ТЕЛЕВИЗОРЫ
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In the Shadow of Two Palaces: Conversations with exiled journalists from Turkey and Russia

BARIŞ ALTINTAŞ

MLSA
Media and Law Studies Association
JAM
Justice for Journalists
Foundation for International Investigations of Crime against Media

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Staff of JAM e.V.

VEYSEL OK : *Head of Human Rights Department*
BARIŞ ALTINTAŞ : *Senior Projects Manager*

Preface

A failed coup attempt. A military invasion. Charges, arrests, and fear.

Both Turkey and Russia have suffered tremendous losses in democracy and erosion of basic rights in the past two decades, starting with full media capture that occurred rather slowly. Government crackdowns in both countries have forced journalists to seek refuge from arrests and other persecution in foreign lands. Still, two key events - Turkey's failed coup attempt in June 2016, followed by a two-year state of emergency and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 - have accelerated the worsening situation.

Turkey and Russia are not unique in this respect. In a 2023 article on exiled journalism, Freedom House President Michael J. Abramowitz and Senior Research Analyst Jessica White[1], note that the ongoing repression of journalists is "linked to a global decline in democracy itself, as attacks on independent media continue to increase around the world."

However, this publication focuses on the story of these two countries where increasing authoritarianism has put in place a Sultan and a Czar, who seemingly will be around for a long, long time. They both have seen better, more hopeful times. Ironically, one of these two became a haven for those fleeing the other.

As a journalist from Turkey and co-director of the Istanbul-based press freedom organization Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA), witnessing the tumultuous shifts in the journalistic landscape leading up to and following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the consequent legislative changes in Russia has been doubly alarming.

Authoritarianism always needs war. And fears turned into real on February 24, 2022, when Russia started its full-scale invasion.

However, it was the Russian Duma's decision to criminalize the use of the word "war" in describing its invasion of Ukraine that sparked the first significant exodus of journalists from the country[2]. Many found refuge in Istanbul, arriving without visas, any financial support, or a clear vision for their future. Istanbul, which is currently home to dozens of journalists in its prisons, became a temporary safe haven for these journalists. Istanbul was the first step on the exile journey of some of the journalists, who shared their experiences with me in this publication.

As a Russian speaker heading a press freedom organization in Turkey, I was heavily involved in trying to help our colleagues who arrived on March 4. During this time, it was impossible not to think of our many friends and colleagues who had had to relocate from Turkey. This is why we embarked on creating a documentary with our sister organization, JAM e.V in Berlin, specifically about exiled journalists from Russia and Turkey. This accompanying publication is also part of the same idea, made possible through the support of the Justice for Journalists Foundation (JFJ).

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1 How Authoritarian Regimes Go After Journalists Beyond Their Borders, By Michael J. Abramowitz and Jessica White, published first on December 6, 2023, 11:00 AM EST https://time.com/6342534/transnational-repression-freedom-house/

2 "Федеральный закон № 32-ФЗ 2022 года" – Federal Law Nober 32-F3, Wikipedia, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Федеральный_закон_№_32-ФЗ_2022_года (accessed January, 2024).

Turkey’s complex dynamics with freedom of the press and growing authoritarianism had already started a slower, steady exodus of journalists from Turkey to countries like Germany, where they sought more stable and secure environments for their work and personal lives. Some journalists who were defended by MLSA moved to Berlin long ago, many colleagues have had to leave over the years.

This publication follows the stories of 11 journalists who had to leave Turkey and Russia after tumultuous events in those countries that led to an increase in the existing crackdown on free media. It seeks not just to highlight their struggles -- and resilience-- but also to offer a comprehensive look into the broader implications of such mass displacement on journalism and freedom of speech and hopefully say more on what others can do to help journalists in this situation.

Several of the Russian journalists I interviewed for this publication are journalists whom I had first met in the first few hectic days of their post-war exodus. I have also included views of some of the Turkish journalists we interviewed with journalist Andrey Zhvirblis in Berlin during the last months of 2023 as part of the documentary we were filming with JFJ’s support.

From the weight of having to leave to bureaucratic and financial hurdles and to safety concerns and emotional turmoil, journalists Yury Davydov (formerly Dozhd TV), Valery Nechay (editor-in-chief of “Ekho Moskvy” in Sankt Peterburg), “7x7” journalist Sofia Krapotkina, multimedia journalist Andrey Shashkov, Pskov journalist Svetlana Prokopyeva who is now working with Radio Free Europe, Alexander Pichugin, a Nizhny Novgorod-based journalist who had to choose exile, “Svobodniye Media” founder and Krasnodar journalist Mark Nebesny have shared their experiences.

Additionally, this report integrates interviews with journalists Çağdaş Kaplan, former editor-in-chief of the Kurdish daily “Yeni Yaşam”, freelance journalist Metin Cihan who had to leave after publicizing the truth behind the death of an 11-year old, veteran TV journalist Banu Acun faced with no options to continue journalism in Turkey due to unrelenting media capture and Baransel Ağca, who faced legal trouble in Turkey over his reporting of an alleged murder in Erzurum.

Writing for a general and international audience, I avoided going into details about specific events in the recent histories of these two very complicated countries. Still, I tried to provide background information related to specific concepts and events that affected the journalists and the media landscape in the countries for readers who might be unfamiliar with either of the two countries.

Through these narratives, I wanted to present not just stories of displacement and challenge but also of resilience, adaptation, and the relentless insistence on not cowering before power and commitment to freedoms and rights that I believe are key to a life of dignity.

CHAPTER 1

Leaving home: Emergency exit

On the morning of February 24, 2022, as the first light of dawn crept through the windows of his Moscow apartment, Yury Davydov, a committed documentarian and journalist, found himself jarred awake by the incessant ringing of his phone. The early hour and the urgency in the tone suggested something amiss.

The voice on the other end was frantic, a close colleague from Dozhd' TV, his voice laced with a mix of disbelief and fear. "Yury, have you seen the news?... Ukraine... it's happening," his colleague stammered.

He flipped on the television. This wasn't just any news story; this was a seismic shift in an already troubled landscape that would alter the course of countless lives, including his.

Inoagenty, undesired organizations, and a special military operation

Amidst the chaos unraveling on the screen, Yury knew that his life in Moscow was drawing to a close. That morning marked the end of an era for him and many others and the beginning of a journey into the uncertain terrain of exile.

And indeed, things changed quickly.

"After the war started on February 24, 2022, [Dozhd] reported on the real events in Ukraine. A few days later, the station's website was blocked, and on March 3, it was shut down completely," he remembers.

Davydov had worked for Dozhd TV until the outbreak of the war as a director of special projects and a cameraman. He also frequently cooperated with other independent media organizations and filmed interviews and reports.

Things had been getting progressively worse since 2012. Like many other journalists, he speaks of many attempts to hinder the activities of the TV station.

"The station's [Dozhd] employees were repeatedly threatened by pro-government agitators and some other organizations. First, it was declared a 'foreign agent' *(inoagent, and plural inoagenty)*. After resuming broadcasts from Riga and Amsterdam, it was declared an 'undesirable organization[3].' This effectively is a complete ban on activities inside Russia. All employees have criminal liability for 'extremism'," he explains.

