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Contesting the State under Authoritarianism:

Critical Journalists in China and Russia

Maria Repnikova

In the winter of 2011–2012, Russia’s liberal journalists and intellectuals took part in and galvanized the largest protest movement Russia has witnessed since the 1990s. The “White Ribbon Movement” attracted tens of thousands to protest rigged parliamentary elections and Putin’s renewed ambition for presidency.¹ One of the key leaders of the movement, Aleksey Navalny, an anti-corruption blogger, drew in crowds of angry protesters with spirited patriotic speeches against the regime. Prominent critical journalists from traditional media mobilized the public by organizing donations and petitions on social media and relentlessly reported on the events, otherwise censored in mainstream news outlets. Though Putin ascended back to his post of president, the movement remains an important marker of anti-establishment attitudes of Russian critical voices and their capacity to gain momentum unanticipated by the regime.

A year later, in January 2013, China’s critical journalists working for the famous Guangzhou news outlet, *Southern Weekly*, came out to protest local censorship of a New Year editorial. The protest, initially depicted by Western press as a pro-democracy crusade, strayed far from democratic ambitions. China’s disgruntled critical journalists avoided the public,² quickly negotiated behind closed doors, and returned to business as usual.³ The largest journalist-inspired protest in recent Chinese history targeted only some parameters of censorship, underscoring that even the most publicized incidents of journalistic contention in China are of a subdued nature, sparking up and fading within the system.

These two examples of journalistic resistance suggest that journalists operating on the fringes of permissible in two seemingly similar authoritarian contexts might contest power in different ways, radicalizing and enacting opposition in the case of Russia, and cautiously pushing their own agenda within the system, in the case of China. This study interrogates these apparent distinctions and theorizes about the modes of boundary-spanning contention under authoritarian rule.⁴ Drawing on extensive fieldwork in both countries, the article positions the rare incidents of journalistic upheaval in the palette of their routine practices and perceptions of their political roles, and links these to

journalists' broader conceptions of political change, rooted in recent experiences with alternative political models. Whereas in Russia, critical journalists conceive of their role as system antagonists, in China, they position themselves in a fluid partnership—or a governance nexus⁵—with the party-state. These distinct modes of contesting the system reflect journalists' visions for political transformation—a gradual shift in the case of China and a radical upheaval in the case of Russia—built on recent national experiences with democratic politics.

Comparative Authoritarianism and Grasping Contention from Below

In response to an explosive proliferation of non-democratic regimes in the past decade, comparative authoritarianism literature has shifted away from the transition paradigm towards explanations of regimes' political survival. In doing so, scholars have largely adopted a top-down prism, illuminating the importance of the coercive apparatus,⁶ state power,⁷ partisan legislatures,⁸ selective censorship,⁹ and propaganda,¹⁰ amongst other institutions and mechanisms behind authoritarian durability. Some studies, specifically focusing on pseudo-democratic institutions under authoritarianism—namely elections—have further demonstrated how regimes can effectively manipulate them to boost legitimacy and co-opt potential enemies.¹¹ The top-down analysis paints authoritarian regimes as cohesive and efficient at deploying a sophisticated “menu of manipulation” to extinguish threats from below and enhance durability.¹²

When societal or bottom-up perspectives drive the analysis, the focus tends to fall on critical points of collision between state and society, when authoritarian regimes are turning the tide towards democracy. In their rich study of diverse electoral outcomes in post-Soviet states, for instance, Bunce and Wolchik point to a strong civil society as critical for empowering opposition and facilitating democratization.¹³ Trejo's work on Mexico's authoritarian regime highlights the linkages between indigenous uprisings and a democratization movement.¹⁴ Other works underline the significance of activism, and especially of citizen journalism, in recent revolutions in the Middle East,¹⁵ while others carry an implicit interest in democratic outcomes. Gilley's conceptualization of spaces for political participation under authoritarianism as “democratic enclaves,” for instance, endows certain spaces and the actors within them with hopeful potential for playing a democratizing role.¹⁶

