

Russian Journalists in Latvia Impacted by the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Aija Cepliša

University of Latvia

E-mail: aijaceplisa@gmail.com

Abstract. The aim of the research is to analyse the experience of Russian journalists who moved to Latvia after 24 February 2022, when Russia started a full-scale armed invasion of Ukraine, and who have since been living and working in Latvia. The theoretical framework of the work is based on three chapters, which examine the aspects of media accountability and influence, freedom of the press, and the work of journalists in exile. The qualitative research has been carried out, using a narrative analysis. Data was obtained with the help of semi-structured interviews. The respondents were found with the snowball sampling method. In the period from 23 March to 20 April 2023, ten semi-structured interviews with Russian journalists who have moved to Latvia after 24 February 2022, when Russia started a full-scale armed invasion of Ukraine, were obtained. The interviews particularly explored their motivation to move to Latvia, their working and living conditions in Latvia, and their opinion about the future of Russia. The results show that Russian journalists could not stay in Russia due to security reasons, and all the journalists reveal that it was their individual decision to move. They evaluate their work in Latvia as safe, but at the same time challenging, because they are no longer able to access local information of their former country, thus gradually distancing them from Russia. Examining these difficulties, the narrative analysis reveals that Russian journalists are concerned about their future life in Latvia, because they have not been issued with residence permits or work visas. One narrative condemns NEPLP (National Electronic Mass Media Council of Latvia) action in cancelling the license of the TV channel “*Dozhd*” (TV Rain). The journalists do not see a quick end to the war started by Russia in Ukraine and are pessimistic about Russia’s future development.

Keywords: journalists in exile, freedom of the press, media accountability, Russian journalists, narrative theory

Introduction

An old Soviet dissidents’ joke goes like this: “There is no news (*izvestia*) in “*Pravda*” and there is no truth (*pravda*) in “*Izvestia*”.” (Roudakova 2017, 4). “*Pravda*” and “*Izvestia*” were major newspapers in the Soviet Union, and

their names translate as “Truth” and “News”. Today’s media environment in Russia is likened to the model of authoritarian countries and the Soviet Union. The press freedom organization “*Reporters Without Borders*” reports that “strict laws restricting the work of the media increased after Vladimir Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012. Independent media were either subjugated and controlled, or their activities were significantly restricted. This did not apply to television, which was saturated with propaganda favourable to the president” (Reporters Without Borders 2023). Political scientist and long-time Kremlin researcher Lilia Shevtsova points out that it was the annexation of Crimea in 2014 that showed the Western world how Putin’s “propaganda machine” works. According to Shevtsova, although this machine was visible before the invasion, afterwards it completely took over the media space in Russia (Roudakova 2017, 17). The already dire situation rapidly worsened after 24 February 2022, when Russian troops launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, triggering the largest military conflict and refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. Shortly thereafter, on 4 March 2022, Law No. 32-FZ “On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and Articles 31 and 151 of the Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation” was adopted. The law was dubbed the “fake news law”, because it stood against “discrediting the power of the state” and “spreading fake news”. The Russian government calls anything that contradicts its version of events “fake news”, while “discrediting” refers to any form of criticism of the government or condemnation of the war (Reuters, Vaganov 2022, 2–3). Violation of the law engenders severe fines and prison sentences for an individual journalist and repercussions against the media outlet. As a result of this law, many media outlets were blocked by the government or ceased operation, while numerous journalists left Russia to continue working from abroad. The editorial offices of “*Dozhd*” (TV Rain), “*Echo Moskvi*” (Echo of Moscow), “*Novaya Gazeta*” (New Newspaper) and other independent media left Moscow immediately. At least 1 000 journalists left Russia in 2022. A total of 250 journalists moved to Riga in the first months after the adoption of the law (Ruduša 2022). In the period until 2023, the “*Media Hub Riga*” foundation, which provides support to journalists in exile, has helped 507 journalists and their family members and given support to 29 independent media outlets.¹ Currently, approximately 300 Russian journalists live and work in Latvia. Russia’s “fake news” law and its consequences allow us to assess the concept of freedom of expression and to compare the media policies of a democratic and an authoritarian country, such as Russia. Putin controls the media in Russia, they are saturated with propaganda to his liking, and all other opinions are censored. Independent journalists, who continue to tell the truth, to criticise the government and to expose more and more of its