Indeed, even before the war, in August 2022[4] , Dozhd -- and many other independent media outlets -- had been declared "foreign agents," a Kremlin tag based on legislation passed first in 2012 -- that had earlier affected mostly civil society organizations. About a year later, Dozhd was also declared an "undesirable organization[5]"..

"After the channel's closure, most of the employees, including myself, were forced to leave Russia and continue their activities abroad to avoid criminal liability for 'discrediting the Russian army,'" says Davydov.

"Discrediting the army" became criminalized as it was adopted into law on March 4, 2022, one week after the start of the Russian invasion[6]. By the end of 2022, more than 4000 people had already been fined a total of 150 million rubles[7] . As this publication was being prepared for print, the Duma passed a law to confiscate the offenders' property for discrediting the army.

I met with Yury for the first time in transit when he arrived in Istanbul, Turkey, in early March 2022, literally days after having had to leave Russia. In addition to agreeing to talk to me about his journey, he has since worked with me as our camera operator for some of the documentary interviews I conducted in Berlin.

Now, re-reading my interviews and writing these lines, it hits me how these legal appropriations such as "foreign agent" (inoagent), "undesirable", and "discrediting the army" sound unreal at an Orwellian level to an outsider. Every Friday, the Russian Ministry of Justice updates the "foreign agents'' list, adding new names of journalists, activists, artists, writers, and others. Often, in Western outlets, it is stated that "this phrase bears negative and repressive connotations in Russian" (as if "foreign agent" sounds positive in any other language!). It is understandable that for the average patriot, it might come off as being the next step before "traitor." Still, for many liberal readers, the phrase actually points to a level of progressiveness and quality.

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[3] It is important to emphasize that while the designation of "foreign agent" in Russia presents challenges for continued operations, it still allows for the possibility of functioning. In contrast, the label of "undesirable organization" severely restricts media operations, akin to a shutdown. Under this status, no one, including private individuals, can legally mention or quote the material from such organizations without risking criminal prosecution. For example, a statement on social media like "TV Dozhd reported that…" could lead to jail time. As of now, three major news organizations in Russia are categorized as such: Dozhd, Meduza, and Novaya Gazeta Evropa.

[4] News report from August 2022 from LentaRU on Dozhd being labeled as a foreign agent, "Телеканал «Дождь» признали иностранным агентом," https://lenta.ru/news/2021/08/20/inoagenttt/

[5] News report from July 2023 from RBK, Dozhd being labeled undesired organization, "Генпрокуратура признала «Дождь» нежелательным" https://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/07/2023/64bfba8a9a7947d6b25691b3

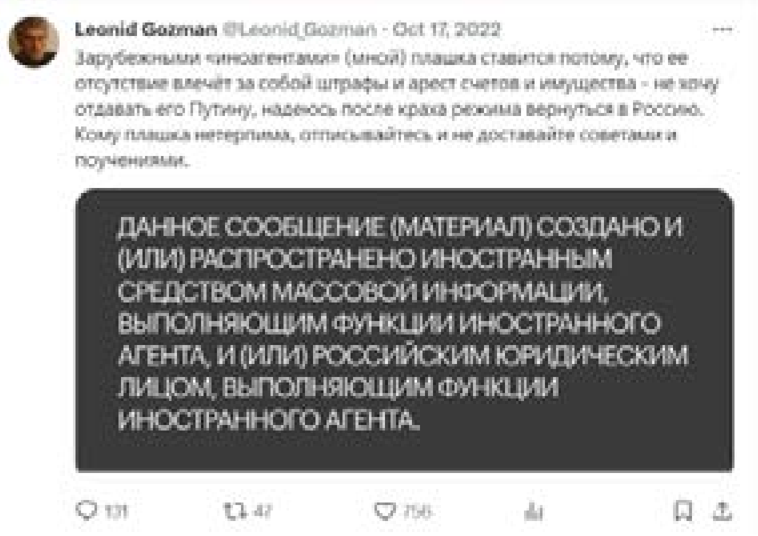
[6] Federal Law No32-F3 Amendments to Articles 31 and 151 Criminal Code of the Russian Federation dated March 4, 2022 (Usually referred to by the press as the "fake news law" or the "war censorship law") https://rg.ru/documents/2022/03/09/armiya-dok.html

[7] Штрафы за "дискредитацию" российской армии (Fines for "discrediting" the Russian military), published on April 24 2023 from Current Time TV, by Mariya Ushakova, https://www.currenttime.tv/a/shtrafy-za-diskreditatsiyu-rossiyskoy-armii/32376971.html

Indeed, based on the findings of the September 2023 survey by the state-funded All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (ВЦИОМ), a significant portion of respondents, 61%, perceive these 'foreign agents' primarily as traitors who spread falsehoods about Russia on behalf of "unfriendly states" -- a designation adopted officially[8] on 5 March 2022[9]. But even in the government's own figures, a minority, 16%, say they see 'foreign agents' as defenders of civil rights and freedom of speech targeted by the authorities to intimidate others.

But how do people know you are a foreign agent? Surely, people can't always monitor the ministry's website? All foreign agents are required to include a boilerplate in block letters in all of their publications, tweets, social media posts, or anything public that goes like this:

THIS MESSAGE (MATERIAL) IS CREATED AND (OR) DISTRIBUTED BY A FOREIGN MASS MEDIA PERFORMING THE FUNCTIONS OF A FOREIGN AGENT AND (OR) BY A RUSSIAN LEGAL ENTITY PERFORMING THE FUNCTIONS OF A FOREIGN AGENT



Leonid Gozman @Leonid_Gozman · Oct 17, 2022

Зарубежными «иноагентами» (мной) плашка ставится потому, что ее отсутствие влечёт за собой штрафы и арест счетов и имущества - не хочу отдавать его Путину, надеюсь после краха режима вернуться в Россию. Кому плашка нетерпима, отписывайтесь и не доставайте советами и поучениями.

ДАННОЕ СООБЩЕНИЕ (МАТЕРИАЛ) СОЗДАНО И (ИЛИ) РАСПРОСТРАНЕНО ИНОСТРАННЫМ СРЕДСТВОМ МАССОВОЙ ИНФОРМАЦИИ, ВЫПОЛНЯЮЩИМ ФУНКЦИИ ИНОСТРАННОГО АГЕНТА, И (ИЛИ) РОССИЙСКИМ ЮРИДИЧЕСКИМ ЛИЦОМ, ВЫПОЛНЯЮЩИМ ФУНКЦИИ ИНОСТРАННОГО АГЕНТА.

A tweet with the inoagent boilerplate by opposition politician Leonid Gozman, who was included in the inoagent register in May 2022.

Failure to place the block letters can result in legal action. For example, writer Dmitry Bykov was given a 40,000 ruble fine in December 2023 for not putting the ionagent boilerplate in his social media posts[10].

Strange intruders, being told 'to leave'

In the case of journalists in Russia, the decision to leave could be "unofficially" taken or encouraged by officials or semi-officials.

