

RUSSIAN INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM IN EXILE: IN SEARCH OF RELEVANCE AND RESILIENCE



Final report to Helsingin Sanomat Foundation

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The name of the project: Russian independent journalism in exile: in search of relevance and resilience

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Other financing received for the project: -

Researcher in charge: Dr Olga Dovbysh, postdoctoral research, University of Helsinki, Aleksanteri Institute (olga.dovbysh@helsinki.fi)

Other researchers of the project:

Katja Lehtisaari, University Lecturer, Tampere University

Elena Rodina, guest researcher, University of Helsinki

Several research assistants, hired by the project, have also participated in the project.

Summary:

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, most independent Russian media outlets were forced to relocate abroad en masse as a result of government repression and the imposition of de facto war-time censorship in Russia. A new community of Russian media in exile, dispersed across various countries due to their respective resources (e.g., visa status and funds) and connections, has become the largest professional media community in exile in recent history. The conditions of exile have influenced the transformation of professional practices within the journalistic process, as well as the reconstruction of professional self-identification and identity among journalists in exile. The study focuses on two critical elements of media functioning in exile: the issue of relevance of such media to their audience located in the home country, and the issue of financial and organizational resilience of

these media outlets. Empirical data include interviews with media practitioners and workers from organizations supporting free journalism, interviews with journalists who remain inside of Russia, observations in exiled newsrooms, and digital ethnography.

The aim of the project:

The aim of this project is to examine the emerging, transnational ecosystem of exiled Russian media and discern how media professionals who have had to flee their country seek to (re)build journalistic community in the face of financial, technical, and personal challenges.

Fulfilment of the aim (scale 1–5):

According to the self-evaluation of the team, the aims were achieved excellently (5).

Key findings:

Based on the research project, it can be concluded that the adaptation and reconfiguration of professional practices among journalists in exile are inextricably linked to their experiences as migrants in the host country (or countries, as most of them have relocated two or more times). The interdependence of the professional experience of journalists in exile with their migrant experiences has formed the basis for an analytical approach to understanding exiled media as a constellation of connections to, and disconnections from, both home and host spaces (Rodina & Dovbysh 2025). On one hand, Russian exiled journalists strive to navigate and reproduce a digitized reality of the home country, transcending the physical boundaries and restrictions imposed by nation-states. On the other hand, their lack of physical presence in Russia fosters a fear of losing their intimate understanding of the homeland and, consequently, their professional authority. Paradoxically, their efforts to stay connected to Russia and maintain journalistic doxa deepen their disconnection from their host country and hinder their personal and professional integration. As such, their occupation, "Russian journalist," becomes a symbolic shelter to maintain the professional status quo. To mitigate isolation in the host society, journalists cultivate alternative connections with exiled journalists from other countries.

Examining the resilience of media in exile, the research project identified a structural problem within journalism in exile. This issue lies in the high degree of interconnection and dependency of such media on donor funding and the resultant power dynamics between media and supporting organizations (Lehtisaari et al., in progress). On one hand, funding and other forms of support from donor organizations enable media to continue operating in exile; on the other hand, they create challenges for the long-term resilience of these media outlets. This includes the issue of low predictability of such

funding, resulting in high risks for media potentially losing support. In practice, this often leads to staff layoffs, which can have dire consequences, as employment is frequently a key factor in the legality of staying in the host country. Although donor organizations strive for collegial, horizontal interactions with media, in practice, they tend to occupy a more authoritative position relative to the media.

Other challenges to the resilience of media in exile include the lack of a well-defined legal framework concerning such media in host countries. For example, many journalists in exile possess short-term residency documents that require renewal and are often contingent on employment status. This creates significant risks for journalists, as most of them cannot return to Russia due to the threat of persecution or criminal imprisonment. Digital security and the risks of digital surveillance present yet another challenge.

The relevance to the audience in the home country (Russia) is the most significant challenge to the long-term resilience of media in exile. Despite the capabilities offered by digital technologies, the emotional disconnect, lack of understanding of the audience, and its needs and concerns, which are associated with physical distance, lead to a decline in interest and trust among the audience. Strategies for adaptation to this problem include, for instance, building and maintaining a network of authors within the country, finding new formats to speak to the audience as well as reorienting the media towards other audiences (such as Russian speakers outside of Russia).

The research revealed that the conditions of financial, legal, and digital uncertainty and precarity faced by media in exile simultaneously serve as an environment for the creation of creative responses and grassroots entrepreneurship. For instance, media outlets are experimenting with alternative forms of funding beyond donor support, devising secure and reliable methods for obtaining information from authors within Russia, and developing ways to deliver content amidst digital blockades and shutdowns in Russia.