¹ See “*Media Hub Riga*” website: <https://mediacentre.sseriga.edu/media-hub/>

wrongdoings, are a thorn in the side of the regime. Although the new “fake news” law has forced the independent media to leave Russia, they continue their work in other countries, including Latvia. The aim of this study is to use narrative analysis to explore the personal and professional challenges faced by Russian journalists living and working in Latvia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. To this end, six research questions have been formulated:

1. Why were Russian journalists unable to stay in their home country and why did they choose Latvia as their new home country?
2. Do Russian journalists consider themselves as journalists in exile?
3. How has the daily working life of Russian journalists changed while working in Latvia?
4. What is the experience of Russian journalists living in Latvia?
5. Russian journalists' opinion on the cancellation of the licence of the media outlet “*Dozhd*” in Latvia.
6. What is the opinion of Russian journalists about the future of Russia?

Methodology

Qualitative methods of data collection, processing and interpretation were used in order to carry out a qualitative study, to achieve the set objective and to answer the research questions. The data collection method employed for the study was the snowball method and a semi-structured interview, while the data was processed and interpreted through narrative analysis.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted between 21 March and 20 April 2023 with ten Russian journalists living in Latvia who moved here after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. All ten journalists admitted that their decision to move abroad was made in the context of the amendments to the law adopted at Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Five men and women took part in the study. A wide age range has been represented, with the youngest respondent aged 23 and the oldest – 65. The average length of service is 21 years, the lowest – four, the highest – 40. Eight journalists work for a news portal, one for television, and one for radio. Some of the respondents are colleagues, hence, the study comprises the total of six different media outlets. One respondent had left his previous job in Russia and shortly after the interview started working for the Russian version of a Latvian media outlet.

The respondents were found by snowball sampling, with each respondent recommending the next one. When addressing the respondents, the author of the study informed them about the purpose of the study, the questions and the expected length of the interview. The semi-structured interview was guided by previously prepared questions that were divided into three blocks: about the reasons for leaving, about work and life in Latvia, and about the future prospects

for Russia. The interview length ranged from 30 to 90 minutes, with an average length of 50 minutes. The data collection phase of the study was completed when ten interviews were obtained. Following the principles of the chosen method of analysis, the interviews were transcribed and then each interview was reread several times, extracting common narratives in the Russian journalists' stories.

Narrative analysis can be interpreted in its broadest sense as "narrative material analysis", where different narratives revealed in conversations, interviews, texts and visual material such as photographs or videos are studied. According to Jerom Bruner, narrative is a way of understanding the world. Our lives are a series of stories that create an understanding of what is happening around us. Our memories, imagination, dreams and thoughts contain narratives that make sense of the world. Through narratives, we communicate with and understand others. It is a collective way of communicating (Seale 2018, 513). Catherine K. Riessman emphasises that narrative is the way we individually and collectively as a society construct self-identity. Narratives can move people to action, encourage change and change beliefs (Riessman 2008, 8).

Globally, narratives are meaningful, necessary and strategic. Consequently, this method of analysis is widely used in social science research, as it offers another way to study people and society. People's stories are their "maps, mirrors and reflections of experience", hence, what they say must be seen as a single, event-centred account of their experience that allows access to them as individuals and as a group (Leavy 2014, 203). The narrative analysis of social science reached a turning point at the end of the 20th century. This was a time when different social groups were becoming visible in society, and research on the interaction of different races in the USA, femininity/masculinity, feminism and people in the LGBT community became topical. The social sciences have always studied people and their life experiences in the hope of understanding them. Narrative analysis helps to comprehend the context, to access intimate experiences and to discover the person. It can enable one to understand other people's lives, learn about the experiences of people different from oneself and bridge the gap between people (Leavy 2014, 211–213).

Riessman gave an example of a study that analysed the narratives of women who had abortions. The research revealed women's motivations, emotions and feelings, making people empathetic towards women who take this socially controversial step. While statistics would provide the number or age range of these women, the narrative of their stories provides an insight into their circumstances, reasons and emotions engendered by going through this experience. This method has also been used to study people growing up in dangerous urban areas, parents of children with learning difficulties or long-term unemployed. Narrative research looks at stories that have been lived and told. Through these stories, we may not only learn the stories of this group of people, but also get

to know and understand them. The benefit of this method is to be able to give people a “voice”, to believe in their stories and to access the thoughts and views of the people present (Riessman 2018).

