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## Media Elites in Post-Soviet Russia and their Strategies for Success

Media managers are key in the relations between, on the one side the authorities, to whom they enjoy privileged access, and, on the other side the newsroom, the functioning of which they define. Contrary to the popular view, held both in Russia and abroad, that the Kremlin controls the majority of the country's media, we argue that media managers have a fair bit of agency and are players in their own rights, able to shape their audiences' attitudes and modify individual as well as collective behavior. To be able to exert this power they must, however, tread a very fine line: they have to demonstrate *adekvatnost'* (literally adequacy, but better translated as appropriateness, or 'the right feel for the game') and demand *adekvatnost'* from their journalists and editors. Focusing on two dimensions – elite theory and the concept of *adekvatnost'* – this article analyses the data gleaned from interviews with a range of media managers.

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*Russian Politics*, 2/1, 2017, 32-54

### Introduction

In this article we look at media managers through the prism of two distinct dimensions of analysis. From the perspective of elite studies – our first dimension – this group is crucial for generating collectively held views (e.g. consent to war) and entrenching divisions (e.g. separation and ousting of the political opposition, named 'fifth column'). Adhering to an understanding of power and status close to Weberian traditions, we think of media managers not simply as a group of people who 'service' elite interests, but as an important part of the elite: even though they lack individual economic control over the media assets they manage (unless they are manager and owner in one person), the more powerful of them occupy positions that provide them with access to vast resources and power of influence over millions of people.<sup>1</sup>

Freedman proposes a definition of media power that refers not simply to specific actors or institutional structures but to their interactions; 'just as power itself is not a tangible property visible only in its

exercise, media power is best conceived as a relationship between different interests engaged in struggles for a range of objectives that include legitimation, influence, control, status and, increasingly, profit.<sup>2</sup> He categorizes media elites as part of the 'power elite'. The US sociologist C. Wright Mills described the 'power elite' in its original form in the 1950s as consisting of the heights of business, politics and the military, stressing the interconnections that allowed elites to combine forces to reign over the rest of the population.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, for our analysis, the structure of relations with other powerful actors are crucial as they contribute to stabilizing the power position of media managers.

In the specific context of Russia, several aspects are crucial. Some media managers have fallen because of specific interests around Putin's cronies (e.g. Irena Lesnevskaja's ren-tv was taken off by Yurii Koval'chuk, a member of a close Putin's circle of oligarch-friends); others were defeated in clan fights (e.g. Svetlana Mironiuk, see article by Vasily Gatov et al in this issue). As Ledeneva elucidated, power relations at the highest levels of Russia's elites run on informal networks, the rules of which are unwritten and yet clear to everybody involved. To stay in, one has to have a 'feel for the game', a 'sense of proportion' and must not misread or ignore *sistema's* signals.<sup>4</sup> This 'feel for the game' or a 'sense of proportion' (we called this *adekvatnost'*) within the media system is our second dimension of analysis. The notion of *adekvatnost'* stems from our previous research into journalist practices in contemporary Russia.<sup>5</sup> Journalists, producers and editors have developed sophisticated mechanisms to handle and execute Kremlin policies, without having any clear guidelines to follow and without restricting themselves and their own creativity too severely.

This is despite the fact that the Kremlin increasingly bluntly makes use of the oldest and most direct form of media politics: propaganda and control. Castells names two distinct forms of this state intervention: (a) the fabrication and diffusion of messages that distort facts and induce misinformation for the purpose of advancing state interests; and (b) the censorship of any message deemed to undermine these interests, if necessary by criminalizing unfettered communication and prosecuting the media outlet that produced this message.<sup>6</sup> In reference to Russia, Castells regards self-censorship as the dominating practice of media control: people act according to 'the wise judgment of responsible journalists and, ultimately, of their managers, if they want to keep their jobs and preserve their working conditions'.<sup>7</sup>

Although there is a lot of truth in Castells's statements, the practices of how news is produced are far more complex than simple censorship and even self-censorship. Even with Putin's further grip in power in his third presidential term, what we see on screen or read in the press by far not only the result of conscious subordination, explicit political pressure, interference or fear. Instead, television and journalistic reports disclose at least as much, if not more, of a journalist's/media personality's tastes and characteristics.

These individual characteristics, however, are not random or a-historical; they follow a process similar to

that which Norbert Elias described as a shift over time from where external constraints (Fremdzwänge) coerce or impose a specific behavior towards a state where this behavior is internalized to an extent that they are self-constraints (Selbstzwänge) which have become routinized and quasi automatic.<sup>8</sup> The latter case was typical for the Soviet Union; first, coercion forced reporters and public activists to suppress their thoughts which, later, became the silently accepted normative behavior in order to get by without trouble.<sup>9</sup> This process was repeated in the new millennium, if not earlier.

Not to have the 'right instinct' is interpreted as lack of professionalism.<sup>10</sup> One could assume that there is a certain correlation between being critical of the regime and being perceived as 'unprofessional', while loyalty is associated with professionalism. There can, indeed, sometimes be a correlation, but things are usually far more complex. Not to have the 'right instinct' internalized, i.e. being perceived as 'unprofessional', is often exactly the problem of those who try too hard to toe the line. An example here are journalists and editors who anxiously try to get things right and, in this process, practice too much self-censorship. The problem here is that too much, or the wrong, self-censorship threatens to stifle creativity and make media products dull and boring.

As an embodied 'feel for the game', *adekvatnost'* is very closely related to a person's habitus. According to Bourdieu, habitus is to be understood as the physical embodiment of cultural capital, deeply ingrained habits, trained skills and lasting dispositions that social actors possess due to their life experiences.<sup>11</sup> They guide people to think, feel and act in determinant ways. Széleányi et al. adapt habitus to post-Soviet circumstances where this internalized 'knowledge' requires an additional skill: how to navigate a rapidly transforming social space and their frequently changing rules of the game.<sup>12</sup> Habitus cannot be based upon calculus, but involves an unconscious relation to the field they operate in.<sup>13</sup> In the specific case of media managers, individuals need to have a habitus that allows them to switch fields between media and politics and function according to the immanent necessity of the field.

