

**LABOR UNDER AUTHORITARIAN NEOLIBERAL
REGIME:
WORK EXPERIENCES OF INDEPENDENT
JOURNALISTS IN RUSSIA**

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Abstract

This study analyzes labor experiences and subjectivities of independent journalists in Russia as conditioned by the specific mode of authoritarian neoliberal regime. While current labor studies focus mostly on the impact of neoliberalization on labor, this thesis demonstrates that experiences of workers, engaged in cultural production in authoritarian states, are conditioned by the state's endeavor at reproduction of symbolic order and marginalization of those in conflict with the hegemonic state project as well. For this reason, labor of journalists under authoritarian neoliberal regime is characterized as “politically” and “economically” precarious, and these two dimensions of precarity are closely intertwined. Journalists simultaneously face lack of stable contracts, employment insecurity, menace of media outlets being shut-down and even life threat. This research discusses how independent journalists in Russia experience and articulate these insecurities, related to specific economic and political contexts in which their labor is placed. The thesis demonstrates that political dimension of precarity, engendered by the authoritarian regime, is treated by journalists as the most problematic, whereas economic insecurities, albeit solidly present, tend to be ignored. Among the reasons for non-acknowledgement of the economic dimension of precarity are specific understanding of labor journalists share, their liberal ideologies, strong affective bindings to a job, widespread among cultural workers, and privileged class positions. Perception of political insecurities as the dominant threat also contributes to disregard of poor formal labor conditions.

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Introduction

In both Russian and international public liberal debates, the condition of media industry in Russia, particularly since 2014, is described as highly oppressed. The episodes of independent newsrooms being shut down, news stories, especially investigations, blocked or removed from websites and outlets' financial sources curtailed, generically titled the acts of censorship, are widely known. Yet, both current academic literature as well as public debates focus on the institutional level and concern primarily the impacts the authoritarian regime has on the entire industry (Kachkaeva and Fossato, 2016; Kiriya, 2013). With this study I aim to put the individual labor experiences to the fore, which have been under-explored in Russian context. I argue that transformations within the media industry under harsh state's pressure highly affect work conditions and experiences of journalists, making employment in independent media outlets less stable, secure and predictable, or precarious.

I place this research primarily within the area of labor studies and focus on labor precarity. The concept "precarity" was developed mostly by Marxist political economists, who traced the relation between the global economic transformations and subsequent neoliberalization trend and escalating flexibilization and casualization of labor relations (e.g. see Standing, 2011; Breman and van der Linden, 2014; Bourdieu, 1998). As an outcome of these processes workers have been losing a range of labor-related securities and predictability of their employment has been coming to naught. Thus, the ever growing dependence of labor on capital around the globe (Munck, 2013) has been named "precarity". However, I find that such a purely materialist stance on labor precarity does not account the entire range of work-related insecurities under current politico-economic regimes: political arrangements might have impact on labor conditions and experiences as well.

Taking Butler's very broad stance on precarity as ontological insecurity and vulnerability (Butler, 2004) I intend to broaden the understanding of labor precarity. In this work I understand labor precarity as a feeling of instability, unpredictability and high dependence on structural circumstances workers experience. Thus, the major theoretical ambition of this work is to expand the mainstream reading of labor precarity as a consequence of change of the dominant economic order solely. Labor precarity might have diverse sources and, for this reason, it should be grasped in the complexity of factors determining it. Moreover, precarity should not be considered as a universal or conglomerate experience. Individuals from different social groups are affected by and experience precarity in diverse ways (Standing, 2011). For example, position in a class structure or type of production an individual is engaged in influence the experience of precarity. This study examines particularly how labor experiences of workers engaged in cultural production are conditioned by political and economic regimes, and especially by their interplay.

More specifically, I attempt to understand how individual journalists' labor experiences in Russia are conditioned by a peculiar mode of "authoritarian neoliberal" order (Bruff, 2014). By independent journalists I consider those working in media outlets, which are financially and, therefore, ideologically independent from the state apparatus. Given that since early 2000s with Putin's ascent to power Russian media industry suffered transformation and the dominant number of media outlets fell under close state control due to their ownership by state structures or oligarchs, close to the political elites, the remaining ones, which I refer to as independent, were placed in the "informational ghetto" (Kiriya, 2013) and suffer harsh pressure from the authorities. Those are mostly online media outlets, sharing liberal ideologies and strongly opposing the state apparatus' political course. Therefore, I argue that Russian independent journalists' labor insecurities are simultaneously conditioned by the neoliberal policies the state has been implementing since the collapse of Soviet Union, which trigger flexibilization and

casualization of relations of employment (e.g. Standing, 2011), and state's reinforcing attempts to marginalize and oppress the oppositional forces (Jessop, 2015) or "ideological apparatuses" (Althusser, 1971), including independent media outlets. Given these two conditions, I claim that journalists' labor is "economically" and "politically" precarious. Thus, the major research question of this thesis is how are independent Russian journalists' labor experiences conditioned by the politico-economic regime or, rather, given Standing's argument on diverse manners of experiencing precarity, how do they perceive and articulate political and economic dimensions of precarity.

To grasp work experiences of journalists, I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with workers of 7 independent media outlets in March-April 2018. My sample included multiple types of outlets: those producing textual and video content, having more than 100 journalists employed and the small outlets, those existing since the 90s and established few years ago. Yet, two major criteria for selecting an outlet were financial independence from the state and economic elites, affiliated with it, and federal level of outlet coverage, i.e. outlets covering major state-level and global agenda but not local events only. I was interested in labor experiences of average workers rather than those of people in charge – chief editors or managers – so I mostly interviewed reporters. Given the journalists' busy schedules and geographical dispersion of media outlets within the country, I conducted only 4 face-to-face interviews; others were taken via Skype. Though, I do not consider it a limitation of my fieldwork, since journalists willingly shared the details of their labor experiences and stronger personal contact was not required.

Yet, the limitation of the research which I consider to be closely related to political precarity was firm requirement of anonymity of many journalists. They were concerned with the possible consequences of their personal information and some of the stories they shared with me

published, even in an MA thesis, so I can not name the journalists I talked to and the outlets they are affiliated with.

My position in the field was beneficial for two reasons. First, journalists, being high educated, share trust to academic knowledge and recognize the value of sociological research, which explains few interview rejections. Second, my familiarity with Russian political agenda facilitated their narratives: journalists vastly contextualized their experience and brought up multiple examples.

Since I was focusing on economic and political dimensions of precarity, I talked to my interviewees about the difficulties they face related to formal bases of their employment as well as pressure the state puts on independent media outlets they are affiliated with and on individual journalists. In order to have a broader understanding of characteristics of journalists' employment, I took one interview with a chairman of the Labor Union of Journalists, established in 2016 and helping journalists about problematic labor-related situations: labor disputes and extreme political cases. Also he provided me with a permission to use the results of the Labor Union's quantitative survey on labor of journalists that was conducted in April 2018.

This thesis is structured as follows: in the first chapter I bring up the theoretical points of departure, explaining the economic and political dimensions of precarity. First, I discuss economic precarity as a consequence of a global neoliberal turn and shed light on the ways it affects labor experiences. Second, I introduce Bob Jessop's strategic-relational approach to the state (2015), regarding the state within the system of social relations, in which it strives to reproduce the contingent order and marginalize the alternative forces, attempting to subvert its state project. I argue that by these means the state, especially the exceptional state, affects operation of independent media outlets and, therefore, labor of workers in them, and thus approach political precarity. In the second chapter I present a more elaborated vision of the

Russian authoritarian neoliberal order and discuss what impact it has on media industry and independent media in particular, which determines labor of independent journalists. The third and fourth chapters are empirical chapters, in which I present the findings related to journalists' vision of political and economic dimensions of precarity. The third chapter focuses on the political dimension of precarity. I outline the mechanisms of the Russian authoritarian state's interference in operation of independent media and discuss how journalists experience and articulate insecurities it brings. In the last chapter I generically describe the formal labor conditions in independent journalistic field, discuss how journalists' labor is economically precarious and bring their stance on this dimension of precarity. I explain the specific vision of labor journalists share (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993; Boltanski, 2006), implying the high symbolic meanings they imbue in it, and relate it to their perception of economic precarity.

Chapter 1. Theoretical points of departure

The aim of this work is to highlight multiple sources of precarity of cultural or immaterial workers – journalists – under current authoritarian neoliberal regime in Russia. I frame this argument within two corpuses of literature. In this chapter I discuss what impacts neoliberalization has on labor and on immaterial labor in particular and the ways the state, and especially an “exceptional” state, impacts labor of workers in oppositional institutions.

1.1 Labor in neoliberal era

A study of labor in any domain, including Russian journalism sector, should be framed within the global politico-economic arrangement that was reconfigured in the last decades of the 20th century. Collapse of state socialism and economic liberalization of the Global South through Structural adjustment programs were the result of neoliberalism gaining pace, which is naturally seeking to subsume more territories to its logic in order to thrive or, as Clarke put it, “aims at transnational hegemony, in which different places are invited, seduced, and compelled to join” (Clarke, 2008). Neoliberal order¹ implies a specific politico-economic configuration, in which the state withdraws from managing the economy, resulting in, applying Polanyian terminology, total “disembedding” of economy (Polanyi, 2001). With diminished state intervention, or without it at all, capital becomes the dominant regulator, subordinating multiple social processes to the logic of capital accumulation and increased competition in the market. Public

¹ In this work I do not treat neoliberalism as a universal project, imposed in a top-down way across the globe and producing equal outcomes. Rather, for me Ong’s standpoint, tolerating local specificities and viewing neoliberalism in its “interact[ion] with situated sets of elements and circumstances” (Ong, 2007: 5), serves foundational. In other words, as Peck put it, “neoliberalism does not, and cannot, exist in pure form, but only manifests itself in hybrid formations” (Peck, 2004: 403). However, for the sake of understanding the essence of neoliberalism, family resemblances, located on the intersection of hybrid forms, need to be observed.

expenditures suffer cutbacks under austerity programs, imposed on both global and national levels, and key state functions become privatized. Therefore, with inclusion of a significant part of the world into global capitalism and the neoliberal takeover, restructuring of relations between the core three elements – state, capital and labor – took place across the globe. Transformation of the dominant labor regime has been the direct result of these processes. This chapter aims to discuss what consequences for labor global economic transformation carries, and what specificities “immaterial” or “cultural” labor has.

