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Voice of Russia: Breaking from the Past to Inform Americans ^[1]

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Ask many Americans what they think about Russia, and you will hear comments about cold winters, KGB, communism, and the mafia. There is a general lack of knowledge about most things Russian, leaving a considerable gap to be filled. Voice of Russia, Russia's state-funded radio station, is taking a new approach to informing Americans: using American and Russian voices to broadcast international news from American soil. For the first time since its beginnings in 1929, Voice of Russia will broadcast to Americans from Washington, D.C. instead of Moscow.

Russia has everything to gain from an improved image in the world's eyes, but Voice of Russia (VOR) has some major obstacles to overcome if this project is to be a success. The first obstacle is one that faces any news venue: how to attract listeners. The second is more difficult and very pertinent given the history of media in Russia: how to overcome questions about credibility.

Under communism, all official media channels were controlled by the Soviet government, with all published materials being subjected to sharp scrutiny by State censors. Anything that did not tout the Soviet ideal was rejected, and under Stalin's reign even led to imprisonment or death. Khrushchev moved away from Stalinist tactics, but media was still under government control. A change came with Gorbachev's policy of *Glasnost* ("openness"), that resulted in an unexpected explosion of free expression in media. The consequent collapse of the Communist Party in the early 1990s helped bolster an impressively independent media in Russia. This continued through Boris Yeltsin's presidency, but economic woes attended with food shortages, anarchy, and a corrupt oligarchy threatening to destroy the country. Vladimir Putin's rise to the presidency signaled a new, more powerful Russia where order would be maintained, but with this new order came a marked contraction of freedom of the press. As media increasingly fell under government control, its credibility was understandably brought into question.

At best, journalists feel pressured to write in a way that sheds a favorable glow on the Kremlin; at worst, journalists have been murdered for their publications. A type of self-censorship has become prevalent in Russian media. A particularly unnerving case of government pressure in journalism is that of Anna Politkovskaya. She wrote for one of the few remaining independent newspapers in Russia, *Novaya Gazeta*, and was best known for her criticisms of Putin (she referred to his regime as brutal and corrupt and questioned his actions in Chechnya). In many cases, she was threatened by the authorities, and was even poisoned on one of her assignments. Her life was eventually taken by a shot to the head and body, with a pistol left near her side, what *The Economist* calls a "blatant hallmark of a contract killing." Those arrested for her 2006 killing were eventually acquitted three years later. This tragedy

left the world enraged and baffled and questioning Moscow's credibility.

In spite of past government control over the media, there is hope for freedom of the press in Russia. A step towards credibility for Voice of Russia comes in the distance it has from Moscow. The move in broadcasting from Moscow to Washington, D.C. symbolically shows that they are ready to play by the rules in a country that highly values a free press. The constitution of Russia allows for freedom of the press and makes censorship illegal, a standard that would be upheld on U.S. soil. Any threats or physical violence would have to be answered in a U.S. court. Another indicator of credibility comes from having American voices, along with Russian voices broadcasting international, cultural, and American news. American voices help to bring a sense of dependability and sameness, while easing listeners into a Russian take on news. The aims of Voice of Russia are to bring a balanced view to news and to rid negative perceptions of Russia among Americans. They have everything to gain by stepping forward as an accurate and reliable news source.

At a time when many Americans on both ends of the political spectrum worry that U.S. politics bias the way that news is reported, Americans may well be ready to get their news from a foreign source. Voice of Russia should capitalize on this opportunity to be a non-biased source for domestic news.

Americans will be able to judge the reliability of Voice of Russia for themselves. VOR will be compelled to accurately report news free of government censoring, as it will be competing with American and International news sources. Unlike what was possible in Soviet times, Voice of Russia will not exist in a vacuum where all information is controlled and carefully dispensed to the public. Voice of Russia will have to stake its name on what listeners hear in comparison to other news sources.

As much as Russia's past seems to contradict the idea of a free press, it also highlights examples of upholding this ideal even at the threat of imprisonment or death. Many examples of Russians defying the state in giving a voice to current events can be seen in the days of Soviet censorship. Russian journalists and novelists were able to honestly reflect the goings on of the times through underground channels. The youth in Russia today carry on the traditions of great Russian writers like Akhmatova and Mandelstam as they choose to enter the field of journalism and have hope for change.

Russia has a great opportunity to present a positive image of itself through Voice of Russia. Accurate information about Russia is badly needed, and this could be the perfect venue for reaching out to Americans. A mix of domestic and international news that is important to Americans, broadcasted with American and Russian voices is a great way to reach the news-conscious populations in New York and D.C. Perhaps in time, it will be the norm to go to a Russian news source to get U.S. news.

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