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Pay Raises, More News and Tighter Control: Staff at Russian State TV Work Overtime Amid Ukraine War

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Staff in a studio of new programme Vremya at Russia's Channel One. **Vyacheslav Prokofyev / TASS**

"No war" and "They are lying to you" were not messages Russian viewers expected to see during a news bulletin on state-run television.

But that was exactly what happened when producer Marina Ovsyannikova stormed a live broadcast waving an anti-war poster shortly after Russia's attack on Ukraine.

"The atmosphere was terrible at Channel One at the beginning [of the war]," said Ovsyannikova, who escaped criminal prosecution and later left Russia. "We realized we were doing something wrong, that we had crossed a line."

Since the start of Russia's invasion at the end of February, state-run television channels — the main news source for roughly two-thirds of Russians — have gone into overdrive to ensure that the Kremlin's messaging reaches all across the country.

Former and current state journalists who spoke to The Moscow Times described more news shifts, longer hours and tightened restrictions in the four months since the war began.

Ovsyannikova was one of dozens of staff at state television channels who quit in the first weeks of the war, but this wave of resignations has since ground to a halt as channels offered better pay packages and imposed stricter broadcasting controls.

Since her public protest, Ovsyannikova has been attacked by journalists and public figures for both her previous work within the Kremlin's propaganda machine and her pro-Kyiv comments, which some consider insincere.

For those still working in Russian state television, her case is far from inspiring.

"When journalists are urged to quit [state-run media] and go to protests — [I ask] okay, but what's next? Who will pay our loans and mortgages if we proudly leave our job? Moreover, I can honestly say that people look at Marina Ovsyannikova's case and how she is being endlessly criticized by everyone after quitting — and they don't want to resign," said a Channel One employee who asked to remain unidentified for fear of losing her job.

Ovsyannikova herself believes many more state television employees would have quit if her protest and subsequent statements had enjoyed a more positive reception.

"I think that 90% of state media employees don't support what's going on in Ukraine," Ovsyannikova told The Moscow Times. "If there was an alternative, everyone would leave."

One reason to stay, however, was likely to have been pay increases introduced at several major television channels in the wake of the invasion.

Salaries for news journalists at state-run Channel One were raised 20% in June to help retain staff, the Channel One employee told The Moscow Times. Employees at state-run Rossiya 1 also got a pay raise, according to a Rossiya 1 journalist who spoke to The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity.

Channel One and Rossiya 1 are the country's two biggest television channels and have a combined audience of tens of millions.

"I was thinking about quitting, but money was important. I hoped peace talks [between Russia and Ukraine] would achieve some results. Plus, our management talked to us, calmed us down, and said we should think about ourselves," the Rossiya 1 journalist said.

Since the start of the invasion, Russian state media has been faithfully relaying the Kremlin narrative that the war is meant to liberate Ukrainians from Nazis that it falsely claims are running the government in Kyiv.

Pundits and presenters on state television channels often use genocidal rhetoric, or mock evidence that Russian soldiers have carried out looting, and engaged in the rape and execution of Ukrainian civilians.

"We are at war with Satanists," said one guest on a popular talk show earlier this month

The volume of such material – and the corresponding amount of work expected from staff – has increased since the start of the invasion when channels ramped up news coverage. Before the war, Channel One had a news bulletin every three hours – they are now hourly.

Extra news coverage has also been required to fill airtime left after entertainment shows – including Channel One's popular talk show Vecherny Urgant ("Evening Urgant") and dating program Davai Pozhenimsya ("Let's Get Married") – were suspended in February.

"The number of news shifts and people who work [in the newsroom] has increased. Journalists are often asked to work extra shifts," said the Channel One employee.

The state TV journalists who spoke to The Moscow Times said they had been ordered to cite only official Russian sources and that the war in Ukraine must only be referenced on air using the Kremlin's preferred term of a "special military operation."

"We cannot use Ukrainian sources, even official ones," said the Rossiya 1 journalist. "The channel has a big meeting once a week and a daily morning meeting. Every day our management tells us how to cover certain events, or which stories we won't cover at all. Some instructions are also given during the day,"

Natalia Peshkova quit her job as a documentary journalist at Channel One a month after the invasion in protest at the war and became a freelancer.

"Many see it as a job that has to be done," she told The Moscow Times of the atmosphere in state media newsrooms. "You cannot change anything or you don't have enough courage and motivation, so you adjust to the situation."

She recounted an incident after the start of the war when managers rejected a documentary film about Ukrainian history that her department had made. "The bosses called them and yelled, accusing them of pacifism — as if pacifism is a bad thing," she said.

Another wartime change at state-owned TV channels has been a tightening of control. In particular, programs are no longer broadcast live – a measure to ensure that on-air protests, like that carried out by Ovsyannikova, cannot be repeated.

Channel One is currently using a broadcasting delay of up to 60 seconds, according to the journalist who works at the channel.

The Rossiya 1 journalist said that only employees who pass security checks are given access to live broadcasts and social media accounts – another likely result of attempts to avoid a repeat of an Ovsyannikova-style protest.

The changes at state-owned television channels come as Russia has introduced new laws effectively criminalizing objective reporting, resulting in hundreds of independent journalists fleeing the country and the shuttering of major independent outlets.

At least 3,000 websites and independent media have been blocked or censored since the start of the fighting, according to online freedom organization Roskomsvoboda. Russia's ranking on the World Press Freedom Index fell last month to 155th out of 180 countries.

Many of the journalists working at state-owned TV channels are well aware of their role in broadcasting deliberate falsehoods and distorted narratives.

“We understand what kind of picture we show and how it is made up, what subtext it has. Of course [state television] channels are deceiving people,” said the Rossiya 1 journalist.

Ovsyannikova was despondent about the prospects for other staff at state media quitting because of the stigma now attached to working at such organizations.

“For people who support [President Vladimir] Putin, they will always be traitors. For others, they will be former propagandists,” she said.

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