### **This Study and Its Empirical Data**

Our two analytical dimensions – the elite perspective and *adekvatnost'* – come together in the research subjects of media managers and editors-in-chief in as much as they; first, are strongly interlinked with the power elites; second, set the rules of *adekvatnost'* and pass them down; and third, abide by them in their own specific way in order to preserve their positions and survive in the challenging environment of Russia's media politics. They adapt these rules to new requirements whenever necessary. This is most visible in the heads of the federal television channels: Konstantin Ernst (*Channel One*), Oleg Dobrodeev (*vgtrk*) and Vladimir Kulistikov (*ntv*). The latter had been replaced in 2015, while the former two media managers have been in their positions for 23 and 17 years respectively. In this research, we chose not to focus on the three individuals, as their career paths and intertwinement with the Kremlin would make it very difficult to dissociate *adekvatnost'* from other factors which affected their professional life. Instead,

we need a wider variety of media managers in order to be able to analytically establish the specific role *adekvatnost'* plays in their work. we will examine media managers in their role as producers of *adekvatnost'* and ask what kind of *adekvatnost'* they have to adhere to themselves. We will examine their elite interactions in more detail. The main question behind this is: what makes these individuals in elite positions in the media survive, succeed and preserve their power positions, despite being exposed to two highly aggressive and competitive environments, politics and media?

We define media managers as both editors-in-chief and directors of media outlets. In most cases, the two roles are executed by one person, but not always. Therefore, it might not seem obvious to the media managers themselves why they ended up in one group, but from our specific analytical position it makes sense: within their media outlet they occupy a position of power and influence, and provide the most crucial link between the Kremlin and their editors, producers and journalists.

Another reason why the media managers themselves might be surprised to find themselves in this group is because they are extremely diverse. The sample of media outlets these managers represent is as widely drawn as any possible. Our cases cover a broad spectrum, ranging from state-aligned television (*Channel One*) and Kremlin-loyal press (*Moskovskii Komsomolets*, *Metro*, *Izvestiia*) to the outlets which support Russian political opposition (*Dozhd*, *Novaia Gazeta*, *ren tv*); from financial newspapers and news websites of general interest (*Vedomosti*, *rbc*, *Lenta*) to tabloids (*Lifenews*). As a result, these individuals enjoy very different levels of prestige, power, popularity and influence.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the selected media managers. With two exceptions (June 2014, February 2015), the interviews were conducted between November 2015 and March 2016 and lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours. They took place primarily in Moscow; one interview was conducted in London, one in New York and another three on Skype and via Facebook chat. The interview questionnaire was divided into questions on why interviewees think they are successful and what skills and qualities they possess, their professional biography, their relationship to the authorities, their management style, their view of ethics and the state of Russia's journalistic community today.

The most important criterion to count as a successful media manager in this research is straightforward: a) to have become one and b) to remain one. To remain in one's position implies, first of all, not to be removed, but also not to have become worn down and fed up. Konstantin Ernst heads the biggest media outlet, *Channel One*.<sup>14</sup> Pavel Gusev has been around the longest, owning and editing *Moskovskii Komsomolets* since the early 1980s.<sup>15</sup> Aram Gabrelianov is Russia's king of tabloid,<sup>16</sup> while Dmitrii Muratov has for years staunchly run one of Russia's very few opposition-oriented newspapers.<sup>17</sup> Anna Berezkina heads the free daily *Metro* from January 2014.<sup>18</sup> During the time of the interview, Elizaveta Osetinskaia, an established financial journalist, ran the business outlet *rbc*, and Mikhail Zygar' was editor-of-chief of the television channel *Dozhd*.<sup>19</sup> The current political situation in Russia is turbulent to

an extent that even while writing this article heads were rolling. Mikhail Zygar' left his position as the editor-in-chief only shortly after the interview and Elizaveta Osetinskaia<sup>20</sup> came under pressure following her coverage of the Panama papers, which eventually led to her ousting from *rbc* in May 2016.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from these seven successful media managers who held their positions during the time of the interview, we have also talked to four media managers who left (or were made to leave) their posts. Irene Lesnevskaja<sup>22</sup> and Vladimir Borodin<sup>23</sup> have quit the media business, whilst Leonid Bershidsky moved to Germany where he now writes op-eds for Bloomberg.<sup>24</sup> The only exception here is Galina Timchenko who was ousted from her position as editor-in chief of *Lenta* in 2014, but currently is again a media manager – she is a director general of a new media outlet set up in Riga.<sup>25</sup>

In the first part of the article, we will examine intra-elite relations. The second part will look at *adekvatnost'*, how it is perceived and shaped by the Russian media managers and how they relate to professional guidelines. In the conclusion we will discuss which aspects are crucial for a media manager's survival in present-day Russia.

### **Intra-elite Relations**

Power networks are paramount wherever money is not accepted as a mean of exchange.<sup>26</sup> The main resource required to partake in these networks is symbolic capital, gained through one's position within the system, as well as the social skills to fit in and be accepted by the networks' most powerful players. One media manager, Aleksei Venediktov, co-owner and editor-in-chief of the radio station *The Echo of Moscow*, euphemistically calls this socializing, which is crucial for everybody's survival, 'to share a bottle of whiskey'.<sup>27</sup> In 2014, in a conflict with the senior management of Gazprom Media, which owns his radio station, he probably only managed to survive because he was wily enough to convince high-ranking bureaucrats of his loyalty.<sup>28</sup> To do so and, more importantly, to get away with it, informal social connections to powerful individuals were key.

