES AND REPORTERS IN THE 2010s

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Abstract: This article examines questions of censorship, self-censorship and conformism on Russia's federal television networks during Putin's third presidential term. It challenges the idea that the political views and images broadcast by federal television are imposed coercively upon reporters, presenters and anchors. Based on an analysis of interviews with famous media personalities as well as rank-and-file reporters, this article argues that media governance in contemporary Russia does not need to resort to coercive methods, or the exertion of self-censorship among its staff, to support government views. Quite the contrary: reporters enjoy relatively large leeway to develop their creativity, which is crucial for state-aligned television networks to keep audience ratings up. Those pundits, anchors and reporters who are involved in the direct promotion of Kremlin positions usually have consciously and deliberately chosen to do so. The more famous they are, the more they partake in the production of political discourses.

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Television is the primary, and most effective, tool employed by the political regime to influence its people, and the federal television networks are critical elements of the political system in Putin's Russia.¹ Eighty-eight percent of the Russian population use television news as their prime source of information, 65 percent regard the news reporting as objective, and 51 percent trust television as an information source.² What the Russian viewers see on state-aligned television is strongly shaped by the Kremlin. Particularly during Putin's third presidential term, news reporting has become more propagandistic.³ Often without being told what to do, journalists, reporters and television hosts are usually keen to get it right and do what they think that the authorities want them to do. Yet at the same time they are also individuals with their own characters and ideas.

This article will explore processes around media governance on federal television networks during Putin's third presidential term, in particular the question of self-censorship among presenters, reporters and media personalities. It will discuss the ways in which the media adapt how news is made and framed to the expectations of the authorities. It will make comparisons between renowned media personalities and less or little known "rank-and-file" reporters.

Questions around censorship and self-censorship are familiar to Russian reporters⁴ and have attracted a fair degree of academic attention, especially from social scientists working on Ukraine and Central Asia.⁵ As Sarah Oates concluded from the study of the television coverage of Russian elections, reporters chose to adjust the message their reports deliver to the position of their political masters.⁶ Censorship, the outright prohibition, alteration or suppression of thoughts in media outlets or other forms of public expression, is usually linked to coercive tactics

¹ This article was produced as a part of the AHRC-funded project "Mediating Post-Soviet Difference: An Analysis of Russian Television Representations of Inter-Ethnic Cohesion Issues," carried out by Professor Stephen Hutchings and Professor Vera Tolz at the University of Manchester.

² Levada Center. 2013. "Otkuda rossiiane uznaiut novosti." The poll conducted on June 20-24 2013, at <http://www.levada.ru/08-07-2013/otkuda-rossiyane-uznayut-novosti>, accessed November 12, 2013.

³ Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz. 2014. *Mediating Post-Soviet Difference*. (Monograph in progress).

⁴ "Razgovory o media: Maksim Koval'skii i Mikhail Zygar'." 2012. *Afisha*. August 3, at <http://gorod.afisha.ru/archive/media-kovalski-zygar/>, accessed November 10, 2013; Robert W. Orttung and Christopher Walker. 2013. "Putin and Russia's Crippled Media. *Russian Analytical Digest* 123, February 21: 2-5, here p 2.

⁵ Marta Dyczok. 2006. "Was Kuchma's censorship effective? Mass media in Ukraine before 2004." *Europe-Asia Studies* 58: 2: 215-238; on Central Asia see Timothy Kenny and Peter Gross. 2008. "Journalism in Central Asia: A Victim of Politics, Economics, and Widespread Self-censorship." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 13:4 (October): 515-525.

⁶ Sarah Oates. 2006. *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia*. London: Routledge, 194.

imposed upon those not complying. Self-censorship implies a self-inflicted restriction of free expression, also arising from subordination to the political interests as well as fear of superiors.⁷ We argue that many reporters act out of conformism. “Conformism” is a difficult notion, as it can mean both opportunism and routinized willingness to accept unquestioningly the usual practices or standards, which were originally imposed through coercion. The latter case was typical for the Soviet Union; first, coercion forced reporters and public activists to suppress their thoughts, which, later, became the silently accepted norm of behavior to get by without trouble. The term “*adekvatnost*” which was used by a number of the reporters who agreed to speak to us, but without attribution, appeared to combine the two differing concepts of conformism.

The issue of conformism in news making was studied by Olessia Koltsova. Among other things, she analyzed the role of censorship and self-censorship in the day-to-day practices of Russian journalists, as well as how they conformed to their superiors’ wishes. According to Koltsova’s study, rank-and-file journalists in the mid-2000s were not particularly interested in the political aspects of their management’s decision making. They would have agreed anyway, which gave them leeway to express their own thoughts.⁸

With regards to self-censorship, we will draw on Koltsova’s *News Media and Power in Russia*. However, we will shift the focus from local channels examined in her study to Russia’s federal television channels. In Putin’s third presidential term, massive changes have taken place in the television landscape. A close examination of the reporters currently active in Russia will allow us to determine whether self-censorship has remained one of the most significant elements of media governance.