One form of narrative analysis is interviews with people whose experiences are relevant to the research. Riessman points out that there are five steps in the process of narrative analysis: ideation, conversation, transcription, analysis and interpretation of experience. In her view, successful analysis requires the researcher to see both the “big picture” and the details. The researcher sets out by formulating an idea of what they aim to find out. This may be the experience of a particular group, or the view of an event from different perspectives. Riessman also draws attention to the role of the researcher in the analysis of the narrative. It is the researcher who, through their questions, determines what stories will be told. They are therefore encouraged to seek narratives from existing data, rather than to create their own. The resulting text must be treated as facts. After transcribing the conversations, the text is analysed, and the narratives found are categorised and elaborated. The final stage of the research is what Riessman calls the interpretation of experience, where the researcher must untangle the narrative from the data to produce a narrative that presents a chronological and personal account of a person or group of people (Leavy 2014, 211–213).

Riessman distinguishes between two types of methods: thematic and structural analysis. Thematic analysis focuses on what is being said. In contrast, structural narrative analysis focuses on the experience of the narrative itself, how it is presented and the experience of storytelling as such. Unlike contingency analysis, narrative analysis to a greater extent is aimed at ideas, experiences and thoughts. Narrative analysis leaves stories intact, while contextual analysis breaks the text into parts (Leavy 2014, 213). Although narrative analysis is used to study stories, the subject of the research is a human being, examining the person’s attitude towards something, their expression, message and response to a phenomenon. Thematic narrative analysis has been chosen for the current study because it enables assessing the experience of the Russian journalists, their feelings, fears, attitudes and values. This analysis enables understanding why the Russian journalists have moved to Latvia, their feelings about working and living here, and their thoughts about press freedom and propaganda.

Results

Summarising the data, the thematic narrative analysis revealed five main narratives: forced departure from Russia; life in Latvia; working conditions in Latvia; cancellation of “*Dozhd*” licence; and Russia’s future prospects. Examining

the material, it was concluded that the security aspect was present in all the narratives, and therefore it was singled out as a separate and unifying narrative.

1. Forced departure from Russia

In all the interviews with Russian journalists, it is clear that they could not remain in Russia, i.e., they had to leave. When analysing the answers of the respondents, the narrative of “we could not stay there” is prominent. All the respondents indicated that they had not planned or wanted to leave, but the actions of the Russian government had left them no other option. All of them openly said that the decision to leave was taken quickly, within a matter of days or a week, the main reasons being the outbreak of war on 24 February and the subsequent adoption of the “fake news” law on 4 March, which severely restricted their work in the profession. The journalists revealed that they did not anticipate or believe that the war would actually start, thinking that the government was bluffing or trying to intimidate the opponents. In their stories, the respondents revealed the reasons why they could not remain in Russia. Although the circumstances vary, the common thread is that it was no longer safe for them to stay in their home country to continue their work. The main motivation for leaving was to avoid unjustified imprisonment. This is particularly evident in the conversations with the five respondents who have been sentenced under the “foreign agent” law; they believe that staying in Russia or returning would be dangerous and pose a risk of imprisonment. The journalists do not see their status as “foreign agents” as extraordinary and do not highlight this in any particular way; they acknowledge that these are the rules of being a journalist in Russia.

2. Life in Latvia

The narrative about life in Latvia shows the respondents’ deep desire for security. Many stressed that the issue of private security was conclusive in their decision to move. They feel secure in Riga and Latvia, describing it as a safe environment, even conveying that, compared to Russia, it is a paradise. Several journalists point out that, unlike in Russia, there is the rule of law here, as it is impossible to be sentenced unjustly. Several respondents adhere to the narrative that they are not afraid of being prosecuted here. This was suggested in the context of mobilisation, and it comes up again in the context of private security. Alexander states: “in Latvia, you can express yourself more freely, without fear that tomorrow they will come after you. Or be afraid that your property will be taken away. There is private security here.” Ilona, speaking about Latvia, says something similar: “It is important to me that I will not be seized and taken somewhere I don’t know.”