Research data gathered and created within the project:

1. Interviews with journalists in exile.

The project conducted two fieldwork trips. The first trip was to Vilnius, Lithuania in August 2023, where 13 in person interviews were collected (by Olga Dovbysh). The second fieldwork was in Riga, Latvia in November 2023, where 12 in person and 1 online interviews were done (by Elena Rodina). In addition to fieldwork trips, Rodina conducted 1 in person interview in Prague, Czech Republic; 3 in person interviews in Tbilisi, Georgia; 1 in person and 2 online interviews in Vilnius, Lithuania; and 1 in person interview in Berlin, Germany. These interviews were conducted during Rodina's trips for her main job in an NGO in Sweden. Dovbysh conducted 2 online and 1 in person interview in Helsinki. In total, the

project's empirical data at the moment includes 37 interviews with Russian journalists in exile. In addition, Rodina conducted interviews with 13 journalists, over Signal (voice call) who still remain in Russia and continue their work by publishing their articles in the exiled independent media outlets

2. Interviews with donor organizations.

Katja Lehtisaari, together with a research assistant, conducted 7 interviews online with experts and professionals, working in or closely with support or donor organisations that support the work of journalism in exile.

3. Interviews with Russian journalists who published their materials in exiled media but could for some time remain inside of Russia.

Elena Rodina conducted 15 online in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Russian journalists with a focus on the ways in which they collaborate and publish in exiled media while taking specific precautions, such as changing linguistic patterns to avoid criminal prosecution or using pseudonyms when having to cover war-related subjects. The interviews were relied on as data for a scholarly article that will come out in the edited volume (translated into French) in January 2026 (the text has been peer-reviewed and accepted for the publication; the volume is currently being proofread and edited by the publisher).

4. Document data.

Together with a research assistant, Lehtisaari collected data from several websites of support or donor organisations that support the work of journalism in exile.

Scientific publications, articles and popular texts:

- Rodina E., Dovbysh O. (2025) Navigating Connections and Disconnections: The (Re)making of Russian Exiled Journalism in the Digital Age. *Journalism Studies*.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2471876>
- Dovbysh O., Rodina E. (2025) Independent voices from Russia: Between safety and knowledge extractivism. *Aleksanteri Insight*. <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/aleksanteri-institute/news-and-events/news-archive/independent-voices-russia-between-safety-and-knowledge-extractivism>
- Rodina E. (upcoming: 2026). Journalism that stayed: the effects of extreme war censorship on the language of independent. *Langues et discours face a la guerre en Ukraine* (in French).

Presentations at scientific conferences:

- Rodina E. (30-31 May 2023) Academic workshop “Reimagining Incarceration and Immobility in

Nordic Countries”, with a paper *“Russian exiled journalists in Nordic countries: modes of isolation and immobility”*, Helsingborg, Sweden

- Rodina E. (26-27 June 2023) Conference *“Languages of war under the war in Ukraine”*, with a paper *“Journalism that stayed: the effects of extreme war censorship on the language of independent journalism inside Russia”*, Paris, France
- Lehtisaari K. (12 September 2023). Online talk on Russian media *“Professional identity and survival strategies of exiled journalists from Syria and Russia”*, a talk *“Resilient model(s) for independent media in Resilient model(s) for independent media in exile”*
<https://blogs.helsinki.fi/russianmedialab/2023/09/05/exiledhttps://blogs.helsinki.fi/russianmedialab/2023/09/05/exiled--onlineonline--talktalk--inin--september/september/>
- Dovbysh O., Rodina E., Lehtisaari K. (27 October, 2023) The project organised a panel entitled *“Resilience/Resistance/Compliance: Russian Journalistic and Activist Communities in Exile and in the Country”* at the Aleksanteri annual conference, Helsinki, Finland. As part of the panel, Rodina and Dovbysh presented a paper titled *“The Biggest Danger is to Lose Focus”: Journalistic Relevance of the Exiled Media”* while Lehtisaari served as a moderator of the panel.
- Lehtisaari K. (4 July, 2024). Conference IAMCR, with a paper *“Supporting journalism in exile: Views from the donor side”*. Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Dovbysh O. (24-27 September, 2024) The project organised a panel *“Real existing journalisms in the world? Towards new epistemology of exile journalism”* at the ECREA conference, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Dovbysh presented the paper *“Connection vs disconnection in the (re)making of professional identity of exiled journalists”* and also served as the chair of the panel.
- Rodina, E. (7-8 November, 2024). Conference at the University of Grenoble, Grenoble, France: *“Colloque Résistance, adaptation et contournement en Russie, dans les aires russophones et l’espace postsoviétique : formes, stratégies, acteurs et pratiques”* (in French and English). E. Rodina presented the research work, *“Internal and external resistance: Russian critical journalists inside and outside of the country.”*
- Dovbysh, O. and Rodina, E. (8-11 November, 2024). Conference in Turkey, *“(In)Visible Networks: Reconfiguration of the Russian Civil Society and Journalism in Uncertain Times”*. The conference aimed to discuss and critically rethink the scholarly and applied work on Russian civil society after February 24, 2022; it was designed as not merely an academic conference, but a discussion space for scholars, civil society representatives, journalists, and policymakers with expertise on Russia and the region. Dovbysh and Rodina presented results of research *on creative resistance practices of Russian journalists in exile*.
- Rodina, E. (24 November, 2024). Conference ASEES, roundtable, *“Beyond Resistance in/outside Russia: From Pacifist Feminists to Nationalist Feminism”* with a paper inquiring into *female journalists' role in Russian exiled journalism*.
- Rodina, E. (May 20, 2025). Research Symposium on Exile Journalism, in Hamburg, Germany,