Valery Nechai worked as the editor-in-chief of the Radio Station Ekho Moskvy in Saint Petersburg. I had met him earlier during a work trip to Germany. He has been in journalism for more than two decades.

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[8] The list of countries is established by an order of the Government of the Russian Federation. As of February 20224 it includes 49 states. For more details, see the official publication at: publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202203070001?index=2.

[9] All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (ВЦИОМ), "Foreign Agents Among Us: Monitoring," accessed January 2024, https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/inoagenty-sredi-nas-monitoring

[10] News report on Bykov's fine, https://dzen.ru/a/ZYQcCo1VN0aKD3j4. Also, the lack of the foreign agent statement was used as an excuse in a trial against the civil society organization Memorial, which ended in its liquidation.

His career, which started at Ekho as a desk clerk in 2003, ended as him being the editor-in-chief of the radio station was “liquidated” in 2022[11].

When the war broke out, he decided to leave. Nevertheless, he was needlessly given a stern warning to do so:

“At the time, I was out of town on a trip. I was supposed to leave on March 1. Before the flight, I returned home on February 27, late in the evening. When I entered my apartment, there were strangers inside. Without resorting to any violence—more or less—they explained to me that I needed to leave with no plans to return.”

Strangely enough, they already knew of Valery’s plans to leave.

Harsher threats against journalists after the war

These “intruders” were sometimes more open about their identities. One journalist who was told to leave in a much less polite tone was Svetlana Prokopyeva, who’s been a journalist for 20 years, mostly focusing on local news - regional stories and people.

In her case, the “suggestion” to leave was rather crude. In her words: “On March 18, a series of government raids targeted journalists and politicians in Pskov, resulting in the confiscation of computers, mobile phones, and other equipment under the guise of a defamation case against the governor. In my own experience, officers forcefully entered my home, kicking down the door and restraining me in handcuffs on the floor face down. This act was a clear signal to me, an unspoken warning that my safety and freedom were in jeopardy. Recognizing the potential for such invasive actions to become a recurring threat, I sought a humanitarian visa from Latvia and left.”

Of course, like the others, this was hardly surprising for her. In 2018, she penned an article where she argued that Russian state authorities were partly to blame for the Arkhangelsk FSB office bombing, where she raised questions about the bomber’s motives. After that, she was charged with “justifying terrorism.” She was found guilty and fined $7,000 in 2020. (She was also awarded a CPJ International Press Freedom Award in November 2020.)

“This incident significantly raised my profile within the journalistic community while simultaneously intensifying my strained relationship with the governmental authorities.”

“For the record, I maintained my innocence throughout the trial. I have since filed an appeal, which is currently under review by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).”

Prokopyeva is one of the journalists I had known from before the war. One time, returning home from a journalism conference abroad, we were seated on the same flight as we had to switch planes in Istanbul. Not long after Istanbul’s mega airport -- one of Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s many construction-driven mega-projects -- had started operations. This was her first time seeing it. “Wow, this is so cool, it looks awesome,” she praised the enormous shiny new structure, bustling with travelers, going in and out of luxury shops at the baggage pickup area.

My response was first an “Oh, I never” gesture, putting my hand on my breast in disbelief:

“Do you know how many trees they cut off for this? It was built despite scientific and environmental reports showing that it would have disastrous consequences, and with zero discussion to just profit just one *shaika*[12].” She looked at me and smiled a knowing smile, “Oh, I get it; it is exactly how I feel when foreigners praise something in Russia.”

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[11] Despite being owned by Gazprom-Media, the Echo of Moscow was regarded as an objective news source. On March 3, 2022, the company announced that the reason for the liquidation was an appeal from the Prosecutor General’s Office, which stated the dissemination of ‘false information’ about the actions of the Russian military in Ukraine. ‘Echo of Moscow’ began broadcasting in the summer of 1990.

Being your own journalist under media capture

Indeed, she knew perfectly well as a journalist who started her career in the independent media how exasperating it is to witness increasing repression and injustice over the years only to have unaware strangers unknowingly ignore or normalize it.

Her first job was with the independent regional social-political newspaper “Pskovskaya Guberniya”.

“That’s where my formation as a journalist comes from. My formation doesn’t come from being a PR person for the government or the business world, which is usually the case in Russia”, she describes her beginnings in the profession.

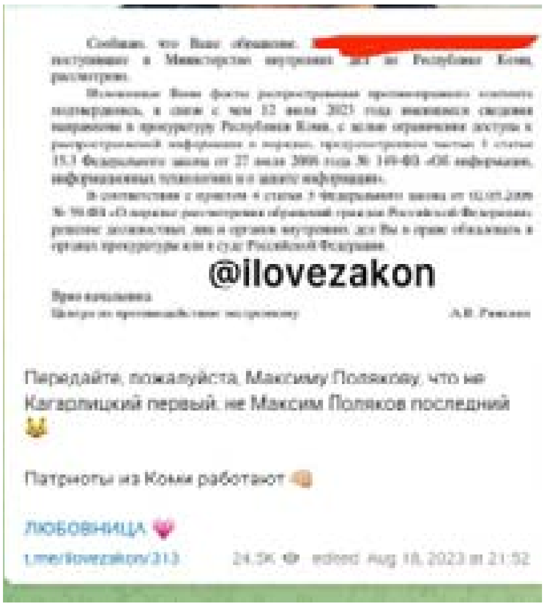
After working for different print publications in various roles, including editor-in-chief, Prokopyeva transitioned to online news outlets. Since 2014, she’s been working as a freelancer. Currently, she is working as the regional editor for the Sever.Realii site which is a project of Radio Free Europe.

“I’ve always held a critical position towards those in power, a normal stance for a journalist. But those in power in Russia cannot properly accept criticism and correct their mistakes, which the press points out. For this reason, independent journalists are seen as enemies of the regime.”

Anonymous tips, website blockages

Sofia Krapotkina, a journalist with the independent 7x7 media outlet, is a seasoned journalist with a career spanning over 15 years. I first met her in Istanbul in March 2022.

Her initial steps in 2005 in the field saw her working as a reporter for regional media outlets. This foundational experience paved the way for her subsequent move to Moscow, where she secured a position with a federal publication.



Передайте, пожалуйста, Максиму Полякову, что не Кагарлицкий первый, не Максим Поляков последний 😼

Патриоты из Коми работают 👊🏻

ЛЮБОВНИЦА 💗
t.me/ilovezakon/313 24.5K 👁 edited Aug 18, 2023 at 21:52

On 18 August 2023, a user with the handle lyubbvnitsa shared a Telegram post showing an official anonymous complaint she filed against 7x7 journalist Maksim Ployakov for his anti-war remarks.

Over the years, she navigated through various editorial roles. In 2016, her career took a significant turn as she assumed the role of editor-in-chief at semnasem.org. After four years at the helm, she transitioned to the position of general producer within the same publication.

There were several catalysts for her departure, including the censorship legislation banning objective reporting on the war, but one stood out: “The most significant of these was the blocking of our publication’s website in Russia, followed by the introduction of stringent laws on military censorship, which included severe penalties for what was termed as spreading ‘fakes.’”