This article challenges the view that self-censorship, if understood as a concept based on fear, is the main regulator in Russian media governance. Instead, we argue that media personalities and reporters on Russian federal television channels do have the option to avoid reporting news which contradict their own political convictions. Those media personalities and reporters who work in positions which involve direct promotion of Kremlin positions usually have chosen to do so, and do it deliberately.

Methodology and Empirical Data

We were particularly interested in whether Russian media governance is based on coercion or whether media personalities and reporters primarily

⁷ Masha Gessen. 2005. “Fear and Self-Censorship in Vladimir Putin’s Russia.” *Nieman Reports* Summer 2005, at <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=101154>, accessed on November 11 2013.

⁸ Olessia Koltsova. 2006. *News Media and Power in Russia*. London: Routledge, 138-142, 148.

conform to the ideas and values promoted by the current regime. To learn more about how media personalities and reporters perceive policies imposed by their editors and how they assess their own role, we conducted interviews with renowned media personalities as well as “ordinary” reporters.

We attempted to interview reporters, presenters and anchors from the widest possible political spectrum covered by the federal television channels. Those opposed to the Putin regime who have openly raised issues of censorship were excluded, as their opinion is publicly available. Instead, we were keen to interview reporters, presenters and anchors affiliated to state-aligned television who do not usually talk about issues of censorship and self-censorship. Also, we sought to find interviewees at different stages of their careers and on different hierarchical levels. We eventually conducted interviews with 13 media personalities and reporters between January and August 2013 in Moscow. Eight have been used for this analysis; 4 famous media personalities and 4 rank-and-file reporters. These individuals were chosen in order to represent an even spread within the ranks of the broadcasting companies. We were therefore afforded the opportunity to analyze at two different levels how these individuals assess self-censorship.

The four famous media personalities (Dmitrii Kiselev/then *Rossia*, later appointed by Putin as head of *Rossia Segodnia*), Arkadii Mamontov/*Rossia*, Maksim Shevchenko/*Channel 1*, and Anton Krasovskii/formerly *NTV*) allowed us to refer to them by name. These four individuals represent a relatively wide political spectrum, from deeply conservative to relatively liberal, both in a political and economic sense. Given their present or past affiliation with the Kremlin, we need to take into consideration that their responses could be toeing the line.

The second set of interviewees consists of relatively unknown reporters who work for important prime-time news programs on major television channels. *Channel 1* is Russia’s main television channel, commanding a 14.4 percent market share, 75 percent of which is controlled by the state. *Rossia*, the second most popular television channel with a 13.2 percent market share, is part of the state-owned media holding *VGTRK* (All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company). *NTV* and *REN TV* are privately owned television channels with audience shares of 12.1 percent and 5.2 percent, respectively. The main shareholders enjoy close links to the Kremlin. Overall, these four channels cover 44.9 percent of all Russian television viewers.⁹

⁹ All audience shares are given according to the TNS Gallup poll conducted between October 21-27, 2013, at <http://www.tns-global.ru/rus/data/ratings/tv/index.wbp?tv.action=search&tv.regionId=9B17541D-53F1-4092-BD51-83041DDAB639&tv.startDate=21.10.2013&tv.endDate=27.10.2013&tv.raitingNameId=0FE4F395-898A-4187-B3BB-3DC1C077622E>, accessed November 10, 2013.

In these interviews we focused on more technical questions related to everyday journalistic practices and procedures: how agendas are set, how decision-making mechanisms operate, and how hiring practices work. Except for one case (the *REN TV* reporter), our incognito reporters represent the same channels as the renowned media personalities. However, they are at the lower end of the internal company hierarchies. Interviewing journalists at the higher and lower end of the spectrum allowed us to gain an insight into two different levels of media governance and editorial hierarchies. These lower-level interviewees preferred to remain anonymous.

In our analysis, we focused on the media personalities' and reporters' career trajectories, political views and the power relations expressed in their narratives, both between them and media authorities as well as between them and their audience. Our aim was to reconstruct contemporary television governance on the basis of our interview analysis and the contextualization of the collected narratives within information gathered from openly available sources, including academic analyses.

We will first discuss the responses given by our four well-known interviewees regarding censorship and self-censorship. Then we will look into the narratives and self-perception of the incognito reporters. These two sets of interviews are used as the basis for our main argument that media personalities and reporters perceive self-censorship in contemporary Russia under Putin's third term as being, first, deliberately applied, i.e. out of conviction and, second, free of coercion. Hence, conclusions drawn from their narratives are that, instead of being repressed individuals, they have sufficient opportunities to choose not to write or articulate things they disagree with.

Renowned Media Personalities: Career Trajectories, Political Views and Censorship

The famous media personalities enjoy their celebrity status for different reasons; they are characters, often sharp, witty, provocative and non-conformist. The television networks' need to keep ratings up means that management has to give in to the occasionally complex, vain and erratic nature of their most famous television hosts, pundits and anchors. Hence, notwithstanding the state's attempt at stricter media control, consumers of state-aligned television can still enjoy listening to a broad range of politically provocative and non-orthodox ideas. At the same time it is absolutely clear to these individuals who has the final say and to whom they have to subordinate. Since the start of Putin's third presidency, it has become more difficult to balance these dichotomies.