### ***Relations between Media Managers and the Kremlin***

The Kremlin possesses vastly superior power compared to the media managers and yet seeks good relations with them. Given the influence media in Russia have on sustaining public support for Kremlin policies, keeping a stable relationship is in the interest of the both sides. Russia's media managers have become acutely aware of this and often are keen to get involved in politics; for example, via governing bodies such as the Public Chamber or supervisory boards of ministries. Even if the role of these bodies in the Russian political system is merely symbolic, it nevertheless gives them opportunity to cultivate crucial networks, maintain good relations with one's peers and, more importantly, with key players in the Kremlin.<sup>29</sup>

Power networks are to a large part invisible to the public, but once rumors about them appear in social media, interview statements and commentaries, they are quickly rendered subject to scrutiny, suspicion and speculations.<sup>30</sup> Most widely discussed by academics and observers of Russia are the notorious weekly meetings between important editors-in-chief, heads of the most important television channels and Kremlin officials.<sup>31</sup> Although the practice of organizing regular meetings between high-ranking politicians and media managers/high-profile journalists is clearly not a Russian invention, but takes place throughout the world, in Russia they have a specific agenda.<sup>32</sup> Initially, these meetings had very practical reasons. A media analyst, Vasily Gatov, remembers that the so-called ‘Friday meetings’ with bureaucrats and media managers started in summer 1996.<sup>33</sup> They served to assist editorials to prepare the coverage of Kremlin affairs. With the rise of Putin, his aides bolstered these resources and the meetings changed their character, gradually gaining control over the media outlets. From the very few accounts there are, we can assume that the Kremlin uses these meetings to lay out their agenda and provide the media managers with guidelines of how to cover certain events.

The rumors around these meetings have become so numerous and mysterious that, in response, those involved in them usually play them down. Ernst describes them as a mere routine exercise:

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*Representatives of the president and the Prime Minister as well as some ministers read out the event plan for the coming week. There is nothing secretive or special about these meetings. It's like: in three days the president will fly to abc, where there will be a meeting with xyz. This helps us get organized; buy flight tickets, send people there, book hotels, etc.*<sup>34</sup>

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Whether Ernst's account is truthful or not, what these meetings certainly do is provide media managers with the chance to build up social capital in the form of relationships and connections to influential and powerful individuals, de facto becoming part of those networks, thereby gaining and sustaining symbolic status and prestige themselves.

Ernst is the secret idol of almost the entire journalist community, whether Kremlin-loyal or oppositionist. He sets the standards for creativity and professionalism. Gatov ascribes to Ernst exceptional talent and admiringly talks about his ability to manage several tasks simultaneously, with unambiguous division between himself, his relations and financial issues.<sup>35</sup> The most hard-nosed staunch oppositionists tend to forgive Ernst any propaganda act Ernst has committed in his news reporting: even though Lesnevskaja was deprived of her own channel by the authorities – pretty much the opposite to what has ever happened to Ernst – she identifies with him: ‘Kostia is confronted with the same type of conflict as I am’, says Lesnevskaja. She admits that he runs propaganda on the channel. However, this gives him the leeway to show figures who some in the Kremlin might consider controversial. ‘The films he shows at

night-time! These art-house movies and documentaries speak about Kostia; he chooses the best of the best and of the best quality possible'.<sup>36</sup>

The editor-in-chief of *Novaia Gazeta*, Dmitrii Muratov, also boasts his friendship with Ernst: 'You won't believe it, but I'm good friends with Kostia. Kostia Ernst'. Muratov admits that not everything his friend does is always correct. He refers to an infamous incident which happened during the Ukrainian crisis: A *Channel One* report from summer 2014 showed a woman who told the story of a three-year-old boy who she witnessed to have been crucified in a showcase by the Ukrainian army. This story later turned out to be a fake presented by an actress.<sup>37</sup> 'True, he does this news about the crucified boy', Muratov admits, 'but that's not the main thing in his life. He does absolutely fantastic documentaries'.<sup>38</sup>

Relations such as these are an indicator of how friendly interactions define the environment of media managers' world. The participants of friendship networks usually exhibit a similar habitus, which makes them be perceived as 'one of us' (*svoi*).<sup>39</sup> Habitus develops over time.<sup>40</sup> Generation and social environments in Soviet times could make people compatible in their habitus, even if their political views and approach to work sharply diverge. Both Ernst's and Muratov's biographies hail from intelligentsia families. Their educational careers were shaped by their studies at Moscow State University. Perestroika opened the door to a rapidly changing media environment.

### ***Inclusion into Media Managers Networks***

Muratov himself is an interesting case; even though he heads one of the most oppositional newspapers he is considered by his peers, among them very regime-loyal ones, as a friend and vice versa:

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*There are several editors-in-chief I respect a lot. Pasha Gusev and Vladislav Fronin (editor in chief of Rossiiskaia Gazeta, the official newspaper of the Russian government) are among them. I'm friends with Volodia Sungorkin (editor in chief of a popular tabloid-like weekly). I can't read his paper, Komsomol'skaia Pravda, for the same reason as I can't watch [the Putin propagandist Dmitrii] Kiselev (presenter at Vesti Nedeli and head of Russia Today media holding). But I know Sungorkin as a person and we are friends.*<sup>41</sup>

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Social, semi-formal or informal interaction are part and parcel of what it means for media managers to act appropriately in their roles, that is, of being *adekvatno*. Just like media elites around the globe, Russia's media managers have their own rituals of how to negotiate common ground and differences. Where there are opposing political views or conflicts of interest, friendly interactions become especially important as a sign of reliability and professionalism. According to Ernst, his

colleagues let their guards down when among their peers and express opinions quite similar to his own:

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*When the major media managers sit in a restaurant together, they are always very honest with one another. Often they say very different things from what they say in public. It's predominantly smart people who understand how the world works. Which is why I hardly ever have problems with my colleagues.*<sup>42</sup>