Like many other outlets, 7x7 was eventually branded as a “foreign agent.” Then, there were repeated “unofficial talks” with former 7x7 employees residing in various regions of Russia.

In a more concerning incident, an anonymous tipper reported one of her colleagues to the authorities for spreading illegal content: the tipper also publicly posted the “tip” on an anonymous Telegram channel.[13]”

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[12] Shaika /шайка (Rus). Meaning: A criminal gang, organized crime ring

“Patriots of the Komi Republic are working!” the tipper announced proudly on their Telegram page.

Fake news charges, but most importantly, knowing when to leave

Originating from Nizhny Novgorod, a major city located 400 kilometers east of Moscow, Alexander Pichugin embarked on his journalistic journey in 1993.

He mainly worked in television and then later even as a press officer for a bank, but his career took a significant turn in 2012 when he pivoted towards the digital realm.

Embracing the internet’s expansive reach, he created and managed several of his own news portals, most notably the independent site “Reporter-NN,” which he continues to edit.

Of course, this road had to be fraught with fake news accusations and legal troubles: “In 2020, I got in trouble with law enforcement agencies and the FSB, already as an independent blogger. At the height of the pandemic, I sarcastically reported on my Telegram channel about violations of epidemiological rules by the Russian Orthodox Church. It was not an informational but a journalistic text - nevertheless, I was prosecuted for fake news. In November 2020, I was fined, which I managed to pay thanks to donations from my readers.”

In the summer of 2021, Pichugin moved to Georgia, seeking a space to write about his hometown, Nizhny Novgorod, without the looming threat of bans and persecution.

This relocation, initially temporary, became permanent in March 2022, a month following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. “I left because I don’t want to be associated with a criminal state in any shape or form.”

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[13] Link to the Telegram channel in question: https://t.me/ilovezakon/313.

CHAPTER 2

Leaving home: Getting out before the storm

As Russian journalists struggled with increasing hostility for much of the 2010s, leading up to their Orwellian realities of inoagents, the undesired and brutal imposition of NewSpeak and Russia's crazed war in February of 2022, another storm -- albeit at a slower rate -- was brewing in Turkey, a neighboring country whose skepticism and distrust of both the West and the East has paralleled that of Russia for centuries.

Much like the better days of Russia, the 2000s of Turkey -- with the Islam-inspired Justice and Development Party (AKP) coming to power -- was filled with hope and belief in democratization in Turkey.

Centuries-old taboos -- what are usually referred to as the state's red lines -- such as the Kurdish question, the Armenian genocide, and the issues with the country's Alevi populations could be discussed. But the biggest taboo of all was the unshakable status of the all-powerful military -- or military tutelage -- and even that was opened to public discussion.

The government actively pushed for and successfully managed to start accession talks with the EU in 2005. It was also taking giant strides to overcome past issues: assets seized from non-Muslim foundations were being returned, talks were being held with the PKK, and Turkey was seeking a rapprochement with all of its neighbors.

However, journalists were the first to feel the signs of what was to come.

Banu Acun, a veteran TV journalist who now resides in Berlin, was one of those. Acun began her career by watching journalist Mehmet Ali Birand, now-legendary 32[14]. Day investigative news hour. It was her dream to work there.

Her dream would eventually come true. In her career of 30 years, she worked as part of the 32. Day team for a decade. Past episodes -- available currently on YouTube show the extent of journalism that was possible at the time -- a relic of the old Turkey, where the state's red lines were in place, but they were much wider.

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[14] 32. Gün," also known as "32nd Day" in English, was a prominent news program in Turkey, both nationally and internationally. Starting in 1985 and created by Mehmet Ali Birand, it holds the record as Turkey's longest-standing and highly influential news show. Initially broadcasted on the state-owned channel TRT 1 from 1985 to 1992, it later transitioned to various private TV channels.

This was a time when real democracy seemed to be within reach. However, it proved to be an illusion. As Turkey's media conglomerates started being bought over by Erdoğan allies one by one after being confiscated by State's Savings Insurance Fund (TMSF), the unprecedented atmosphere of freedoms proved to be only superficial. For journalists, the early warning signs came much before; for Banu Acun, the earliest was the 2007 elections:

"I think this was after the 2007 elections when he was elected for the second time. For it became evident that he had become very powerful now, and he could now intervene in the dealings of media bosses."

When is the right time to leave?

This wasn't the case only for the pro-government media, being bought by government allies and being aided by interest-free credits from state banks, which would never ask for the loan to be paid.

She says: "This was also the case for mainstream media such as CNN Türk," where she worked at the time. And censorship became visible for her for the first time circa 2008 when her team was investigating a swindling scandal in Germany, which had launched a major investigation into the Islamist Deniz Feneri Association for defrauding hundreds of citizens of Turkish origin out of millions of dollars.

"At this stage, we requested the German prosecutors to provide us with all the relevant case files, initiating our investigation into the implicated holdings in the scandal. Our findings revealed a startling fact – one-third of the AKP deputies were board members of these implicated companies. The preliminary findings of our two-month investigation were broadcast twice as teasers by CNN Türk, for which we were compensated. However, the full program never made it to air. This evident act of censorship was not disclosed publicly at that time, as our boss preferred to remain silent on the matter."

Another breaking point in Turkey's case would come later in 2013: the Gezi protests.

Indeed, the brutal suppression of the widely peaceful Gezi protests against the AKP government in 2013 is a testament to this. Nearly a decade after the protests, a court sentenced[15] civil society leader Osman Kavala to life in prison without parole for "attempting to overthrow the Turkish government by force" by allegedly orchestrating the Gezi Protests. Seven others were given 18 years in prison for supporting Gezi.

"After Gezi, our ranks were tightened," she says. The existing atmosphere of polarization had reached its peak, massively working in favor of Erdoğan.

As always, the media were the first to feel the heat: "All of our friends who participated in Gezi were blacklisted. They lost their media jobs, and some were sent to jail."

Acun and her family moved abroad a few times, but they eventually returned to Turkey slightly before the July 15, 2016, coup attempt.

The late 2010s in Turkey markets the beginning of a new transition. Decade-old alliances were shattering, and new structures were emerging. The collapse of the AKP government's long-standing partnership with the Islamist Fethullah Gülen group against the secular elite became public for the first time. Gülenist prosecutors tried to take legal action against Erdoğan's beloved chief of the National Intelligence Agency (MİT), Hakan Fidan[16]. , who is Turkey's foreign minister as of the time of writing, and tried to charge AKP ministers for corruption.

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[15] "Court sentences Kavala to life in prison," Al Jazeera report from April 2022, accessed January 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/25/turkish-court-sentences-activist-osman-kavala-to-life-in-prison

Things had gotten worse. "Can Dündar was in prison," Acun remembers.

Dündar -- now in exile in Germany -- was imprisoned in 2015 at the time over a news report alleging that the Turkish government supplied arms to jihadist groups in Syria. He left the country after his release.

Despite all of this, Banu Acun thought they could stay: there were still a number of independent media outlets. "I was thinking at least the *Cumhuriyet newspaper* is still here, as well as some other outlets. I thought we should continue to fight for as long as we can."

