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Navigating Connections and Disconnections: The (Re)making of Russian Exiled Journalism in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

The growing shift of many countries toward authoritarianism has led to an increase in exiled media communities. This study examines the dual identity of exiled journalists: as new immigrants who must adapt to their host countries, and as media professionals who must maintain ties with their estranged homeland. Drawing on extensive empirical data from interviews with Russian exiled journalists and fieldwork done in 2023, it develops an analytical approach to understanding exiled media as a constellation of connections to, and disconnections from, both home and host spaces. On the one hand, Russian exiled journalists strive to navigate and reproduce a digitised reality of the home country, transcending the physical boundaries and restrictions imposed by nation-states. On the other, 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 keep 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.

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Introduction

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian authorities swiftly imposed de facto wartime censorship, which included criminal penalties of up to 15 years in prison for disseminating “unreliable information” about Russia’s armed forces and its “special military operation” (Troianovski and Safronova 2022). As a result, more than a thousand journalists fled the country to avoid the immediate threat of imprisonment and to continue their work free from censorship (*The Moscow Times*, 2023). This mass exodus of journalists, along with their relatively swift re-establishment and continuation of their work from abroad, has become one of the most prominent examples of “exilic journalism”, garnering significant media and public attention (Dovbysh and Rodina 2022; Windelspecht 2023; Myklebost 2023).

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As of September 2024, at least 66 independent Russian media outlets operate in exile, generating billions of website visits, YouTube views, Telegram and TikTok subscriptions (JX Fund Research Report 2024). Journalists working for the media outlets experienced severe changes to and traumas in their private and professional lives, including, but in no way limited to, multiple relocations, legal and professional uncertainties, risks to their relatives and close friends remaining in Russia, and financial instability.

While many of the challenges are similar to those experienced by other migrant groups, journalists in exile face an additional layer of tension directly tied to their professional roles. On the one hand, they are new immigrants who must adapt to their host countries; on the other, their profession requires them to maintain a close connection to the home country they have left and cannot return to. This study investigates how the dual identity of exiled journalists as new immigrants and media professionals reporting on their home country impacts the professional (re)making of their careers as journalists in exile.

In contrast to previous studies, which have examined exiled journalism through the lens of its differences from the professional roles and norms of mainstream (Western) journalism (O'Loughlin and Schafrad 2016; Arafat 2021), this study investigates exiled journalism as a domain where professional practices are deeply intertwined with and shaped by journalists' experiences as immigrants. Drawing on approaches from both journalism and migration studies, as well as from extensive data on the case of exiled Russian media, this paper develops an analytical framework for understanding exiled journalism through the constellation of journalists' practices of connection to and disconnection from their home and host countries. We focus on the tensions that Russian journalists in exile face due to professional pressures, compounded by their precarious status as immigrants, and explore how these tensions influence their work and life in exile.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we present a critical review of existing scholarship on migration and exiled journalism, followed by an outline of our conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon. We then explain our methodology and analyse the empirical data. In the final section, we examine the key findings of the study and propose directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework: Practicing Connection and Disconnection in Exiled Journalism

Connection and Disconnection: Migrants in the Digital Era

Today's ease of digital connectedness complicates the distinction between local and global communication, blurring the formerly much more distinctive lines between "home" and "host" countries for migrants and creating a complex continuum (Diminescu 2008). As noted by Appadurai (1996, 4), "electronic mediation and mass migration" might "impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination", producing instability and shifts in the relationships between local and global, with "both persons and images" meeting "unpredictably, outside the certainties of home and the cordon sanitaire of local and national media effects'. Through digital platforms, individuals are no longer confined by the physical and ideological boundaries of their homelands; instead, they can engage with diverse audiences and perspectives that transcend the limitations of traditional media. This dynamic interaction fosters new forms of understanding and

representation, enabling migrants to reimagine their narratives and build connections that reflect the complexities of their lived realities in an increasingly interconnected world (Marino 2015).

Existing research indicates that migrants, while typically relying on both transnational “old” ties with their home country and “new” ties in their host country, often experience a diminishing connection to their older, transnational ties as they expand their networks in their new country of residence. Although they may maintain “emotional support” connections with close friends and family, migrants tend to decrease the intensity of communication, leading to weaker ties in their home country (Djundeva and Ellwardt 2019; Morosanu 2013).

One of the key reasons for this phenomenon is the limited resources available to migrants. They must allocate their time and energy in a practical manner, prioritising their more proximate networks in the host country and “shifting loyalties and allegiances” toward individuals physically present in their new environments (Waldinger 2015, 10). Over time, the motivation to maintain connections with their home country also diminishes (Waldinger 2015, 8).

