

In February 2012, I landed in Moscow in the middle of what, at the time, looked like Russia's biggest journalistic story in years. Crowds reaching a hundred thousand people were coming into the streets, braving that winter's numbing frost, to protest the results of a fraudulent parliamentary election—and, more generally, to voice their rising displeasure with the corruption, cynicism, and authoritarian overreach that had come to personify the Putin system.

After more than a decade of studying Russia's history, politics, and language—including a formative spell as a graduate student at the Harriman Institute—I had decided to leave my job as a junior editor at a magazine in New York and buy a one-way ticket to Moscow. That winter's protests felt like a unique moment, one that I would be remiss to let pass me by as a young, aspiring foreign correspondent. Would the Russia story ever be as urgent or in demand again? In time, of course, that would come to sound naive.

My first days in Moscow were exhilarating and hectic in equal

measure. I had been to the city many times and was familiar with its madcap energy and imposing form. Moscow always struck me as colossal and majestic—as if the feeling of tragedy, even menace, lurked never too far offstage, but that's what made the place so invigorating, and certainly fascinating. I had little experience covering protests, even if those in the winter of 2012 were approved by the authorities, giving them the odd veneer of official sanction. Riot police in body armor were everywhere—their imposing yet awkward getup gave them the nickname “cosmonauts”—but they let crowds of demonstrators walk past and listen to impassioned speeches from a varied cast of opposition figures.

One of the first stories I wrote from Moscow was on the prominence of humor and satire at the protests, a jocular irreverence aimed at making Vladimir Putin and his allies in the Kremlin “appear out of touch, uncool, and, in a way, not especially dangerous.” The country's middle class, I argued, were “forging a new political language: light, very much alive, and thickly coated with irony.” But that sense of lightness and promise didn't last long. Nor did the era of the Kremlin tolerating large-scale demonstrations in the streets.

That May, on the day of Putin's inauguration to a third term, I made my way to Moscow's Garden Ring, where a crowd of tens of thousands had gathered. They began to march, signs in hand, the mood rawer and more uneasy than it had been earlier that winter: the protestors frustrated by how little the country's political system cared about their demands; the state ever less tolerant of people still being out on the streets at all.

A SLOW-MOTION CRACKDOWN

A DECADE AS A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

BY JOSHUA YAFFA



Joshua Yaffa at
Dom Radio in St.
Petersburg; photo
by Evgeniy Rein.

THINGS TURNED CHAOTIC, AND SOON, VIOLENT.

A cordon of riot police blocked the flow of marchers as they moved toward the stage set up on Bolotnaya Square. Things turned chaotic, and soon, violent. I watched as riot police grabbed people from the crowd and brought their batons down on their heads, dragging them away for arrest. Some protestors lobbed bits of asphalt back at the police. I couldn't make sense of much, other than that I wanted to get off the square, which was impossible given the immovable phalanx of police.

In the days and weeks to come, police rounded up dozens of protestors and charged them with participating in a “mass riot,” a claim that seemed clearly inflated and politically motivated. The show trial that followed marked the end of one phase and the start of another. “Before that day, it was relatively safe to be a regular, anonymous supporter of the opposition; afterwards, that was no longer the case,” I wrote in a magazine feature on the Bolotnaya case, as it came to be called. “Putin and those around him had managed to secure their rule with clever games of co-optation and manipulation. Now they would rely on blunter tools.”

I had come to Russia to cover a protest and found myself tracking a slow-motion crackdown, with all manner of independent media outlets and civil-society groups targeted. In

Moscow's liberal quarters—which, to be honest, were home to most of my friends and colleagues in the city—a feeling of buoyant optimism, however naive in hindsight, began to sour.

A year later, the mood shifted even further, with the Maidan protests in Ukraine and, most decisively, what followed: Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Suddenly I and my fellow journalists in Moscow, both Russian and Western, were thrust into the world of conflict reporting. We had come of age in the postmodern fantasy world of Russian politics, where events often felt not quite real, and now found ourselves donning flak jackets and ducking firefights. That was very real. Making the job even harder was the degree of murkiness, obfuscation, and outright misdirection that defined the war.

I spent a number of months following the story of one Russian conscript soldier named Petr Khoklov who went missing in Donbas, briefly turning up as a prisoner held by Ukrainian forces, then disappearing again just as quickly. How exactly he ended up in Ukraine was a mystery—

Video operator on a fire truck boom at a rally on Bolotnaya Square, December 10, 2011. Photo by Sergey Norin via Wikimedia Commons.

Russia was sending its forces over the border even as it denied any such thing—as was the question of how he might ever return home. The Russian military had written him off, and the only person interested in his fate was his older brother back in Russia. I got a series of contradictory stories

from official sources, or just as often, no information at all. “It had become obvious that a Russian soldier in Ukraine was a deeply inconvenient person to bring home,” I wrote in an article on my search for Khoklov. On one level, that piece was about Russia’s shadow war in Ukraine; but on another, it was about the cost inflicted by those larger forces on one lost and powerless individual.

As Russia’s role in stoking the conflict became clearer, and especially after the downing of Flight MH17, the war took on the feel of a proxy geopolitical struggle; at least that was how the Kremlin saw it. Russia was upending the international order and pushing back against Western power—

and however strange or unwelcome it felt, it was hard as a journalist not to get sucked into this new dichotomy.