But then the coup attempt happened.For Acun, who worked as a correspondent for Erdoğan before, this was the biggest threshold. "I remembered on July 15 the poem that he read: *Minarets are our bayonets, Mosques are our barracks, and Believers are our soldiers*[17]. That night, I felt it. And it really was like that."

She and her husband, who is also a journalist, decided that they would "certainly leave" if the government made a move on Cumhuriyet, one of the last standing independent newspapers.

On October 16, police raided the Istanbul office of the opposition newspaper Cumhuriyet and detained at least 12 journalists and directors of the newspaper. Yet they stayed in Turkey.

As of the end of August, nearly a hundred journalists were in prison. "Then they started arresting the Kurdish politicians, first Gülten Kışanak and Selahattin Demirtaş and then others," Banu Acun remembers. Yet they stayed.

"I think it was when they arrested Osman Kavala. That's when we eventually knew it was time."

When they were packing up for the big move, they received a phone call. Their friend Deniz Yücel, who was Die Welt's Turkey correspondent at the time, was being questioned by the police department.

"We were packing stuff and also trying to follow up on whether Deniz would be arrested." And he would be. He would spend almost a full year behind bars in Silivri Prison. It would take many negotiations between then-Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkey's Erdoğan to release him.

In February of 2017, she moved to Berlin.

Always under attack: the Kurdish Saga

An exile story I know too well is that of Çağdaş Kaplan, a Kurdish journalist and former editor-in-chief of Yeni Yaşam.

A former colleague and friend, we met on a clear and chilly day in Berlin to speak for our documentary.

Like any Kurdish journalist, Çağdaş has had a career marked by challenges. He started journalism in 2008 as an intern at the Istanbul branch of Dicle Haber Ajansı (Dicle News Agency), where he worked for about a year before transitioning to a reporter role. He later moved to the role of courthouse reporter at Beşiktaş Courthouse.

"Later on, I worked as a journalist in various different cities in Turkey, especially in Kurdish cities."

However, Kaplan's journalistic career was not without interruptions. He recalls, "In 2011, there was an operation against Kurdish press institutions. Along with 36 journalists, including those from the [pro-Kurdish] Özgür Gündem newspaper and the Dicle News Agency, we were detained. All newspaper buildings were raided, our offices were stormed, and I was imprisoned for about a year."

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[16] Reuters article on prosecutor attempts to charge MİT Chief Hakan Fidan https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-intelligence-idUSTRE81A0J520120211/

[17] Turkey's leader Erdoğan was imprisoned for reciting this poem early on in his career in 2002

He was released in the same year and started working for Dicle News Agency.

Imprisonment and raids, but when did he really start to think of leaving?

"In the 1990s, there might have been worse, bloodier times. This has always continued, but from my perspective, the period when the greatest pressures on politics and media increased corresponds to the years 2015-2016."

Between 1990 and 1995, arguably Turkey's darkest five years, 33 journalists were killed, in addition to many activists and business people. A majority of those killed were Kurdish.

But still, 2015 - 2016 was significant, according to Kaplan, who notes that AKP's reaction to losing its majority in the 2015 elections was an important turning point.

The lead-up to these elections was marred by several violent incidents, culminating in an abrupt end to the peace talks Turkey was having with the PKK:

"The AKP, or rather Erdoğan, suddenly put the peace talks on ice, acting as if it had never happened, as if it had never been experienced," he said.

This was followed by military operations by the Turkish military in late 2015 and early 2016 in nine provinces, in which many civilians were also allegedly killed by the security forces. "Tanks entered towns, civilian areas were bombed, people died, and their bodies couldn't be retrieved for days," Kaplan says.

In the end, Çağdaş Kaplan's decision to leave Turkey was a culmination of years of challenges and legal pressures stemming from his work in Kurdish media.

"Working in Kurdish media means being prepared to face trials," he says.

Kaplan's legal troubles began in 2009, and over the following years, he faced numerous terrorist propaganda cases and minor charges. "My first case started in 2009. Then, in 2011, there were propaganda cases and other minor cases. We knew this would happen."

"After founding Yeni Yaşam, not only did the newspaper face trials, but my personal, years-old Twitter posts were used as a pretext for issuing arrest warrants against me. I already had many cases pending," he explains.

Realizing the mounting legal risks and the potential long-term imprisonment, Kaplan decided to leave Turkey.

"I understood that I could no longer continue under these conditions. There was a looming sentence of nearly 40 years if these processes continued. If I were to be re-arrested, my previous sentences would be ratified, and I knew I wouldn't be able to leave prison again. That's when I decided to leave the country."

Two murders, new pilgrimages

The story of journalist Metin Cihan is closely tied to the tragic fate of an 11-year-old girl, Rabia Naz Vatan, in Turkey. On an April day in 2018, Rabia Naz was found critically injured outside her home in Eynesil, a town in the Giresun Province. She later died from her injuries.

Initially, local authorities ruled her death as a suicide, suggesting that she had jumped from the roof of her family's home. Later, the family and journalists, including Metin Cihan, who is currently exiled, would dispute the narrative.

Her death became emblematic of the broader situation in Turkey regarding the absolute lack of judicial impartiality, media freedom, and the extent of evil produced by the powerful autocratic elite under Erdoğan. The stuff of essays on the nature of evil and crime for philosophers like Hannah Arendt.

It appeared that circumstances were suggesting that Rabia might have been involved in a car accident. Furthermore, there were subtle indications that local authorities, including the mayor and police, might have been discreetly managing the situation, possibly to keep it under wraps. The case gained significant public attention, partly due to the efforts of journalists and activists who questioned the official narrative and called for a more thorough investigation. Among them was Metin Cihan, whose investigative reporting brought national attention to the inconsistencies and alleged cover-up in the case.

Cihan's work involved scrutinizing the evidence, interviewing witnesses, and challenging the official account, which suggested inconsistencies and possible foul play.

Initially, Cihan believed that as he continued to investigate and stood by his journalism, the case would be solved, and he even communicated this optimism to Rabia Naz's family. However, he soon realized that the situation was more dangerous than he had anticipated.

The first investigations against him were related to his activism during the Gezi protests of 2013. Nothing much came out of it. However, his personal turning point was during a trip across Turkey with his son. The manager of the hostel where he stayed said police officers had come looking for him. They'd asked, "Why are you letting a terrorist stay here?" They also said they were seeking an arrest warrant for him.

The hostel owner later approached Cihan, feeling the need to inform him about the incident. That's when he decided to leave.

Another journalist who had to leave after a murder that implicated an AKP deputy was. Baransel Ağca. In his career, he mostly worked as an editor until 2019, when he started digging into troubling reports on his own social media account.

"I started reporting exclusive news starting in 2019. And I can say that I have lost my peace since then. Because the news I made disturbed others, I also lost my peace."

His first case was in 2019, after a report on migrants: "The next day, I was sued under Article 301 on charges of 'insulting Turkishness and the institutions of the state.'"

