

TERMINATION OF JOURNALISTS' EMPLOYMENT IN RUSSIA: POLITICAL CONFLICTS AND ORDINARY NEGOTIATION PROCEDURES IN NEWSROOMS

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In the media community and sociopolitical publications, every termination of a journalist's employment in Russia immediately raises suspicions of a crackdown on the "fourth estate." In this article we analyze employment terminations in newsrooms in light of the interactions between separating parties. The political disputes that occurred in Russian news media between 2012 and 2014 shed light on the complex forms of pressure and compromise exerted on journalists. We have selected three cases (*Gazeta.ru*, *Kommersant-Vlast*, and *Lenta.ru*) to illustrate three modalities of regulation of political disputes in the Russian media in the mid-2010s. They show that political control is perfectly compatible with the liberal management of press companies, which facilitates the use of financial justifications in cases of conflict, and with newsrooms' commitment to social civility, which insures observance of good morals. Despite their differences, the three termination cases show the avoidance of politics in the Russian media in three ways. Neither authoritarian control nor renunciation on the part of journalists explains the exercise of power over the Russian media. It is rather on the side of negotiated arrangements meant to avoid political controversy that we observe the reconfiguration of public space in Russia.

Keywords: Russian News Media; Political Disputes; Termination; Dismissal; Control

Whenever a journalist loses his or her job in Russia, the country's media publications are prompt to express suspicions that the "fourth estate" is under attack.¹ Termina-

¹ The authors are grateful to Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, who discussed and suggested lines of thought during a study day at the Sorbonne organized by the ComPol research group of Association Française de Science Politique. We are also grateful to Cyril Lemieux and Eric Lagneau for valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper.

tion cases of chief editors or media professionals are regularly condemned in the journalistic community as demonstrating the extreme dependence of editorial policies on the interests of the elites (Halimi [1997] 2005) or managerial subservience to intellectual conformity (Ancelin 2016). In many areas of the world, including Central and Eastern Europe (Krasztev and Van Til 2015) and Asia (Zhao 2008), termination of journalists' employment is perceived as yet another sign of a tightening of authoritarian rule. In France lawmakers have included a preventive provision, a conscience clause permitting journalists to sever their employment relationship with an outlet in case of sale or significant shift in editorial policy (Ader 1997). In Russia, however, this provision does not exist, and political domination over the media has been a particularly powerful issue since the government took over mainstream news channels in the early 2000s. Most observers agree that the state has total control over the media (Lipman 2007). They most often refer to television, a *de facto* government-controlled media (Fossato 2005), but print journalists are not exempt from pressure either (Pasti 2005). In this restrictive political environment, terminations in the so-called independent press²—to use the term of journalists of privately owned media whose political lines differ from those of public and semipublic media—are a particularly sensitive issue. Terminations and newsroom reshufflings are condemned by international organizations for press freedom (such as Reporters Without Borders) as so many instances of government pressure on the media.

These condemnations, which are part of a protest campaign based on provisions and rules in international law, pay little attention to the way in which the disputes actually take place. Soviet-era censorship institutions (Blum 2009) were abolished in the late 1980s (Simons and Strovsky 2006), and journalists are no longer submitted to controls by a single ruling party. In this context, how can sociology approach the termination of an employment relationship between a journalist and a newsroom? How can one inquire into ordinary termination procedures in order to understand both the conflict and the compromise agreement that makes separation possible? To answer these questions we have based our study of contract terminations in newsrooms on the interactions between the separating parties and conducted an inside study of how the people involved in these disputes relate to each other, how they justify their actions (Chateauraynaud 2004), and what their justifications tell us about both the disputes and compromise agreements—all the while not losing sight of the political pressures exerted over newsrooms. The sociology of media does not usually address terminations of contracts in dedicated studies. When it does, it instead approaches them from the perspective of scandal construction (Thompson 2000; Delporte, Palmer, and Ruellan 2001). Terminations are then investigated by a sociology of professional relationships focusing on dealings, negotiations, and interplay between unions. Studies consist in comparing negotiations and testing their—if any—sectoral specificities (Bérout and Guillaume 2012; Bérout and Yon 2013;

² We use the phrase "independent press" to designate the media not directly owned by political authorities. They are independent insofar as they can be patronized by members of the opposition or derive revenues from sales or web traffic. Here, independence is a moot question, for the media can also fall into forms of financial dependence (Vartanova et al. 2016).

Dupuy 2016). On the other hand, approaching termination procedures through the exchanges of arguments that shape them allows us to bring to light the negotiating leeway needed to reach compromise agreements, collective reference points, and emerging calculation spaces (Dobry [1986] 1992; Chateauraynaud 2004:198). The mutual agreement to part ways can then be a serious object of analysis.

When dealing with the Russian media, we are faced with the difficulty of choosing an adequate term describing the termination of employment. While the term "dismissal" seems the easiest choice, the parties involved seldom use it. Most journalists in our study resigned of their own accord following arguments with their superiors. Organizations promoting the rights of journalists were usually absent from the negotiations (the Russian and French systems differ significantly in this respect), and recourse to mediation institutions (labor relations board, administrative courts) was unthinkable: compromise agreements were negotiated on a one-on-one basis between the journalists and their employers. In order best to understand employment terminations in Russian newsrooms, we have observed how the parties involved created a common space for confronting their convictions (Chateauraynaud 2004). We have examined three case studies that are both specific to and emblematic of three different ways in which employment was terminated. Since the 2011–2012 winter and anti-Kremlin demonstrations, several disputes involving the state and the media have been widely commented on social and independent media. These disputes eventually led to the termination of several chief editors' employment in Moscow-based general-news outlets. We have selected the departures of journalists from *Gazeta.ru*, *Kommersant-Vlast'*, and *Lenta.ru* to see what arguments were exchanged during moments of tension inside newsrooms. Our choice was determined by the fact that these cases concerned media outlets that kept away from the Kremlin and were notorious in Russia and abroad for their—particularly financial—independence. They owed this relative independence from the state to advertising revenue generated mostly by print circulation and/or pageviews. The outlets were general-news websites: we have not addressed termination cases in more specialized venues.³ It must be noted that terminations have been regularly observed since the early 2010s. They increased in number with the Ukrainian crisis and came to be perceived in the international press as examples among many of "how Russia's independent media was dismantled piece by piece."⁴ The cases we have selected can thus claim to be representative. Last, we did not wish to include an analysis of the case of state-owned media, where practice of (self-)censorship is more routine and less visible in the public sphere (Belin 2001; Koltsova 2006).