1.1.1 Labor precarity

Sociology of work and labor tends to focus primarily on the transformation of labor relations in Western advanced capitalist context, since retreat of the state is claimed to be most tangible in this part of the world. In Western welfare states the period of the mid-20th century, known as *trente glorieuses*, can be considered beneficial for the workforce: “Standard Employment Relationship” guaranteed the employees with stable full-time jobs, wage, supporting acceptable living standards, labor-related securities and social insurance provisions (Bremán and van der Linden, 2014). Adoption of neoliberal policies transformed state-capital-labor nexus in a way that the state’s new “partisan” role in economic policy was limited to “serving the interests of the capital and one-sidedly promoting free enterprise” (ibid: 929), providing no support to the population. Albeit current literature on labor proves that stable formal employment, social security and strong bargaining power of the workers have been an historical and geographical exception² (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Bremán, 2013; Munck, 2013; Bremán and van der Linden, 2014), deteriorating labor conditions of Western workers served a trigger for academic

² Authors argue that instability has always been a natural condition for millions of workers and urban poor – the majority of world population – in the Global South where neoliberalization did not create as big difference as in the Global North.

endeavor to grasp the nature of the “new global labor regime” in neoliberal era. “Precarity” as a dominant condition of employment³ was named the outcome of welfare state decline by the Western mainstream authors.

Yet, looking from the global perspective, precarity is broader than the mere consequence of welfare state decline. Ronaldo Munck offers an insightful approach to the roots of precarity as a global phenomenon (2013). Reconstructing the notion “precarity” he is arguing that it can be grasped through examination of two dialectic processes – proletarianization (multiplication of proletarians – workers, deprived of means of production and depending on selling labor power as the only asset possessed – and deepening dependence on selling labor power), and commodification and dispossession. Globalization of capital accumulation, implying “real subsumption of social relations and modes of labor” (ibid.: 754) to the logic of capital, engenders accelerated process of proletarianization. Thus, incorporation of former socialist states and the Global South into the circuit of capital accumulation caused expansion of the proletariat. Accumulation by dispossession, manifested in hyper-privatization of natural resources, welfare, housing, intellectual creativity, which is reinforced by neoliberal measures, imposed either by states or through SAPs (Harvey, 2003), as well as ultimate subsumption of fictitious commodities to the logic of the market (Polanyi, 2001) makes labor even more dependent on capital. The two processes combined – proletarianization, affecting mostly workers outside the Western states, and commodification and dispossession, having diverse impacts on populations of Global South and North – create a situation of total dependence on capital and, therefore, instability and precarity, of the global labor (Munck, 2013).

³ I intend to emphasize here that precarity is a condition of employment, a labor regime or a way of economic organization, rather than a class, as Standing, author of the most prominent writing on precarity, was arguing (Standing, 2011). Precarity, therefore, is a feature of labor of proletarians – individuals, deprived of means of production – characterized by a bunch of labor-related insecurities.

On a more grounded level, precariatization entails flexibilization of labor market and subsequent casualization and informalization of work. Since right to define employment conditions in deregulated labor markets conveys to capital through lifting restrictions on employment and labor-related practices in the legislation, flexibilization of labor relations takes place. The capital, prone to accumulation and striving at reducing costs, makes maneuvers to make labor relations adaptable to this logic, or flexible. By flexibilization, therefore, I understand facilitation of hiring and dismissal processes as well as movement to contract-based employment practices and massive substitution of full-time work with casualized and part-time jobs, bringing intensified irregularity of employment. Flexibilization also implies a shift to regime of informality, reinforcing workers' vulnerability, which allows researchers of new labor regimes claim that the global labor is becoming homogenous (Bremen and van der Linden, 2014): not only workers of the South and post-socialist space turn into proletarians, but also informality as "the dominant mode of employment in the developing world" (ibid: 926) reaches the Western workers.

Flexible labor policy appears as a source of increased exploitation, based on the "division between the growing number who do not work and diminishing number of those who work, but who work more and more" (Bourdieu, 1998: 86). Taking into account that free labor market is immanent to existence of such a "large reserve army" (Marx, 1976)⁴, which creates high competition for workplaces, workers' sense of irreplaceability, coupled with simplified dismissal procedure, creates an image of a job as a "fragile, threatened privilege"⁵ (Bourdieu, 1998: 82-83). Such conditions often compel workers to agree on whatever job possible, leading

⁴ Albeit capitalism generally implies presence of surplus workforce, in neoliberal order "relative surplus population ... spilled over into an absolute labor surplus population" (Bremen and van der Linden, 2014: 923).

⁵ Albeit precariatization is a global process, affecting all proletarians, it rarely has uniform impacts on all groups. As Standing (2011) argues, different groups experience precarity in different ways to and different extents.

to a further decline of wages. To sum up, what precarious global labor faces is a turn to flexibilization, casualization and informalization of labor, yet precarity cannot be reduced to three elements only⁶.

Precarity, a condition which proletarians face, is reinforced by cuts in social provision. Such public sector securities as healthcare, education, access to natural resources, pensions and others are cut or withdrawn by the state and are privatized. Therefore, the workers depend only on selling their labor power on deregulated market in order to gain means of subsistence to have capacity to sell more labor power. In other words, with privatized social sector, workers' incomes are directed to reproduction of labor power. As a result, their current existence becomes less secure and projection of the future less feasible.

One of the core outcomes of precariatization, inextricably linked to transforming state-capital-labor nexus, is shrinkage of bargaining power of labor⁷. First, workers' declining capacity to project the future, often coupled with the need of everyday subsistence, leads to "demoralization and loss of militancy" (Bourdieu, 1998: 83). Having forfeited support of the state, which used to mediate relations of employers and employees, workers have lost capacity to mobilize. Secondly, neoliberal agenda, applied by the states also as a governmentality technique (Ong, 2006), does not tolerate collective forms of agency, reinforcing individualistic and entrepreneurial subjectivities of workers (Breman and van der Linden, 2014; Brown, 2015) and making them more tolerant to the structural conditions.

⁶ Yet, one should acknowledge that regimes of flexibility or informality are not homogenous and uniform across the globe (Breman, 2013) and workers' subjective experiences need to be examined specifically, taking into account historical and geographical contexts.

⁷ Here, again, researchers focus primarily on advanced capitalist states, where workers' movements and trade unionization were on the rise during welfarism (Standing, 2011; Breman and van der Linden, 2014; Bourdieu, 1998).

1.1.2 Immaterial labor: specificities of work in cultural production

Debating about the new labor regime under neoliberalism, scholars tend to agree that all employees – performing both manual and intellectual labor, working in industry, institutions of cultural production or self-employed – face precariatization. Yet, albeit “job insecurity is now everywhere” (Bourdieu, 1998: 82), its effects on diverse groups are not the same (Standing, 2011). Here I will account for specificities of “immaterial” labor⁸.

Immaterial or cultural production is studied within different sociological and anthropological areas. Here I focus primarily on the labor dimension and attract literature, regarding immaterial labor as a segment of employment. I need to note here that, albeit scholarship on immaterial labor has been largely developed by autonomist Marxist scholars (Lazzarato, 1996; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008), whose writings have a strong political dimension⁹ and can be considered as political manifests rather than academic theoretical accounts, this thesis does not focus on forms of collective organization workers engaged in immaterial labor create. Rather, this pool of literature is attracted for the sake of definition of peculiar properties of immaterial labor as well as of understanding insecurities workers face.

First of all, what is understood as immaterial labor? Definitions of immaterial labor vary, yet it usually implies commodification and extraction of value from cognitive and affective capacities of workers. As regards the activities performed, immaterial labor implies “activities involved

⁸ Albeit there is a wide variety of alternative concepts – among others are “cultural”, “informational”, “symbolic”, “cognitive” and “creative” labor – in this work I apply “immaterial labor”, which is mostly used in labor studies (e.g. Lazzarato, 1996; Gill and Pratt, 2008). Immaterial labor is not totally related to production of symbols only: it involves production of material objects – books, IT software, news articles, films, etc. – as well. However, the role of intellectual skills is primary for this kind on employment.

⁹ Autonomist Marxists tend to optimistically regard workers of immaterial labor as potentially revolutionary, since, firstly, they are given more autonomy and freedom and, secondly, their work constitutes in forms that are collective and network-based in nature. As a corollary, immaterial labor power, they argue, can not be considered “functional to a new historical phase of capitalism” but rather disruptive (Lazzarato, 1996).

in defining and fixing [...] public opinion” in a broad sense (Lazzarato, 1996: 133). Academia, media, cultural institutions, digital sector are some of the domains for immaterial labor. It is often characterized by high intellectual intensity and vast educational capital required from workers¹⁰. Immaterial labor is concentrated mainly in urban areas, predominantly in the West. It is related to expansion of tertiary sector of economy in this area. Since capital is prone to geographical expansion as a means to resolve overaccumulation crisis, massive exodus of manual labor to the regions with surpluses of cheap labor power takes place (Harvey, 2001), therefore, tertiary sector, attracting immaterial labor, thrives in Western metropolitan areas.

Two major elements distinguish immaterial labor. The first one is linked with a specific temporality characteristic to it. In the era of massive digitalization immaterial work, not bound to a specific geographical location, where all production is accomplished, or, to put it in Lazzarato’s words, “not defined by the four walls of the factory” (Lazzarato, 1996), expands spatially. Distinction between labor-related localities and spaces for leisure evaporates, causing in turn blurring of temporal boundaries between work and leisure and, subsequently, subordination of the whole life of the worker to capital. Putting it in terms that autonomist Marxists adopted from Habermas, “colonization of life” with work takes place, for example, in digital industry, the new media or in neoliberal university. Excessive working hours often do not impact wage levels (Gill and Pratt, 2008).

Temporal specificity of immaterial labor is not limited to prolonged workday only. Time can also be thought as problematic given capitalists’ tendency to organize labor in certain domains in a project-based way and to employ temporary freelance workers. Project work brings irregularity of employment: stages of “crunch times”, requiring intensive activity and round-

¹⁰ Yet, work practice often exceeds immaterial production: Lazzarato puts “intellectual skills” among “manual” and “entrepreneurial” skills as those required in activities of immaterial labor.

the-clock shifts give way to periods of no work. Thus, striving at reduction of costs and growth of productivity, capital tends to hyper-exploit workers, engaged in projects¹¹, and in the meantime places immaterial labor employees into a precarious situation, in which unpredictability of work activity, disruption of a standard workday and over-dependence on the employer takes place (Pratt, 2000; Perrons, 2002).

The second peculiar feature of immaterial labor is linked to enhanced affective bindings the jobs carry. Those can be manifested in both affirmative and negative feelings workers have in relation to work. As empirical research documents, workers experience increased frustration and anxiety, related to immense competition on labor market. This becomes the reason of “bulimic careers”, built around self-exploitation and leading to the permanent state of exhaustion. Moreover, workers regularly experience fear of poor performance, since future employment is highly dependent on current work – “you are only as good as your last job” (Blair, 2001) – and on compulsory socializing. Therefore, simultaneous need to overwork and feeling of insecurity become “salient feature[s] of this field” (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008).

Yet, the affective experiences of immaterial workers surpass frustration, anxiety and fear only. Gill and Pratt note a tendency toward romanticization of work in particular domains: they highlight that immaterial labor can be “intensely pleasurable (at least some of the time)” and workers might have “deep attachment, affective bindings” to their jobs (2008: 15). Coupled with accomplishment of activities “that are not normally recognized as work” (Lazzarato, 1996: 133), acknowledgement of insecurities labor carries does not always take place.

¹¹ In some industries “crunch times” might become normalized and routinized.