In many ways the Donbas war was a fight over the presentation of information and narratives, making the very act of gathering facts and reporting them seem a provocative intrusion into the conflict. I rejected this paradigm and insisted on a kind of dispassionate professional competence, but that was hard to explain on the war’s front lines. The questions were predictable and relentless: Who sent you, whose story are you here to tell, whose cause are you here to advance? Despite my insistence to the contrary, both internal and verbalized, it could feel as if I was participating in a struggle I had merely intended to observe.

That dynamic reemerged in new ways in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, when suddenly Russia became a central political story for American readers. Had the Kremlin interfered in that election? Was Donald Trump a compromised agent of Putin? Was Russia making the American electorate paranoid and unstable—or were we doing that to ourselves? As these storylines came to dominate headlines back home, they grew increasingly frustrating to cover from inside Russia.

For starters, much of the reporting grew out of leaks and sources in Washington, not Moscow, which meant I often had very little knowledge or ability to confirm (or refute) the allegations that interested readers back home. Officials in the Kremlin and the FSB do not pass information to journalists as do their counterparts in the White House and the FBI. Who knows, I thought, maybe some of the more alarming tales of



Russian interference were true. Yet, rather paradoxically, Russia was not always the best or most productive place to report on them. I felt at once at the center of a big and important story and yet strangely unable to penetrate its inner sanctum.

Beyond that frustration, I felt another: the Russia I had come to know as a student and then even more intimately as someone who lives and works here was not always reflected in the coverage I was reading in the U.S. press. Instead, it felt as if Russia served as a kind of psychological foil for our own fear and disorientation. It is now clear that the Kremlin did seek to interfere in the 2016 election, but that it did so the same way it usually acts: chaotically, messily, inefficiently. For one article, I spoke with a number of leading independent journalists in Moscow, who, as I wrote, were “bemused, frustrated, or disappointed in the way that the U.S. press has covered Putin and Russia.” One of them, Mikhail Zygar, said that coverage has made “Putin seem to look much smarter than he is, as if he operates from some master plan.” The truth is, he told me, “there is no plan—it’s chaos.”

Eventually, the fever of the Trump-Russia story broke, freeing up space to return to writing about Russia itself, in all its wonder and beauty and tragedy. I wrote cultural pieces, like one on Maxim Osipov, a doctor-turned-author in Tarusa, a provincial town I have grown to love. Meanwhile, Moscow became an ever more pleasant place to live: fun, exciting, alive, with an exploding

number of fantastic and affordable restaurants. This is the aspect of life here I suspect least comes across in my coverage: the surface experience of life in Moscow has become smoother, easier, more enjoyable—European, you could say—but at the same time, the country’s politics have tacked in the exact opposite direction.

In recent months, that repressive drift has picked up fearful momentum. The catalyst was the poisoning and subsequent arrest of Alexei Navalny, the country’s

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Yaffa at the Melnikov Permafrost Institute in Yakutsk; photo by Max Avdeev.



leading opposition politician. I reported on protests in the winter of 2021 that were broken up with an uncompromising violence that would have shocked me 10 years earlier. Now I thought it routine. Journalists were told to wear yellow vests if they planned to cover demonstrations, but even that measure didn't protect several from ending up on the receiving end of a police baton. I darted among side streets and courtyards to avoid columns of police on the march.

Across the country, the number of people detained climbed into the thousands. Parliament passed one restrictive law after another; every week it felt as if a media outlet or even individual journalists were being labeled "foreign agents." The onetime small niches for freedom, however self-contained and ineffectual, were disappearing. These days, the

domestic political story has become unambiguously dark.

It has also become personal, so far as the latest wave of repressions has targeted the media. Over the years, I have become close with many Russian journalists, a number of whom work at outlets targeted by the state or have been personally stamped with the "foreign agent" designation, complicating if not ending their careers. Several have left the profession; some, the country. I can't help but feel dispirited as I see those whom I admire face increasingly maddening and absurd barriers to simply doing their job.

So far, foreign correspondents in Moscow, including me, do not face any of the pressures—legal, economic, personal—that are regularly endured by our Russian counterparts. That dynamic has left me with a heightened respect for those who do work under such constraints. The stakes of journalism in Russia feel much higher; here it's not so much a profession as a calling. Would I have the same level of bravery and fortitude? I'm not sure.

After a decade in Russia, both my affection and fascination remain. I can be delighted or horrified by the stories I'm reporting—but never indifferent. I owe my career to this country, not to mention some of my

most intense, strongly felt memories, both happy and not. I have long found great comfort, and no small amount of utility, in the insider-outsider status of the foreign correspondent: I know the place, its history and language, but I can also see it with the eyes of a stranger, which, after all, is how the reader will see it. The job is one of translation, not so much of language but of experience. Of course, that's the only option available to me when reporting in Russia—I have no familial or personal ties to the land—so perhaps I have a self-interest in the value of such an approach, but I do hope I'm able to bring empathy to my reporting: for those people whose stories I'm telling, and for those who are reading them. ■

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Yaffa at the Crimea Bridge construction site; photo from Yaffa's personal archive.