³ There were other cases concerning more specialized outlets such as free city magazines (*Bol'shoi gorod*) or the cultural website *Openspace.ru*. In June 2016 top editors of the RBC news group (which includes a television channel, a newspaper, and a news website) were ousted after they published inquiries on the assets of the country's main leaders. This recent case is in keeping with those described in this article.

⁴ Konstantin Benyumov, "How Russia's Independent Media Was Dismantled Piece by Piece," *Guardian*, May 25, 2016 (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/25/how-russia-independent-media-was-dismantled-piece-by-piece>).

We have gathered empirical data on the arguments put forward during disputes from the press and interviews with the journalists concerned. We encountered difficulty in scheduling interviews with chief editors, and when the latter were available, they were pressed for time. Our method was then to systematically combine these interviews with anonymized interviews of some of their coworkers with whom we met several times to obtain more in-depth information. These interviews were part of an inquiry on Russian journalists in the 2010s that was wider in scope; by 2017 we had gathered some 60 interviews. As it turned out, six of them were conducted with people involved in termination cases. One of our respondents was even involved in several of them—he worked at *Gazeta.ru*, *Lenta.ru*, and RBC. By adopting this approach, we avoided focusing too much on personal cases and could, whenever possible, render the collective import of the termination issue. We have also used a second source—a body of articles in Russian from general-news websites and websites specializing in the media. Most chief editors' stands on the issue were published on independent websites and in the independent media. The media close to the opposition performs important, noninstitutionalized monitoring of these termination cases. However, our research was hampered by the fact that Russia has no unified database on the press analogous to France's *Europresse* or *Factiva*. We had no other choice but to perform the painstaking work of manually collecting opinion statements on these terminations from several websites. The collected material provided information complementing and adding to the interviews and formed a basis for more precise wording of the questions of our interview guides. Last, as concerns the third termination case, we used a commemorative collection of eyewitness accounts posted on *Lenta.ru* by journalists who had left the online publication. Some of the most committed journalists opposing the political regime are indeed intent on producing retrospectives of these independent outlets and their histories. Combining interviews, our data, and eyewitness accounts has allowed us not to give in to the heroic illusion that the people involved fostered about their actions.

Analysis of these cases shows the various ways in which political authorities take control over media companies deriving income from their economic success. Specificities aside, these three cases give information on the modalities of political control in an authoritarian regime (Hibou 2011; Favarel-Garrigues 2014). Looking at the first case—that of *Gazeta.ru*—along the lines described by Béatrice Hibou allows us to see how “the most common economic systems and routine economic functioning jointly partake of domination mechanisms” (2011:14–15). In the second case, that of *Kommersant-Vlast'*, the argument put forward is not financial but moral: respect for common decency. In the third case, that of *Lenta.ru*, the political argument is directly put forward and leads to termination of employment without negotiation. What is striking in the study of these terminations is the depoliticization of negotiations. The depoliticization of internal disputes in the public sphere is undoubtedly one of the trademarks of the present regime and the way in which it exercises power. When depoliticization is impossible, employment termination leads to the departing journalists' expatriation or abandonment of political journalism.

USE OF FINANCIAL JUSTIFICATIONS TO AVOID POLITICS: GAZETA.RU'S ELECTION VIOLATIONS MAP

Since the 2010s, most terminations of journalists have taken place in an extremely tense political context. Most often, however, the justifications provided by the actors involved typically avoided or downplayed the political nature of the disputes. Journalists generally put forward deontological arguments while media owners and newsroom hierarchies charged journalists with hindering the business. These formal depoliticization tactics using financial arguments constitute one among other modalities of dispute regulation in authoritarian states.

A "POLITICAL" DISAGREEMENT

A good illustration of negotiated terminations is provided by a dispute occurring in 2011 in the Moscow press. It concerned Roman Badanin, deputy chief editor of the online daily *Gazeta.ru*. In November 2011, during the Russian parliamentary campaign, Badanin and the elections monitoring organization Golos collaborated in posting a map of election violations (*karta narushenii*) identified in Russia by Golos. The journalist justified his action by declaring that it was a "citizen project":

On the one hand, violations were obviously occurring. On the other hand, crowd-sourcing projects were popular and rested on the fact that people volunteered information on what they saw. We thought we owed it to our readers.... We told them, "Just read, everything's there! We're going to check some of the violations, but read, everything's there. It's your right."⁵

As Badanin stated in 2011 and again when we interviewed him, the map was put together from "reports of violations rather than actual vote tampering."⁶ The choice of a partnership with Golos can be explained, he said, by the fact that, putting aside state organizations whose explicit mission it is to monitor, Golos was one of the few organizations with enough competence and expertise for this type of monitoring.⁷

Golos gained visibility from this collaboration thanks to the traffic on *Gazeta.ru* at the time. Between 2010 and 2012 the number of visits per month on *Gazeta.ru* increased from 4 to 10 million, making it one of the most popular websites in Russia.⁸ Badanin's choosing to work with Golos was a form of political/activist involvement in keeping with some of his earlier commitments. A graduate in history, he conducted expert scientific studies for the International Foundation for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (The Gorbachev Foundation). In November 2011, as he was preparing the publication of the election violations map, he was asked to publish a publicity banner of Vladimir Putin's political party, *Edinaia Rossiia* (United Russia), on the homepage. This paid ad was part of a PR plan consisting in posting publicity in vari-

⁵ Interview with Roman Badanin by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, August 29, 2014.