In sum, immaterial labor might be extensively precarious, allowing scholars declare that “experience of informational labor is exclusively oppressive” (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005), albeit it is not necessarily acknowledged as such by workers.

1.2 State and reproduction of symbolic order

One of the major arguments of this work is that precarity, understood in broad terms as labor instability and dependence on structural circumstances, causing individuals’ frustration about the future (Bourdieu, 1998), should not be regarded only as an outcome of economic transformation. This chapter would provide an explanation of precarity in some certain labor domains as a result of state apparatus’ actions. Thus, an optics for examining the state as working on reproduction of a certain order is pertinent, since it might highlight the difficulties of functioning of particular institutions as well as of individual workers. Specificities of operation of “exceptional” forms of states (Jessop, 2015) – among which is authoritarian regime – and their outcomes for actors beyond the state’s border and subordinate to it would be examined by the end of the chapter.

1.2.1 Strategic-relational approach to the state.

This chapter aims to elaborate an understanding of the state, specifically focusing on its strategies to reproduce a “symbolic order” or domination of its “state project”. For this endeavor Bob Jessop’s strategic-relational approach to the state will be applied, supplemented with Pierre Bourdieu’s stance on statist capital within the bureaucratic field¹².

¹² Bourdieu and Jessop’s approaches, regarding the state through the prism of structure-agency debate and addressing the mechanisms of maintenance of state power, share multiple

This study rests on a strategic-relational approach (SRA) to the state, designed by Jessop (Jessop, 2015). Focusing on the exercise of state power and its effects rather than taking the state as a fixed entity, SRA allows considering the state's performance dynamically in relation to other forces or actors within the social whole and thus might provide a deeper understanding of its aspiration at reproduction of a symbolic order through maintenance of a specific state project. In fact, the state as a substantial unitary entity "always-already" present does not and can not exist, since its composition, capacities and boundaries are always dependent on the current balance of forces. However, at any conjuncture each state can be grasped as an institutional ensemble, pursuing some project, hindered by a chance of losing legitimacy of its hegemony.

Two crucial characteristics of the modern state, attributed by *strategic-relational* approach, need to be elaborated in more detail. First, any state is *relational*: it can only be understood *within a system of relations*. Jessop bases his reflections on Poulantzas' stance, implying that the state "is a material condensation of [...] a relationship of forces", embedded in a wider political system or a social whole (Poulantzas, 1978). Since the balance of forces within the social is never fixed and stable, the state must be viewed as a conjuncturally varying expression of some interests, contingently crystallized in an institutional system to (re)produce an established order. Therefore, the state's agency needs to be viewed as limited due to the external forces' capacity to influence it. Second, given that all forces within the social whole or the balance of forces have specific interests and in the meantime face structural constraints, varied by agent, *strategic selectivity* is structurally inscribed in all their actions. And, since the social system is not stable but is in flux, strategic selectivity is subject of change as well. Therefore,

similarities, although differ in respect of the scales of analysis, as well as conceptual apparatuses.

the state, situated within the balance of forces, needs to be (constantly) strategic in selecting how it shapes and articulates its state project.

Albeit the state as an institutional ensemble is placed within the broad system of social relations, and alike other forces faces a structurally inscribed composition of constraints and opportunities, it occupies a specific place within the system of social relations, since it possesses and exercises state power. SRA understands state power as a “a contingent expression of a changing balance of forces that seek to advance their respective interests inside, through, and against the state system” (Jessop, 2015: 54). In other words, the state¹³ – whose interests cannot cover the entire range of possible interests – is attributed with a capacity to privilege some interests and agents within a complex multiplicity of forms of social domination and by these means modify the distribution of forces within the broad system of social relations in each certain historical conjuncture. Among the foundations for social domination can be class¹⁴, gender, political alignment, religion and so on. However, what is the foundation of the state power? What does stipulate domination of state power over that of forces operating beyond the state’s boundaries?

Bourdieu’s theory of capitals, and particularly his take on statist capital, supplements Jessop’s SRA, providing a good understanding of the roots of state power. Since the state as an institutional ensemble accomplishes functions, attributed to the institutions within it, it simultaneously accumulates different sorts of capital, related to accomplishment of these

¹³ To be more precise, it is representatives of the state apparatus who express interests of certain groups and forces.

¹⁴ Some version of the SRA was first used by Marxist scholars, debating on the state’s role in reproduction of a class-based system of dominations (Gramsci, 1971; Poulantzas, 1978), which is most famous one. However, state’s power is not exhausted by mediation of class domination only, but centers around a combination of multiple forms of domination (Jessop, 2015: 59).

functions¹⁵. As a result, accumulation of multiple forms of capitals comprises the “statist capital” – “culmination of a process of concentration of different species of capital”, among which are capital of physical force and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1994: 4). Statist capital allows the state to “exercise power over ... different species of capital” and their distribution (ibid: 4), which is inextricably linked to privileging of some interests and actors and sheds light on the possibility of state power, offering the state a means to control balance of forces, which no other agent has access to.

Placed within the system of relations and forces, the state can be argued to hold a dominant position, since it exercises state power. Yet, state’s domination is contingent rather than always-already given to it. Thus, the state performs strategic actions to maintain the order, in which its state project, which can simply be understood as a political imaginary of the balance of forces (Jessop, 2015: 84), is dominant. State’s strategic actions of order reproduction concern both micro level of individual agents and macro level of a system of relations. First, on a micro level the state utilizes institutions as mechanisms of imposition of its hegemonic ideology – or its principle of vision and division¹⁶ – upon its subjects, rather than merely for the sake of capital accumulation. How the state makes use of institutions for imposition of a specific set of ideas is best explained by Althusser, who discussed the role of ideological state apparatuses in the reproduction of a certain order, i.e. “reproduction of submission [of the masses] to the ruling ideology” (Althusser, 1971). By the means of such institutions, usually included in a state institutional ensemble, as school, church, art – or such state apparatuses as educational, religious, cultural – the state distributes its hegemonic project, which constitutes a shared

¹⁵ For example, tax collection triggers accumulation of economic capital, securing order brings capital of physical force, etc.

¹⁶ In this work the concepts “dominant/hegemonic ideology” in a Gramscian understanding, which Jessop adopts, are treated as synonymic to Bourdieusian principles of vision and division/of classification or doxa, as a “common sensual” set of ideas.

“commonsense, [or doxic], world” (Bourdieu, 1994: 13). By imposing a “pre-reflexive agreement” upon the symbolic order among the subjects, the state obtains recognition and legitimacy, and a risk of subversion of social order decreases. Second, the state’s strategic actions include not only shaping of consent, but also managing dissent. On the macro level, the state attempts to “refute, marginalize, or oppress the [projects]” and forces (Jessop, 2015: 4) that pursue alternative interests and therefore, might transform the current order by translation of an alternative project. Since, as it has been noted, the balance of forces is permanently a subject of transformations, and the state boundaries might move, causing transformation of the state project and state power, the state apparatus needs to proceed with a struggle against competing visions.

To sum up, this work treats the state as a contingent institutional ensemble, striving to maintain the hegemonic order and, incorporated in a broad system of relations and forces, which can potentially subvert the hegemonic order, making strategic actions for marginalization of oppositional forces and imposition of its own project and principles of vision and division upon all agents.

1.2.2 Authoritarian states in struggle with competing forces

Multiple states, including Russia, function in a specific way in terms of strategies they select for maintenance of order within the struggle with competing forces. Jessop refers to such states as “exceptional states”. I need to make a reservation here that Jessop’s normalization of the liberal-democratic form of the state and following exoticization of other models can be viewed as problematic for its strong West-centrism. Moreover, alternative regimes are currently becoming more present, so the “exceptionalism” he is talking about is not solidly in place anymore. However, I find the way he characterizes the “exceptional” states fair, especially considering his reflections on “exceptional” states’ mechanisms of marginalization of

oppositional forces. Since authoritarianism is a form of an exceptional state, further I will outline the specificities of authoritarian state.

Operation of authoritarian states is based on the state of emergency, manifested in the “immanent existential threat to the survival of the state, such as war or invasion” (Jessop, 2015: 216). The specificity of current regimes is that such conditions of emergency are not necessarily real, but are rather often intentionally discursively manufactured by the state apparatuses and imposed on subjects through “ideological state apparatuses” (Althusser, 1971)¹⁷, in order to increase state power. The state apparatus, therefore, has a broader range of capacities applicable for maintenance of the balance of forces.

Situation of emergency – real or manufactured – provides a state apparatus with “a cover for open or covert action to weaken social forces that oppose the state ... policies” (ibid: 217), residing in special prerogatives or extraordinary capacities the state leaders receive. Thus, with declaration of emergency state, the state apparatus receives a possibility for almost unlimited arbitrary action, since “the rule of law” ceases functioning as a mode on which order resides. Whereas liberal-democratic states resolve crises through a “war of position”, discussed in detail by Gramsci (Gramsci, 1971), “exceptional states intensify physical repression and conduct an “open war” against subaltern and marginal forces” (Jessop, 2015: 212). Thus, in authoritarian states elimination of oppositional forces in the declared name of the state security takes place by the means of “war of maneuver” rather than by “war of position”, and therefore the balance of forces becomes more rigid. Position of alternative forces becomes unstable and highly dependent on the state’s – often arbitrary – actions.

¹⁷ Which become strongly “integrated into the official state to legitimate its enhanced powers” (Jessop, 2015: 219).

As a result, conditions for existence of alternative forces – oppositional media, distributing alternative ideas among the population, – are rendered more difficult. As a result, I argue that labor in the organizations the state is leading a “war of maneuver” against to be characterized by high degree of instability, since the state is making effort to affect their operation.

Chapter 2. Historical contextualization

This chapter targets the process of formation of the authoritarian neoliberal regime in Russia, which determines the experiences of workers in many areas of cultural production. I highlight how processes of neoliberalization and consolidation of authoritarianism have been connected and proceeded simultaneously. In this way I connect the two corpuses of literature I use – on “exceptional” or authoritarian state and on labor under neoliberalism – and demonstrate what impact the current regime has on industry of independent media and on individual workers in particular. By this means I explain why labor of independent journalists became politically and economically precarious.

2.1 Authoritarian neoliberal order in Russia

I place analysis of the factors, conditioning independent journalists’ labor experiences within the politico-economic arrangement, established in Russia after collapse of state socialism. The order one could observe in the making in Russia after the regime change in 1991 can be referred to as “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff, 2014). This order is broadly characterized by reconfiguration of state and institutional power and imposition of neoliberal policies “from social and political dissent” (ibid, 115), or as Gramsci would put it, by coercion (Gramsci, 1971). The umbrella term “authoritarian neoliberalism” is applicable to multiple diverse settings. Thus, “situated sets of elements and circumstances” (Ong, 2007: 5) that shape the peculiar Russian regime and affect labor conditions and experiences, especially in knowledge production sectors, need to be specified.

