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Why Russian 'Opposition' Journalists Find Refuge in Propaganda Outlets

Independent sources have been disappearing like seats in a game of musical chairs.

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Maria Baronova **Artyom Korotayev / TASS**

Last month, former opposition journalist Maria Baronova and Human Rights Council member Yekaterina Vinokurova announced that they agreed to work for RT, the state-backed channel previously known as Russia Today. This sparked a resurgence of gloomy predictions that soon all of Russia's media professionals would be working for RT.

How did it happen, that the state's propaganda television channel — originally created to broadcast to a foreign audience — became the latest refuge for Russia's journalists? Is this a scary development?

Of course it is, but not for the obvious reasons. The scarier part is that Russia's media landscape offers little alternatives or visions for a better future.

It's no secret that, for the past five or 10 years, Russia's independent media outlets have been growing more scarce — disappearing like seats in a game of musical chairs.

The shuttering of independent voices is no isolated event in Russia: the authorities have long since turned this country into the world's largest media desert.

Russians have grown accustomed to it, just as they have to the authorities pressing criminal charges against people who re-post "undesirable" messages on social media and blocking various Internet sites.

The Russian Constitution prohibits censorship, but life in recent years has devolved into a reality in which journalists – and everybody else – feel almost entirely disconnected from their own country.

Nobody finds it surprising that the current round of "musical chairs" has left only about three-and-a-half independent media outlets in operation, or that people who once considered themselves part of the "opposition" have now gone to work for RT. This, by itself, does not convey the full spirit of the times.

"*What will those young idealists do a couple of years from now when there are practically no more "chairs" left.*"

It is simply that jobs are scarce these days, and journalists feel that a job with RT was an acceptable way to pay the bills.

Does it mean that the Kremlin has silenced alternative outlets so completely that young, idealistic journalists who once dreamed of working for Dozhd or Meduza are now rushing to sign on with RT? Of course not.

RT remains exactly what it was from the start: a government propaganda tool, in the same way that Russia — as writer Vladimir Nabokov noted when quoting a textbook — is our Fatherland and death is inevitable.

But what will those young idealists do a couple of years from now when there are practically no more "chairs" left — as will almost certainly be the case?

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To its credit, tech giant Yandex has done a lot with its staffing policy to make the company a sort of Noah's Ark for journalists. Of course, media professionals don't use Yandex as a platform for journalism, but as a sort of creative safe haven, in much the same way that, say, Korney Chukovsky and Samuil Marshak expressed themselves through children's literature in Soviet times. However, Yandex cannot hire everyone.

Optimists will say: "To hell with the traditional media! YouTube has created an alternative to TV and now anyone can make a podcast or publish on social networks. Just sit down and write— speak out — shoot a video — show it to others. Earn your money from advertising and you'll do fine."

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Unfortunately, this is a very superficial view. Sure, it is a good alternative for those who do not want or cannot get a job with one of the few remaining independent media outlets, but the websites have very strict rules, they are geared more towards entertaining the masses than enabling dreamers to speak truth to power.

"I have a dream," the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. once said.

"We have a dream," the Russian magazine Afisha said 20 years ago. It was a dream of a Moscow in which people drank coffee in cafés and rode bicycles wearing fashionable clothes.

"We have a dream," said Kommersant newspaper 30 years ago, and that was a dream of a Russia in which people could do business.

"We have a dream," said the magazines and newspapers that managed to come through *perestroika*, "a dream of openness and freedom to learn the whole truth."

No one has a dream now — not Yandex, the independent media, or YouTube bloggers. And definitely not RT. The dreams have faded.

Without dreams, there is little left to fear — or be happy about.

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