organised by Körber Stiftung. Presented the research work of Rodina and Dovbysh on *connections and disconnections of Russian journalists in exile*.

Other presentations, lectures and courses:

- Dovbysh elaborated a master course *"Russians in exile in the digital age"* that was taught in the fall semester 2024 in Tampere University. In the course there were 14 students enrolled, and 13 students completed the course.
- Rodina E. Guest lecture in the course *"Russians in exile in the digital age"*, Tampere University
- Rodina E. Incorporated results of research on journalism in exile during the course she taught at Charles University in the fall semester of 2024 (the course of 10 lectures entitled *"Leadership and Advocacy in Media"*)

Event for media professionals in exile:

In May 2024, the project organized a two-day event in Riga, Latvia, for exiled Russian media professionals. As part of the event, a strategic session was held with an invited moderator (Jakub Parusinski, SSE in Riga), dedicated to exploring and finding solutions to the issue of maintaining connections with authors, experts, and audiences in their home country.

The event also included an academic component aimed at sharing research on relevant topics with exiled journalists. The following presentations were delivered:

- Karolina Nugumanova (European University Institute, OutRush Project), *"The Russian Diaspora: What It Is Interested In, Whom It Supports, and What It Fears."*
- Oleg Zhuravlev (Public Sociology Lab; Scuola Normale Superiore), *"How Do Russians Perceive the War, and How Can the Media Speak the Same Language with Them?"*
- Project authors (Dovbysh, Rodina): research results and data discussion *"Journalism in Exile: What We (Don't) Know About Russian Journalism and That of Other Countries."*

In total, 23 media professionals representing a broad range of Russian media outlets in exile participated in the event.

Closing event:

Project's closing event *"Entrepreneurship and precarity in journalism in uncertain times: evidences from exiled and small-scale media"* was organised in Media Museum Merkki 22 October, 2024. The program included:

- *"Russian independent journalism in exile: in search of relevance and resilience"* - the project's main results,
 - Olga Dovbysh, Helsinki University - Project's background and the results
 - Elena Rodina, Helsinki University, *"Navigating Connections and Disconnections: The (Re)making of Russian Exiled Journalism in the Digital Age"*
 - Katja Lehtisaari, Tampere University, *"Supporting journalism in exile: Views from the donor side "*
- Journalism under conditions of instability and the entrepreneurial potential (Olga Dovbysh)
- Jenny Wiik, University of Gothenburg, *"Exiled media as agents of change: Rethinking journalism in times of transformation"*
- Olli Seuri, journalist, founder of Uusi Juttu, *"Building a news start-up in Finland: Case Uusi Juttu"*
- Round table discussion *"Challenges and entrepreneurial responses of the small-scale media under conditions of instability"* (participants Jenny Wiik, Olli Seuri, Liudmila Voronova (Södertörn University), Elena Rodina). Moderator: Katja Lehtisaari

Media publicity:

- Lehtisaari was an Invited panelist at Kulttuuriykkönen radio program (Yle, Finland) on 22 February 2023, topic *"Toimittajat pakenevat Venäjältä voiko kansa herätä milloinkaan Putin propagandan unesta?"* (Journalists go exile from Russia can people never wake up from the dream of Putin propaganda?)
- Dovbysh commented for Yle's publication entitled *"Suomessa tutkitaan, miten venäläistoimittajat pärjäävät maanpaossa – Anna Jarovaja, 35, soimaa itseään, ettei pystynyt pysäyttämään Putinin Venäjää"* on 25 January 2023 <https://yle.fi/a/74-20014377>
- Lehtisaari was interviewed for Maailma.net publication entitled *"Venäjältä paenneiden toimittajien tulevaisuus on epävakaalla pohjalla"* on 12 December 2024 <https://maailmankuvalehti.fi/2024/12/maailma-net/venajalta-paenneiden-toimittajien-tulevaisuus-on-epavakaalla-pohjalla/>

The project also created own webpage to publish project's updates

<https://blogs.helsinki.fi/russianmedialab/rjex/>

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