Students of post-socialist transition in Russia tend to link the authoritarian drift in the 90s and early 2000s with the necessity to push forward the neoliberal policies (Matveev, 2016; Gelman, 2015; Klein, 2007). Since the left did not “evaporate” the same second Soviet Union collapsed,

the first “shock therapy” phase of marketization was implemented under strong parliamentary resistance and popular critique. Therefore, in order to conduct radical economic liberalization, in the absence of administrative unity within the state apparatus the president Boris Yeltsin demanded unlimited presidential power for a one-year period, and, disregarding popular dissent, eliminated most restrictions in economy “in one day”: rapid price liberalization, curtailment of money supply and elimination of trade barriers were initiated in January 1992; privatization began the same year in summer. It was a moment when not only the neoliberal program was launched, but also when Russia entered a “state of emergency” (Jessop, 2015), which it has not departed from ever since. As the super-presidency period was over, Yeltsin drafted a new constitution, which accumulated a strong authoritarian potential: the leader was granted with broad powers, whereas parliament’s sphere of influence was limited. However, in the context of “weak” state apparatus (Rutland, 2013; Myant and Drahokoupil, 2011; Gelman, 2015) and multiple alternative forces, pursuing diverse interests and striving to influence the state project, Yeltsin did not achieve concentration of power in one hands, characteristic to authoritarian statist regimes (Jessop, 2015). In a de-centralized state, the new economic elites – beneficiaries of privatization, mostly former communist party apparatchiks, enjoying patron-client relations with the leadership – as well as regional leaders, disloyal to Yeltsin, could affect key political decisions. In this way, given that multiple forces could affect the state project and implemented policies, one can talk about blurred boundaries of the state and its de-crystallization during the 90s. Since institutional architecture of the state was not solid, and the balance of competing forces was not fixed¹⁸, the responsible bureaucrats did not manage to implement any deeper economic policies, corresponding to Yeltsin’s neoliberal course. Under resistance from the left neither labor code, nor taxation system were amended during the 90s,

¹⁸ President’s decisions uncovered resistance of the communists, the mob and in some cases of the influential oligarchs.

albeit the reform projects were discussed. Nonetheless, Yeltsin's presidency established and reinforced the exceptional regime based on "emergency" state and laid foundations for further consolidation of autocracy and deepening of neoliberal regime.

After ascent to power in 1999 Putin not only preserved Yeltsin's course both in political and economic respect, but worked on monopolization of state power, characteristic to authoritarian leaders, and reconsolidation or "re-crystallization" of the state (Myant and Drahokoupil, 2011). This process started in the context of Chechen War, which provided Putin with a legitimacy to act within the state of emergency¹⁹. By the means of "imposed consensus" – "a combination of carrots and sticks that left [his subordinates]²⁰ no choice of strategic behavior other than unconditional subordination to the Kremlin, either voluntary or involuntary" (Gelman, 2015: 74) – he marginalized oppositional forces (primarily the left and the oppositional economic elites) and built up the "power vertical" (Gelman, 2015), a strongly hierarchical governance model. By these means Putin prevented resistance of alternative forces, guaranteed himself unrestricted access to legitimate state power and received leverages for ideological control over the social whole. Among actions, aimed at establishment of power vertical, Putin abolished regional elections, changed political party legislation and built up parliamentary coalition, minimizing a chance of vetoing his decisions. "Perversion and demolition of democratic institutions", such as NGOs and Labor Unions, overlapped with gaining pace "war of maneuver" (Gramsci, 1971), manifested in expansion of police and surveillance powers, making mechanisms of "imposed consensus" maintenance primarily coercive (Gelman, 2015). Special prerogatives, which state apparatus received in the state of emergency, lead to selective and arbitrary application of legislation and prosecution. "Discovery of enemy within" (Jessop,

¹⁹ Since then the state of emergency has always been either a real-existing thing or was artificially discursively manufactured.

²⁰ Which mostly addressed the economic elites and the oppositional forces within the state institutions

2015: 217), characteristic of the “exceptional” regimes, engendered the Russian state’s endeavor to conquer those who are claimed to be threatening national security – independent media among others – and, given that the forces critical of the regime often received the statuses of “enemies of the people”, the oppositional forces found themselves in an extremely vulnerable position.

Putin’s endeavor to establish power vertical concerned not only the political regime, but also shaped a specific model of capitalism, referred to as “state capitalism a la Russe” (Matveev, 2016). For the sake of concentration of power in all domains, Putin transformed the ownership structure of the key branches of economy in a way that he received leverages over them. Control over, for instance, hydrocarbon sector went over to state corporations; president’s confidants received controlling interests in companies in other sectors. Those resisting to comply with the imposed consensus, lost their assets. Yet, growth of state intervention in economy did not signify departure from neoliberal course: as Matveev concludes, with “the expansion of state property under Putin, Russia’s economy wasn’t so much taken over by the state, so much as the state was transformed into its own kind of corporation... and neoliberal logic [was put] at a deeper level” (2016). With growing means of direct control and management of the most significant economic domains, the state in the meantime was implementing policies that would privilege capital and reduce its intervention and participation in social sector.

Centralization of power and “imposed consensus”, coupled with dissolution of resistance from the left, allowed Putin to push forward “structural reforms” – a bunch of reforms, that had been blocked by the communists in the parliament and the regions in the 90s (Matveev, 2016; Cook, 2007). Due to decay of democratic institutions and representational functions of the legislature, structural reforms were negotiated only within the elites (Cook, 2007). The structural reforms comprised transformation of taxation system (progressive tax was replaced with flat tax; corporate taxes decreased significantly), introduction of a market-oriented welfare arrangement

(insurance-based medicine was also set up, and education-sector reforms limited state's participation in coverage of tuition fees for post-secondary education) and implementation of the Pension reform (private pension funds introduced, making pensions size dependent on wage instead of length of service²¹) and of the new Labor Code.

The new Labor Code made relations of employment more flexible, job security guarantees were cancelled. Employers received expanded rights to transfer and dismiss workers, and temporary contracts, inexistent before, were allowed. Workers, in the meantime, lost possibilities of defending own rights, since Labor Unions' functions were highly restricted. The new Labor Code made organization of legal strikes almost impossible²² (Cook, 2007; Myant and Drahokoupil, 2011; Matveev, 2016). In other words, the new Labor Code weakened employees' positions.

Therefore, in the context of authoritarian neoliberal regime journalists of independent media, on the one hand, are exposed to flexibilization of employment relations as a consequence of neoliberal social policies the state has been implementing since the 90s, and on the other hand, working in institutions, resisting to accept the "imposed consensus", have a vulnerable position and suffer from the state's attacks. Further I focus more closely on the transformation of the media industry under the consolidating authoritarian neoliberal regime and the independent outlets' position in it.

²¹ Given that a significant part of the workforce is employed informally, often by the initiative of employers, who were seeking to avoid or reduce taxes, lack of redistributive mechanisms decreased future life standards of a big share of population

²² While in the 90s the level of unionization and collective bargaining of workers was high – massive protests, defending workers' rights took place in mid-90s (Ashwin and Clarke, 2003) – in 2000s bargaining power of workers was legally restricted. For example, in 2009, according to Matveev, there was only one official strike, and the amount of unofficial ones was low (2016)

2.2 Media field in Russia: formation of “informational ghetto”

Media field in Russia and elsewhere (Yesil, 2016) is very sensitive to both political and economic transformations. Independent journalists’ working conditions in turn depend on the situation within the media industry in general and the position of independent outlets in particular. In this chapter I present a short historical account on the trajectory of development of media industry in Russia after the regime change, particularly on its current state and independent outlets’ positions within it. In short, since early 2000s independent outlets find themselves in a constantly deepening “informational ghetto” (Kiriya, 2013), exposed to state attacks, having restricted access to the audience and lacking financial means.

With rapid economic liberalization in early 90s media sector of economy was decentralized and lots of new private media outlets, independent from the state, were established on federal and regional levels. Given low unity of the state apparatus and “de-crystallization” of the state, no clear regulations within media sector existed. Researchers refer to this period in history of Russian media as “totally chaotic” (Kachkaeva, 2010). Yet, for current liberal journalists that period is associated with the “genuine freedom of speech” and “golden age” of media in Russia, albeit only few of them caught it.

In mid-90s two processes in media field were initiated: concentration of media assets and their utilization as ideological apparatuses. In 1994-1996 a scrappy structure of media ownership was substituted with high level of cross-media ownership, or concentration of media assets. Large entrepreneurs shortly purchased most of significant outlets and used media for influencing state project and re-formation of the hegemonic vision of the state. For the first time since collapse of USSR media were utilized as an ideological – albeit not yet state – apparatus.

Two oligarchs, belonging to “semibankirshchina” group²³ – Boris Berezovsky and Viktor Gusinsky – who accumulated a dominant share of media market, utilized media resources for pursuing own political interests: re-election of Yeltsin²⁴ in 1996 presidential elections. Afraid of a radical transformation of the property and class structure, they provided Yeltsin a huge bankroll and eight hundred times more coverage in media controlled by them (Klein, 2007: 232). Power of media as an ideological apparatus again became evident.

Putin’s ascent to power brought a critical moment to the history of Russian media. Striving at dissolution of alternative forces, affecting state project, Putin, within the frameworks of his nationalization project, changed the ownership structure of media (retaining the concentration, beneficial for simplified control over separate outlets). Thus, Berezovsky and Gusinsky were deprived of their shares in media industry²⁵, and their assets have been split between the three dominant holdings²⁶. With holdings being either state assets, or belonging to the state confidants, a big part of Russian media have since then been ideologically controlled. By these means Putin succeeded in establishment of “an authoritarian model of informational service”, in which “information flows are radically controlled, topics and participants of the few debate-based programs are negotiated” (Kachkaeva, 2010).

Yet, it is wrong to say that Putin’s presidency brought total homogenization of media field and that *ultimately all* informational flows fell under radical state control. From 2001 on, media

²³ Semibankirshchina – seven oligarchs, controlling large businesses, including in media sector and having often determinative influence on political and economic life of Russia in the second half of 1990s.

²⁴ By 1996 Yeltsin’s approval ratings fell to single digit due to unpopularity and harmful consequences of his neoliberal course.

²⁵ One was arrested for alleged violations of law, the other – was forced to flee the country (Kachkaeva, 2010; Gelman, 2015)

²⁶ Gazprom-media holding, a dominant one, is a subsidiary to the major gas corporation, majority owned by the Government; VGTRK – a unitary state enterprise; and NMG, which was partly swallowed by Gazprom Group, owned and managed by people from Putin’s “inner circle” (Kachkaeva and Fossato, 2016: 198)

field was segregated into two parts, or “divided into communicational spaces”, functioning in different manners and serving different groups of population (Kiriya, 2013; Kachkaeva and Fossato, 2016). There remained a limited range of outlets, beyond the holdings and therefore independent from the Kremlin. On the one hand there is a huge group of the state controlled outlets, for the most part involved with holdings – as Anna Kachkaeva names it, a “media machine of mature authoritarianism” (Kachkaeva and Fossato, 2016). From early 2000s they had black lists of guests and show hosts, a bunch of programs was closed, content of the remaining ones was censored. Financially they have been very successful, since many of them are state-funded and they face no restrictions on advertising. On the other hand, there remained a small bunch of media, having alternative financial sources (foreign or oppositional Russian investors, such as Prokhorov or Khodorkovsky) and critical towards the state apparatus’ decisions. This second group is claimed to exist within the “informational ghetto” (Kiriya, 2013), since diverse state apparatus’ mechanisms to maintain the balance of forces and marginalize all oppositional forces hinder their operation, and second, informational distribution is limited for them, because they are mostly working online²⁷. After 2014 independent outlets’ critique of state’s policy in eastern Ukraine and in Syria, they fell under harsher state attacks, and “informational ghetto” started dwindling. It undoubtedly affected labor conditions and experiences of journalists working for these outlets.