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These informal operations are usually hidden to researchers; however, some of our interviewees alluded to them. What has become obvious is that a shared set of values is crucial for participants to be accepted into these exclusive, closed networks. The nucleus of these circles is dominated by people (predominantly men) born in the 1960s; that is Ernst's and Muratov's generation. Despite their different paths in post-Soviet Russia, they still speak a common language and share similar memories of the past; endless debates within closed Soviet intelligentsia friendship circles in narrow, cigarette smoked filled kitchens till the small hours of the morning about philosophy, repression, liberal freedoms and, most importantly, Russia's fate, past and future.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Exclusion from Media Managers Networks***

Aram Gabrelianov, the head of the media holding *Lifenews*, appears to be excluded from higher media circles '*Lifenews* is a low-budget propaganda tool', one of our media managers remarked sneeringly.<sup>44</sup> Despite holding a degree from Moscow State University, back then the most prestigious place to study and, more importantly, despite the success his media holding *Newsmedia*, Gabrelianov has remained an outcast within the Russian community of media managers.

Historically, the fact that he left a prestigious Moscow community after graduation to move to the province and then come back did not help his integration to the higher media circles back in the 1990s. He chose a different path: being extraordinarily loyal and subservient to Putin. This subservience requires, among other things, to bash the opposition whenever possible and, more crucially, never say a negative word about Putin.<sup>45</sup> However, this did not help him either. Gabrelianov seems to be aware of his lack of reputation among his peers: 'I haven't got any friends there to be honest. Anyway, the media business is like a nuclear war'.<sup>46</sup> The low regard of tabloid press held by most of media managers undermines his position further.

In his pursuit to increase his status he took over *Izvestiia* – one of the most prominent and respectful newspapers, which was a very prestigious media outlet throughout the Soviet period too. However, when Gabrelianov attempted to merge the editorial team of the daily with the tabloid's editorial team, this



caused much consternation. The former *Izvestiia* editor-in-chief was not prepared to work together with the tabloid's journalists and left the newspaper.<sup>47</sup> Gabrelianov's contract ran out in 2016 and was not renewed. It is assumed that the decision not to renew his contract is related to the fact that he tried to run *Izvestiia* in the same style as he has ran his tabloid.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Inclusion to, and Exclusion from, Kremlin-hosted Gatherings***

To be part of the community of higher media managers circles requires from the individual to read the signs sent by the Kremlin correctly. Whether a media manager is in the Kremlin's good books is apparent by how often they are invited to official meetings with Putin. Just prior to our interview with Gusev, Putin had hosted a major meeting with leading media managers.<sup>49</sup>

Generally, Gusev presents himself as an independent element in the Russian media system and demonstrates that he can judge for himself where to go, whom to meet and what articles to run. 'Nobody would ever dare to pressurize me', Gusev assures us. 'They know very well that that's pointless. Still, he perceives invitations from the Kremlin as a sign of respect. 'Last night I met Putin', Gusev is visibly proud. 'I told him directly that many of the latest amendments to the media legislation are not good at all. I told him personally that the presidential administration doesn't do things right in the media sphere'.<sup>50</sup> Gusev has the ideal habitus to feel comfortable in these meetings and to be perceived as good company, and yet he has to negotiate his interests carefully. The first indicators of the Kremlins' waning affection are reminiscent of Stalin's ritualistic method of excommunicating selected members of his entourage: instead of an open conflict, they get quietly side-lined. Gusev has personally been at the receiving end of this tactic: 'They might "forget" about you when they compile their guests lists, or not find time when you want to meet up with them to discuss an important issue.'<sup>51</sup>

Gabrelianov was not present at this meeting and, furthermore, was not even aware of it despite the fact that he manages the assets of *Izvestiia*. This seems odd, given that even Putin-critical Muratov was invited. 'Three days ago we were in Novoogarëvo at Putin's residence', he refers to the same dinner as Gusev above. 'It was a dinner for us editors-in-chief and for some state officials. It's important to attend if you want to get heard'.<sup>52</sup>

Why does the Kremlin prioritize the opposition newspaper editor Muratov over Kremlin-loyal Gabrelianov? The common explanation for the Kremlin's quiet endurance of Muratov is because his newspaper is read only by a small number of people who are critical of Putin anyway.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to that, Gabrelianov's audience comes from the large majority of the Russian population who form the basis of support for Putin's regime.<sup>54</sup> *Novaia Gazeta* serves as a fig leaf the Kremlin can refer to when justifying that there is free speech in Russia. Albeit critical of Putin, Muratov is in some respects more predictable than the Putin-admirer Gabrelianov. First, Muratov works very thoroughly and has proven

that he is ready to abide by unwritten rules set up throughout the years of mutual cooperation with the authorities, which has helped protect the newspaper from potential attacks from the Kremlin. Gabrelianov, in turn, is far less concerned about thoroughness. His main aim is to be the first to get news out, which implies making mistakes – a risk for the Kremlin. Women and children of leading Russian politicians are taboo topics for Muratov, which gives Putin some peace from rumors around his supposed daughters and lovers.<sup>55</sup> Gabrelianov obeys these informal rules too with regards to Putin, but he occasionally rants against politicians and bureaucrats. These rants can be very erratic and, more importantly, quite painful for the authorities. Muratov is in his own way more reliable – a quality which is confirmed by his habitus: in his mentality, social behavior and culture he is on the same wavelength and ‘one of them’.

A few other media managers we have interviewed dropped out of this community. Although they were friends with some of their colleagues at the time they were heading their media outlets, they nevertheless did not fit in. They found it difficult to warm to the Kremlin officials and vice versa; they are too different in their culture and mentality. Timchenko nevertheless accepted invitations by the Kremlin once in a while (‘because to be invited means that you are someone, but if you don’t show your face, you are a nobody to your colleagues’); but she and the Kremlin people never grew on each other.<sup>56</sup> This was even more true for Borodin who always felt like an outsider at these meetings, which, he says, reminded him of Communist Party congresses where several back row seats were allocated to fig leaves to indicate the diversity of the Party, whilst the policies were defined by a handful of powerful bureaucrats in the Central Committee.<sup>57</sup> They stopped going.