Career trajectories

Dmitrii Kiselev (*Rossiiia*) was appointed by Putin as the head of the state-owned news agency *Rossiiia Segodnia* in December 2013. Until 2012, he served as the deputy director of the state-owned media holding *VGTRK*. During the time of the interview in March 2013 he was author and presenter of *Vesti Nedeli*, the second most popular weekly Sunday news program.

Arkadii Mamontov from the *Rossiiia* channel is the author and host of the talk show *Spetsial'nyi Korrespondent*. The show raises topical and controversial political issues. Their aim is to spread the Kremlin line among the public. The experts and guest speakers are chosen in order to provoke heated discussions. A number of Mamontov's shows even caused diplomatic scandals.¹⁰

Maksim Shevchenko (*Channel 1*) is the former host of the talk shows *Sudite sami* and *V kontekste*. He became acclaimed for his sharp and witty discussion style in *Sudite sami*. Shevchenko's public activities extend to political activism. For example, he took part in election campaigns, supporting Kremlin-loyal politicians.¹¹

Anton Krasovskii was formerly a presenter on the Kremlin-sponsored online channel *Kontr TV*. Prior to this, he worked on *NTV* from 2010 to 2012 as editor and host of the popular talk show *NTVshniki* which discussed current political affairs and was closed down in summer 2012. In between his employment at *NTV* and his post at *Kontr TV*, Krasovskii made a name as a presenter on *NTV* and briefly as a campaign manager for the oligarch and 2012 presidential candidate, Mikhail Prokhorov. Lately, Krasovskii has published articles in *The Guardian* and other Western European newspapers on homophobia in Russia.

Political views

These four media personalities are, or at least used to be, loyal to the government. They act as executors of state policies. Despite their loyalty to the Kremlin, they are also bold and vain characters, whose showmanship and partly radical views are crucial to keep viewer ratings up, and the audience entertained.

¹⁰ The government of Tajikistan, for example, raised sharp criticism of a hate campaign in a series of television shows in spring 2013 directed at Central Asian migrants. Mamontov's *Spetsial'nyi Korrespondent* took an active part in this campaign. 2013. "MID RT: Rossiia nachala shirokomasshtabnuii informatsionnuii kampaniiu protiv Tadzhiikistana," *Avesta.tj*, April 24, 2013, at <http://www.avesta.tj/government/18037-mid-rt-rossiya-nachala-shirokomasshtabnuyu-informatsionnuyu-kampaniyu-protiv-tadzhiikistana.html>, accessed February 26, 2014.

¹¹ For example, Shevchenko was an official supporter of Moscow's mayor Sergei Sobianin during the summer 2013 electoral campaign in Moscow. Ilya Azar. 2013. "Sobianin po proiskhozhdeniiu – korenoi evraziets." *Lenta.ru*. July 30, 2013, at <http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/07/30/shevchenko/>, accessed November 10, 2013.

Kiselev is a militant defender of the Putin regime. In 2013, *The Economist* labeled him “Russia’s chief propagandist.”¹² In the interview with us, he declared the growing “Islamic threat” one of his personal priority topics.¹³ In the West, Kiselev has become known for his homophobic statements, his anti-Western stance and, lately, for his ferocious support of Putin’s Ukraine/Crimea policies, for which his name appeared in the list of individuals targeted by EU sanctions.¹⁴ In the 1990s Kiselev was a strong advocate of liberal views and unconditionally defended the rights of the Fourth Estate. His program *Okno v Evropu* (Window onto Europe) promoted a cosmopolitan view of the world. In a discussion in 1999, Kiselev claimed that a reporter has no right to be a propagandist.¹⁵ Since then his position has taken a U-turn and he considers it to be one of a reporter’s primary tasks to produce new values, educate the Russian people, and establish new norms.

Mamontov is as radical in his patriotic conservatism as Kiselev. He is notorious, in particular, for his views on migrants, and his crude approach to journalism. One reporter we talked to called him “a symbol of propaganda.”¹⁶ Mamontov became famous as a war reporter on *NTV* in the 1990s, a time when the news channel was known for its critical coverage of the military conflict in Chechnya. (After Gazprom took over the network following Putin’s rise to power, it supports the Kremlin’s position). Mamontov’s stance changed in 2000, after he joined the state-owned *VGTRK*, from being critical of the regime into being highly critical of Russia’s “enemies,” both within and outside the country. In the 2000s he began to play a major role on behalf of the Kremlin to trigger events which resulted in the justification for the repression of political oppositionists.¹⁷

A common reference point for these two media personalities is the first post-Soviet decade. They look at the 1990s resentfully. Mamontov remembered: “1993 [when Yeltsin crushed the parliament by force] had great influence on me. I was in the White House [the parliament] and saw everything. I began to understand that they betrayed us. They were not democrats, but swindlers, who looted my country pretending to be democrats. They looted it and carried the money to the West. Eighty percent of

¹² 2013. “Russia’s chief propagandist.” *The Economist*, December 10, at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2013/12/ukraine>, accessed April 3, 2014.