Following his reports on the fate of Kyrgyz student Yeldana Kaharman, who was raped and murdered in Elazığ, he was faced with mounting legal troubles and threats. Eventually, he had to leave Turkey.

CHAPTER 3

New lands, new dangers, and the price of safety

After the decision to leave, all of the journalists faced significant challenges. Most of them had to act quickly, leaving overnight, with authorities showing that they mean business with the new military censorship legislation, and even intelligence officers and law enforcement -- sometimes through legal threats and intimidation, other times through more "unofficial" methods, signaling to journalists that now is a good time to leave. The decision was quick for those who left Russia shortly after the Duma law criminalizing using the word war for Russia's war in Ukraine, but it also had to be quite rushed. There was talk of the possibility of border closures - prices on flights to countries that weren't part of the sanctions or demand visas were exponentially increasing. Knowing that bank cards weren't going to work outside the country due to sanctions, many had to just take a backpack and leave.

Mark Nebesyny, editor-in-chief and founder of Svobodnoye Media, a regional publication founded in 2017 and became quite popular over a short time with their unbiased reporting on civil society, showcasing local initiatives and covering problems of Krasnodar Kray. Everything was going well until, of course, February 24, 2022.

They knew right away that it would be impossible to stay in Russia and left the country after a few days. A few days after their departure, their website was blocked by the federal watchdog Roskomnadzor -- responsible for overseeing electronic media, mass communications, information technology, and telecommunications -- as was the case for many regional outlets.

During their flight, things went smoothly, for the most part. They made it to Armenia and then Georgia, where they were able to secure German visas. His is a happy story, "Here, I live without any problem of visa, documents, or integration. We are continuing our work. We circumvent access bans with the help of mirror websites and publish on social media."

All of this has led to their readership dwindling. "Apart from that, it is way more difficult to 'feel' the region from abroad, interact with active people, and understand what is going on." However, Nebesny says: "This is the price for the safety, which we certainly have found to be unlike our colleagues in Russia."

Visa problems are a safety issue for exiled journalists

But Nebesny's case is a rarity. Outside him, all of our journalists faced significant challenges in adapting to new environments abroad.

Firstly, not everyone has made it to Europe, where the threat of extradition practically doesn't exist. Indeed, visa and residence issues for exiled journalists are not just bureaucratic hurdles or red tape; they present, first and foremost, a safety issue.

Valery Nechay , former editor-in-chief of Ekho Moskvy in Saint Petersburg, is rather straightforward about the legal and bureaucratic hurdles he faced related to his migration status after relocating. Does he feel safe? His response is a solid "No".

"I am not sure that I can continue to maintain my migration status. And in case of persecution in the home country, extradition there from the current host country is possible." He currently lives in a country where he resides on a student visa. Still, it isn't easy to obtain permanent resident status in that country due to its visa regulations.

In the summer of 2023, we had the opportunity to spend some time together when Valery had a full-day layover before his next flight to his host country. It was really stressful even for me to hear that he might not be allowed in at the border upon his return, a risk that he says exists every time.

In addition to visa issues, expiring passports are a major problem, he adds.

Indeed, experts note that the situation regarding visas for political refugees from Russia is getting a bit more difficult. According to data from InTransit, a Berlin based organization that helps political refugees from Russia, three times fewer German humanitarian visas were issued in 2023 compared to 2022 despite a similar number of applicants. The situation is expected to worsen unless there is a decisive political decision in Germany to address this issue.

In light of this, people waiting for visas in transit countries are in desperate need of support. Many of them have exhausted their financial resources and are unable to return to Russia, where they face criminal charges. Some have managed to find work, but others have not been as fortunate. InTransit calls for the establishment of more support programs such as mini-grants and assistance with housing and food, specifically for human rights defenders, journalists, activists, and LGBTQ activists from Russia.

Visa problems also impede journalism in exile

Sofia Krapotkina, who shared her story of leaving Russia and relocating to Lithuania in the previous chapter, says she met a series of challenges that significantly impacted her ability to continue her journalistic work with the same consistency as before. But of course, the visa renewal process was among the top factors hindering her. She explains:

"The journalist visa in Lithuania is valid for only a year, and the renewal process takes about 4-5 months. This creates a situation where, for almost half a year, I live in uncertainty, not knowing whether I'll be allowed to stay in the country."

This prolonged and uncertain process poses a significant obstacle to work continuity and planning.

"In addition, Lithuania canceled the so-called waiting visas (national visa type D), which used to allow those waiting for a decision on a residence permit to stay in the country legally," Krapotkina explains a development which adds to the precarious situation of the exiled journalists.

The price of safety: reduced resources and dwindling audiences

Sofia further explains: "The move was a challenge also professionally. The editorial staff and the newsroom also had difficulties in dealing with tax legislation."

From complicated financial realities to not being on the ground, journalists often find it hard to maintain audiences.

Pichugin, who is in Georgia, said they had to deal with the suspension of their Russian-language radio program in Georgia due to financial constraints: “Our Russian-language radio program in Georgia, ‘Tbilisi Panorama,’ had to be paused because of financial reasons, highlighting the challenges we face in maintaining our media work abroad.”

Similarly, journalist Mark Nebesny of “Svobodniye Media,” shared difficulties he faced in maintaining an audience and staying connected to the region while operating from abroad: “One of the major challenges has been keeping our audience engaged and ‘feeling’ the region from afar. It’s much more difficult to understand what’s happening on the ground and communicate that effectively when you’re not there.”

For regional media outlets like Svobodnye Media, ensuring that content remains relevant to their local audience is even more challenging. Nebesny says: “Adapting to a new environment and continuing to provide pertinent content for our audience back in Krasnodar has been a significant challenge. It requires constant adjustment and innovation.”

Staying connected with Turkey also proved challenging for Baransel Ağca, who had to leave Turkey because of his legal troubles. He says he struggles with the shift from being a journalist in Turkey to his current situation, saying, “I cannot do journalism properly here. I try to do it as much as I can, but I wouldn’t survive here either.”

“Since I don’t have a financial income, I am currently working as a cleaner. And I am happy with that.”

The financial toll of having to leave

In Germany, where journalists already struggled with visa safety, the high cost of living was a problem.

Among those who made it to Berlin was Andrey Shashkov, who faced significant challenges upon his relocation to the city. He had tremendous difficulty finding affordable housing and navigating bureaucratic hurdles, “The hardest part in Berlin was finding an apartment that a journalist could afford. It’s a daunting task in this city,” he says.

Shashkov had to deal with complex bureaucratic processes, including securing a work permit and arranging for health insurance. He explains, “Even after one and a half years, I’m still caught up in some bureaucratic intricacies related to taxes and health insurance.”

Another new Berliner, Yury Davidov, who shared his experiences of leaving Moscow as a Dozhd cameraman in the previous section, seconds the thought. He says, “Expensive health insurance for people over 45 years of age, time-consuming bureaucratic issues, and the overall financial condition” are the top three hardest challenges for an exiled journalist in Berlin.

Shashkov’s journey was further complicated by an unexpected job loss, which he attributes to being misled by the leadership of a Berlin-based project. This sudden change forced him to seek new employment and reapply for his residence permit, adding to the stress and uncertainty of his situation.