As a rule, developing good relations both with the Kremlin and other media managers is essential to preserve one’s position and increase one’s individual power. A high level of social capital can in moments of crisis even be about survival. Being well acquainted with many of his media managers-peers, Muratov is confident that he can rely on their common sense to the extent that if ‘they had to choose between pressing the red button [Muratov’s death] and the green button, they would choose the green one; even those of them who have different views on life’.<sup>58</sup> However, if someone lacks sufficient social capital as well as status, as does Gabrelianov, things risk developing differently.

### **Media Managers on *Adekvatnost*: Editorial Guidelines**

‘*Adekvatnost*’ is in some respects the most normal self-censorship’, Timchenko states, thus reiterating Castells’ argument of being determined by ‘the wise judgment of responsible journalists’.<sup>59</sup> Developing the concept of *adekvatnost*, we, however, seek to derive at a more nuanced analysis. In contrast to self-censorship, *adekvatnost*’ is not triggered by a fear of coercive consequences. On the contrary, it is perceived as a virtue rather than a limitation and as a key to success. Based on their professional experience, the media managers we have interviewed have worked out sophisticated practices which

allow them to get on with their work unhindered by the current controversial political climate. Their proximity to the authorities helps them sense what is appropriate to cover in the news and how to provide this coverage.

One aspect of *adekvatnost'* is how media managers relate to the importance of guidelines in the day-to-day work of the newsrooms. Previously we stated that on state-owned or state-aligned channels there are no guidelines or blacklists used which help journalists perform their work. Instead, journalists and editors follow their 'instincts' to provide a news coverage which is considered appropriate and which tows the current political line. The closer a media outlet is to the Kremlin and the more loyal it is, the less transparent and consistent are its informal guidelines with regard to how to cover news because they have to adapt to the Kremlin policies – and those are in constant flux.

Back in the 1990s, when the Russian media were trying to emulate western media companies' methods, having written guidelines was a fashionable detail. It was so very different to the lawlessness around them, which rendered many written contracts worthless pieces of paper. It was also something intrinsically 'Western', quite contrary to the inherent suspicion of written rules, codes and contracts which is historically rooted in Russian culture. Yury Lotman locates this suspicion in Russian medieval culture: whereas in Western Europe concluding a contract was a stigma-free activity without risking any offence, in Russian culture contracts were seen as the last resort, to be concluded with no one better than 'the devil'. In other words, where there was trust, no contract was needed, conversely where there was a contract, there was suspicion. Thus, in Russia a contract was often meaningless and could be easily dismissed, while, at the same time, in Western Europe the contract was sacred and the acceptance of it shared by society.<sup>60</sup>

Editors-in-chief with a self-perception as being modern and Western adopted guidelines in the second half of the 1990s. 'Dogma', the code of practice of *Vedomosti*, was one of the first guidelines to be introduced in a post-Soviet media outlet. The rules specified, among other things, that journalists must not take bribes from newsmakers, they should use several opposing sources to provide a full picture of an event, they must state the source of information and articles should be clearly structured.<sup>61</sup> Leonid Bershidsky, its co-author, told us in an interview what their basic motivation was: 'We wanted the paper to be different from all the others, so we put all the differentiation points in this document.'<sup>62</sup> Other media outlets followed suit; many never bothered. Soon the idea seemed obsolete. When, with Putin's consolidation in power, the media became increasingly controlled, following written-down guidelines became increasingly difficult, if not unfitting to editorial life. They inflicted constraints on the outlet's ability to switch strategy and line of argument if need be and adapt it to the latest Kremlin policies and its frequent changes.

Ernst's approach shows the ways Kremlin-loyal media managers have handled their tasks. In the

interview with us in 2016, the *Channel One* boss does not think that there is any point in writing things down:

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*You know, I have worked here for 20 years and we have got nothing written down. Everybody knows the rules. If not from the beginning, they will learn them empirically. We've had some people who didn't obey the rules and we had to sack them. Of all the people I've sacked, nobody would have ever asked where the rules they had broken were written down. They knew anyway that they did wrong. What did they do? They behaved unethically; they had offended someone or acted in a way that risks litigation against us.*<sup>63</sup>

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For Ernst, there cannot be any open question: ‘We don't need to have written down that people shouldn't piss and shit onto the street; everybody knows it’.<sup>64</sup> As roguish and rough as this might sound, it does make sense in the context of *Channel One*, whose importance obliges the editors to be particularly careful in their approach to news coverage; less in terms of getting the facts right, but more in terms of getting things right for the Kremlin. Written-down guidelines would become a huge obstacle when the channel has to quickly react to a U-turn imposed by the Kremlin. *Channel One* journalists' *adekvatnost'* means that they are fine-tuned to respond to rapid changes whenever necessary.

Gusev explains the lack of written guidelines at *Moskovskii Komsomolets* with the excuse that rules, including an ethics code of practice, are clearly set down in every employment contract. Gusev adds: ‘As I am the editor-in-chief, I am the chief guideline.’<sup>65</sup> Here yet another mechanism is revealed which characterizes all the media managers: an urge to control as many processes as possible. Gusev checks all articles which can potentially cause conflicts with the authorities himself before they get published: ‘I read all the more sensitive material because it's so tricky to predict how they will respond. Okay, we all know that Putin's children are a taboo topic. But apart from that it's impossible to tell. Wherever I am – in the us, in Africa, in Europe – I always read the tricky stuff first’.<sup>66</sup>