²⁷ TV remains the dominant source of information in Russia. The internet audience is still highly limited, so access to independent media is restricted.

Chapter 3. Political precarity of Russian independent journalists: a dominant form of insecurity

“We are forced to do journalism from beneath the pavement”²⁸. This and similar metaphors are frequently invoked in the public debates among the Russian liberal journalists on the condition of the independent media field. All of them imply a highly oppressed status of the critical outlets. Yet, it is important that such laments concern not only the level of the “decaying media industry”, but also the hardships it brings for individual employment and labor subjectivities. Adopting Jessop’s perspective on the state’s strategic endeavor to reproduce its own dominance in the balance of forces (Jessop, 2015) by the means – among others – of marginalization and oppression of the alternative forces, to which independent media in Russia belong, as well as drawing on the perspective on Russian state as an exceptional state with authoritarian regime, in this chapter I aim to highlight the relation between the macro-level strategic decisions of the state²⁹ and micro-level individual worker’s experience. To a large extent the state impacts journalists’ individual experiences through affecting the medium level of media institutions. More specifically, this chapter provides an account on the diverse mechanisms of contending against ideological opponents the state invokes and connects them with labor-related vicissitudes and insecurities individual journalists articulate. Thus, labor in independent critical outlets would be referred to in this work as “politically precarious”. The term rests on a broad understanding of “precarity” as a condition of instability and aims to broaden the understanding

²⁸<https://meduza.io/episodes/2017/10/20/zhurnalistika-iz-pod-asfalta-spetsialnyy-vypusk-v-chest-dnya-rozhdeniya-meduzy> (accessed on 2.06.2018)

²⁹ The state as such, having no subjectivity, can not decide or act. It is the state apparatus, which I understand “a set of politically relevant individuals” (Jessop, 2015: 55; Bourdieu, 1994: 17), responsible for decision-making. In Russian case, given an extremely high “power vertical”, most significant decisions are taken by the president, presidential administration and in some cases the Parliament (Gelman, 2015). In this work I will talk about the actions/decisions of “the state”, which in fact would mean those of officials at the state apparatus

of labor-related insecurities as created by a certain economic regime only. In other words, this chapter illustrates how labor is experienced as unstable due to the conditions created by the “exceptional state”. Departing from Bourdieu’s idea that one of the the major consequences of precariatization is loss of belief and hope in the future due to its high uncertainty (Bourdieu, 1998), “political precarity” might be understood as diminution of future employment predictability, triggered by the strategic political decisions of the state apparatus.

This chapter is divided in several sections. First, forms of state intervention and techniques of direct influence on media operation would be discussed. Second, leverages of indirect transformation of labor conditions through change of the ownership structure, are presented. Finally, some of the sources of personal threat to journalists would be briefly elucidated. These three points stem from journalists’ narratives and are presented in close relation to their labor experiences, so that they demonstrate how labor is actually made “politically precarious”.

3.1 Mechanisms of state control

There are two things necessary to take into consideration when analyzing the mechanisms of Russian state influence on independent media. These two points make identification and generalization of such mechanisms a hard task to fulfil. First, the state has a huge *creative potential* in designing leverages over media. This is characteristic of all states which turn state of emergency into a rule³⁰. Armed with statist capital, Russian state has influence on determining the rules of the game through affecting legislative, economic, judicial and other systems, which lay foundations for functioning of media field in general and of certain outlets

³⁰ For example, Eva Fodor discusses how the Hungarian state employs novel techniques we “weaken” the alternative forces: <http://www.publicseminar.org/author/efodor/> (accessed on 2.06.2018)

in particular. In doing so, the state often employs novel strategies of interference, making elaboration of strategies of resistance against new decisions complicated. Such “creativity” of the state is acknowledged by journalists, who can do nothing but speculate about the future:

“Whatever might happen, the crazy State Duma might enact a new law on any day, maybe tomorrow. Once it does, I will act accordingly” (investigative journalist, outlet 1)

Second, the “rules of the game” the Russian state establishes generally function in an arbitrary fashion. For example, some legislation might be implemented but ignored for a long time, and “at the right time” instrumentally applied by the state and its executive branches. As a result, the state has a possibility to use targeted and selective mechanisms of influence over media, leading to deepening marginalization of the independent ones, which, again, happens unexpectedly:

“Many laws are not abided. You never know when and how any of the laws might be put in action” (editor, outlet 2)

However, classification of state apparatus’ techniques of intervention based on journalists’ narratives is feasible. Here I present the mechanisms of affecting media functioning, most frequently articulated by my interlocutors.

The first of them is related to the legal basis of media functioning. There is a number of laws in Russia which influence work of independent media in a specific way (besides, laws are frequently amended as well as new ones are implemented). Many decrees are impossible to interpret precisely. While the basic media legislation is univocal and simple to follow, obedience of the “anti-extremism law”, for example, is hindered by the lack of consistent wording and vague interpretations. Among the prohibited actions are “propaganda and public demonstration of nazi symbols”, “public justification of terrorism” and “wrongful accusation of a person

holding a public post in Russian Federation”. However, what is propaganda? How exactly should justification of terrorism look like? There is a broad range of possible interpretations of these laws, which journalists I was interviewing find problematic:

“you are constantly on a hook, since all these laws are created in such a vague way that whoever might be caught violating them if there would be a need to catch”
(reporter, outlet 3)

What complicates the story is that the new laws, forbidding “disgracing the honor and reputation of citizens” (2018), “protecting children from information, potentially harmful for their health and development” (2010), “libel law” (2012) might emerge at any time. The task of following equivocal legislation in a context when you are under close supervision becomes harder.

What is most problematic for journalists is how and by whom such laws are interpreted. In 2008 a new executive body Roskomnadzor (RKN) – a Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media – was established. A list of RKN’s tasks – among others – includes supervision of compliance to the Russian legislation within telecommunications, mass media and the Internet as well as control over compliance of the law on personal data. The service is empowered to block the webpages and websites which violate the law³¹. Technically RKN is not a “censoring machine” as such, since it was established for control over the entire media field and provision and maintenance of informational security, for example, preventing proliferation of extremist and terrorist content and protection of children

³¹ For example, RKN blocked LinkedIn for denial to store personal data of Russian users on web servers in Russia. In April 2018 a messenger Telegram was blocked for an official reason of securing national safety, since terrorists might use it as a means of communication. Media blocking procedure is more complicated: in case prohibited content appears online, RKN sends a prior notice to the outlet with a request to remove the content. After two notifications during one year RKN has a right to block the website. In fact, blocking after two notifications does not happen often, many media outlets receive more notifications.

from “harmful information”. However, journalists find operation of RKN prejudged against them and biased, and name the service “the state’s censoring machine”. They give examples of how critical independent outlets and those loyal to the Kremlin are treated differently:

“I am sure that these madmen [RKN] control us more closely than the federal media. Roughly, ‘Life’ would never receive anything for naming underaged victims. They even post their photos freely, which is clearly forbidden” (reporter, outlet 3)

“we constantly receive notifications. For example, from time to time I see an ISIS flag on the Russia-1 channel³². And no consequences for them. Of course, it would not work for us” (reporter, outlet 4)

“Pressure on the independent media and the Internet is unstoppable” (reporter, outlet 3)

These quotes illustrate the instrumental application of informational security “mission” by the executive body. In order to avoid being blamed in engagement in extremist activity, independent outlets work closely with lawyers. Yet, it does not help them diminish the number of notifications and legal lawsuits, while work of the media is, first, rendered difficult and, second, runs a risk of closure.

“To be honest, we necessarily receive letters with notifications from RKN once in a week or two” (reporter, outlet 3)

“With such a huge amount of prohibitions, RKN would always manage to find something wrong if it wills” (reporter, outlet 3)

“Without any doubt, we feel constant pressure from RKN [...] which always cavils about minor details” (editor, outlet 5)

Ambiguous principle of RKN functioning – formally, two letters of notifications are enough to block the website and withdraw license from the outlet – places these media in a position of uncertainty: they cannot predict the consequences of receiving the next – albeit wrong from

³² One of the most popular pro-Kremlin TV channels

their standpoint – notification. The permanent fear of outlet closure and job loss, which might happen at any time, is articulated by most of the journalists.

Russian legislation affects labor experiences of journalists not only by decreasing stability of the outlets operation and threat of shutdown. Several of my interlocutors anonymously told me that a criminal case is instituted against them for appealing for something illegal. How the cases were regulated remains unknown.

Secondly, journalists report the regular checks by some services, by no means related to media. The state utilizes its administrative resource to initiate control over fire safety, tax payments and so on. My interviewees declare a connection between publication of a significant critical material with the more often searches, checks of the fire service, tax revenue service, public prosecution office and others.

“Of course, there were lots of cases when accidentally the public prosecution service visits us with a ‘regular check’, the same day a fire brigade comes by coincidence. It is always related with the big political materials coming out”
(reporter, outlet 4)

The journalists consider such checks as directly targeting independent media. In case of minor violation of fire safety regulations, for example, the office of the outlets might be closed for an indefinite period, as well as the organization might be fined. Such a sophisticated mechanism of pressure affects daily functioning of the outlet³³ and creates the conditions of unpredictability, because *“if they need that, they surely will always find something”* (reporter, outlet 3).

³³ It might seem absurd, but this kind of examinations in organizations critical of the state actions – not only media outlets, but also NGOs, educational institutions and others – happens on a daily basis. For example, one of the reasons of withdrawal of teaching license from European University in St. Petersburg was mismatch of minor fire safety regulations.

The third mechanism of influence is linked with the clientelistic pattern of state apparatus-elites relationships, established in Russia in mid-90s. It stipulates the existence of “the untouchables”, who, enjoying patronage of the state apparatus and possessing immense economic, social and symbolic capitals, have a huge influence on the courts and can perform actions that clearly contradict the legislation. And still, their actions are not followed with sanctions.