Reflecting on this experience, he says, “It was a setback when the leaders of the ‘reborn’ Echo project in Berlin withdrew their job offer, leaving me to scramble for new employment and start the residence permit process all over again.”

For journalists with dependents, like Alexander Pichugin, who is in Georgia, one of the key challenges he faced was sustaining his dependents financially. Pichugin shares, “The main problem in the new country is financial. I still don’t earn enough to support my family, so I am gradually spending the money I got from selling my assets in Russia.”

CHAPTER 4

Neither here nor there

Exile is not only a journey of political persecution, resilience, or struggle but also one of vulnerability, inner turmoil, and sometimes nostalgia.

One thing is certain: the journalists who contributed to this publication aren't complainers. Not all of them speak about emotional distress openly, despite going through tremendous emotional upheaval, leaving their home country under duress, losing all that was familiar, including social and professional ties, and the uncertainty about the future.

Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, feelings of homesickness, disconnection, and the stress of having to rebuild lives in a new country are prevalent. While this is not surprising, This aspect is often overlooked by professional support groups and civil society organizations.

For most of the journalists, uncertainty and anxiety about their future rules their day. "I am not sure about my safety and future," said Valery Nechay, who spoke of the precariousness of his legal status in the previous section, reflecting his continuous state of unease.

For Russian journalists, the gap between their stance and what their country is doing is heart-wrenching. Valery Nechay says: "Feeling yourself associated with a state that started a war of aggression is hard. And also to see compatriots who support what is happening."

Certainly, it is not only journalists who are upset about the war. The entire world is. This alone makes life more difficult for the exiled journalists, especially those in the Baltics, which has a troubled approach to Russian citizens due to the Soviet occupation in the past.

"Because of its complicated past, many people treat Russian citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, whether they are Russian, Karachai, or whatever, with dislike or fear. Russian citizens are often refused to rent apartments because of their citizenship. If a citizen of the Russian Federation opens a non-profit or business organization in Lithuania, banks are almost 100% likely to refuse to open a current account. A few months ago, the Lithuanian parliament considered an initiative to ban the sale of real estate to Russian citizens, and it was adopted with some amendments. Russian citizens were banned from owning weapons. I can't buy my own apartment, of course, and I'm not going to own a gun -- but living in a situation where you are constantly under scrutiny because of your passport, which you didn't choose, definitely leads to emotional difficulties."

Such experiences of alienation and discrimination contribute significantly to journalists' feelings of emotional distress, creating an environment where they constantly grapple with feelings of being an outsider.

In the narrative of exiled journalists, Banu Acun's story stands as a heartbreaking testament to the complex realities and challenges faced by journalists who seek safety in foreign lands. Acun, the seasoned TV journalist who made the hard decision to leave in 2017 in Turkey after things started to really heat up, says her move to Berlin was shadowed by feelings of resentment and loss.

"I came to Berlin in 2017, quite bitter and angry," she reflects. "I thought I had lost my profession, my country, and now I had to build a new life for my child."

A love and hate relationship

Exile also makes the already-strained relationship with one's motherland trickier.

Andrey Shashkov has been very expressive about this, sharing the deep sense of nostalgia and loss he feels for his life in Moscow. "The main difficulty is homesickness, although I realize that it is not a question of place but of time, about a period of my life that is gone forever. The Moscow from which I left is no longer there. My friends are scattered all over the world. In Russia, I have only my 50-year-old mother, my ex-husband with whom I have kept very close relations, and my grandmother's rented apartment in St. Petersburg," he shares.

"Every small inconvenience here in Germany is a reminder that my coming here was not a choice but a necessity," he says, contrasting his situation with other immigrants fleeing wars or famine.

"For example, we are particularly annoyed by all the minor inconveniences in the new place that we didn't have in the old place," he says, listing restaurants being more expensive yet offering lower quality service, food delivery, level of digitalization, bad quality of mobile communication and internet speed, perpetually late Deutsche Bahn trains.

However, he notes, they complain "Not because things are terrible or we are ungrateful to Germany for accepting us. It's because we didn't come voluntarily in search of a better life. We fled from a worse one. Made a decision in a matter of days. And we have no idea if we'll ever be able to return."

"Thus, those who relocated from Russia in 2022-2023 chose between the permanent fear of those who stayed and the permanent longing of those who left. And also, not everyone could leave - for example, because of elderly sick parents. I decided that my circumstances allowed me to leave, that between fear and longing, I would choose longing as a less destructive emotion. After leaving, I started drinking more - and this is not an uncommon story among those who have left either. I am saved by renewed sessions with a psychoanalyst and vipassana meditation."

Like most of his other colleagues, Alexander Pichugin also expresses an emotional disconnect with his past in Russia. "My emotional ties with Russia have become quite limited," he states, a very complex form of homesickness rather than detachment in my opinion.

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CHAPTER 5

Long arms: When governments try to get journalists in exile

The spine-chilling murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 is possibly etched in the memories of many. The Washington Post columnist had an appointment at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, and he could never leave. He was assassinated brutally and dismembered.

Maybe this is the most memorable and extreme case. But at least 25 other governments have targeted journalists abroad, according to Freedom House. , which has identified 112 incidents against journalists from 2014 to 2023, including assault, detention, unlawful deportation, rendition, and, as in the case of Khashoggi, assassination.

According to a report from Insider, starting in the fall of 2022, a new wave of poisonings affected journalists and activists who have left Russia. In October, Elena Kostyuchenko, a journalist for “Novaya Gazeta” and “Meduza,” was poisoned in Munich. A week later, Irina Babloyan, a journalist from “Echo of Moscow,” experienced almost identical symptoms in Tbilisi. In the spring, Natalia Arno, the head of the “Free Russia” Foundation, was poisoned with a neurotoxic substance.

In 2021, the exiled Turkish journalist Erk Acarer, who has lived in Germany since 2017 due to government pressures, was attacked with “fists and knives” outside his apartment in Berlin. The attack came shortly after a list targeting exiled journalists in Germany was published.

In other words, for some journalists, leaving the country might not always guarantee safety. At least one journalist who had an experience with Russian intelligence offers I have heard of refused to speak openly. However, in terms of direct threats from the home country, most exiled journalists say they feel safer than they would have stayed -- which was the main reason for their fleeing in the first place.

Metin Cihan, the journalist who had to leave after reporting on the murder of an 11-year-old in Turkey, acknowledges the uncertainty and fear that influenced him to continue journalistic work abroad, which further solidified his inability to return to Turkey, as new investigations and arrest warrants were issued against him.

Cihan expresses mixed feelings about his departure but recognizes the necessity of his work, “Sometimes I think I shouldn’t have left, but then I realize some of the work I did wouldn’t have been possible if I were still in Turkey. And someone needs to do these things.”

As Andrey Shashkov puts it, “I think Berlin is generally a very safe city. However, my colleague and acquaintance Irina Babloyan was tried to be poisoned in Germany. As we know, agents of the Russian security services have been very active here since the Cold War, perhaps more so than in any other Western European capital. But I was hopefully not so famous in Russia that I was at the top of their target/victim list. Overall, I feel safer than not.”