⁶ Interview with Roman Badanin by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, August 29, 2014.

⁷ Golos has been compiling a database on election violations since 2008.

⁸ This information was provided by Mariia Travnikova, *Gazeta.ru's* marketing manager, August 28, 2013 (see Daucé 2014).

ous liberal newspapers.⁹ Badanin met with the editor-in-chief of *Gazeta.ru* Mikhail Kotov, who had formally received this proposition via the marketing department, expressed his reluctance, and decided not to post the party's ad, thinking that it could have a negative impact on the website's image. He confided later in an interview with the independent website *Slon.ru* that he regarded this as an attempt by the ruling party to subdue the outlet.¹⁰ He posted the election violations map instead.

Seeing these conflicting political loyalties between the regime's party and the Golos organization, the general manager of Kommersant, the publishing house owning *Gazeta.ru*, asked Badanin to withdraw the map. "Our chief editor received a phone call from the higher official spheres. It emanated from [Deputy Prime Minister Viacheslav] Volodin, or Alisher Usmanov, the owner of the publishing house, I don't know. And they called again and again. And they said that we must remove the map," a journalist from the newsroom said.¹¹ The map was removed from the website on November 30, 2011. It was later released again by other media outlets, website of radio Ekho Moskvy, *Slon.ru*, *The New Times*, and *Forbes.ru*—*Slon.ru* and *The New Times* claiming then that they were Golos's partners. Badanin thought it was disloyal to end the collaboration with Golos and resigned from *Gazeta.ru*.

THE MANAGEMENT'S FINANCIAL JUSTIFICATION

In this termination case, which was linked to a political publishing choice, the management's justifications were not political. The arguments put forward by the owners of *Gazeta.ru* were of a solely financial nature. After the map was posted, Kommersant's management blamed Badanin for overstepping his bounds, emphasizing that his decision not to post United Russia's publicity caused *Gazeta.ru* to lose a considerable amount of money. Moreover, the spot occupied by the map was also used as an argument: it meant a shortfall in advertising revenues. Dem'ian Kudriavtsev, general manager of the Kommersant group and informal mediator between the owner and the group's various newsrooms, used the same argument, and so did Mikhail Kotov, a coiniciator of the publication of the map. He justified the removal of the map, saying, "Because there is much advertising (as is usual in December), the commercial department (*kommercheskaia sluzhba*) considered that money was more important than the map."¹² In other words, the decision to post political advertising did not respond to a campaign-related duty but rather stemmed from purely commercial considerations. After all, Ekho Moskvy and other liberal media had accepted to advertise for United Russia. The management stated on the occasion that the newsroom must not inter-

⁹ Nataliia Rostova, "Roman Badanin: 'V Rossii v rassledovateli perekvalifitsiruiutsia zhurnal pro uspekhi i gazeta pro trendy.'" *Slon.ru*, December 2, 2013 (https://republic.ru/russia/roman_badanin-1027489.xhtml).

¹⁰ "They pay money not for the ad itself but to show us that they can do with us what they please."

¹¹ Interview with a then journalist at *Gazeta.ru* by Ivan Chupin and Françoise Daucé, Moscow, November 1, 2012.

¹² "Zamglavreda 'Gazety.ru' uvolilsia iz-za proekta s 'Golosom.'" *Lenta.ru*, November 30, 2011 (<http://lenta.ru/news/2011/11/30/gazetaru/>).

ferre with the commercial department's decisions to sell advertising on the website.¹³ That financial argument was all the easier for the owners and their representatives to advance as *Gazeta.ru* depended almost entirely on advertising—since charging for online access is seldom practiced in Russia (Daucé 2014). In a for-profit newsroom making extensive use of advertising, the financial argument was considered legitimate.

MAKING AN AGREEMENT POSSIBLE

How to explain this recourse to financial justifications in a conflict that is clearly political? Looking beyond common sense, which naturally points to media authorities' hypocrisy and collusion with the powers that be, we hypothesize that the discrepancy between the nature of the fault and the justification of the sanction facilitates the elaboration of a compromise agreement between the conflicting parties: the journalist and his superiors want to leave the space of political confrontation in order to settle the conflict amicably. Badanin himself avoided using political arguments and hid behind a "professional" and deontological logic, explaining that the map was useful "information" for the readers.

Interviewer: Was publishing that map a political act?

Badanin: Not from our point of view. It is part of the media's work. Seen from outside, it must appear as a political act, and this explains why the map was removed.¹⁴

Badanin also downplayed the markedly political nature of Golos. His statement shows denial of the political character of his act, which he reduces to a form of professional commitment.

However, Badanin's deontological claim is hardly tenable. Professionalism in Russia is hardly guided by established codes of ethics. In the early 1990s some newspapers acquired such codes—*Izvestiia* did on January 29, 1993, *Nezavisimaa gazeta* envisaged doing so but eventually gave up the idea, and Ekho Moskvyy acquired statutes by which its newsroom still abides today. This is not a general trend, however. Most often, these codes of ethics are calqued on foreign ones, as is the case for the dogma of *Vedomosti*, based on the rules and regulations of the *Financial Times*. At the time, these codes were meant to differentiate these publications from more financially dependent ones, suspected of corruption.¹⁵ At this point, Russian journalists' deontology depends less on written texts than on their own definition of their trade and the acceptability of its rules to them. The TV channel Russia Today has also issued a newsroom guide for its editorial team (Obmanets 2011:43–45).

¹³ "Otstavki v 'Kommersante': Oligarkh Usmanov posle vyborov obvinil 'Vlast' v 'melkom khuliganstve.'" Newsru.com, December 13, 2011 (<http://www.newsru.com/russia/13dec2011/kommer.html>).

¹⁴ Interview with Roman Badanin by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, August 29, 2014.

¹⁵ The Russian term *dzhinsa* refers to commissioned articles passing off as news items (Daucé 2016).