Most contention, however, happens alongside authoritarian rule, rarely bringing about democratic outcomes. Grasping such practices can inform us about the more subtle, ongoing pressures on authoritarian adaptability. The existing studies tend to identify and theorize micro and macro-strategies in single-country cases. Hassid, for instance, puts forward a concept of “pushback” in theorizing about Chinese journalists' resistance that does not amount to outright subversion.¹⁷ O'Brien's concept of “rightful resistance” underscores the importance of deploying existing channels as a means of voicing opposition and affecting change in China.¹⁸ Chua's concept of “strategic adaptation,” that draws on the study of gay resistance in Singapore, points to the

importance of law as a tactical tool that facilitates these practices.¹⁹ This article builds on these works and pushes the analysis beyond specific strategies and towards a theorization of distinct types of contestation under authoritarian rule by focusing on the largely overlooked,²⁰ but arguably the more contentious, actors probing authoritarianism: critical journalists. Critical journalists operate on the fringes of the media and political landscape and attempt to investigate governance and offer alternative discourses to those of official state media that propagate views from the top. Such journalists are especially sensitive for authoritarian leaders as they can offer and diffuse a potential counter-narrative that challenges power, and can thereby mobilize social movements. At the same time, if handled skillfully, critical journalists can serve as useful allies, endowing the state with credibility and precious information access that is lacking in authoritarian systems.²¹ While some studies have mapped out comparative strategies for evading censorship under authoritarianism and engaging in activism online,²² we still know little about journalists' distinct relationships to the state under authoritarianism, nor about their dispositions when it comes to affecting political and societal change.

Specifically, the study of critical journalists—defined here as media professionals working for nationally reputable news outlets who engage in investigative and in-depth reporting on contentious social issues—in China and Russia illustrates two modes of boundary-spanning activity under authoritarian rule: fluid collaboration and oppositional contestation. The former signifies journalists' creative alignment with state interests being at the core of their defiance. Distinct from the framework of “rightful resistance,” it positions the nexus or partnership with the state as driving the very acts of contestation. Not only are journalists making use of official channels, they align their short-term and long-term objectives and visions for political change with that of the central party-state. This notion of partaking in governance nexus with the party speaks to other works on Chinese intellectuals²³ and NGO leaders²⁴ that have highlighted the collaborative facet underpinning interactions between activists and the central state. The second type of marginalized opposition embodies contestation that positions itself on the opposite spectrum or against the political status quo. It deploys the tactics of political opposition in democratic contexts, featuring less adaptation to political apparatus and limited flexibility when it comes to the vision for political change. These two types of boundary-spanning activity, of course, can co-exist within a single political entity, as some groups are more inclined to partner with the state, while others are more radicalized in favor of Western-style democracy. In this article, however, the distinction is explored and theorized on the basis of comparing two similar groups in two large authoritarian states: China and Russia.

China and Russia: Parallels in Political and Media Governance

The two largest authoritarian regimes in the world that share communist and socialist legacies—China and Russia—are frequently merged together in discussions of global illiberal trends. From their voting down of U.N. Security Council resolutions (they voted down six resolutions together in the past decade),²⁵ to their joint declarations of

support for Internet sovereignty,²⁶ the two regimes externally exhibit some shared positions on sensitive political issues. Domestically, there are growing signs of convergence between Presidents Xi and Putin, both featuring increasingly personalistic leadership traits, more centralized management of bureaucracy and dissent, and a resurrection of nationalist and populist rhetoric used for legitimization purposes.²⁷

At the same time, the two regimes also carry some important distinctions in societal governance that add theoretical richness to the comparative analysis. Specifically, whereas in China there is a consultative dimension underpinning the party's mode of governance,²⁸ with the state and society being actively engaged with one another,²⁹ in Russia, the society has been largely excluded from governance processes or bound by a "non-participation pact," whereby the leadership provides stability in exchange for public acquiescence.³⁰ The one-party state seems to derive some utility from bottom-up feedback in mitigating the challenges of effective vertical accountability, whereas Putin's regime has thus far ruled via power-vertical, seeking little societal feedback. These distinctions are likely to permeate throughout the comparative analysis of journalists' contestation in the two contexts.