“Georgia is very safe - and generally has a relaxed pace of life. There are many opportunities for self-realization,” says Alexander Pichugin.

However, perils continue for journalists in exile, especially for those crossing borders and for those who might be obliged to return to their home country for an urgent need.

Banu Acun was detained by Turkish authorities after starting to return to her career in exile.

Despite the initial despondence, the Istanbul elections of 2019 reignited a glimmer of hope in her. It prompted her to ponder if the democratic change was possible if she could contribute from afar to support her colleagues resisting in Turkey. This period marked a rekindling of her passion for journalism, leading her to contribute to a news website founded by her friends.

Acun’s return to journalism, however, did not come without its perils. Her investigative work, particularly an inquiry into why the Colombian authorities did not inform the Turkish government about a significant cocaine haul, drew ire from the Turkish authorities. She was briefly detained at Sabiha Gökçen Airport in Istanbul on May 7, 2023, during a visit to Turkey. She was charged with inciting hatred and insulting institutions, and her trial is ongoing.

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CHAPTER 6

Where does this end?

Despite the challenges the journalists have dealt with, many have shown great resilience and dedication to continue their journalistic work. Not all of them, but most of them have found ways to adapt, such as leveraging digital platforms and networks, to keep reporting on issues important to them and their audience.

Yury in Berlin continues his collaboration with TV Rain, Novaya Gazeta Europe, and other independent media, demonstrating his commitment to journalism and adaptability in continuing to produce content for the Russian audience from abroad. Valery continues reporting on his YouTube station. Sofia, who has adapted to her new circumstances in Lithuania, is continuing her work as an author and editor for Radio Free Europe's regional project.

Shashkov, even after facing job loss and much stress in Berlin, has still found ways to remain in the profession. Aleksander Pichugin continues to edit his independent site "Reporter-NN" and has tried different approaches to journalism in Georgia, showing his adaptability and dedication to providing independent news.

Mark Nebesny also continues to operate his media. Despite the loss of audience, with the use of circumventing censorship through mirror sites and social networks, he has remained committed to journalism.

Not all of them have been able to continue their journalism, though. “I’ve been in Germany for two years now. Since I was newly exiled from my profession, I tried to follow up on my work. I attempted to prepare dossiers on migration issues.”

Despite his desire to remain active in journalism and assist his colleagues in Turkey, Kaplan faced significant hurdles. “I wanted to do a bit more. I also wanted to help my colleagues in Turkey by producing news from outside and contributing to the organizations we worked for. But after coming here, that wasn’t very feasible.”

One of the primary obstacles Kaplan encountered was the language barrier, which significantly limited his ability to produce content in Germany. He explains, “Creating something here is a bit problematic, primarily because of the language barrier. And frankly, in Germany, there isn’t a very open media landscape for journalists coming from outside.”

However, he acknowledges the efforts of other exiled journalists who have managed to create substantial work from abroad related to Turkey’s current affairs: “There are colleagues abroad who prepare many significant dossiers, doing serious work related to Turkey’s agenda. Personally, I might not have been able to continue this.”

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CHAPTER 7

Recommedations for policymakers and civil society

The stories of exiled journalists paint a clear picture of the multifaceted challenges they face. The following recommendations, drawn from their insights and my research, are directed toward governments, media companies, and civil society organizations.

Comprehensive support

Exiled journalists encounter a complex web of challenges, ranging from financial instability to emotional and psychological strain. A predominant issue is the financial difficulty they face, especially given the high cost of living and the challenge of sustaining their journalistic work in a new environment. This often forces them to seek employment in unrelated fields, which can further disconnect them from their profession and audience.

The bureaucratic labyrinth of obtaining visas and residency permits is another significant hurdle. The process is usually protracted and convoluted, impeding their ability to work and settle effectively. For instance, the short validity of certain permits, like the journalistic residence permit in Lithuania, creates a sense of instability and uncertainty, impacting not just the journalists but also their families, who may not be able to join them.

In other cases, visa safety can downright be a serious security issue. This concerns not just journalists but all of the Russian opposition or anyone who is remotely political but has spoken against the war. In a most recent example, at the time of writing, Thailand nearly sent Bi-2 rock band members to Moscow under pressure from Russian diplomats. The musicians have made their anti-war stance clear, and Russia decided to go after them after a concert. All of the seven members eventually could be flown to Israel, even those that held only Russian citizenship, but after much stress and political effort. Had any of them been returned to Russia, there could have been grave consequences.

In the case of journalists, another problem is adapting to a new journalistic environment while maintaining relevance and connection to their original audience, which is difficult. Also, often overlooked by journalists and civil society, the emotional toll of leaving their homeland, coupled with the trauma of war and political repression, cannot be understated. Feelings of isolation, homesickness, and the psychological strain of adapting to new surroundings while worrying about loved ones back home add to their burdens.

Actionable strategies and solutions

A multifaceted approach is needed to address these challenges. First off, governments need to establish more accessible and expedited visa programs and asylum procedures specifically for journalists facing persecution. These policies should be transparent, clear, and sensitive to the unique risks journalists face.

Financial and legal support is crucial. Establishing funds to provide financial aid covering living expenses, legal fees, and costs associated with setting up journalistic ventures in new countries is vital. This support will help alleviate the immediate financial pressures faced by exiled journalists.

Mental health and social integration programs tailored for journalists in exile are necessary. These services should focus on trauma, cultural adjustment, and overcoming isolation, recognizing these needs as primary rather than secondary.

Professional training and resource provision will be instrumental in helping journalists adapt to new media environments and technologies. Media companies and NGOs should consider integrating exiled journalists into the existing media landscape, leveraging their expertise about their home countries and regions. Affirmative action-like programs for videographers and camera people could facilitate professional integration and provide new opportunities.

In conclusion, the support for exiled journalists should not only address their professional needs but also their personal well-being. Implementing these recommendations will significantly contribute to safeguarding the rights and futures of journalists who have made immense personal sacrifices for the pursuit of free and fair journalism. Governments, media entities, and civil societies play a crucial role in shaping a supportive environment for these journalists, ensuring their voices continue to be heard and their stories told.

Conversations with exiled journalists from Turkey and Russia

BARIŞ ALTINTAŞ

Note: The cover photo is taken from pastvu.com, it depicts a group of Roma flagging down a taxi outside the Petrovksy shopping center. It was taken circa 1981 and uploaded by user silver44 (accessible at pastvu.com/p/7369). The other photos used in the report are the author's own creations, imagined through the lens of AI, depicting 1980s versions or blends of several cities including Istanbul, Diyarbakır, Şırnak, Nizhny Novgorod, Ankara, Moscow, and Strasbourg These imaginary cities are crafted to reflect the detached homesickness feeling described by some of the journalists in exile whom I interviewed for this book. They aim to capture the essence of the countries as one would remember them from childhood in the 80s, juxtaposed with the stark realities faced in adulthood by those who have had to leave their homelands.

Justice for Journalists
Foundation for International
Investigations of Crime against Media

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