The dispute at *Gazeta.ru*, strikingly, ended with an amicable contract termination. Recourse to nonpolitical justifications allowed the parties concerned to part peacefully (without a lawsuit, for example). “There are no firings, there only are disagreements leading to resignations,” a *Gazeta.ru* journalist noted.¹⁶ Officially, Badanin’s departure was justified by *Gazeta.ru*’s economic management imperatives on the one hand and by professionalism or journalistic ethics on the other. At the conclusion of the dispute, Badanin resigned (*uvolilsia*). The protagonists did not lose face, reached agreement by mutual consent, and avoided lawsuits or an open political conflict.

Badanin’s departure did not trigger any collective support in the newsroom. *Gazeta.ru*’s political department journalists admitted having debated on the attitude to adopt. Kotov’s staying on the staff and asserting that he wanted to protect the newsroom from Kudriavtsev’s interventions sufficed to persuade most journalists to stay. As one of them stated,

Badanin said that he would not be the leader of the opposition. He said it was our decision. First, to discuss among ourselves and then, with Kotov. Kotov said that he didn’t want this dispute and that we had to accept what was happening. “It will be business as usual, but without Badanin. I give guarantees that I will minimize damage to the newsroom.”¹⁷

The majority of journalists decided to stay. However, looking at the two years following this event, one sees that most of the political and social journalists progressively left the website, one by one. They did sever their ties with the newsroom, but their departure was negotiated and gradual.

There is another factor hindering mobilization: the offending journalist was not definitively stigmatized on the job market. His relative ease in finding new employment abated other journalists’ fear of losing their jobs. Badanin left *Gazeta.ru* and was hired at the RBC media group. After RBC ran into trouble in June 2016,¹⁸ he started working as editor-in-chief for the independent TV channel Dozhd’. This shows that termination by mutual agreement is no obstacle to finding employment at another media outlet—probably because the separation did not evolve into a political scandal. After their negotiated departures, the journalists mobilized their friend and family networks to put their skills to work in another newsroom. At the end of a political dispute cloaked in financial garb, recourse to personal connections helps soften the consequences of the termination. It even seems that “blows” of this type, dealt to journalists of the “liberal” media community by managements wary of alienating the Kremlin, turn them into patented professionals (Chupin and Mustafina forthcoming).

¹⁶ Interview with a *Gazeta.ru* journalist by Ivan Chupin and Françoise Daucé, November 1, 2012.

¹⁷ Interview with a *Lenta.ru* journalist by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, June 27, 2014.

¹⁸ He, together with one of his deputy editors, Elizaveta Osetinskaia, was dismissed from RBC following a complex episode involving both financial problems and editorial disagreements inside the group. The group’s owner was oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, Putin’s challenger in the presidential election of March 2012.

MORAL JUSTIFICATION IN A POLITICAL DISPUTE: VLAST'S INSULTING SCRIBBLE

The second case of our analysis is based on recourse to moral justifications in a political dispute. Here, the offending editor-in-chief and his superiors put forward moral justifications having to do with good morals in order to avoid a political confrontation. The dispute shifted from politics to civility and polished courtesy. The political gesture was no longer at the heart of the issue. What was, however, was the publication of an expletive on the glossy pages of a magazine. This shift permitted to elaborate an amicable arrangement between the management and the journalist and to organize a departure without a public conflict and recourse to a third party (such as a labor union or court).

A POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT

After the December 2011 parliamentary elections the weekly newsmagazine *Kommersant-Vlast'* published a photograph of a ballot scribbled with obscenities directed against Putin. The photograph appeared in a report on expatriates voting at the Russian consulate in London. The day following the release, the owner of Kommersant Publishing House Alisher Usmanov declared on *Gazeta.ru* that he had fired chief editor Maksim Koval'skii. He also decided to fire Andrei Galiev, general manager of the publication's holding company, and Veronika Kutsyllo, deputy editor of *Kommersant-Vlast'*. Usmanov, a billionaire, owner of the large Metalloinvest mining company, and deputy general director of Gazprom Investholding, has close ties with the Kremlin. He bought the magazine in August 2006 above the market price as a "prestigious asset." Formally, as owner, he could not himself fire a Kommersant journalist and needed approval from the board of directors (*sovet direktorov*), but he just went ahead and announced the dismissals.

Koval'skii had to leave his post. He later explained, "When I published the ballot, I knew I would be fired. Azer [Mursaliev, chief editor of Kommersant Publishing House] had asked me to remove it. But I sent it to ... Putin instead."¹⁹ Koval'skii presented his action as a form of "professionalism." He explained in an interview that he decided to publish the ballot because it was deemed legally valid by the Yabloko Party but not counted because of its insulting character. He included a caption reading, "A correctly marked ballot that was ruled invalid." Another reason, he said, was the fact that publications of this type are "common practice" in the foreign press.

I asked an editor to look at other international titles, foreign news agencies, pictures of prominent political figures. You see "Fuck Bush, Fuck Sarko" almost everywhere. Why not? Was I supposed to hide this? Even *Le Figaro* features such language. As far as I know, nobody ever got fired for publishing such pictures. So, why hide them?²⁰

¹⁹ "Razgovory o media: Maksim Koval'skii i Mikhail Zygar'." *Afisha Daily*, August 3, 2012 (<https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/gorod/archive/media-kovalski-zygar/>).

²⁰ Interview with Maksim Koval'skii by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, July 22, 2014.

Unlike Badanin, Koval'skii acknowledged the "political" character of his dismissal. Since his coverage of the 2014 Winter Olympics, he had been at odds with Kudriavtsev, the representative of the owner's interests, who, in Koval'skii's terms, was "a doormat for the Kremlin." "It was clear to me that he wanted to fire me. But if they were to kill me, it had better be big. That's why I published the picture."²¹ In the same logic, after Badanin resigned from *Gazeta.ru*, Koval'skii asked him to publish an article in *Kommersant-Vlast'* in order to demonstrate his editorial independence to Kudriavtsev.

