The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

I’m a Russian Journalist. I Recognize The Strangulation of American Media Today

By Ksenia Turkova

March 24, 2025



Ksenia Turkova **Ksenia Turkova / Facebook**

The day Voice of America went silent, my friend from Moscow — also a journalist in exile, now living in Europe — posted a photo of me from 11 years ago. In that picture, I’m captured in a strange dance with my friend, TV Rain host Mikhail Kozyrev.

It was May 2014 in Moscow. Crimea had just been annexed and the hybrid war in Donbas had begun. We were hosting the PolitProsvet (Enlightener Prize) award ceremony, dancing on top of a newspaper to illustrate what was happening to Russian media under Putin’s regime.

Dancing on newspapers is a silly contest we used to play in high school. At first, couples dance on a whole newspaper, then on half, then a quarter, then an eighth until there’s no space left to stand on. The winning couple is the one who can keep dancing the longest.

I always thought I would be that winner, that there would always be room to dance. “No

matter what he does to the media, you always have a choice," I used to say in online discussions. I believed my own story was proof of that.

I started my career as a 20-year-old intern at NTV — a dream employer for any aspiring reporter at the time. After my internship, I got a job there, only to see my dreams shatter within a year. After Gazprom took over NTV, I left along with most of the team. I still remember the feeling of being attacked and betrayed, like losing someone you love.

Related article: For Russia's Regional Journalism, RFE/RL's Closure a 'Catastrophe'

The next channel we joined (TV6), and the one after that (TVS), were both shut down by Putin. The message "Goodbye, we're off air" was broadcast on the TVS late on the night of June 22, 2003.

I knew that the wound would never fully heal. But I also knew there were still places where real journalism could be done, And I found them. Yet if you look at the list of Russian media and institutions I worked for — Echo of Moscow, City FM, Internews Russia, Moscow News — most of them no longer exist.

Since Putin launched his full-scale war against Ukraine, working in Russian media is no longer like dancing on a shrinking newspaper. There is no newspaper anymore — no islands left to step on. Those who stay and continue working as journalists do so underground, at enormous risk. Others, unwilling to compromise their dignity but determined to stay safe, simply quit. Two of my former colleagues, whose voices were once familiar to Echo of Moscow listeners, now have entirely different lives: one sews linens, the other works in a veterinary pharmacy. I admire them. But I also wonder whether I could do the same if there was no room left for me to dance.

Related article: 'Big Men' See Everyone Else As 'Small.' That's How Washington Sees Europe and Ukraine

Here in America, for journalists from Russia like me, the most frightening thing is the feeling of recognition. You've seen it before — the way they start folding the newspaper, making you escape, flee, give up, surrender, quit and shrinking the space you have to be free.

First, you recognize the fear at work — an unfamiliar fear of particular topics, angles, and words. No, it isn't outright censorship, which makes it even scarier. It's the "just in case" mindset that natives of the U.S.S.R. know all too well. You refuse to believe that this could happen in America. But people insist we have to be cautious "so they don't have any reason to shut us down."

That's another dark flashback. It was 2002. We had just finished a three-day marathon covering the Dubrovka Theater hostage crisis. The Kremlin already wanted to control our narrative. They called our bosses, who then pressured the hosts to talk about the "brilliant operation" — even though we know how many people died. I refuse to go on air. Later, a senior executive calls me aside. "Do you know how we got this broadcast license?" he asks.

“We can’t afford to lose it.”

Eight months later, we were off the air.

And here I am, 25 years later, twice as old and — I thought — wiser. Having worked in Russia and Ukraine I had crossed the ocean to try my luck in America. I didn’t expect to run into ghosts of the past here. But I recognize them too well not to see them.

First, you recognize the fear. Then, you recognize the rhetoric— radicals, enemies of the people. And finally, you recognize the methods — media silenced overnight, over the weekend, or even instantly.

You tell yourself: “Don’t freak out; this isn’t Russia! Yes, you’ve seen this before. But it’s just impossible here!” And then, the most horrifying realization dawns: once, in Russia, you told yourself the same thing.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/03/24/im-a-russian-journalist-i-recognize-the-strangulation-of-american-media-today-a88462