¹³ Dmitrii Kiselev. 2013. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfossel, Moscow, March 27.

¹⁴ Peter Spiegel and Christian Oliver. 2014. “EU adds new names to visa bans.” *The Financial Times*, March 21, at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/315b890a-b090-11e3-8058-00144feab7de.html#axzz2xp7wCLcA>, accessed April 3, 2014.

¹⁵ 2012. “Dmitrii Kiselev o zhurnalistike (1999 g.)” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yhrKB7sr6I>, accessed November 10, 2013.

¹⁶ Anonymous interviewee. 2013. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfossel.

¹⁷ Svetlana Meteleva, Aleksandr Raskin. 2006. “Spetskor upolnomochen zaiavit’,” *Russkii Newsweek* no. 4, January 30, 17.

my country thinks like this.”¹⁸ Also, the former liberal Kiselev looks back at the 1990s as a dark decade and highly approves of Putin’s turn to anti-liberalism: “We can’t rely on Western liberalism... By 2000 Russia was close to falling apart. Entire regions did not pay taxes, we had a war, and one region after the other declared its independence from Moscow. Putin put everything back together, found the political will and saved the country.”¹⁹ The U-turn these two media personalities made from being staunch liberals to anti-liberals probably partly explains the ferociousness of their present stance. However, this does not mean that their former liberal outlook was any less conformist than their new anti-liberal outlook. In the 1990s it was fashionable to be a liberal and today it is fashionable to be an anti-liberal.

In contrast to Mamontov and Kiselev, Shevchenko represents a later generation of pro-Kremlin pundits. His generation of media personalities did not go through a transformation from liberal to conservative, but was formed by the Putin administration in the 2000s. As public intellectuals of the new millennium, representatives of this generation articulated the various ideological concepts which the presidential administration had developed. In addition, they went along with the policy changes the presidential administration undertook. Despite this fealty to the authorities’ changing positions, ironically, these younger media personalities enjoy more legitimacy both in public and in journalistic circles. In contrast to the older generation, they never collaborated with the Yeltsin regime, which became increasingly discredited in the late 2000s, often by those who supported it in the 1990s. The older generation had entered a treaty with the “devil” when supporting Yeltsin’s presidential campaign by participating in a propaganda campaign which led to his re-election in 1996.²⁰ The fact that Shevchenko was not involved in it makes his criticism of Russia’s neoliberalism and the pro-Western attitudes, which the political establishment of the 1990s advocated, more credible.

Being popular for his provocative statements and sharp criticism of the West, Shevchenko combines contradictory views in a blend which polarizes and at the same attracts audiences, ensuring his popularity. He entertains his audiences with political statements which oscillate between the left and the far right. As he explained in the interview with us and often states publicly, Shevchenko favors a strong state which opposes the West.²¹ He advocates a return to some socialist elements in education. He justifies

¹⁸ Mamontov. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss, Moscow, March 28.

¹⁹ Kiselev. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

²⁰ Ivan Zassoursky. 2004. *Media and Power in post-Soviet Russia*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 64-79.

²¹ Maksim Shevchenko. 2013. “My ne Evropa? I slava bogu!”, *Moskovskii komsomolets*, February 11, at <http://www.mk.ru/specprojects/free-theme/article/2013/02/10/810258-myi-ne-evropa-i-slava-bogu.html>, accessed 24 February, 2014.

Stalin's terror as well as the Soviet campaigns against Jews and identifies with, for example, Austria's right-wing on the issue of immigration.²²

Shevchenko frequently presents himself as standing in opposition to the regime, which in occasional statements consists of bureaucrats and criminals. In one interview, he even demanded that the authorities should not treat political prisoners too harshly.²³ Nevertheless, he is considered to be loyal to the Kremlin. Paradoxically, this apparent inconsistency makes him extremely useful as an official media personality. Political flexibility and the ability to quickly adapt his political identity to the regime's changing line afford Shevchenko the opportunity to stay within the bounds of what the authorities consider acceptable. For this reason, he enjoys far more freedom and leeway to make critical statements against the regime than many of his colleagues.