All the respondents say that they are satisfied with the living conditions in Latvia. The respondents who live in Riga (including the one in Jurmala) describe Riga as a peaceful, cosy, green, small, historic and comfortable city, where it is easy to settle in and where they feel at home. The people are described as kind, quiet, and it is repeatedly stressed that Latvians are polite. The negative aspects of living in Latvia are the high cost of living and the limited entertainment opportunities in Riga compared to Moscow.

The respondents unanimously agree that “*Media Hub Riga*” and its manager Sabine Sile, who is known in the Latvian media as “the mother” of Russian journalists, have been a great help in their lives. “*Media Hub Riga*” provides all the necessary support to Russian journalists. The common narrative is one of immense gratitude for the support in ensuring the necessary conditions for working here. “*Media Hub Riga*” has created a sense of community, new contacts and friends. It organises events, celebrations and trips around Latvia. The support of “*Media Hub Riga*” is described as “invaluable”, while the people who work there – as “lifesavers”, without whom the Russian journalists “could not cope”.

3. Working in Latvia

A new narrative emerges in the Russian journalists’ answers about their work experience in Latvia, i.e., that distance has changed their work practice and reduced their contact with Russia. The journalists reveal that it has become much more difficult to write about events in Russia, as they are unable to witness these events, be present for interviews, gather opinions and observe what is happening there with their own eyes.

Until now, the journalists have been the first sources of information, whereas at present they must rely on someone else sending information from within Russia. Furthermore, the links with people have been lost, as it is impossible, for example, to go to a rural village to canvass opinions. Although all the respondents talk about this, four of them reveal that this distance has compelled them to change the focus of their activities, and they no longer write about the events in Russia. The remaining respondents continue to write or speak about Russian domestic politics, and obtain information from colleagues who have stayed behind. Noticeably, on this topic, the respondents do not go into details, because, as they admit themselves, their sources who have remained in Russia face the risks which they themselves have escaped by going into exile. If something happens to them, we will not be able to help, – they say.

The respondents confirm that they feel physically and legally safe in Latvia, but repressions from Russia continue in cyberspace. While most media have been blocked in the early days of the war, independent media are finding new ways to be accessible to their audiences. A safe alternative is the *YouTube* platform, which is used by several media outlets and is ironically called “the new Russian TV channel”.

4. Treatment of the cancellation of the licence of “Dozhd” (TV Rain)

Regarding the cancellation of the licence of “Dozhd”, the narrative that the channel did not comply with the Latvian rules is echoed in the answers of the respondents. They did not specify what these rules were, but rather explained that the local audience did not understand that “Dozhd” could not adapt to no longer being based in Moscow, where a different kind of journalism was needed. They described “Dozhd” as a provocative media outlet that failed to comprehend that it had a completely different audience. In almost all the conversations, the narrative was that the cancellation of the licence was an overreaction on the part of Latvia. Seven respondents expressed belief that the Latvian public would have benefited, had the licence not been revoked and the media outlet continued to operate in Latvia. ““Dozhd” would help to reduce Russian propaganda and the number of Putin supporters in Latvia.”

Overall, the “Dozhd” incident affected the sense of security of some journalists, who after the event began to fear that it could happen to the media outlet employing them. The respondents say that they have realised that Latvia does not forgive mistakes, and that a similar fate could befall any other media outlet. The journalists are comforted by the thought that not all media in Latvia are under the same spotlight, moreover, not all Russian media in Latvia are known here. The media representatives say that although they are competitors, they now feel united because they are “in the same boat”. Even the journalists who have not watched the content of the “Dozhd”, support the channel. All the surveyed journalists admitted that the event was unpleasant and certainly affected the attitude of the Latvian public towards all Russian journalists.