THE "MORAL" FAULT DISCOURSE

From the point of view of the newsmagazine's management, the debate occurring during the conflict was not officially political even though the article dealt with the elections. The fault was considered moral. For Kudriavtsev, publishing the ballot was a violation of *Kommersant's* internal rules, journalistic standards, and even of the Russian Federation's laws.²² Usmanov justified the decision to fire Koval'skii by arguing that "journalistic ethics had been violated." According to him, the published materials "border on petty hooliganism."²³ Publication of a photograph with "uncensored language" was a breach to moral and ethical principles. In order best to understand this situation, one must take into account the specific character of *mat*, a language condemned by the upper classes for its vulgarity but widely used by the lower classes. It is under severe scrutiny in the media and has been legally banned in the registered media since 2013.

Koval'skii interpreted the situation with reference to tradition rather than politics:

I understood perfectly well why Usmanov did it. He's from an Eastern culture, and what matters to him is respect for the elders. I am his slave and he's Putin's slave. It's a ladder. And he found himself in a situation where Putin could ask him, "how come your slave did that to me?" And, like an emperor, Usmanov showed that he could punish his own slave himself. The first time he came by *Kommersant*, we asked him if he was going to control the paper's editorial policy. He said no, only if my honor is concerned. I understood that this would be a key issue in our freedom of speech. Honor means friendship, friendship means loyalty [*vernost'*]. He's my friend, I can't do that. When asked for comments, I said that it was a question of honor for him, that he had his own conception of honor, and that I had mine.²⁴

Koval'skii shifted the conflict to the domestic sphere, a sphere founded on tradition and domination by elders (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). When publicly expressing his views, he abstained from referring to a political conflict with his management.

²¹ Interview with Maksim Koval'skii by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, July 22, 2014.

²² "Koval'skii uvolitsia iz 'Kommersanta' po soglasheniiu storon." *Lenta.ru*, December 16, 2011 (<http://lenta.ru/news/2011/12/16/kovalsky>).

²³ "Alisher Usmanov o kadrovyykh izmeneniiakh v ID 'Kommersant.'" *Gazeta.ru*, December 13, 2011 (https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lastnews/2011/12/13/n_2133038.shtml).

²⁴ Interview with Maksim Koval'skii by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, July 20, 2014.

AGREEMENT ON THE DISAGREEMENT

After Koval'skii was fired from *Kommersant-Vlast'* and appointed editor-in-chief of the website Openspace.ru, he attempted a political interpretation of his conflict with his superiors. "As it turns out, there have been many changes in the last six months—for Dem'ian Kudriavtsev and myself, they were political; for OpenSpace, they were financial; and for *Bol'shoi gorod* and *Citizen K*, they were somewhere in between."²⁵ He thought that the Kremlin's influence was increasing.²⁶ In his view, "The Kremlin used to be only interested in TV. With the protest movements, the authorities got scared and turned their attention to the printed press."²⁷ However, as there was no outward evidence of interference by the authorities, avoiding politics made negotiable ways out of the conflict possible. Two days after the publication of the offensive ballot, TV journalists asked Putin what he thought of it. The Putin explained that he had no problem with the publication, especially as the ballot came from London, where Boris Berezovsky lived at the time.²⁸ Two hours after the interview in which the president showed a liberal attitude, *Kommersant's* General Manager Kudriavtsev went to Koval'skii's office with a new offer. The following is Koval'skii's account of the conversation:

"Listen, Maks, there's still a way out. Will you stay if the stockholder cancels the dismissal?" He said the whole thing was no big deal. That's the way it works [laughs]. But then, my deputy editor had already resigned from her post. She was leaving. She couldn't go back on her decision, and if I stayed and she was leaving, it would have looked weird. Secondly, I had said everywhere, including the international media, that I was leaving because I had been fired. I simply would have lost face if I had stayed on the staff. It would have been interpreted as a Kremlin scheme—he's leaving, but in fact, he's staying, as if it had been planned beforehand. I could not afford this reputation. I'm leaving, this means I'm leaving, and I left.²⁹

He left in December 2011. Officially, his departure was mutually agreed upon (*po soglasheniiu storon*). In spite of its sensational nature, this ousting did not prevent Koval'skii from continuing working for *Kommersant* (then under Kudriavtsev's management), particularly for television. This tends to support the fact that, in spite of what happened, he was recognized by his profession regardless of strong political divergences.

Koval'skii's ousting mobilized collective support and his fellow journalists addressed an open letter to Usmanov. Initiated by an acquaintance of 16 years, the

²⁵ Asia Dunaevskaia and Asia Chachko, "Eks glavred 'Kommersanta-Vlast' Maksim Koval'skii vozglavil redaktsiiu OpenSpace." *Bol'shoi gorod*, June 25, 2012 (<http://www.bg.ru/news/11283/>).

²⁶ He cited as evidence the dismissal of Aleksandr Gerasimov, chief editor at Citi FM radio station, which took place at the same time as his, in December 2011.

²⁷ Interview with Maksim Koval'skii by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, July 20, 2014.

²⁸ The Russian oligarch lived in exile in Berkshire. He died in his house in March 2013.

²⁹ Interview with Maksim Koval'skii by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, July 20, 2014.

letter was signed by 35 people (journalists and a member of the board of directors in charge of marketing), who later met with the owner. "We regard [Koval'skii's] dismissal as an act of intimidation aimed at preventing any criticism of Vladimir Putin, even if expressed indirectly through photographs of texts in which he is mentioned without due respect.... We are forced into cowardice, this is injurious to dignity," the letter said. Vladimir Iakovlev, the original founder of *Kommersant*, acted as moral authority by supporting the letter. The secretary general of the journalists' union stated on the radio station Ekho Moskvy that the union condemned "censorship." However, the signatories did not leave their posts. Koval'skii explained this by the fact that they were comfortable at *Kommersant-Vlast'* and did not want to lose prestigious jobs. He himself was reinstated after his dismissal, working on special editorial projects. This shows that these dismissals can sometimes be reversed.