“so the court simply knuckles under to a big bureaucrat, for example, despite that the journalists have all the evidence and reason to write about that” (investigative journalist, outlet 1)

“experience has proven that the elites manage to do whatever. Be that a high-level public official or a large businessman” (reporter, outlet 4)

So, materials that criticize high level officials and their confidants, for example, investigations of corruption among the elites – obviously, they are published by the independent and disloyal to the state outlets – usually trigger unpredictable consequences for the outlets and individual journalists. In fact, their actions might be even more creative than the official state actions:

“today they really play dirty. They invent unbelievably different ways to affect us!” (editor, outlet 5)

Given that judicial system functions as selectively and arbitrarily as RKN, the level of media protection against elites’ voluntary actions comes to naught. Danger of the DoS attacks on the media outlets, which are mostly working online, institution of criminal cases with a predictable outcome, and even such farcical actions as “bugging of all computers, including chief editor’s one” (editor, outlet 5) significantly disrupts stability of media functioning.

“So this Bolonkin, he organized a DoS attack. It was a big DoS attack of 2014 or 2015, when all media publishing on Prigozhin’s³⁴ actions were not available. Those were Novaya Gazeta, Fontanka, Echo, Forbes, Dozhd’ and some more, I don’t remember, maybe RBC” (editor, outlet 5)

³⁴ Prigozhin is Putin’s cook, very close to the president

“The court happily decrees that Igor Ivanovich [Sechin]³⁵ is right, we think that all the materials should be deleted or blocked, and newspapers – disposed. This is an illustrative example” (investigative journalist, outlet 1)

The last frequently mentioned mechanism of influence on independent media functioning – also a selective one – is informal pressure of the state officials on large companies in order to restrict advertising in certain outlets³⁶. Since independent media, none of which belongs to the large media holdings, are financially dependent mostly on advertising, it significantly affects work of media.

“for example, a bank can withdraw its advertisement very quickly, which is a very notable problem for the outlet” (reporter, outlet 1)

“most of the Russian outlets are in one way or another dependent on the major advertisers, big and strong, often affiliated with the state’s officials. The ones who are capable to appropriate money for advertising. Once we lose their advertisement, we are in trouble” (investigative journalist, outlet 1)

The presented mechanisms of affecting media operation – through legislation, state’s use of its administrative resource, unrestricted actions of the elites and financial limitations – set a vector of labor unpredictability in independent outlets. Journalists are incapable to foresee if their workplace would exist tomorrow, since, first, the authorities’ actions are often arbitrary and erratic, and second, their techniques of action are not exhausted with the ones mentioned here. Consequently, the workers cannot predict and prevent the possibility of blocking and other threats, which fosters the rhetoric of “political precarity”. The situation in which “menace might come from any side” is described by each and all my interlocutors.

³⁵ Chief executive officer of a large oil and gas company – Rosneft’

³⁶ It is not an explicit prohibition: instead the state is putting companies in a dilemma situation when they either design the advertising campaign as they want, including advertising in independent media, or find themselves in a precarious position with unpredictable actions against them from the state institutions’ side in case they do not withdraw advertisements. The companies prefer the second option

3.2 Transformation of the media market and moral aspects of labor

Labor experiences of journalists are hardly affected by the threat of closure of outlets only. “Re-division of the media market”, manifested in transformation of ownership structure, taking place under a strong pressure of the state, which Putin initiated in early 2000s as a part of his “imposed consensus” project, is claimed to have a very strong influence on working experience among the liberal journalists I was talking to. Given that independent media, existing outside the state-controlled media holdings and therefore operating from the “informational ghettos” since early 2000s (Kiriya, 2013), had no financial dependence on the elites³⁷, they remained ideologically independent and could publish critical materials. In 2014 the level of independence of some media decreased, when they started an open harsh criticism of the state’s military campaigns in Eastern Ukraine, in Syria and on escalating clash with the West. In 2014 the state bewildered with a task to reinforce control over them and did it to a significant extent through increasing pressure on the owners and investors (Kiriya 2013: 21). More precisely, it triggered change of the financial leadership of the major independent outlets. Thus, since 2014 in a significant number of popular independent outlets owners and investors were changed.

The state performed this task in two ways. First, in 2014 it designed a law, “limiting the role of foreign capital in mass media”, which was implemented in 2016. The law restricted the foreign shares in Russian media to 20%. Therefore, in several outlets change of owners was compelled by law. As a result, the Russian state received increased leverages over media, since influence on foreign investors is more complicated than on Russian entrepreneurs. Some journalists consider this legislation to be selectively targeting independent media, since most of the “pro-

³⁷ Independent media were owned mostly by a few entrepreneurs, many of them are critical of the Russian political establishment; foreign media holdings had shares in some of the outlets

Kremlin” outlets were already controlled by the Russian holdings and were not affected by the law.

Second, under pressure from president’s administration many Russian entrepreneurs were forced to sell their media assets. Owners, tolerating the critical materials, were replaced with those more loyal to the state apparatus. The new owners, in turn, immediately changed the “rules of the game” within the outlets. Journalists declare that change of ownership usually affects the editing policy within each single outlet, and often leads to “emergence of censorship” in a way that some topics and opinions become taboo and the share of investigative journalism decreases within the outlet. Thus, the state “by the means of [transforming] capital ownership in ‘liberal media’ ensures a possibility of control and surveillance over the ‘informational ghettos’” and can put restrictions on content by the hands of loyal owners and investors (Kiriya, 2013).

“those changes are caused by the change of owners and desire of the new ones to please the Kremlin. Anyway, it is definitely related to regulation imposed from above” (editor, outlet 2)

Journalists articulate two ways in which ownership structure transformation and emergence of thematic limitations affects their work. Primarily, the pool of themes, coverage of which becomes restricted, is rarely articulated within the outlet³⁸. Many journalists employ a metaphor “double solid line”, which has become extremely popular in public debates, meaning that there is a vague thematic border, which cannot be crossed, though no one can name where exactly it lies. It creates a condition of precarity and total unpredictability of employment in a way that journalists are in a permanent fear of crossing this “double solid line”. Since 2014 a plenty of

³⁸ Yet, in some outlets these thematic restrictions are openly named, for example, during the job interviews. Among the ones, mentioned most frequently, were Putin and especially his private life, his closest allies and the Russian Orthodox church.

journalists, including chief editors, were dismissed by the owners for the reason of publishing a material on a certain topic, which was in fact not forbidden formally³⁹.

However, most journalists are not dismissed, but resign, which is the second impact of ownership structure transformation on labor. As students of immaterial labor argue, symbolic production is inextricably linked with enhanced affective bindings of labor (Gill and Pratt, 2008). In this respect, work in media sector is not actualized as mechanical, and the content produced has a dominant meaning for workers. Transformation of editorial policy and flourishing of censorship, therefore, is experienced very sensitively. For journalists, *“consider[ing] very important and necessary to inform the population about what’s going on in the world”* and perceiving own labor as socially crucial and ideologically loaded, change of owners and introduction of thematic restrictions led to mass resignations.

“There were 5 or 6 of us who simultaneously resigned from Russkaya Planeta, where censorship started flourishing due to publications about Maidan and Crimea” (reporter, outlet 3)

“When I was working in Nevskoe vremya newspaper, I noticed that there were the so called ‘flags’ – those were the vague borders, which were constantly changing place. The outlet has some themes, which one could not touch upon. Eventually, I resigned” (editor, outlet 5)

Therefore, shrinking of the independent media market, taking place since 2014, and subsequent dramatic decrease in a number of potentially “good” workplaces is considered very problematic for journalists. Chances of finding a replacement for the current – unstable and unpredictable – employment are coming to naught.

³⁹ <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2016/05/13/121658-rukovodstvo-redaktsii-rbk-uvolili> (accessed on 2.06.2018)
<https://www.rbc.ru/society/12/03/2014/5704192f9a794761c0ce7c16> (accessed on 2.06.2018)

“As it was called, the last steamboat to Istanbul. Lots of people wanted to take it to escape the Red Army and Bolsheviks. The last hope. Sometimes I feel that we are such a last steamboat” (editor, outlet 5)

“There are really few “free” media, where you can work and avoid disgrace, stay a real journalist, tell the truth, restrain from betrayal of profession” (reporter, outlet 6)

Talking about the “decaying industry” and own experience in it, journalists demonstrate fears and uncertainties, described by the theorists of precarity (Standing, 2011; Bourdieu, 1998). Only one journalist among my interviewees considers changing a labor domain to a more stable and predictable one.

“at some point I might need a job in a different sector, not in journalism, so I am trying to get a new profession in advance” (reporter, outlet 1)

Others lament that they are forced to live for a day and give up making future plans, remaining in a state of total dependence.

3.3 Life threat

In 2006 Anna Politkovskaya, a distinguished journalist, was shot. 4 years later Oleg Kashin was harshly beaten. Yulia Latynina’s car was set on fire in September 2017. These three most renowned stories do not exhaust all cases of physical attack on individual journalists, caused by critical materials they publish. During one of the round tables in 2016, dedicated to the issue of work in independent media, one of the most famous journalists remarked that “in Putin’s Russia profession of journalist is the second deadly one after the miners”⁴⁰. Existential danger, related to work activity, is acknowledged by many of my interlocutors. Some of them have experiences of facing physical threat while accomplishing work:

⁴⁰ https://echo.msk.ru/blog/open_lib/1827504-echo/ (accessed on 2.06.2018)

“Some of my colleagues used to have problems. Some were beaten in the streets. It happens oftentimes” (investigative journalist, outlet 1)

“Pretty often some surveillance cars follow me. And the only question is how far they are ready to go” (reporter, outlet 4)

“They were driving and suddenly noticed surveillance. Their tires were shot through; the windscreen was crushed. It was really very scary” (editor, outlet 5)

In sum, the experience of insecurity is an outcome of both the state’s endeavor to maintain the contingent order through marginalization of independent media outlets or their transformation into ideological state apparatuses by the means of changing ownership structure and the individual existential threat labor in critical outlets brings. As a result, the journalists articulate *political* precarity as the major form of insecurity, affecting the everyday labor experiences.

Chapter 4. Economic precarity: a missing category

Journalists' labor instability is stipulated not only by the authoritarian regime and state's endeavor to maintain the established order. Given the details of employment (forms of employment, types of contracts, wages, amount of excess hours, etc.), named by journalists in the interviews and presented in a quantitative research of the Labor Union of journalists, conducted in April 2018, employment demonstrates many characteristics of precarious labor. However, unlike labor theorists assume, only few journalists make account of it, their capacity to project the future is not perceived as declining and labor is generally not articulated as a "fragile, threatened privilege" entailed by flexibilization and casualization of work relations and their total subsumption to market forces. Generally, political precarity is viewed by the members of the field as more significantly affecting their labor experiences. In this chapter I shed light on the specificities of Russian journalists' employment as well as present the reasons of little acknowledgement of economic precarity.

4.1 Journalists' formal labor conditions

There is a broad array of details in employment that allow to assess journalists' work as precarious. Among the most widespread characteristics of employment among Russian journalists are high casualization, growing flexibilization, expressed in reduction of contract terms, long internships and curtailed securities, and significant informalization of employment, leading to frequent disregards of the labor law. I will briefly discuss how these labor-related insecurities are actualized and how workers subjectively relate to them.