However, when examining journalists in exile – particularly those who continue to work as journalists after migrating – we observe a different pattern.

Our case study of Russian journalists in exile demonstrates that they feel pressure – stemming from their professional imperatives – to maintain a strong reliance on their transnational ties and connections to their home country. This reliance is not solely for emotional support; rather, it is integral to their work and essential for sustaining their livelihood, professional identity and status. Furthermore, their inability to travel back home – for political, rather than financial, reasons – intensifies the effort required to stay connected to the daily realities in their homeland. Consequently, in comparison to other migrant groups, Russian journalists in exile have fewer resources to dedicate to integration, establishing local ties and the “insertion process” of settling into their host country (Koelet, Van Mol, and De Valk 2017, 441).

We view such a situation as a context shaping the tension that they face: while the “natural” dynamics of being migrants would encourage integration and the establishing of the local ties, professional pressures compel them to laboriously maintain the connection to their home country, dedicating their limited resources to simulating proximity to events occurring there.

Understanding Exiled Journalism: Constellation of Connections and Disconnections

Over the past years, the global state of democracy has been consistently in decline (Global State of Democracy Initiative 2022). Consequently, research on exiled media has expanded over the last decade in response to the increasing number of media communities forced into exile by repressive regimes. Exiled media are generally understood as outlets that “can no longer function in the country relating to their content and operate in either self-imposed or enforced removal due to danger” (Cook 2016, 515). These media organisations leave their countries due to repression and severe limitations imposed on their profession, and in most cases they cannot return home without facing state persecution. Researchers have emphasised the political significance of exilic media, which have proven to be vital platforms for social movements and the struggle for free

expression against state oppression in their home countries (Michaelsen 2018; Porlezza and Arafat 2022; Crete-Nishihata and Tsui 2023).

Conditions of exile inevitably impact professional journalistic values, norms and routines, ultimately influencing exiled journalists' professional self-making. Esther and Thomas (2024) refer to this as "journalism in another form", asserting that purposefully exiled journalists remain committed to the principles of normative journalism; however, the context of exile significantly affects how this type of journalism is practiced. Similarly, Porlezza and Arafat (2022) have examined how networks of Syrian exiled media adopt a strong activist stance, resulting in an extension of journalistic norms toward activism. The case of Burundian journalists in exile illustrates a scenario in which exile disrupts journalists' self-confidence and trust in their ability to uphold their professional ethos (Frère 2017). For their part, Badran and Smets (2021) employ the concept of precarity to explore the work of exiled Syrian journalists in Turkey, highlighting how those journalists experience and navigate the "landscapes of systemic precarity" in which they exist (Badran and Smets 2021, 1378).

Previous research has also explored how the loss of physical closeness to events in the home country affects the journalistic authority of exiled media (Zelizer 2007, as cited in Crete-Nishihata and Tsui 2023). While many address this loss by finding new tactics to re-create a sense of proximity (Crete-Nishihata and Tsui 2023), journalists nevertheless often struggle with the more overarching anxiety of "losing touch" with their country. The latter does not necessarily imply the loss of access to the facts or information, but the loss of the "feeling" of the country, the so-called journalistic *doxa* (Schultz 2007), the ingrained, self-evident norms of practice that enable journalists to create content that resonates with their audience back home.

The mass exodus of media professionals from Russia following the February 2022 attack on Ukraine represents a continuation of the long-standing tradition of political emigration from Russia, evident during the era of the Russian Empire (Hartnett 2020), Soviet times (Johnston 1988; Kind-Kovács and Labov 2013), and most recently, President Putin's administration (Fomina 2021).

This latest wave of Russian journalists in exile both mirrors and diverges from other exilic journalistic communities. Similar to other displaced journalists, they operate as "digital migrants" (Ponzanesi 2020), forming part of a diaspora that not only actively participates in but also reshapes a transnational online community, which transcends conventional nation-state boundaries. More significantly, such journalists challenge the territorial and cultural centrality of Russian state claims to national identity, fostering an alternative, borderless reality. In this sense, they are both "deterritorialised" (Appadurai 1996) and cosmopolitan, yet their identity as Russian journalists remains a pivotal and defining element of their lives in exile.

At the same time, the Russian journalistic community in exile is also characterised by important distinctions. As citizens of an aggressor country in a war of conquest, Russian journalists confront a profound ethical dilemma that complicates their ability to advocate for their rights. Despite their open opposition to Russia's role in the conflict, they often feel a diminished moral authority to assert their own needs, which in turn shapes their practical and professional challenges.