Gusev promotes an image of himself of being a political liberal who has never kowtowed to the Kremlin. He occasionally publishes biting material against politicians of all levels of authority, from a local council up to the government. All the same he would not have survived that long if he did not know exactly how to play the game. One moment here has been his flexibility to adapt to, and compromise with, the Kremlin's demands. One way to do so is to hold back with strong statements of political nature which could backfire in the future (‘I never openly express my political views’.<sup>67</sup>) Gusev justifies his refusal to express himself politically by referring to principles of ‘neutrality’: ‘I think that an editor-in-chief of a daily of general interest must refrain from voicing his individual political views and political preferences...The paper can articulate opinions, I as editor-in-chief can't; I should remain neutral. There is one more

important principle: not to trigger criticism.’<sup>68</sup>

Having a written-down code of practice is one of the signs which differentiates independent and non-state-aligned media in Russia. *Lenta* during Timchenko’s time followed guidelines called Manual.<sup>69</sup> Osetinskaia, upon arrival at *rbc* in 2014, also established guidelines,<sup>70</sup> and so did Zygar’ for the staff of the television channel *Dozhd*.<sup>71</sup> As bizarre as it might appear, guidelines are a way to attract a loyal audience. While state-owned or state-aligned channels receive funds from the state or state-allied corporations, non-state-aligned media do not receive state subsidies, which forces them to secure funds through audience numbers. Having guidelines gives them the appearance of being more professional, which can help them bind a loyal audience to them, particularly young, urban audiences.

Having said that, the benefits of guidelines go beyond the promotion of material interests and care of image. Given its specific profile (being independent, doing investigative journalism and promoting views divergent from, and critical of, the Kremlin), *Novaia Gazeta* was forced to work out particularly thorough, strict and transparent guidelines. Since the foundation of the newspaper eight journalists have been assassinated, which made its editor-in-chief principally concerned about security of his staff. ‘No material is worth risking the life of a journalist... Thank God over the last seven years we have learned how to assess and analyse a situation so that we have managed to avoid losing more precious lives.’<sup>72</sup> Nobody else works as exemplarily as Muratov does:

Before the publication of an investigation we ask the main actors of the story to comment on the material. We don’t publish any investigation without sending a request beforehand to those who will feature in it. This is our most important ethical principle. We give them the right to reply. After all, we are not the almighty, but simple journalists. Those people are rich, powerful and often armed to the teeth.<sup>73</sup>

This thorough extra work has at least three benefits for Muratov. First, he mitigates the risk being sued. Second, his audience does appreciate qualitative investigative work. Third, and most importantly, it makes him predictable to the authorities, which ensures peaceful relations with them, despite Muratov’s oppositional stances.

## Conclusion

Power structures are relational and depend on intense interaction between different elite groups. Following Freedman, who draws attention to intra-elite interaction, we looked at media managers as elites, their relation to the Kremlin and their relationships amongst one another. To partake in both types of relationship is paramount for individuals to strengthen their position.

Russia’s media managers’ close connections to the authorities, and their informal subordination to them,

make them an integral element of the Russian regime. Being the lynchpin between the offices in the presidential administration, the newsrooms and the millions of living rooms across the country that they influence, they know how to play the game, the rules for which were partly set by the *sistema*, the informal governing system of Putin's Russia. One important aspect of media managers' *adekvatnost'* is to maintain good relations with the authorities. They themselves have also contributed to how the *sistema* runs. Some of our interviewees have shown exceptional flexibility, 'correctly' navigating permanently changing political environments. They have led their media outlets from the first years of post-Soviet Russia, some even from the late Soviet period, weathering the most radical changes from the Soviet communist system, the Yeltsin years turbulences, through to Putin's growing authoritarianism.

In contemporary Russia the success of media managers depends on how loyal they have been to the Kremlin and how decisive their role has been in manufacturing consensual attitudes towards the current regime. Notwithstanding this, less loyal ones also have the opportunity to preserve their position providing that they, like the loyal ones, abide by specific informal and unwritten rules of *adekvatnost'*. Consequently, they are the beacons that guide the rest how to successfully apply *adekvatnost'* principles in practice. Important platforms for the demonstration of *adekvatnost'* are meetings with Kremlin bureaucrats, which not only provide an access to important decision makers in the country, but also significantly increase the status and prestige of the media managers. This, in turn, helps them to be accepted by the networks' most powerful players; and staying in these ranks indicates that the manager abides by the rules of *adekvatnost'* accepted by the *sistema*.

For the Kremlin this networking is equally beneficial. In this way the authorities can keep their hands on the pulse of the media and ensure their control over them. For this purpose the Kremlin has fostered regular meetings with the senior media management of important outlets. It is true that meetings between high-ranking bureaucrats and media managers/high-profile journalists exist all over the world and governments are keen on influencing media products. What is, however, specific in the Russian case is that these kinds of meetings are frequently acknowledged in public, treated as the norm, and are regarded as a basic and fundamental professional skill.

As for the personal connections between media managers, we have encountered two major attitudes. The first is that elites want to be sure that their peers are reliable and speak the same language. Trust is created more easily where individuals share the same or a similar habitus. Even though their political views and approach to work sharply diverge and their media outlets treat the Kremlin policies very differently, Muratov and Ernst are compatible in their habitus, and in personal life they can enjoy each other's company. They grew up in similar environments at a similar period in time with similar values. This also explains why Gabrelianov is excluded from both types of elite networks. The tabloid king occupies the negative end of the spectrum of Russian media managers; being a pariah amongst Russian media managers despite his ultimate loyalty to Vladimir Putin. He does not fit in and he is not someone

other media managers are keen to socialize with.