Alongside with other domains of immaterial labor, journalists' employment is characterized by high irregularity or casualization. According to the results of the survey conducted by Labor Union, almost 30% of journalists work as freelancers, having no permanent stable employment

and obtaining job “only when it is required by the capitalist” (Lazzarato, 1996: 4). Thus, alike other project-based workers, freelance journalists are employed only for the duration of a single task and are therefore highly dependent on the market demand. The employment basis of freelancers is rarely formal: only 30% of freelance work is regulated with formal labor contracts; in most cases labor relations are informal.

“I was almost everywhere working informally, on a good faith, without any contract” (reporter, outlet 7)

However, most journalists still have full-time jobs and their employment is still formally regulated with contracts, albeit contract duration is a subject of change in most outlets. Journalists who started working in independent outlets in early 2000s notice that the dominant type of contracts changed. Unlimited-term work contracts are replaced mostly with 1-year ones. It concerns both the new employees who rarely obtain contracts with a date limit as well as experienced workers, whose formal basis of employment changes. Shorter contracts, which might not be extended, provide the employers with increased leverages over the workers and tend to increase productivity of employees (Standing, 2011; Bourdieu, 1998). Yet, journalists do not find reduction of contract terms problematic. Instead, they attempt to justify the change:

“When I started working, I used to have a non-limited employment contract. Later it was terminated, and replaced with a fixed-term one. The non-limited contracts were really ineffective, because people worked less and it was hard to dismiss them” (reporter, outlet 1)

Apart from a widespread transformation of labor contracts type, in some outlets employees suffer a radical change in the forms of employment, which are mostly triggered by financial struggles of the outlet⁴¹. In this way, journalists employed on a full-time basis are dismissed but keep working part-time informally, receiving honorariums instead of stable wages.

⁴¹ Which partly relates to state’s influence on advertising market, discussed above.

“We needed to change the employment structure for financial reasons, so now almost all our employees are freelancers” (editor, outlet 5)

Considering that for many of the dismissed journalists a certain media outlet serves a major workplace, and given “shrinkage of the market” and decrease of alternative workplaces liberal journalists lament about, most of them continue working in the same outlet. Yet, the amount of work journalists need to accomplish to receive the same monthly income increases significantly. As the chief editor of one of the outlets claims, *“in case they publish really a lot, their wage might remain more or less the same” (editor, outlet 5).*

Secondly, in most outlets workers are not officially hired after the job interviews. Albeit candidates in a dominant number of outlets are required to present decent portfolios, my interviewees claim that *“in Russian media it is very common to have internships, so that journalists accomplish work for free or for very small wages” (reporter, outlet 1).* Internships last for three months to half a year and that only few candidates succeed, bringing falls in employment predictability – candidates stay in a condition of inability to prospect future employment for a long time. Coupled with a general decrease in labor stability caused by shortening contracts, dependence on capital of journalists grows⁴². Nevertheless, a dominant number of workers normalize internships and talk about candidates, critical of them, ironically:

“Some candidates want to start work straight away. To have salary, to have a contract – that’s absurd! It does not work this way” (reporter, outlet 1)

Securities provided to employees are also curtailed. Given the demise of state welfare and privatization of, for example, healthcare, only 27% of employers provide workers with medical insurances. In the meantime, more than a third of journalists report having no paid sick leaves. One of the journalists even claimed he had to use his vacation days for treatment, since the

⁴² Also, a long unpaid – or low paid – internship requires possession of economic capital. Class position of independent journalists would be discussed later.

employer did not let him take a sick leave. Moreover, in half of the outlets workers receive envelope salaries. As the survey shows, only 53% of journalists receive official pay. Lack of official incomes seriously affects the pensions, making future well-being less certain. Wage adjustment – both official and “envelope” ones – to inflation is not a very common practice: 64% of full-time workers claimed no indexation of their wages.

Altogether, based on formal details of labor conditions represented in the survey data and in narratives of my interviewees, labor of independent journalists can be qualified as precarious. However, journalists do not acknowledge precarity and do not view it as a problem. Further I will highlight some of the possible explanations of such a matter of things.

4.2 Ignorance of economic precarity: finding reasons

4.2.1 Understanding of labor and economic precarity as non-existent

The data I have – narratives of the journalists I talked to as well as public utterances of members of the field – demonstrates that there is a contradiction between the critical analytical view of labor scholars have and the one workers within the field share. Independent journalists’ understanding of their labor is broader than a mere value-creating activity through application of bodily and mental capacities, comprising commodified labor power (Marx, 1902) or, to put it more simply, production of use value and surplus value. Thus, it is journalists’ perception of own labor that has an impact on low acknowledgement of its economic precarity. For this reason, I aim to elaborate an approach to labor derived from journalists’ narratives. There are two crucial features of independent journalistic labor I find constitutive. The first one stems from the journalists’ acknowledgement of the struggle independent outlets take part in for redefinition of the “illusory” public interests, comprising the hegemonic vision of the state (Jessop, 2015) and their perspective on personal role in this process as members of the outlets.

The second key detail, contributing to a specific vision of labor, is high level of informality within the outlets stipulating subjective labor-related experience as pleasurable and fulfilling, which is not limited to work in media only, but is relevant to employment in other sectors of immaterial production as well – academia, art, IT (Gill and Pratt, 2008; de Peuter, 2014).

4.2.2 Pursuing the common good

The first factor contributing to a specific understanding of labor among journalists and their disregard of economic precarity is tied to perception of labor-related activities as performed within the struggle for the “good”. In other words, labor is viewed by journalists as serving public interest and, therefore, as socially important. Fulfilling the “mission”⁴³ to translate a certain set of ideas among the population and to transform the state project for the common good, independent journalists might neglect the economic dimension of labor and ignore precarious position⁴⁴. For understanding the high valuation of undertaking the “mission” among journalists, I consider application of Boltanski’s theory of justification and worth to journalists’ work helpful.

Journalists’ activities might be placed within the “civic world”, which implies that they justify and value own activities through the task of representation of the common interest and will (Boltanski, 2006). Therefore, the economic dimension of work recedes into the background.

A bit needs to be said on journalists’ vision of their role in the struggle and representation of the common interest – or of their “mission” to better place their work within the civic world.

⁴³ Since journalists share ideas and attempt to distribute them and as a result to change the balance of forces, I find analogy between independent journalists and missionaries appropriate.

⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, it is journalists’ class position that allows them privileging “fulfillment of the mission” and downplaying economic instabilities that such immaterial labor carries. Class positions of journalists would be elucidated later.

As it has been discussed earlier, I view independent critical outlets in Russia as forces within the social whole that are alternative to the state⁴⁵. As Jessop declares, forces struggle for elaboration of a legitimate hegemonic vision of the “nature and purposes of the state for the wider society” (Jessop, 2015: 57), and attempt to influence the design of the state project. Thus, I treat the Russian independent media, critical of the current hegemonic vision of the state, as striving toward elaboration and translation of the alternative vision. Implying a divergent from the state’s system of forms of domination, the journalists believe – like the bureaucrats within the state apparatus – that their project better represents the public interests⁴⁶. Thus, journalists consider distribution of the alternative ideas and principles of vision – which they treat as “true” – among the population as a good and important business.

“Lots of journalists want to bring good knowledge, light, unravel the truth to the readers” (reporter, outlet 7)

“I think informing people of what is really taking place in the world is of highest importance” (reporter, outlet 1)

Thus, since “in the civic world, the worthy beings are ... the collectives that assemble and organize them” (Boltanski, 2006: 186), performance of these “missionary” functions coupled with an attempt to intervene in the process of re-formation of the state project is subjectively perceived by journalists as serving the public interest and brings “moral” capital to the workers. “Moral” capital, therefore, is one of the constitutive elements of the journalistic labor, which, in turn, can be seen as compensating labor-related insecurities. Journalists’ ignorance of the formal dimension of work is evident from their narratives about the labor conditions.

⁴⁵ Since sets of ideas and visions of the state project, shared by journalists within the outlets diverge from the dominant state’s hegemonic vision.

⁴⁶ It is based on a different and – from journalists’ standpoint – more socially beneficial idea of a system of forms of domination. For example, alternative vision of a class structure, manifested in journalists’ critique of corruption and of economic reforms; also critique of other parts of the current state project: dominant political alignment, gender relations, religion, etc. (Jessop, p 59)

Answering my questions about the formal grounds of employment, securities provided by the employer and so on, they demonstrated lack of competences and interest. Only one of my interviewees showed knowledge of the subject.

“My colleagues have no idea about what work should be paid and how it needs to be done. No one knows the Labor Code and so on. I would say, journalists are poorly competent in this sphere [labor law]” (reporter, outlet 7)

“I will say a criminal phrase now, but I never read the contract and can not remember anything from it. It is a pure formality” (reporter, outlet 1)

Therefore, representation of the collective will or interest, that journalists consider being pursuing, is treated as the most valuable within the logic of the civic world and outbalances the precarity of work.

4.2.3 Informality at workplace and “work as play”

Literature on immaterial labor argues that some employment domains, mostly those related to symbolic production, imply increased affective bindings (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 15). Affect involves both affirmative feelings, manifested in work perceived as satisfying and pleasurable, and negative ones, such as fatigue, exhaustion and frustration. While empirical studies demonstrate that negative affective features of immaterial labor frequently outbalance the positive ones (de Peuter, 2014; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Ursell, 2000), journalists I was talking to regard own work mostly as enjoyable.

To a large extent positive affective bindings derive from high level of informality. Informality within the outlets is based on several elements, highlighted by journalists. Among others are horizontal organizational structure within the outlets, strong social integration, manifested though *“everything rest[ing] on good personal relations” (reporter, outlet 4)* and *“pleasant environment” (reporter, outlet 3)* at workplace. Coupled with journalists’ claims that labor

involves activities they enjoy accomplishing – *“it is exactly what I enjoy doing the most”* (reporter, outlet 6) – the expression “work as play” gets applicable to their labor.

There are two aspects of labor, related to economic precarity and its neglect, stemming from high level of informality. First, good social environment and perception of work as satisfying cause downplay of significance of formalities of employment and frequent violations of labor law, which are not problematized by journalists as such⁴⁷. One of illustrations of labor regulations violation is mass overtime work, or, as theorists of immaterial labor refer to it, “colonization of life with work”. Formally, according to contracts, journalists’ workday does not exceed 8 hours. Yet, as survey of Labor Union demonstrates, 58% of journalists work more than that (up until 14 hours per day) and 84% of workers claim that they overwork more than once per week. Narratives like this one emerge from interview to interview:

“No one spends 8 hours in office. Usually I come around 11am and go back home at 10pm” (investigative journalist, outlet 4)

In a minor share of outlets (as survey reports, it concerns 14% of employees) overtime work is paid, but mostly journalists do not get extra income for staying in office longer. Moreover, only few of my interviewees problematized overwork and attempted to discuss the issue with the people in charge. A significant share of journalists normalizes overtime work and claim it to be a signifier of a good worker:

“work has to be more important than... so far it happens that work is more important than personal life and my own plans” (reporter, outlet 1)

“you can come in the morning, before the briefing, and leave the office late at night. Moreover, you leave the office, get a phone call and be asked to do something urgently. So you go somewhere” (investigative journalist, outlet 4)

⁴⁷ Pursuing a mission, discussed above, also contributes to non-acknowledgement of violation of law.