This status also complicates their migration process on both legal and physical levels: as "representatives" of an aggressor country, they encounter difficulties in obtaining legal

documents and residence permits in host countries. Additionally, they are affected by sanctions imposed on Russian citizens, which restrict their ability to, e.g., travel freely and access banking services.

These practical and emotional complexities, while not unique, must be taken into consideration since they contribute to the instability experienced by Russian exilic journalists, leading to multiple relocations and further hindering their willingness to focus on integrating and establishing connections in their host countries.

In the proposed framework, we integrate the concept of the duality of migration – simultaneously maintaining ties to the home country while becoming embedded in a new place of residence (Waldinger 2015) – with existing scholarship on the ways in which conditions of exile shape journalistic practices. Drawing on empirical data from Russian journalists in exile, we contend that their professional practices are inextricably linked to their migratory experiences. Consequently, exiled journalism can be conceptualised as a constellation of practices characterised by both connection and disconnection between journalists and their host and home countries. Figure 1 illustrates the symbolic map of how exiled journalism can be (de)constructed at the intersection of the connections and disconnections to their host and home countries, which are simultaneously informed by and also influence the personal (as migrant) and professional (as journalist) identity of a media professional in exile.

Methodology and Settings

In this study, we employ a social constructionist perspective on journalistic work, which posits that the ideas and actions of media professionals are “embedded” in specific

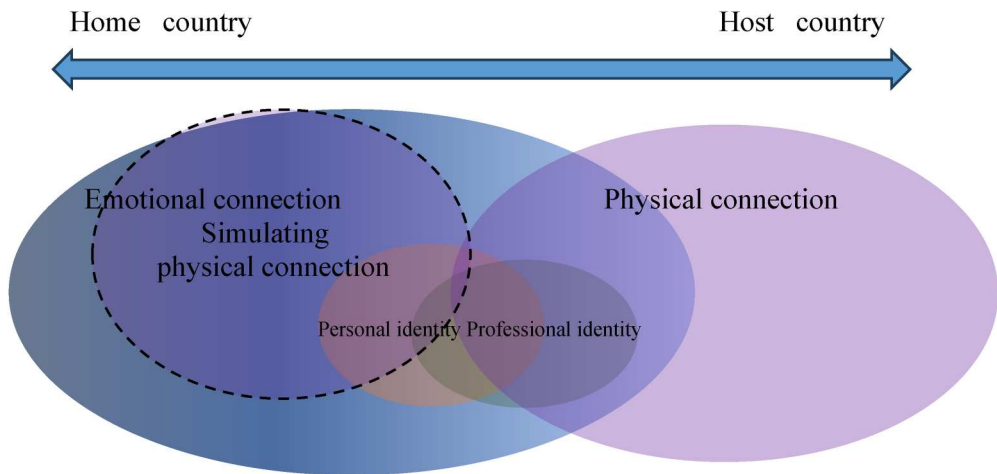


Figure 1. Symbolic mapping of Russian exiled journalists’ connections and disconnections to their host and home countries (colours and cloud sizes do not reflect specific metrics and are used for illustrative purposes only): while physically they are located in the host country, most of their emotional connection is to the home country; their personal and professional identities, closely interconnected, are also “located” in their home country; their audience is mostly in their home country, with some shift towards the host country (where the audiences are mostly similarly exiled and relocated compatriots and other Russian-speaking readers/viewers).

social and historical contexts, often articulating the interests of the dominant class to which they belong (Gitlin 1980). This perspective suggests that, due to their institutional positions and organisational practices, journalists are likely to serve the interests of the class of which they are a part and reproduce the structural and power dynamics of that class (Tuchman 2002). In the context of exiled journalism, the perspective enables us to trace how the work- and life-related practices, beliefs and values of the exilic media community shape their professional identities and, ultimately, the nature of exiled journalism as a whole.

The research is based on extensive qualitative data collected from various sources between August 2023 and November 2023. The primary data source consists of interviews with Russian journalists and media professionals currently working from abroad (in exile). We conducted 37 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with representatives of exiled media in Vilnius, Riga, Prague, Berlin and Tbilisi.

Our selection of the locations is informed by reports and analyses published since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, highlighting areas that have emerged as significant "media hubs" for exiled journalists and activists from Russia. Most of the interviews were conducted in person during the authors' fieldwork in Lithuania (N = 13) and Latvia (N = 12) in the fall of 2023. Additional in-person interviews took place during one author's personal trips to Prague (N = 1), Tbilisi (N = 3), Berlin (N = 1), Vilnius (N = 1) and Riga (N = 1). One interview was conducted by the other author in Helsinki, while four interviews were held online. This type of data collection design facilitates a nuanced understanding of the field and allows for the possibility of returning to the primary locations where the Russian journalistic community in exile is situated, enabling follow-up questions.