The outlined principles and the interaction between the media elite and the political elite may be illustrated by the recent case of the ousted management of *rbc*. The former editor-in-chief, Elizaveta Osetinskaia, has been capable of socializing with the country's most powerful business and political elites, at the same time as being one of the most respectful media managers of the young generation. However, her elite interaction was not efficient enough for her to survive in the controversial environment of Russian politics. In addition to that, to survive, Osetinskaia should have made sure that all *rbc* investigations were backed very strongly by the members of Putin's elite. Yet such support was impossible to secure as *rbc* was targeting Putin and his family – the threshold one simply must not cross in Russia. In contrast to Muratov, whose media outlet can risk publishing daring journalistic investigations, Osetinskaia's social and symbolic capital within the circles of powerbrokers close to the Kremlin was not strong enough to match her professional ambitions. Hence, her departure from the media holding is further evidence that Russian media elites, however close they are to the power elite, are all at its margins; very fragile and vulnerable.

To a certain extent, this article is a snapshot of the Russian media system today, and in some respects it is also a snapshot of the Russian political elite in general. It is dominated by the habitus widespread among middle aged, male members, most of whom came from the Moscow intelligentsia. It was hard for Osetinskaia to get integrated into this group due to generational gap and the socialization into different milieu and social setting. Like for many media professionals of her generation the access to the most prestigious and well-funded media outlets is closed for her at the moment and like many she chose to leave the profession. Despite the current weakness of young, more independent media managers, what can be said for sure is that this group of middle aged men won't be around forever and the changes are inevitable.

## Endnotes

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4 Alena V. Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernize? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge up, 2015): 113.

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11 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1984).

12 Ivan Szelényi, Gil Eyal, and Eleanor Townsley, *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists. Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1998): 17.

13 Mike Savage, Elizabeth B. Silva, “Field Analysis in Cultural Sociology”, *Cultural Sociology* 7, no. 2 (2013): 111–126, 113.

14 Konstantin Ernst, born 1961, is a prominent television and film producer and the director general of *Channel One*, one of the biggest television channels in Russia. Ernst started to work at television in 1988, as an editor of *Vzgliad*, one of the most popular television shows of the perestroika period. In 1995 he became chief producer of the Channel One, after its founder Vlad List’ev was assassinated. Parallel to being director general of *Channel One* since 2001, Ernst has co-authored and produced popular television shows and films. Ernst was the author and creative director of the opening ceremonies of Eurovision in Moscow in 2009 and the Sochi Winter Olympic Games in 2014. He is considered a major and highly influential person in the Russian media market who enjoys close ties with the Kremlin.

15 Pavel Gusev, born 1949, is the owner and editor-in-chief of the daily *Moskovskii Komsomolets*. Gusev took his position in 1983, which makes him one of the longest-standing media managers in Russia today. He occupied several positions in the Central Committee of the Young Communists Movement. After the



privatisation of the newspaper, Gusev became its single shareholder. He also got control of press distribution networks such as kiosks and logistics companies, which allowed him to set up a media empire. In 1991–92 he was briefly the minister of print and communication in the Moscow Mayor's Office. Since then he has been the chair of the Moscow Journalist Union and, in 2006, also became a member of the Russian Public Chamber. Despite being critical of the ruling party *United Russia*, Gusev has long become an active Putin supporter.

16 Aram Gabrelianov, born 1961, is the head of the media holding *Newsmedia*, which owns several tabloid newspapers and websites in Russia. Graduated from the faculty of journalism of the Moscow State University in the mid-1980s, Gabrelianov moved to Ul'ianovsk, where he started his first newspaper. He returned to Moscow in the mid-1990s, where he opened the tabloid newspaper *Zhizn'* (*Life*). The concept of *Zhizn'* was largely borrowed from the British tabloid *The Sun*. *Zhizn'* soon became the major Russian tabloid. In 2008 part of the shares of the holding was sold to the pro-Kremlin media holding *National Media Group*. In 2011 Gabrelianov became a managing editor of *Izvestiia* – one of Russia's major daily newspapers. Gabrelianov's media are known for its loyalist position to the Kremlin and often publish leaked and compromising publications about the Kremlin opponents.

17 Dmitrii Muratov, born 1961, is the editor-of-chief of the oppositional daily *Novaia Gazeta*. He began his journalistic career in Saratov, a city on the Volga, and in 1987 moved to Moscow, where he joined the daily *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*. After a conflict with his editors, he left *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* and took part in establishing a new daily, the *Novaia Ezhednevnaia Gazeta*, later renamed into *Novaia Gazeta*. He became its editor-in-chief in 1995. The newspaper has frequently published investigations about political machinations among the political leadership and the situation in the Northern Caucasus. Several of his journalists were murdered because of their professional activity, most famously Anna Politkovskaia.

18 Anna Berezkina, born 1989, has been the director general of the free daily *Metro* from January 2014. She is a daughter of the billionaire and ceo of esn Media Holding Grigorii Berezkin.

19 Mikhail Zygar', born 1981, was from 2010 to 2015 editor-in-chief of the television channel *TVRain* (*Dozhd'*). He began his career at the daily *Kommersant'* as a war correspondent covering conflicts in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq and Ukraine. In 2009 and 2010 he worked as departmental editor at Russian *Newsweek*. He is an author of several books about Russian politics.

20 Elizaveta Osetinskaia, born 1977, was since editor-in-chief at *rbk Media Holding* from 2013 to May 2016. In the 1990s she worked as a journalist at *rbc*, *Segodnia* daily and the weekly *Itogi*. From 1999 onwards, she worked at financial daily *Vedomosti*, the editor-in-chief of which she became in 2005. From 2011 to 2013 she was head of Russian *Forbes*.

21 Neil MacFarquhar, “Removal of Top Editors Signals Trouble for Independent Russian Paper”, *New York Times*, 13 May 2016, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/14/world/europe/removal-of-top-editors-signals-trouble-for-independent-russian-paper.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/14/world/europe/removal-of-top-editors-signals-trouble-for-independent-russian-paper.html?_r=1), accessed 20 July 2016.