WHEN JOURNALISTS MOBILIZE: THE RESIGNATION OF *LENTA.RU*'S EDITORIAL TEAM

If terminations do not usually turn into scandals, tensions at *Lenta.ru* in March 2014 showed how an internal dispute could become public. In a tense political context due to the situation in Ukraine, a change in modes of media regulation caused an open conflict. The termination case of *Lenta.ru*'s editor-in-chief Galina Timchenko differs from those described above. Since the intensification of conflict with Ukraine, media regulation had been characterized by more direct political interference from the authorities and a more severe curbing of freedom of speech. What makes this case different from the other two is the direct political interference in the functioning of a particularly economically successful website that was the leading Russian news website in 2014. Moreover, it affected an editor-in-chief who had managed to establish charismatic authority based on personal involvement and directive management. Finally, unlike the first two cases, it triggered a very active mobilization among other journalists. We will try to explain this phenomenon here.

A CRITICAL NEWSROOM

Created in 2000, the *Lenta.ru* website occupied a central place in the Russian general-news media landscape in 2014, when it reached a record 20 million visitors and 130 million clicks per month.³⁰ Its owner Aleksander Mamut was a banker who diversified his investments by buying insurance stock. He was an economic adviser for President Boris Yeltsin's administration in 1998 and 1999. He then turned to the media and founded the SUP consortium in 2007, which bought LiveJournal in 2008, as well as restaurants, theaters, banks, and steel industries (Polymetal Company). He is said to be on good terms with Putin. Paradoxically, the website's

³⁰ Victor Smeyukha, "La censure frappe en pleine crise de Crimée." *Courrier International*, March 15, 2014 (<http://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2014/03/15/la-censure-frappe-en-pleine-crise-de-crimee>).

financial success turned out to be detrimental to the newsroom: "With such a large audience it was impossible not to catch the authorities' or the oligarchy's attention," Timchenko later reckoned. "It could not but be a cause of worry. The higher your influence, the higher the risk.... Websites like ours must be tightly run or controlled."³¹ Timchenko protected her autonomy against official circles. She did not take part in meetings of chief editors with the press office of the presidential administration.³² A journalist explained, "She would miss Putin's invitations, balls, and inaugurations, she did not socialize with Kremlin people when others did because they wanted to hobnob with Putin's entourage and avoid being ousted should trouble occur."³³ Timchenko was always cautious when it came to politics. "*Lenta.ru's* policy was to keep away from politics. We never published anything on Putin's party, United Russia, or on possible disputes.... Investigating on how United Russia used public funds was not our business, but that of *Novaia gazeta* or *Vedomosti*. We strove to go unnoticed and unhurt,"³⁴ a former *Lenta.ru* correspondent explained.

Shielded by its distance from politics, the website had already distinguished itself with critical publications. During the December 2011 parliamentary elections, *Lenta.ru* journalist Il'ia Azar published an article entitled "The Carousel Is Broken," in which he documented electoral violations. In one evening the article received more than 300,000 clicks.³⁵ It was posted at 6:00 p.m., and by 4:00 a.m. it had been deleted by decision of the owner. Timchenko's dismissal was already in the offing. The website gave further evidence of its independence by featuring the video report project *Srok*. The Russian term *srok* means "term," as in "One term in office and one term in jail." The authors planned to make a documentary compiled from video footage shot during the 2011–2012 winter demonstrations. As members of the project were hosted by *Lenta.ru's* special projects, they acquired journalist credentials. In December 2012, the footage caught the attention of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation after the apartment of one of the authors was searched during an inquiry related to the Bolotnaia Square case.³⁶ In addition, during the Ukrainian crisis, the team had also been on Maydan Square in Kiev, where they gathered numerous reports by Russian-speaking Ukrainians not fitting the "fascist" stereotypes conveyed by state television. *Lenta.ru* had also made a number of critical reports on sensitive themes in Russia: the Bolotnaia Square case, the Gay Pride parade, and the Sochi Winter Olympics.

³¹ Nataliia Rostova, "Galina Timchenko: 'Mozhet, u kogo-to eto trafik, a u menia – auditoriia.'" *Slon.ru*, March 18, 2014 (https://republic.ru/world/galya_galya-1072609.xhtml).

³² Chief editors of most media outlets—mainly television—are regularly invited by the presidential administration.

³³ Interview with a *Lenta.ru* journalist by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, June 27, 2014.

³⁴ Interview with a *Lenta.ru* journalist by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, June 27, 2014.

³⁵ Interview with Il'ia Azar by Ivan Chupin and Renata Mustafina, Moscow, December 2012.

³⁶ "Rezhissera 'Sroka' doprosili v SK." *Lenta.ru*, December 10, 2012 (<http://lenta.ru/news/2012/12/10/kostomarov/>).

“EXTREMISM” AS A PRETEXT FOR DISMISSAL

In March 2014 Azar posted an interview with Andrei Tarasenko, leader of the Kiev section of the Ukrainian far-right organization Pravyi Sektor. He inserted a hyperlink to a 2008 interview with Ukrainian far-right leader Dmytro Iarosh published by another site. Following the publication, *Lenta.ru*'s editors received a warning from the communications regulatory agency Roskomnadzor. According to the legislation in force, a media outlet can be banned automatically and blocked on Russian territory if it receives three warnings in less than a year. Roskomnadzor incriminated the hyperlink to Iarosh's interview, condemning an “extremist” publication.³⁷ According to the agency, Iarosh asserted in the linked interview that “Ukraine's worst external enemy is the Russian Empire.” Roskomnadzor regarded this as an extremist incitement of racial hatred and preempted its right to take prophylactic and binding measures to put an end to this infraction and demanded that the link be deleted within ten days. Timchenko complied in order to prevent the website from being shut down.³⁸ This gesture of goodwill was not enough, since Mamut asked both Timchenko and Azar to leave. The following is Timchenko's account of her termination interview:

Timchenko: I went to General Manager Mamut's office. Only he and I were present. He told me that he wanted to terminate our employment relationship, and I said it came as no surprise. The interview lasted five minutes. He said he wanted to appoint Aleksei Goreslavskii as editor-in-chief.... I wished Aleksei good luck in this difficult task and went for my stuff.