In recruiting our interviewees, we began our outreach by leveraging our existing connections within the Russian media field, where both of us had conducted research previously. We then employed snowball sampling, asking interviewees to suggest additional participants from their professional networks. All interviews are fully anonymised, comprising 16 male and 21 female participants. Of the interviewees, 18 work as editors, 14 as journalists and five as other media professionals (such as fundraisers and producers). The interview guide included, for instance, questions about relocating and adapting to new countries (many respondents had to relocate twice), professional practices in exile, self-identification, understanding of their audience and connections to their home country. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full.

Analysis of the interviews was done through inductive open coding. The authors read all the transcripts, marking important or sensitive issues. Then, connections between issues were identified and broader themes were formulated. This resulted in several codes describing the media professionals' engagement with the digital and physical space of home and host countries in their work. We divided the codes into the groups describing the challenges of *connection and disconnection with home and host countries*.

In addition to interviews, we utilised secondary data sources to ensure a nuanced understanding of Russian exiled journalism and its dynamics. First, this data stems from ethnographic observations made during our fieldwork (e.g., in common workplaces for journalists). Although the data was not systematically documented, the authors created an encrypted channel on Signal to share their emotions, feelings and observations throughout the fieldwork.

Second, we conducted digital ethnography by regularly reading Russian media in exile and monitoring open social media posts (on X, Facebook and Telegram) made by Russian media outlets and individual journalists in exile. The inclusion of digital ethnography in our study is informed by the understanding that offline and online interactions are not “discrete entities” (Gajjala 2009), which is particularly significant when studying the work of exiled journalists, whose professional and social interactions are deeply intertwined with the online realm. Third, we attended several open or semi-open events organised by donor organisations and research institutions for Russian media professionals in exile. Again, reflections on these events and discussions were recorded in an encrypted document for later data analysis.

Results: Experience of Connection and Disconnection with Home and Host Countries

The analysis of data collected during our fieldwork enabled us to deconstruct the exiled experience of journalists as a constellation of various connections and disconnections encountered throughout their professional and personal lives.

Home Country: Physical Distance

Most Russian outlets and journalists in exile continue to write about Russia and for Russian audiences – both for those who left Russia after the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, but also, and primarily, for those who remain inside the country (Balakhonova et al. 2022; Agentstvo 2023). An ongoing engagement with their home country is essential for fulfilling their professional roles and also serves as their primary source of income. Additionally, their ability to maintain legal status in exile depends on them maintaining their professional role as journalists, and the latter hinges on their capacity to report on developments within Russia.

However, their connectedness with the home country and its audience is perceived, by journalists themselves, as threatened by their extended stay outside the country. This loss of physical presence is perceived as the most difficult one – something that our interviewees describe using such words as “painful”, “sad” and “tragic”; it is a feeling closely resembling nostalgia, both on a personal and professional level. The journalists’ described it as follows: “This is my loss of identity, my personal pain” (R30); “I have always thought that if I write about Russia, I will live in Russia, and I think this process [of losing touch with the country] can be slowed down but never stopped” (R33); and “This [the loss of touch with Russia] is quite painful, and we are always thinking about how to avoid it” (R35). When speaking about this sense of loss – which is often expressed and explained as a physical loss – many journalists also contemplate leaving the profession as a whole:

I think that for me in Russia, there was this drive, this adrenaline rush, when you come to a protest rally for example or to a court session. ... Or you have a chance to do something related to reportage, to go into the field and create something beautiful (...) And there is none of this drive anymore, that there’s a protest rally and you are ready to work for ten hours straight, and you have that energy – this doesn’t exist in emigration. It is sad; everyone is speaking to each other via computers. In this sense, I feel that everything is lost (...) (R2)

The sense of loss is particularly relevant to journalists who, prior to leaving the country, worked as national correspondents – they admit that in exile, the genre of reportage is basically lost to them, and they are forced to find other genres and change their specialisation in order to continue their journalistic work.