22 Irena Lesnevskaja, born 1942, worked in Soviet television from the 1960s onwards, first as editor and then as assistant director. In 1991, together with her son, she set up *ren tv*, Russia’s first independent television production company, becoming president in 1997. She was one of the co-founders of the *Public Russian Television* (later *Channel One*). In 2005 Yurii Koval’chuk, Putin’s close oligarch and head of *National Media Group*, bought her shares in *ren tv* consequently pushing her out of the media business. In 2006 she founded the weekly magazine *The New Times* – one of the few media outlets highly critical of the Russian political regime. She has been its editor-in-chief since its foundation until 2009.

23 Vladimir Borodin, born 1975, was from September 2004 to November 2005 editor-in-chief of the daily *Izvestiia*. He started his career in 1996 at *Izvestiia* as a journalist covering regional politics. In 1999 he became executive editor of *Izvestiia*. After publishing a special issue about the 2004 Beslan tragedy, *Izvestiia*’s editor-in-chief Raf Shakirov was fired and replaced by Borodin. Borodin himself lost his job in November 2005 for publishing a critical report on the People’s Unity Day, a major nation-building initiative of the Kremlin in the 2000s. From 2006 to 2010 Borodin worked as a senior manager in the media holding *Promsviazmedia* which owned several newspapers (*Trud*, *Argumenty i Fakty*). He left media in 2010.

24 Leonid Bershidsky, born 1971, is the founder and former editor-in-chief of several magazines and news websites. At the beginning of the 1990s was a Moscow correspondent of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Moscow Times*. In 1999 he became editor-in-chief of a financial daily *Vedomosti*. In 2002–2003 Bershidsky did an mba in France. Upon return to Russia he became senior manager at *Axel Springer Russia* publishing house launching *Russian Forbes* and *Russian Newsweek*. From 2009 till 2011 he was editor-in-chief of the website *Slon*. In 2011 Bershidsky moved to Ukraine where he founded and managed several media outlets, including the Ukrainian version of *Forbes* magazine. Since 2014 has lived in Germany, writing for *Bloomberg*.

25 Galina Timchenko, born 1962, was from 2004 to 2014 editor-in-chief of the news website *Lenta*. She started her career at the *Kommersant*’ publishing house in 1997 and joined *Lenta* in 1999. In 2014 *Lenta* became the most popular news source on the Russian Internet and one of the most popular news sources in Europe. In 2013, amidst the violence in Ukraine, 1.5 billion people visited the website which published critical articles about Russia’s involvement in the conflict. In March 2014 Aleksandr Mamut, the owner of *Lenta*, fired Timchenko. According to her, this move was politically motivated. As a sign of protest the majority of her staff members left the company.

26 Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favors: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge up, 2008), 180.

27 “Venediktov: kogda ia prishel s viskarem, vse dogovorennosti uzhe byli, a Gromov prishel pozzhe”, *tv Rain*, 25 December 2012, available at [https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/harddaysnight/venediktov\\_kogda\\_ja\\_priehal\\_s\\_viskarem\\_vse\\_dogovorennosti\\_uzhe\\_byli\\_a\\_gromov\\_prishel\\_pozzhe-334737/](https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/harddaysnight/venediktov_kogda_ja_priehal_s_viskarem_vse_dogovorennosti_uzhe_byli_a_gromov_prishel_pozzhe-334737/), accessed 26 April 2016.

28 Kseniia Sokolova, “Aleksi Venediktov: Ia khodiachii mertvets”, *Snob*, 22 August 2015, available at <https://snob.ru/selected/entry/96814?v=1460202165>, accessed 26 April 2016.

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33 Vasily Gatov, *Putin, Maria Ivanovna from Ivanovo and Ukrainians on the Telly* (London: *The Henry Jackson Society*, February 2015): 4.

34 Konstantin Ernst, interview by Elisabeth Schimpfössl, 13 March 2016, Moscow, Russia.

35 Vasily Gatov, interview by Ilya Yablokov, 10 February 2016, Facebook.

36 Irena Lesnevskaja, interview by Elisabeth Schimpfössl, 14 June 2014, Moscow, Russia.

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41 Dmitrii Muratov, interview by Elisabeth Schimpfössl, 15 February 2016, Moscow, Russia. 42 Konstantin Ernst, interview by Elisabeth Schimpfössl.

43 Petr Vail', Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie), 180. 44 Dmitrii Muratov, interview by Elisabeth Schimpfössl. 45 "Aram Gabrelianov: 'Putin – papa natsii, pred"iavit' emu nichego nel'zia'", *Openspace*, 11 July 2011, available at <http://os.colta.ru/media/paper/details/23555/page1/>, accessed 26 April 2016.

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51 Ibid.

52 Dmitrii Muratov, interview by Elisabeth Schimpfössl.

53 Luke Harding, *Expelled: A Journalist's Descent into the Russian Mafia State* (London: Palgrave, 2012): 111.

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57 Vladimir Borodin, interview by Ilya Yablokov, 25 January, 2016, New York, usa.

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59 Galina Timchenko, interview by Ilya Yablokov.

60 Yuri Lotman, *Vnutri mysl'ashchikh mirov: Chelovek-Tekst-Semiosfera-Istoriia* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 1996), 358–362.

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62 Within the media outlet, ‘dogma’ was powerful: the *Vedomosti* journalists’ island status made them weld together; they grew into a group of close colleagues with a similar motivation. Bershidsky maintains that this is partly true even today: ‘It was a strong value statement, almost like, you know, the rules of a monastic order. That has a certain appeal to people, being part of a certain club with very strict rules.’ Leonid Bershidsky, interview by Elisabeth Schimpfössl, 12 February 2015, Facebook.

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Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2017

DOI 10.1163/2451-8921-00201003

I am grateful to The Leverhulme Trust for enabling this research through the award of a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship.

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Elisabeth Schimpfössl's research looks into questions around elites, power and social inequality. She has also conducted collaborative research on media and journalism, with a focus on self-censorship in post-communist Europe. Elisabeth Schimpfössl has a PhD from the University of Manchester and is currently Lecturer in Sociology and Policy at Aston University.

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