Anton Krasovskii was the only media celebrity who did not toe the Kremlin line. Only a few weeks prior to our interview he lost his job on *Kontr TV* for announcing live on air that he is gay. Like Shevchenko, Krasovskii represents the post-2000 generation. Many of them are extremely cynical about the current state of things in the country and lack general trust in democracy, including the democratic demands which the opposition movement put forward. "Like Stolypin, my aim is a Great Russia. The liberals aim at destroying and looting Russia. Nobody can change my opinion. I know many of them [in the liberal opposition] personally. They are not the best people. Any average member of Putin's *United Russia* [*Edinaia Rossiia*] is much closer to me than any Aleksei Navalny," Krasovskii argues.²⁴ Despite being banned from work on state-aligned television in Russia because of his public criticism of the authorities, Krasovskii still approves of the current regime and sharply criticizes the Russian opposition movement.²⁵

Views on censorship

In his prominent position, Kiselev is as much censor as the censored: "I write my own texts and nobody reads them in advance, i.e. there is no censorship whatsoever."²⁶ In the interview with us, he stressed freedom of opinion and diversity as being important aspects of his program: "Our reporters represent a wide range of views and political opinions. We have conservative ones, and we have liberals. I am myself an enlightened

²² Shevchenko. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfossli.

²³ Ilya Azar. 2013. "Sobianin po proiskhozhdeniiu – korennoi evraziets."

²⁴ Anton Krasovskii. 2013. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfossli, Moscow, March 26.

²⁵ Sergei Korzun. "Bez durakov." 2013. *Radio Ekho Moskvy*. September 21, at <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/korzun/1159140-echo/#element-text>, accessed November 10, 2013.

²⁶ Kiselev. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfossli.

conservative, a moderate conservative.²⁷ Kiselev's tolerance of political diversity has clear limits. It ends where political views are not in accordance with the current regime, in particular with Putin. The rationale here is simple and clear; every reporter who is opposed to the government should find a medium not financed by the government to work for. Due to his powerful position in the media hierarchy, Kiselev influences how information policies are shaped: "In general, being a well-known reporter, I make politics. I am in a strong position to do so."²⁸

However, Kiselev sees his role far beyond the task of news making: "I act as God, as Jesus Christ. On television, I have a role as the creator. This is not because I want it. This is because since the Soviet era only 20 years have passed... If English reporters found themselves in such a situation, they would have done the same [as us]. One hundred percent. We are obliged to colonize our own country, and the English are excellent colonizers. They imposed their values in many parts of the world."²⁹ Here, references to the West serve to legitimize the missionary vocation.

In sharp contrast to Kiselev, Mamontov named the lack of freedom of speech as one of the most pressing issues in Russia today: "We need freedom of speech as much as we need air to breath. We need it to be able to talk about corruption. To uncover it and to talk about it. We need to be able to say who is a crook and who is a thief."³⁰ However, this cannot be interpreted as an expression of criticism of the current media governance.³¹ Instead, Mamontov cleverly turns the tables. He takes up burning issues which have been frequently raised by the opposition movement, such as corruption, migration policies, and widening social inequality in the country. He then flips them to support his own agenda, thereby neutralizing the opposition.

Mamontov's framing of the origins of self-censorship shows a certain cunning. Being an important actor of Kremlin media policies, he does admit that there is self-censorship, something everybody suspects anyway. However, he does not point a finger at the government, or the media elite, for why censorship and self-censorship have prevailed. Instead, he blames the backward Russian people for it: "Freedom of speech does exist, but is not supported by the people's mentality. Its mentality is different; it is still Soviet."³²

²⁷ Kiselev. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

²⁸ Kiselev. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

²⁹ Kiselev. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

³⁰ Arkadii Mamontov. 2013. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

³¹ Neither was it a rare statement. Instead, he has frequently taken up similar issues. See, for example, 2013. "Mamontov Arkadii Viktorovich. Master class 18.05.2011." October 3, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcY1i9NgWnc>, accessed November 10, 2013.

³² Mamontov. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

Mamontov includes himself when attempting criticism; “I censor myself at times, after all I am a Soviet person.”³³ To illustrate this, Mamontov cited a corruption scandal, which erupted in 2012 around the Minister of Defense Anatoliy Serdiukov and his lover Evgeniia Vasil’eva “who adored luxuries.”³⁴ Serdiukov’s departure from the government was, among other things, triggered by the documentary which Mamontov produced for his show. The documentary described the scale of corruption among Serdiukov’s close circle. Mamontov explained: “We could have said much more about her [the lover], but we decided not to... I was afraid that it would annoy people too much.”³⁵ This self-censorship, as Mamontov further elaborated, is related to two things. First, there is a lack of a culture of speaking out and articulating criticism. Second, Russian newsmakers are reluctant to say what they think for fear of unexpected consequences.³⁶

Similarly to Kiselev, Shevchenko ferociously defended his channel’s governance by claiming journalistic and editorial freedom: “There is no self-censorship; we have a normal editorial policy. This is not any different to what any reporter from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* or the *Kurier* experiences... If I put my money into a channel or a newspaper, why should I be forced to like everybody? This is why there is such a thing as editorial policy. If the state invests money in a media outlet, it has the right to demand that it follows the state’s policy.”³⁷