Home Country: The Fear of Emotional Disconnection

Physical distance is connected to the fear of emotional disconnection. Most Russian journalists in exile express a certain level of fear at losing their ability to correctly define the tone of their texts. As one of our interviewees described it:

There is 100% fear [that the sense of country will disappear]. When they announced that mobilisation was about to start, I wrote a message on my Instagram, saying “Run away, quickly!” I used a lot of pompous words, like “Don’t die” and “Don’t kill”. Then I calmed down, re-read it two hours later, and thought, “God, who do you think you are, Gandhi?” (R18)

The aspect of a perceived emotional disconnect that the interviewees mentioned most often is the fear of adopting an overly critical view of Russia when reporting on it, focusing purely on negative aspects of the events in the country, and therefore potentially alienating the Russian audience. Their fear is that their readers living inside Russia would grow tired of reading only negative information and find it difficult to be exposed to “apocalyptic journalism”:

There is a very big problem of the divergence of the tone. Many journalists in exile are aggravating, exacerbating the problems that they detect [in Russia]. ... This can concern anything – the state of the economy, the shortage of medicines, the availability of spare car parts, the level of life in general, the quality of life and everything that happens (...) There is this problem that the tone of journalists in exile is increasingly pained, perhaps even aggressive ... apocalyptic, so to say, [claiming that] everything is going to hell and that “Russia is finished”. It is increasingly apocalyptic, alarmist and exaggerated. (R37)

Moreover, this “apocalyptic” tone may also be in contrast with the actual reality on the ground, as journalists themselves perceive it. One of the interviewees, a journalist who left Russia shortly after the attack on Ukraine but managed to briefly return (a rare exception, as most journalists cannot do so due to the high risks of persecution by the state), recounted their surprise when they saw life in Moscow going on as usual, even happily, while journalists in exile have a perception of Russia as a place immersed in perpetual doom:

We think that in Russia, everything is awful, that life there has stopped, everything has stopped. In reality, they have opened lots of new bars in Moscow, and everyone’s having a blast. Everything continues to work; the system has adapted. (R32)

Another journalist explained how exaggerating the negative aspects of everything that happens inside Russia might be the result of one’s internal desire for it to be that way, part of the ideologisation of journalism in exile, “a desire to see [in Russia] only the downfall, the decay, the death, not necessarily where it really exists” (R29). Journalists reflect on how this type of negativity is not only tiresome for readers inside the country but also often does not reflect reality in Russia. It can thus produce the opposite effect: instead of truth finding its way to the readers, it can cause them to reject and resist the message:

I think that for the people who remain there [in Russia], the demonstrative pleasure [derived] from Russian losses [on the battlefield], calling them “the orcs”, and stories about how the Russian economy will collapse in half a year and people will eat dogs are not inspiring people to doing something good; on the contrary, it’ll rather make them think that “the whole world is against us” and “if we are now up against the wall, we might as well fight till the end”. (R5)

Home Country: Maintaining New Connections to Retain “The Touch”

The high level of concern about “losing touch” with events back home expressed by our interviewees leads them to develop tactics that help them maintain their relevance and connectedness. One such tactic is keeping in constant contact with those who remained in the country and taking advantage of every opportunity to speak with those who have just returned from Russia.

Journalists also rely on technology to maintain connections to their homeland and home cities. Some respondents say that they do it because of nostalgia; others consider it a way to stay connected for professional reasons. They find new ways to reproduce, through digital experience, the physical feeling of being in the city and the country. They do so by a combination of subscribing to and reading “a fuck-billion¹ Telegram channels” (R27), joining WhatsApp groups where Russia-based persons engage in a range of discussions and using visual aids to immerse themselves in Russian realities: thus, one of the interviewees mentioned using street view on Google Maps to “walk” along the streets of his native town, while another watches YouTube videos of his city’s streets made by dash cameras, the so-called “video registrators” (in Russia, using dash cameras is a common practice; see Lavrinc 2013).

Another way to remain relevant with the Russian audience is by means of a system of “check-ins”, which many of our respondents spoke about in the interviews. When producing journalistic materials, they ask their colleagues and friends in Russia to read or watch them and let them know if they still find the information relevant and tonally appropriate:

I have an agreement with my colleagues and my friends in Moscow that if I start leaning into some “emigrant thingy”, that is, writing something condescending or something like “he cut a deal with the government” ... I am asking them to check my texts so that there is no accusatory tone there. I am interested to see what kind of compromises people make, because I myself also make compromises. And I wouldn’t want to condone that. (R27)

From a professional standpoint, journalists comment on the necessity to restructure their work to achieve the same results as when they worked in Russia: to maintain veracity and for their texts to remain relevant, they must do increasingly more factchecking, make more phone calls – due to their inability to physically walk to a place as well as the fact that many experts and others inside the country refuse to speak to exiled journalists out of fear of being targeted by the state.

Reinventing themselves as journalists does not come easy. Aside from the dramatically increased workload while in exile (“I now work five times more than before” (R27); “the job has become immensely more complex” (R36)), facing constant rejection when asking for commentaries from experts back in the home country is often discouraging and frustrating. While many experts and speakers are still willing to provide their expertise and commentaries to exiled media, it is risky for them to do so. Increasingly, Russian exiled

journalists are relying on data analytics and data journalism, using open sources and leaked data to conduct investigations or else use that data as a source in their reporting.