Interviewer: Were you given a reason for the termination?

Timchenko: No.³⁹

What makes this situation different is that Timchenko was not notified verbally or in writing and was not given the reason for termination during the interview. This blocked possibilities for a negotiation and compromise agreement. Instead, Mamut used the charge of “extremism” formulated by Roskomnadzor according to the laws in force. Legal and institutional logic prevailed, making an amicable settlement impossible. This situation echoed the tightening of control over news websites during the Ukrainian conflict and the subsequent narrowing of journalists' room for maneuver (Daucé 2014). At a time when the media had become polarized (Chupin 2014), the reasons for termination became more openly political. They could be openly expressed because of the tightening of control over news content.

³⁷ Federal'naia sluzhba po nadzoru v sfere svyazi, informatsionnykh tekhnologii i massovykh kommunikatsii (Roskomnadzor), Preduprezhdenie, March 12, 2014 (http://rkn.gov.ru/docs/Preduprezhdenie_12032014.pdf).

³⁸ Daniil Aleksandrov, “Glavred Lenty.ru Galina Timchenko ostavit svoiu dolzhnost'.” *Slon.ru*, March 12, 2014 (<http://slon.ru/fast/russia/glavred-lenty-ru-galina-timchenko-ostavit-svoyu-dolzhnost-1069429.xhtml>).

³⁹ Nataliia Rostova, “Galina Timchenko: ‘Mozhet, u kogo-to eto trafik, a u menia – auditoriia.’” *Slon.ru*, March 18, 2014 (https://republic.ru/world/galya_galya-1072609.xhtml).

FROM MOBILIZATION TO ABANDONMENT OF JOURNALISM AND EXPATRIATION

Timchenko's termination, unlike Badanin's and Koval'skii's, was immediately followed by a collective reaction from her editorial team. On March 13, 2014, *Slon.ru* posted: "Yesterday one of the biggest Russian media scandals of recent years broke out, as the result of which the majority of journalists left the country's largest online media outlet" (Timchenko 2015:322). How is one to understand this scandal, considering that mobilization was relatively weak (not to say lacking) in the cases described above? Lack of mobilization among journalists seems to be the rule. This can be explained by the weakness of journalistic and professional unions (*Soiuz zhurnalistov*). The Soviet-era journalists' union, in which membership was quasicompulsory, was thoroughly restructured in 1993.⁴⁰ It has several local networks and claims a 100,000-strong membership throughout the country. However, most of the independent media journalists whom we interviewed in Moscow question its professional credibility. A journalist working at the time at *Gazeta.ru* said,

We've had terrible relationships with the Russian Union of Journalists since one of my colleagues published an article showing that the union issued press cards just to give access to reduced entrance in museums and reduced airlines tickets. We are pariahs in the Union. None of my friends are members.⁴¹

The Union therefore seems to be an organization representing journalists close to state media, serving honorific functions (e.g., granting medals and prizes), and representing the profession abroad. There is no consensually recognized structure susceptible of mobilizing support for certain chief editors throughout the media community. Most of the time journalists are alone in defending their jobs when in conflict with their hierarchy or Kremlin representatives.

In the case of *Lenta.ru*, mobilization was significant. Most likely, the speed of the decision process together with Roskomnadzor's direct administrative interference produced an injustice frame facilitating radicalization among certain journalists (Gamson 1992). First of all, the mobilization was due to Timchenko's charismatic leadership. She had worked some 15 years at the publication and had recruited most of the team. In the early years, the small size of the staff (10–15 people) allowed her to develop personal relationships with employees. A former department head described the friendly work atmosphere in the newsroom in these terms: "We were driven. People would go to concerts together; they're my friends. They all understood that they could not stay."⁴² In general, close social relationships of this type constitute a contributing factor for mobilization (Benquet 2011).

⁴⁰ At that time, the Journalists' Union of the Soviet Union became the Russian Union of Journalists.

⁴¹ Interview by Ivan Chupin and Françoise Daucé with a *Gazeta.ru* journalist, Moscow, November 1, 2012.

⁴² Interview with a *Lenta.ru* journalist by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, July 2, 2014.

An additional factor in the mobilization of journalists seems to be the choice of Goreslavskii as Timchenko's successor, which gave a political dimension to the conflict.⁴³ Goreslavskii was regarded as an agent of the Kremlin in charge of curbing the publication's independence. Timchenko had always handled government pressure personally. She eventually came to play a protective role for her team vis-à-vis political pressures. Goreslavskii was known in Russia for his work at the progovernment news website *Vzgliad*. Il'ia Krasil'shchik, the then editor-in-chief of *Afisha*, publicly chided a "friend of the Kremlin" on Facebook. Anton Nosik, who launched *Lenta.ru*, told the British daily *Financial Times* that Goreslavskii had completely overhauled the editorial team of *Gazeta.ru*, "which has become nothing more than a government news agency."⁴⁴ When the incoming editor-in-chief first met with the editorial team, he was asked if he was committed to continuity in editorial policy.

When I saw the new chief editor and how he answered questions, I understood that I could never work with him. He didn't answer the questions, everything he said was bullshit. He was asked: "What are your plans?"—"I don't know." "How do you see the future of the website?"—"I don't know." "Whom are you planning to hire?"—"I don't know." "How can you manage without the editorial team?"—"I don't know." "Why did you become editor-in-chief?"—"The owner asked me and I accepted."