Compared to the celebrity hosts we discussed previously, Krasovskii’s statements about censorship and self-censorship were more explicit. He admitted that direct censorship existed at his workplace. At the same time he saw great freedom of expression which he referred back to geographical factors, among other things. Whenever reporters transgress acceptable boundaries, the time zones in Russia enable the authorities to stop such disagreeable programs. It will simply be taken off air: “A program first appears on screen in the Far East, and nobody watches it. The population there is small, they are not interested and many don’t even have a TV set. You can show them whatever you want. Then, if some program doesn’t find approval, it is simply taken off the screen. Anyway in Irkutsk, nobody will see it.”³⁸ This distinctive feature also demonstrates the flexible nature of media control in Russia: in many ways it does not need coercive mechanisms, whilst still affording reporters their creative freedom.³⁹

³³ Mamontov. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

³⁴ Mamontov. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

³⁵ Mamontov. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

³⁶ Mamontov. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

³⁷ Maksim Shevchenko. 2013. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss, Moscow, April 3.

³⁸ Krasovskii. Interviewed by Elisabeth Schimpfoss.

³⁹ 2011. “Na NTV siuzhet o pokhishcheniakh liudei v Chechne vyrezali iz peredachi “Tsentral’noe televidenie”.” *Gazeta.ru*. October 3, at http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/10/31/n_2076166.shtml, accessed November 10, 2013.

Self-censorship was, according to Krasovskii, no issue in the television projects he participated in. These include the liberally inclined television shows *NTVshniki* and *Tsentral'noe Televidenie*. They were notorious for their occasionally scandalous approach and attempts to report on issues which were excluded from the programs on other federal channels. However, these two shows, together with a few others on federal television, are rare exceptions enjoying significant freedom to report on cutting edge issues without being subject to censorship.

By contrast to these individuals who demonstrate solid loyalty to the regime, most of Russia's major (free-thinking) media personalities disappeared from television screens in the 2000s as soon as they made open and honest statements.⁴⁰ One of Russia's most successful political reporters, Leonid Parfenov, lost his job on *NTV* in 2004 because he ignored the prohibition on reporting the war in Chechnya.⁴¹ His removal was the first major act of censorship by a federal television company owner in the 2000s. In 2010, Parfenov publicly stated that reporters had become bureaucrats unwilling to criticize top-ranking politicians and that political journalism had degraded into merely praising the political leadership.⁴² Up to now, he has remained persona-non-grata in political programs on state-aligned television. His political unpredictability makes him one of the most visible examples of censorship in the history of post-Soviet television.⁴³ The fact that Parfenov has been allowed to keep one film a year on *Channel 1* (on Russian culture and history) is a clever move of the regime; by still allowing Parfenov to appear on screen, they can claim that freedom of information does exist. Another highly acclaimed television reporter, Vladimir Pozner, managed to keep his programs at the state-aligned *Channel 1*, despite openly admitting that the head of the channel interfered with who he was allowed to invite onto his show.⁴⁴

Pozner and Parfenov clearly have different political positions compared to most of the media personalities we talked to. One must

⁴⁰ Most of those who stayed on television throughout the 2000s were made redundant during the editorial purges at the beginning of Putin's third term. For more, see, for example, Arina Borodina. 2013. "Pavel Lobkov: ne podnimu tost ni za zdavie, ni za upokoi NTV," *RIA Novosti*, 10 October, at <http://ria.ru/interview/20131010/968861350.html#ixzz2hgsjJfD>, accessed February 26, 2014.

⁴¹ Afanasii Sborov. 2004. "Kto uvolil Leonida Parfenova," *Kommersant-Vlast'*, 7 June, at <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/480909>, accessed 28 February 2014.

⁴² 2010. "Vystuplenie Leonida Parfenova na tseremonii vrucheniia premii imeni Vladislava List'eva." *Channel One*, at http://www.ltv.ru/sprojects_edition/si5817/fi6319, accessed November 10, 2013.

⁴³ 2013. "Leonid Parfenov ob izgnanii iz raia, proroke Dzhobse i krivom kaftane." *RBK*, March 20, at <http://top.rbc.ru/viewpoint/20/03/2013/849970.shtml>, accessed November 10, 2013.

⁴⁴ Vladimir Pozner. 2012. "Chto izmenilos' na televidenii." *Afisha*. March 1, at <http://gorod.afisha.ru/archive/new-politics-tv/>, accessed November 10, 2013.

assume that, indeed, the state exerts pressure on media personalities and reporters whose views diverge from those of the Kremlin. However, these two individuals also illustrate differences in how they are managed by the state. Parfenov's unpredictability caused the authorities to remove him from political programs on state-aligned television. By contrast, the regime has come to terms with Pozner, who agreed with the channel's head, Konstantin Ernst, not to invite a number of prominent opposition figures.⁴⁵

This also indicates why an apparent political rebel like Shevchenko is acceptable for, if not welcomed by, the authorities. However provocative he appears, his statements remain within the boundaries of the Kremlin's agenda. Predictability, and loyalty the regime can rely on, are crucial to survive on state-aligned television. These are, however, vague categories which need to be internalized by media personalities. By contrast to well-established Western state broadcasting companies, such as the *BBC*, who provide clear guidance to their staff, in Russia, reporters, pundits and anchors are confronted with unwritten rules. The logic behind this rule of the game became most apparent in the statements made by the rank-and-file reporters we talked to.