Home Country: Sustaining a Professional Identity

Professional affiliation is highly important for Russian exiled journalists. In their volatile, unstable situations, journalism represents a constant in their lives, it provides them with their income and ensures their legal status, and it also helps them maintain their identity and agency in circumstances when so much else is beyond their control. At the same time, their professional identity is, in most cases, closely tied to their ability to continue being a Russian journalist – almost none of the interviewees identified at a more general level with the European or international/global journalistic community:

If at some point I realise that I don't understand Russia, I will end my career in journalism, because I don't see a career in European journalism at all (...) I can't explain it to myself, but so far, I don't have this [European] identity ... I can talk about what is happening in Europe from the position of a Russian journalist, but I cannot talk about it from the position of a European journalist. When they say "Europeans", I do not include myself in this category, so to speak. (R15)

Their striving to maintain connection with the home country as a means of sustaining a sense of professional identity and professional self becomes one of the key reasons for a certain level of isolation and non-integration in their host countries.

Host Country: Self-Censorship as Disconnection and the Challenge of Isolation

Russian journalists also experience limited integration into the local professional community, often discussing their isolated position in the host country as follows: "There is no need, no request from our side, no request from that side ... I don't think it's time yet – perhaps there is wariness towards each other and there is no clear understanding of why we need each other" (R18).

The journalists also reported often feeling a strong psycho-emotional contrast of living in a European country while covering repressions back home, which may increase their sense of distance from the local population. As one interviewee described it: "There is an emotional disconnect – you write about some fucked-up thing back in Russia, then you go out for a walk and see an entirely different environment" (R20). In some cases, journalists also experience a degree of hostility directed at them because they are from Russia, causing them to feel even more isolated: at home, they are labelled as foreign agents and traitors, while abroad they are perceived as citizens of an aggressor country.

Journalists from Russia often feel that they are under additional pressure to not make any mistakes while working in exile, with their professional identity and career, hence their whole livelihood, being at stake; this pressure requires additional energy and effort:

For instance, in Georgia one can't afford to mistakenly write "Belorussia" instead of "Belarus" or "Pribaltika" instead of the "Baltic countries"; this would cost dearly. This would result in immediate and severe blowback. Yes, we once wrote "Pribaltika". Well, so, the editor was tired. Just tired. But they swooped down on him, saying "you came to Georgia with your Imperial texts ..." (R11)

While describing situations of facing discrimination or extra scrutiny in host countries, the journalists almost immediately added that they expect and accept such attitudes – like the above respondent, who, after describing how an editor was verbally harassed for mistakenly using a Soviet-era term for the Baltic countries (*Pribaltika*), then immediately added that such a situation is normal, dismissed it as a mere “a discussion” before concluding that “everything’s fine” now (R11). This type of sentiment, repeatedly expressed by the journalists, is defined by the context of the ongoing war being waged by Russia: they feel that they do not have the right to complain.

This self-censoring process contributes to their further isolation and disconnection from the local community – while they can discuss their grievances with each other, they do not feel as comfortable sharing them with people from the host country. At the same time, their isolation from the local community leads to such interactions involving the professional journalistic community from Russia only – often resulting in additional pressures and exhaustion from having their professional identity overshadowing the rest of their life:

My life consists of opening my laptop in the morning and closing it in the evening. My communication is all there [online], because here I have no one. (R31)

It stresses me out that, when you come across your acquaintances, you start discussing these internal [topics] all the time. And it is as if you are always in distress mentally, in your thoughts (...) It is harder to discuss something not connected to work, like a movie. (R1)

Finally, most of the journalists do not speak of their host countries as their “final stops” – partly because they are unsure about their legal and working situations (whether their work visas will be extended, whether their jobs will be discontinued due to a lack of funding) and partly due to the fact that they, in most cases, did not choose their host countries but went there because of their employers or visa opportunities. In addition, while most of the interviewees rationally accept the fact that they will likely never return to Russia, many also expressed their inability to truly think about it. In general, it is hard for them to plan ahead in their unstable situations; they cannot plan long into the future, and they hence cannot exclude the possibility of returning to Russia, no matter how unrealistic it may seem from a rational standpoint. This situation creates a “nomadic” mindset. As one of the journalists defined it: “it’s as if you are suspended God knows where, between Russia and here” (R2).