5. Russia’s future outlook

All the respondents are pessimistic about Russia’s future prospects and do not foresee any significant improvement in the near future. Most journalists contend that any changes in Russia’s course depend on the country’s leader. There are theories about what would happen if Putin retired or died, and also what would happen, if a more liberal-minded president came to power. Most journalists believe that Putin’s death will not change anything, because the Russian people will not be able to elect a democratic leader. There is a view that the next head of state will be just as authoritarian and that the change in leadership will make no difference overall. Several respondents acknowledge that the war Russia has started in Ukraine is not beneficial for anyone, but will continue for an unknown period of time. The journalists perceive the decision to go to war as illogical, incomprehensible and unnecessary. The respondents blame Putin for the duration and outcome of the war. Most are not optimistic and do not foresee an early resolution of the military conflict. As for the future of Russia, a new narrative of fascism in Russia is emerging. Due to the power of the Russian propaganda and

brutal war crimes, some journalists equate the Russian government with Nazi Germany.

6. Security as a shared narrative

The common narrative that permeated all others was security. This aspect motivated journalists to leave Russia and move to Latvia, and it was closely linked to their perception of press freedom. In the narratives, security was the main aspect that motivated the respondents to leave the country, because it was no longer safe to remain in Russia. All of them stated that they did not plan and did not want to leave their homeland, but they had to do it. The general mood was that they had to flee. Security was also a decisive aspect prompting them to move to Latvia to work; they described life in Latvia as safe and peaceful. Compared to Russia, the respondents can work here without fearing arrest.

As regards freedom of the press, the journalists pointed out that there was a certain correlation with security. Alexander explained this, as follows: “if I can write the truth and I am safe, then there is freedom of expression.” It can be concluded that the security of independent journalists, i.e. state protection, is one of the aspects pertaining to the freedom of the press. The conditions for journalists in Russia were not safe because they had no state protection, Putin’s censorship did not allow media that opposed the government. In general, the narratives of the Russian journalists show that they cannot work as independent journalists if they are in danger, hence, security is a very important aspect of their work and daily life.

Conclusions

Independent journalism in Russia has long been repressed, but after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the situation deteriorated rapidly. Any media in Russia that is not blatant propaganda is blocked, independent journalists are sentenced to harsh prison terms and forced to leave their homeland, continuing their work outside the country. The themes of media accountability and press freedom are very important in the study of communication, drawing attention to the quality of the information that the audience receives. The contemporary situation of Russian journalists in exile combines both of these theories. In this part of the study, it is shown that Russian journalists could not continue to work in Russia because there is no freedom of the press and freedom of expression. The media are unable to publish objective and truthful information, while the state administration spreads propaganda and censors the opposing views. The Putin’s regime controls the media space, leaving no place for independent media. Similarly, the conversations with the Russian journalists revealed that they were motivated to move by a sense of responsibility, which prevented

them from becoming propaganda mouthpieces or changing their profession. Thus, they continue their work by exposing the Kremlin's lies and calling Putin a criminal who is waging war, not a special operation, even if they have to move to another country to do so. Their responsibility to their audience and their ethics as journalists motivate them to continue their work, even if this means having to uproot their everyday lives, whether giving their cat to their parents or selling their flat.

Author's note. The current paper is based on a master's thesis developed and defended in the master's study programme "Communication Science" at the University of Latvia Faculty of Social Sciences. The research supervisor of the thesis is Assistant Professor Laura Ardava-Āboliņa.

REFERENCES

- Leavy, P. (ed.). (2014). *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press.
- Reporters Without Borders (2023). *Russia*. Retrieved from: <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia>
- Reuters, Vaganov, A. (2022). *Understanding the Laws Relating to "Fake News" in Russia*. Thomson Reuters Foundation and the Committee to Protect Journalists. Retrieved from: <https://cpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Guide-to-Understanding-the-Laws-Relating-to-Fake-News-in-Russia.pdf>
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. SAGE Publications.
- Roudakova, N. (2017). *Losing Pravda. Ethics and the Press in Post-Truth Russia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ruduša, R. (2022). Stratēģiskā viesmiliba: Kādēļ Latvija devusi patvērumu Krievijas neatkarīgajiem medijiem [Strategic Hospitality: Why Latvia Gave Refuge to Russian Independent Media]. *LSM.lv*, 7.okt. Retrieved from: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/zinu-analize/strategiska-viesmiliba-kadel-latvija-devusi-patverumu-krievijas-neatkarigajiem-medijiem.a476691/>
- Seale, C. (ed.). (2018). *Researching Society and Culture*. SAGE Publications.