Rank-and-File Reporters on Censorship

All the other reporters we interviewed universally agreed that with regard to censorship one must not report negatively about Vladimir Putin. The state-aligned networks even hire teams of special reporters to manage Putin's whole news agenda. This goes back to the early 2000s when the federal channels developed the image of Putin as the sole leader of the nation.⁴⁶ If a private television channel resorts to cautious criticism, as *REN TV* has done occasionally, the term "president" is replaced with "power" [*vlast*].⁴⁷

The existence of the taboo for any critical assessment of Putin's work tends to be accepted as fair and right by our interviewees: "There is a clear boundary. We are not allowed to cover certain topics, as is the practice on any channel. Just like in every family, the children are not allowed access to the family budget. There are boundaries everywhere. There is a special

⁴⁵ Oleg Kashin, 2013. "Vladimir Pozner: Ernst skazal, chto soglasen s kazhdym moim slovom." *Colta.ru*. February 26, at <http://www.colta.ru/articles/media/355>, accessed November 10, 2013.

⁴⁶ For further discussion on that, see Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova. 2009. *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: Remote Control*. London: Routledge, 33-35.

⁴⁷ Interview with the *REN TV* reporter. The existence of relative freedom on *REN TV* is still an issue to be discussed among the experts. It is most probably explained by the need to be seen to have at least one major source of balanced information. For details, see Anna Kachkaeva. 2009. *Kak sobytiia stanoviatsia ili ne stanoviatsia sobytiiami televizionnymi*. January 26, at <http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/482102.html>, accessed November 10, 2013.

team that works on, with and for the president.”⁴⁸

Apart from this taboo, the reporters we interviewed denied any censorship, arguing that, in fact, “everything goes.”⁴⁹ They claimed not to have experienced any direct interference or any instructions to cut out parts from reports or withdraw them. On the contrary, they insisted that their editors and bosses do not exert the slightest hint of coercive control. This can be partly explained by these individuals’ specific positions. Most of them have consciously distanced themselves from covering political issues, working in fields that are politically less sensitive, which allows them much greater freedom.⁵⁰

Another reason for the freedom our interviewees claimed to have enjoyed might be related to the fact that television channels need to sustain viewers’ interest in the programs. As one of our interviewees explained, *Channel 1* cannot aim solely at brainwashing viewers because their viewers will become bored and will stop watching the channel. The need to keep viewers’ interest ensures that the state-aligned channels keep the level of information censorship within certain limits.⁵¹

Censorship and self-censorship tend to risk making reports dull and boring, whereas a reporter’s creativity usually does the opposite. The opinions and interests of many reporters often overlap with those of their viewers, and a reporter’s personal background and experiences will significantly influence the content of a report and the slant it will take. This partly explains the appearance of shows and reports with anti-migrant, sexist or homophobic content. As our interviewee from *NTV* admitted, “I don’t like migrants [*priezhhzhikh*], even though I myself moved here. But at least I’m not from another country... If you take them individually, put them in a corner and talk to them, they all are good people. But if they are in masses, they become unmanageable, they turn into bad people.”⁵² In short, unless a reporter’s views run counter to their employers’ editorial policies, they might indeed be granted great freedom in their work.

There are, however, clear mechanisms for ensuring informational discipline and loyalty. Almost all of our interviewees identified “*adekvatnost*” – literally “adequacy”, but better translated as the right instinct combined with adroit appropriateness and a portion of wiliness – as the main trait required for potential candidates to be hired by a federal television channel. One reporter defined *adekvatnost*’ as “the ability to react appropriately to the conditions in which you find yourself.”⁵³ It is assumed

⁴⁸ Interview with the *NTV* reporter.

⁴⁹ Interview with the *NTV* reporter.

⁵⁰ Interview with the *Channel 1* reporter.

⁵¹ Interview with the *Channel 1* reporter.

⁵² Interview with the *NTV* reporter.

⁵³ Interview with the *Channel 1* reporter.

that reporters should understand the specific character of their job and avoid violations of unwritten laws (which could be changed without any explicit notification). A reporter from *NTV* stated: “You understand what you are allowed to do and what not. It is basically on a subconscious level that you understand what to do... Although you can suggest whatever you like. If you present it appropriately [*adekvatno*], there is no problem.”⁵⁴

Adekvatnost’ as a reporter’s characteristic is neatly tied to self-censorship. In many cases it is straightforward. When experts are consulted or guests invited to the studio, each reporter has their own contacts who are selected according to the principle of *adekvatnost*’. As a reporter explained, “anyone can be included in such a list. It is not a prescribed list from the Kremlin... Of course, every reporter looks for experts who are likely to conform to the policy of the channel.”⁵⁵ It is assumed that every reporter who is up-to-date with political developments in the country is able to decide for him- or herself whom to include on their individual list of banned people. This requires intervention from supervisors only in exceptional cases.