Regarding languages, the majority tend to be sceptical of their ability – or lacking in energy and resources – to learn the local language. Even those who try to do so see it as a symbolic act, a gesture to express gratitude to the host country, but they do not believe that they ever could learn the language well enough. A lack of time, energy and motivation are often given as reasons. Moreover, in the Baltic countries and the South Caucasus, the Russian language is common enough to be able to get by just using Russian or English only:

Unfortunately – it’s good that our conversation is anonymous – I am not ready to learn Lithuanian; I am saying this honestly. That may sound rude, but I don’t see the point. This is a fairly small language in terms of distribution, and it would be cool to learn it to train one’s brain, so that the neurons do not relax in the head, but I don’t see any practical benefit from doing so. (R18)

Some of the journalists also view their lack of attachment to the host country as a protective mechanism that allows them to survive the instability of their situation. As one interviewee noted: “We have accepted this status: we are the nomads, and we are not getting attached to one place. ... In the Baltic countries, the situation is unstable when it comes to the visa policies, and this is understandable, because if there is any conflict, any tensions near the borders ... they will cancel our visas, like they did in Latvia at some point. People [from Russia] cannot live or work there anymore, their licenses are being taken away, and so on. Hence, I think that this is not my final stop” (R11). Such a state of detachment takes an additional emotional toll on the journalists, many of whom continue to perceive themselves as aliens:

The inability to go home, and the fact that you found yourself in a foreign environment and you are an alien everywhere ... they don't need you there; they don't need you here. That's indeed very, very hard. Even with all my privileges, with the local partner, this is very hard. Just hardcore (...) Will you be given a legal status or not, will they extend your residence permit or not? No one knows. And this is just terrible. (R7)

Host Country: Maintaining Connections Inside It and Beyond

While their connections with the local journalists and other local communities in the host countries appear to be either weak or non-existent, exiled Russian journalists do find other ways to establish resource networks while in exile. One such way is tapping into a support system of other recently exiled journalists from Russia – usually those who have moved to the same country of exile. Thus, all the locations with large journalist communities in exile have group chats where Russian journalists exchange tips and provide support to each other.

Exile, it appears, on the one hand reproduces some of the hierarchies (e.g., journalists from the larger organisations and Moscow-based outlets have more privileges than regional or freelance journalists), but on the other it breaks down some of the distinctions and introduces elements of egalitarianism. More famous and established journalists and outlets find themselves connecting, interacting and collaborating with less famous and less prominent ones:

I remember when I lived in Moscow, all those “high-society” people always went to Mayak, or to Jean-Jaques [hip restaurants in downtown Moscow]. And if you didn't go, then you were not one of the gang. It really infuriated me. Because I can't say that I really love drinking or partying, and I don't really understand why I need all that during non-working hours. But that shapes the attitude of others towards you. Here, this really doesn't exist. (R6)

Some respondents noticed an improvement in their professional socialisation after migration due to the fact that a certain “horizontality”, or levelling of the playing field, proved one positive aspect of living in exile, contributing to a willingness to support each other among the exiled journalists. One of the respondents compared this condition to a “clean slate”, with everyone going “back to step one”, and hence, being “more open” to both “helping and being helped” (R28).

With such newly established mutual support networks, the personal and professional dimensions merge, transforming professional networks into sources of personal support as well. While some respondents find this type of integration challenging, as it leaves little

room for personal boundaries, the majority said that they find it beneficial and actively participate in the new networks. As one interviewee explained, they can rely on such chats and discussions for nearly everything – from acquiring a vacuum cleaner and medicine to purchasing boots and receiving assistance when calling emergency services (R32).

Finally, another way of finding support and establishing a semblance of integration and stability in exile for the journalists is to tap into other networks for journalists in exile. They are networks of journalists who are not coming from the Western countries; rather, those who have similar, comparable experiences – for instance, one respondent explained how she has closely connected with a community of exiled journalists from Belarus, who are “a step ahead” in that respect; another said that he was excited to speak to exiled journalists from Afghanistan and Turkey, finding similarities in experiences, challenges and sentiments.

Russian media outlets in exile are also increasingly seeking collaboration with other “non-Western” exiled outlets and journalists on a more institutional level. They are organising joint discussions at conferences, exchanging experiences and expertise, and forming professional groups online. For example, a recently established network of exiled journalists called “Nemo” (exiled.media) brings together media outlets in exile from Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, Nicaragua and Myanmar, facilitating the exchange of professional knowledge and experience while fostering collaborative opportunities.