Yet, such “colonization of life with work” is not treated as problematic, since time spent in the office is considered enjoyable. Journalists report socializing with colleagues they like, performing pleasant activities and also producing the product – textual news/investigative materials – which “belongs” to them rather than is appropriated by a capitalist.

“of course, I have to stay longer to finish work. It is in my interests to finish a material – it is my material, only I will suffer if I leave it incomplete” (reporter, outlet 6)

The second way how informality reinforces precarity and in the meantime prevents journalists from resisting against it is based on strong social ties within the outlet. A situation in which a group of workers considers labor as a common activity for the one goal (a common good as it has been discussed above) results in statements such as “*we all here stick together*” which in turn hinders articulation of dissatisfaction with work. Also, strong social ties make complaining against precarity and “uprising against principles of shock work” “improper” (Kuleva, 2017: 59).

“I am satisfied with work – I have friendly relations with the managing director and all the editors” (reporter, outlet 5)

“many journalists are afraid or simply don’t want to discuss with managers if something is wrong” (reporter, outlet 7)

However, what was the most intriguing for me is that precarity of labor and disadvantageous working conditions are ignored by journalists only till a certain point. One of the chairmen of Labor Union of Journalists, an organization initially created for regulation of labor-related conflicts of both economic and political nature⁴⁸, claimed that friendly relations within the

⁴⁸ Labor Union of Journalists is a non-state organization, established in 2016. Leadership of the organization share leftist political views, therefore, the organization they chair treats labor of journalists as precarious and regards one of its “missions” – along with provision of help in resolution of labor-related conflicts – “enlightenment” of Russian journalists on Labor law and workers’ rights. <https://profjur.org/#whatwedo> (accessed on 2.06.2018)

outlets often prevent journalists from acknowledging violations of the labor law and of labor-related agreements written in the contracts. Once a conflict situation arises (often accompanied with violations of labor regulations), and a regime of informality between a worker and a manager collapses, journalists suddenly realize that labor conditions are dissatisfying:

“In fact, I can describe a simple recurrent situation. A journalist has been working in an independent outlet. He was on good terms with the editor, with his immediate managers. He has been enjoying his work. Good wage. Often, the wage was ok, but it was paid unofficially. The formal salary was small, and the other informal part was an envelope wage. And accidentally relations with managers got worse, it happens, they quarreled, and the worker was said “leave us! and we will compensate you based on your formal wage”, which is almost nothing (3 kopeyki). And then usually realization of some problem arises, when journalists get into a conflict situation. They suddenly realize that they are not appreciated as workers, they in fact no one in the outlet really needs them” (Labor Union Chairman)

This long quote highlights that in fact precarity is not a condition of labor relations elaborated by scholars for analytical purposes. Russian media labor does have many characteristics allowing its qualification as precarious. Yet, specificities of work in a particular sector of immaterial production in an authoritarian state stipulate non-acknowledgment of precarity on a daily basis.

4.2.4 Class positions of journalists

Apart from a specific stance on labor Russian independent journalists share, I argue that class positions of journalists contribute to ignorance of employment instability. Students of precarity argue that “getting by in an informal cultural labor economy obliges individual coping strategies” (de Peuter, 2015: 33). In this sense, Russian independent journalists, being in a privileged class position, are integrated in safety nets, which they can employ in a crisis situation. Families, possessing economic capital, might serve foundations for coping strategies

in case of job loss, income payment delay, failed internship, etc. Thus integration into such safety nets makes economic precarity less dangerous and, therefore, less problematic. Initially I did not intend to talk to journalists about their class backgrounds. Yet, this information occasionally popped up in the interviews. One of my interviewees, trying to generalize, claims that

“I was always living in so-called “greenhouse” conditions. So, especially in the very beginning, when I did not earn anything, it was fine. Work was more like a hobby for me. My parents gave me a car, I had a place to live in, I did not need a thing! I think it concerns most of the journalists in this kind of outlets – people who need to work for income, people in need would never start working in such a place”
(reporter, outlet 5)

Independent journalists’ decreased interest in formal foundations of employment can also be explained by observing independent outlets within the entire Russian media field and particularly composition of workers in it. For this purpose, Bourdieu’s stance on the field of cultural production as an “economic world reversed” (Bourdieu, 1993) is pertinent. Albeit my research did not focus on the entire media field in Russia but on independent media only, one of the journalists I talked to made a distinction between the backgrounds of journalists working in independent outlets and the “*pro-Kremlin*” ones, which I find important to elaborate.

Two types of Russian media, distinguished by students of Russian media field (Kiriya, 2013; Kachkaeva and Fossato, 2016), can be treated as belonging to two major poles or subfields within the big one: field of restricted and field of large-scale production. To explain how this division into subfields helps understand the low level of acknowledgement of economic precarity among independent journalists I need to shed light on specificities of the two subfields. As Bourdieu claims, what differs them is the level of autonomy from the fundamental principle of hierarchization, which is based on the economy. The expression “art for art’s sake” corresponds to the field of restricted production: often “produc[ing] for other producers”, actors

involved are oriented primarily at “adherence to the values” and creation of a high-quality product, and in this way are to a significant extent autonomous from the dominant principle of hierarchization and partly ignore the economic. For the actors in the field of large-scale production, which is often “symbolically excluded and discredited”, pursuing of the economic interests is paramount. Thus, the fields of cultural production become “the economic worlds reversed” (Bourdieu, 1993: 39). I suggest considering independent media as belonging to the field of restricted production for pursuing a “mission”, which they treat as highest priority as it has been discussed earlier, and due to restricted audience they have

“we have a small intellectual audience ... all these media are small cozy nests; they all write pretty much for each other” (editor, outlet 5)

Accordingly, the outlets, which are loyal to the state apparatus, would be treated as belonging to a field of large-scale production.

My interviewee demonstrates, how division of media into two “camps”, having different orientations, is closely related to backgrounds of journalists working in two types of outlets.

“of course, I had a clear picture in mind that there is “real” journalism and there is TV, where they tell lies. There was a split in the department of journalism between guys who wanted to work on TV, Channel 1, and ... the oppositional guys who wanted to work in independent media, where I belonged... Guys who wanted to have a good career, to have great social mobility and to earn money, they started working on TV. Those were primarily people from the regions, who strived at great economic success. It is unlikely that they were growing up in favorable conditions. Their starting point was much lower than ours [those who are currently journalists in independent media] – metropolitan kids with well off parents” (reporter, outlet 6)

Thus, there is a correlation between the economic capital of the family journalists originate from and their employment within the field of restricted or large-scale production. Independent

journalists, thus, have access to resources they might potentially employ, allowing them to “fulfill a mission” and stay in a field of restricted production – in independent media.

4.2.5 Independent journalists’ ideologies

The last but not the least reason for ignorance of economic precarity I would like to point at is rooted in ideologies journalists have. As it has been said earlier, independent journalists in Russia share liberal views: they put individual freedoms to the first place, including the entrepreneurial freedoms. To a large extent their ideologies successfully fit in and, what is more, are partly engendered by the global hegemonic neoliberal discourse, which the Russian authoritarian neoliberal state is partly taking part in. Some scholars argue that neoliberal states impose the “neoliberal rationality” upon its subjects. Adapting Foucauldian theory (Foucault, 1991) to the study of global economic transformations, some scholars claim that neoliberalism is not only a structural condition, but also a specific form of governmentality (Ong, 2007; Brown, 2015). Ong declares that neoliberalism can be viewed as a “technology of governing ‘free subjects’... that requires people to be free and self-managing in different spheres of everyday life” (Ong, 2007: 4)”. Subjects, internalizing neoliberal rationality, regard free market, including free labor market, as a virtue rather than oppressive and problematic. In this respect, independent journalists accept this hegemonic discourse willingly and readily, vision of free market as bringing insecurities fades into insignificance, and their non-acknowledgement of economic precarity becomes even more understandable and even reasonable⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ One might find a contradiction in the journalists’ struggle against the state project – given that it is the neoliberal state which imposes neoliberal rationality on subjects, journalists turn out to operate within its logic and play the game “by the state’s rules”. However, liberal journalists manage to utilize this logic, imposed by the state, as a tool against the other dimension of the state’s project.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to elaborate a broader understanding of precarity than the one developed by the theorists of labor. More precisely, I discussed how precarity might be caused not only by flexibilization and casualization of employment relations, triggered by the transformation of the economic regime and the neoliberal policies implemented, but also by the political regime. I used Jessop's strategic-relational approach to the state and, by arguing that the state tends to marginalize alternative forces to maintain order, claimed that it affects labor in institutions, comprising such alternative forces. Thus, particularly in authoritarian states, labor, related to "activities involved in defining and fixing [...] public opinion" (Lazzarato, 1996: 133) is often characterized by insecurity, unpredictability of employment and high dependence on the state, a condition I refer to as "political precarity".

More specifically, I investigated Russian independent journalists' labor experiences and subjectivities in the context of authoritarian neoliberal order. As I demonstrated, they face a real-existent condition of both economic and political precarity. However, my research question, that was put as *how* Russian independent journalists *perceive and articulate* the situation of these two dimensions of precarity, allowed me to discover a contradiction in their modes of articulation and acknowledgement of insecurities.

While journalists put a large emphasis on the political dimension of precarity and broadly discuss the mechanisms of state's intervention in their work as well as the consequences these unpredictable interventions carry for employment, they tend to ignore the economic instabilities. I brought up several reasons for non-acknowledgement of economic precarity, among which are specific understanding of labor, based on endeavor to pursue a mission and causing high affective bindings to work, as well as privileged class positions of journalists.

The expanded understanding of precarity and its political dimension I introduce in the thesis can be used not only in the research of Russian independent journalists. First, it is applicable to other spheres of cultural production, such as academia or arts, since these domains can be also viewed as forces, alternative to the state and attempting to subvert the current order by the means of distributing “oppositional” ideas. Secondly, Russia is not the only state where political regime might trigger instability of workers in some sectors. The idea of political precarity of labor is applicable to such contexts as, for example, Turkish or Hungarian.

I identify two major limitations of this thesis. First, given that this research has a political-economic focus, I could not elaborate the cultural aspects of work in independent journalism in Russia, which comprise a separate wide research area, but I used them as an explanatory scheme for understanding journalists’ disrespect of economic precarity. Further and more detailed research can be done on the specific meanings independent “missionary” journalists imbue in their work practices. Secondly, this thesis covers a narrow part of the Russian journalistic field and the findings cannot be extrapolated to labor experiences of the entire media industry in the country. In this way, I assume, experiences of labor of journalists, working in “pro-Kremlin” outlets, significantly differs from that of independent journalists’: they hardly face the political dimension of precarity since they do not oppose the contingent state project, but instead might have different sources of instability. Research of the other pole of the journalistic field might saturate the concept of precarity even more.

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