Unexpected and rapid political changes, however, can turn self-censorship into a challenge. One interviewee told us a story about when they had invited a writer who fell out with Putin on the very day when the interview was scheduled to take place: “We asked ourselves: maybe we should not have him [the writer] here anymore? And without any instruction from above our team decided to cancel the interview. Our producer gave him [the writer] some lame excuse that some technical equipment broke down here in the studio or something. The program is pre-recorded, so we could have actually just cut out some bits if necessary, but we wanted to cover our backs... He [the writer] instantly wrote about it on *Twitter*, and in the end we had a scandal.”⁵⁶ The need for a reporter to sense what is appropriate at a particular moment in time might lead to insecurity and overly cautious approaches.

Overall, however, our interviewees claimed to enjoy fairly unlimited freedom in their journalistic practice. An *NTV* reporter stated that “even on federal channels you can find a compromise with your conscience. If you are cultured and educated, you can easily find your way.”⁵⁷ Moreover, reporters have the freedom to suggest topics they wish to cover as long

⁵⁴ Interview with the *NTV* reporter.

⁵⁵ Interview with the *Channel 1* reporter. Russian television experts and journalists publicly confirmed that several people were banned from participating in television programs. See 2011. “Irina Petrovskaja. Televidenie. Krizis zhanra,” *Fond Liberal’naia missiia*, November 17, At: <http://www.liberal.ru/articles/5493>, accessed 26 February 2014; 2011. “Pozner rasskazal o “stop-listakh” Pervogo kanala,” *Lenta.ru*, 24 February, At: <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/02/24/pozner/>, accessed 26 February 2014.

⁵⁶ Interview with the *Rossija-24* reporter.

⁵⁷ Interview with the *NTV* reporter.

as they entertain the viewers, guarantee high ratings and are relevant to current developments.⁵⁸ To enjoy the freedom to hold views which diverge from those of the government usually implies not being involved in the broadcasting of political news. This rule of the game, however, also means that if a reporter is keen to report on political topics, he or she will choose this path consciously, being well aware of all the limitations.

Conclusion

Our interviews with both celebrity media personalities and rank-and-file reporters indicate that coercion is not an aspect which concerns journalism on federal television channels. Self-censorship is euphemistically described as *adekvatnost*, a term which is vaguely defined, but definitely seen as a virtue and expression of professionalism. A close look at the practices of Russian reporters, pundits, anchors, editors and managers with regard to self-censorship reveals that they have developed their own sophisticated mechanisms to execute Kremlin policies, without ever making this process too explicit. It would be wrong to assume that the images broadcast by television were initiated by the Presidential Administration and imposed coercively onto media personalities and reporters. In many respects television reports and talk shows disclose at least as much, if not more, of a media personality's or reporter's personal characteristics than of explicit political pressure and interference.

All the media personalities and reporters we interviewed showed complete understanding of this form of regulating and governing media and information policies. Many of them hold the view that, if a media personality and reporter does not agree with the editorial policy of one media organization, he or she is free to change to another organization. As in Koltsova's study of reporters working for regional channels in the mid-2000s, our interviewees also seem to freely promote their masters' view. In the case of state-aligned channels, this is the Russian government's. This conclusion does not imply that all the media personalities and reporters we interviewed are cynics. It does imply, however, that those who practice political journalism do so consciously and deliberately. Whoever is happy to play, will play hard.

Wherever celebrity media personalities admit to "regulatory mechanisms" (usually described as editorial policy), they refer to Western editorial practices, stating that the latter are in no way better. As in many spheres of life, Western practices decisively legitimize Russian practices, which our interviewees ferociously defended. In general, however, renowned media personalities, such as Mamontov and Kiselev, deny censorship as such and argue that neither censorship nor self-censorship is the decisive tool of

⁵⁸ Interview with the *REN TV* reporter.

media governance regulating the daily news agenda on screen. And indeed, proximity to the decision-making centers allows them to speak freely and disseminate their ideas without being censored. Instead, they are part of the process of news production: Being important public mouthpieces for the Kremlin, Mamontov and Kiselev mediate the discourse produced by the Kremlin and, at the same time, partake in its production.

The Russian political puzzle became even more complicated after 2012, as the future of the political regime now looks much more unpredictable than at any previous time of Putin's rule. This challenge makes the political elite keep their eye on federal television as a main pillar of their informational power. As our analysis shows, media personalities and reporters are ready to employ whatever means they have to ensure stability and the maintenance of Putin's regime. The large majority of media personalities and reporters who work in state-aligned television seem to regard their principal role in defending the status quo. They see themselves as important agents of ensuring stability in the country by means of their programs. Their mission is to impose an order which stands in sharp contrast to the turbulence and the chaos of the 1990s. Especially well-known media personalities perceive themselves as far more than simply reporters, pundits or anchors. They serve the country by simultaneously being (and having the right and vocation to be) media professionals, educators and politicians.