What was to be done? A few days later, he removed an article. The Federation Council had allowed Putin to wage war in Crimea. The decision violated international laws. We wrote about those violations, he read the article and asked us to remove it from the main pages. Everything became clear at once. Why work with a boss you don't respect? And besides, you know that he won't support you.⁴⁵

The editorial team posted a statement on social media that soon gathered 50,000 "likes": "Replacing an independent editor-in-chief with a pliable, Kremlin-friendly individual constitutes a violation of the media law, which stipulates that censorship is unacceptable.... The trouble isn't that we've got nowhere to work. The trouble is that you, it seems, have nothing to read" (Timchenko 2015:333). Eighty-four members of the editorial team signed the statement, and 39 resigned. Timchenko left her job and the country and launched a new website, *Meduza*, in Riga, Latvia. Several resigning journalists joined the startup, definitely breaking with the Russian media and its owners. In this third case, reconciliation and reemployment in the Moscow media community were not possible and led to the fired chief editor's expatriation. In the absence of acceptable justifications on both parts, employment was terminated without a compromise agreement.

⁴³ Editor, "New Editor-in-Chief of Lenta.ru: I Don't Know Why You Need Me." *The Interpreter*, March 20, 2014 (<http://www.interpretermag.com/new-editor-in-chief-of-lenta-ru-i-dont-know-why-you-need-me/>).

⁴⁴ Sébastien Seibt, "Comment le Kremlin utilise la crise en Ukraine pour contrôler les medias." *France 24*, March 13, 2014 (<http://www.france24.com/fr/20140313-lenta-kremlin-poutine-crise-ukraine-controle-media-crimee>).

⁴⁵ Interview with a *Lenta.ru* journalist by Ivan Chupin, Moscow, July 2, 2014.

CONCLUSION

Observation of political conflicts in the Russian media between 2012 and 2014 helps shed light on the complex forms of pressure and compromise exerted on Russian news journalists. The disputes that we have studied here were clearly sparked by incidents perceived as political. But these three cases bring out several modes of regulation of political disagreements in the media. In the first two cases, acceptable justifications allowed both parties to find a solution and “save face.” Managements put forward financial (*Gazeta.ru*) or moral arguments (*Kommersant-Vlast*). Journalists consistently put forward work ethics and concern for keeping the public informed (Lemieux 2000). The protagonists distanced themselves from the political nature of the controversy, thereby allaying the violence of the termination. While the journalists' first motivations can be regarded as political—and therefore transgressive—justifications for their departures were not. The disputes were qualified in a different register. Shifting the set of arguments from the political to the financial or moral arenas made negotiation and separation on mutual agreement possible. These interpretative shifts are important because they allow us to understand how termination compromise agreements are reached. They allow both parties to avoid politics and subsequent irreversible terminations. Journalists can be rehired in other Moscow media outlets. In the third, *Lenta.ru*'s, case, the dispute was more directly political. Dismissal was consequential to the state administration Roskomnadzor's warning. Skirting a political conflict was neither possible nor attempted by the parties involved. The political nature of the confrontation caused a scandal and the collective resignation of the editorial team. The conflict then came to an end through renunciation and withdrawal—in this case the expatriation of a chief editor and part of her team. Here, the sanction by a state institution and lack of justification for the dismissals contributed to the editorial team's realization of the higher, political, stakes involved in the conflict.

These three examples allow us to show the diverse ways in which political conflicts were regulated in the Russian media in the mid-2010s. They show that the pressures exerted on the media do not necessarily entail that the authorities take control of newsrooms (nationalization of television channels is not the sole control instrument) or direct physical violence. Political control is perfectly compatible with the liberal management of media companies, which facilitates recourse to financial justifications in case of a conflict (lack of advertisement revenues, detrimental effect on the publication's image, sponsors' concerns, etc.) or with a company's commitment to civility, which insures observance of good morals. Every termination involves power relationships but also mutual compromise agreements between the editor-in-chief, certain journalists, the owner, and his intermediaries, who often act as informal mediators. When politics cannot be kept at bay, the crisis becomes a scandal and the separation is public and abrupt. Termination and expatriation put a radical end to the conflict. Despite their differences, the three cases nonetheless contribute to showing three modalities of avoidance of politics in the Russian media, and this in the three ways described by Nina Eliasoph. As she explains, “Common sense and much social research direct our attention to two common ways of understanding

apathy and engagement: one focuses on structural power, the other on beliefs.... Neither the 'inner' nor the 'outer' approach pays enough attention to the 'in-between'—to the ways people talk to each other about the political world and their place in it" (Eliasoph 1998:230–231). The present article is based on the study of this in-between, in which compromises are worked out in Russian newsrooms. Neither authoritarian control nor renunciation on the part of journalists fully explains how control is exerted over the Russian media. It is rather in negotiated compromises meant to avoid political controversy that reconfigurations of the public space are achieved in Russia.

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УВОЛЬНЕНИЯ ЖУРНАЛИСТОВ В РОССИИ: ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ КОНФЛИКТЫ И ПЕРЕГОВОРЫ В РЕДАКЦИЯХ

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В российском медиа-сообществе любое увольнение журналиста общественно-политического издания немедленно вызывает подозрения в ущемлении «четвертой власти». В этой статье мы анализируем случаи прекращения журналистской занятости в свете взаимодействий конфликтующих сторон. Политические споры, которые имели место в российских СМИ в период между 2012 и 2014 годами, проливают свет на сложные формы компромисса и давления, объектом которых становятся журналисты. Мы отобрали три кейса (Gazeta.ru, «Коммерсант-Власть» и «Лента.ру»), чтобы проиллюстрировать три разные модальности урегулирования политических споров в российских СМИ в середине 2010-х годов. Они показывают, что политический контроль вполне совместим с либеральным управлением медиа-компаниями, при котором в случае конфликта идут в ход финансовые обоснования, а также с приверженностью редакций кодексу профессиональной этики. Несмотря на различия, все три кейса прекращения трудовых отношений показывают стремление любыми путями избежать «политики». Ни авторитарный контроль, ни добровольный уход со стороны журналистов не позволяют описать, как осуществляется власть над российскими СМИ. Скорее, мы наблюдаем компромиссные соглашения стремящихся избежать политической огласки сторон, которые свидетельствуют о реконфигурации публичного пространства в России.

Ключевые слова: общественно-политические СМИ; политические конфликты; увольнение; трудовые споры; политический контроль