Discussion and Conclusions

Journalism in exile is a complex phenomenon shaped by a constellation of factors, including the journalists’ professional backgrounds prior to exile, their experiences as immigrants and their personal agency in defining and constructing their professional identity. This study has explored how the practices of connection to and disconnection from both home and host countries influence the personal and professional experiences of Russian journalists in exile, and how such dynamics affect their ability to retain their professional identity amidst the challenges of migration.

The connection/disconnection framework has made it possible to trace the links between journalists’ struggles, challenges and achievements, both as professionals and as migrants. The study reveals the tensions arising from the contradictory pressures of “connecting” versus “disconnecting” for Russian journalists in exile, contributing to our understanding of how migrants’ professional identities influence their migration trajectories.

While other migrant groups gradually become less connected to their home countries and more embedded in their host societies (Waldinger 2015), the case of Russian journalists illustrates how this process is disrupted by their professional obligations to maintain close ties with a home country that they can no longer physically access.

Although digital tools help bridge the gap, maintaining meaningful professional connections requires significant time and energy. The constant struggle to obtain reliable, newsworthy information from Russia is exacerbated by a deeper fear: the loss of intimate understanding of the country’s day-to-day life – the concerns, atmosphere and nuances that can only be fully understood from within a country. This fear is also linked to the potential loss of journalistic doxa. Ultimately, the fear of losing both physical and

emotional connections to Russia is intertwined with concerns about losing professional authority and identity.

At the same time, the imperative to “stay connected” to Russia diminishes journalists’ ability to establish ties with the local communities in their host countries. As a result, many journalists perceive themselves as “vagabonds” without a permanent place to call home, unable to plan or fully root themselves in their host countries. As such, despite the tendency to establish a transnational social space, ensured by digital technologies (Diminescu and Loveluck 2014; Marino 2015), the experience of exiled journalists demonstrate their existence in (digital) national spaces of home and host countries.

Their situation is further complicated by the precarities of migration, including visa and legalisation challenges, and by their status as citizens of an aggressor state. It not only places formal (legal and financial) pressures on exiled journalists but also generates feelings of guilt and shame, further hindering their ability and willingness to connect with the local population. Additionally, self-censorship in their interactions with locals, driven by a fear of being perceived as complicit in Russian aggression, adds another layer of difficulty.

Despite such challenges, or perhaps because of them, Russian journalists find ways to mitigate the precarities of being “non-integrated” migrants by establishing alternative forms of connection. The new connections include the creation of “alternative networks” – consisting of neither the “old” ties to their home country nor the “new” connections with local populations. Instead, the networks consist of digital and physical ties with other exiled journalists worldwide – primarily fellow Russian exiles, but also journalists from other authoritarian contexts – while they invent new and creative methods to strengthen their connections to their homeland.

Exile also fosters more horizontal and less hierarchical connections among exiled Russian journalists. Their precarious status as migrants creates greater equality among them, as they face similar challenges and risks. By engaging in professional networks of Russian journalists in exile, they provide and receive mutual support across different outlets and career statuses. These supportive, non-hierarchical networks – often extending across borders – enable both professional collaboration and personal assistance, ultimately creating a sense of community. Additionally, Russian journalists forge stronger connections with other exiled journalist communities from similarly authoritarian regimes. In this way, the profession becomes a symbolic shelter in exile, allowing the journalists to preserve their professional status and identity while complicating their integration into the host society.

This study will have significant social impact, as its findings provide key information on the workings of supportive networks and policies designed to address the unique challenges faced by exiled media. Such initiatives are essential for fostering a richer and more diverse media landscape that promotes democratic values and human rights. By illuminating the experiences and perspectives of exiled journalists, the study emphasises the importance of recognising them as integral members of the global journalistic community and acknowledging their critical roles in providing professional coverage from a country that is increasingly difficult to access and report on. Furthermore, it offers actionable insights that can guide policymakers and media organisations in developing frameworks that effectively support exiled journalists in their efforts.

Future research could build on these findings by conducting longitudinal studies to explore how exiled Russian journalists’ experiences evolve over time as they navigate

the challenges of displacement and exile. Such studies would provide valuable insight into whether, and how, professional and personal networks change as well as how the tension between connecting with the home country and integrating into host societies might shift.

Furthermore, comparative studies of exiled journalists from other authoritarian contexts could offer a broader understanding of how exile impacts journalism in different geopolitical settings. Additionally, more research is needed on the role of digital platforms in sustaining professional identity and community among exiled journalists, particularly since such platforms increasingly mediate both their work and their social interactions. Finally, examining how exiled journalists navigate legal and institutional barriers in host countries could deepen our understanding of the intersection between exile, migration policies and the journalistic profession.

Note

1. A difficult word to translate – *οχυλληαρδ*, meaning “a lot”.

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