Turning to the realm of the media, the two media systems are heavily state-controlled. Russian media has undergone a transition from the democratic 1990s to state capture under Putin, with all major news outlets (namely television but also key print outlets and online news platforms) now either directly or indirectly belonging to the state,³¹ while the Chinese media has consistently remained under the grip of the powerful Propaganda Department.³² While political control over the media features some distinctions between the two cases, such as the presence of more institutionalized censorship in China versus ad-hoc, post-factum coercion in Russia, both nations consistently appear at the bottom of press freedom rankings.³³ Russian media is still commercially freer than its Chinese counterparts (the highest private ownership stake allowed in Chinese media is 49 percent),³⁴ but Russian authorities put pressure on private media owners through tax police and economic threats to media stakeholders.³⁵ At the same time, in both contexts, control over the media (similar to civil society) is not absolute, and some spaces for critical reporting continue to survive and reinvent themselves. Despite the constraining environments, in both China and Russia there are a number of nationally renowned news outlets that operate on the edges of the political system, engaging in investigative and in-depth reporting on contentious societal issues, such as corruption and protests. In both contexts, these outlets and individuals face significant risks as they navigate the ambiguous restrictions and dangerous political repercussions of their work. This article illuminates the perspectives of these individuals that can easily get submerged under the broader narratives of censorship and repression.

Data and Analysis

In examining journalistic contestation and political dispositions in China and Russia, this article primarily draws on in-depth interviews with journalists, but also triangulates

these data through interviews with media scholars, media regulating officials, and experts, as well as participant observation of journalistic practices online and offline. To ensure that the sampling draws on comparable groups in the two contexts, this study focused on media professionals operating on the most extreme spectrums in their respective contexts, or on the fringes of the permissible. The process of sampling was carried out in two phases. First, preliminary fieldwork and interviews were conducted with media scholars and observers (2008–2010) to identify the news outlets that are nationally reputable for investigative reporting in the two countries. Then a total of eighty interviewees were selected from these respective outlets for in-depth interviews. In China, these include journalists from the Guangzhou-based *Nanfang Zhoumo*, *Nanfang Dushibao*, and *Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan*, as well as the Beijing-based *Caijing* and *Caixin* magazines, the *Bingdian* edition of *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*, and the CCTV program, *Jiaodian Fangtan*. In Russia, interviewees draw from mainly Moscow-based newspapers *Novaya Gazeta* and *Vedomosti* (especially the op-ed page), the magazines *Vlast'* and *The New Times*, and liberal investigative digital news outlets, *agentura.ru* and *grani.ru*. Interviews were also carried out with some retired investigative journalists and freelance commentators in both countries. While journalist interviewees in Russia are all based in the capital, their counterparts in China are spread between news outlets in Beijing and Guangzhou. This regional difference reflects the divergence in political and economic centralization in the two cases. In China, the southern province of Guangzhou has served as one of the key centers for liberal thinking, in part due to its distance from Beijing and in part due to its economic vibrancy and, up until recently, a more open-minded orientation of provincial leadership, whereas in Russia, the key center for intellectual and critical thinking has consistently remained in Moscow.

It is important to clarify here that this study focuses on professional journalists rather than bloggers and social media commentators, although journalists tend to have parallel identities online.³⁶ The interest in media practitioners is both methodologically and theoretically grounded. First, independent reporting remains largely exclusive to professional news organizations in China, as bloggers and online commentators are officially outlawed from carrying out and publicizing independent investigations.³⁷ In examining critical journalists in comparative perspective, therefore, the emphasis had to remain on established news outlets (including digital only news outlets). Focusing on professionals was also driven by the interest to trace journalists' perceptions over time, grounding them in historical experiences, and thereby illustrating the evolution of political culture of media practitioners. Theoretically, media professionals represent a unique actor in authoritarian systems. Their visibility (in contrast to anonymity of many online commentators) makes them especially vulnerable to political control, while at the same time empowering them as public opinion makers and potential social movement leaders that can undermine the legitimacy of authoritarian leaders.

In addition to journalists, the author has interviewed media experts at think tanks and at top journalism schools in Moscow (e.g., the Carnegie Center, Moscow State University, and the Levada Center, as well as the journalism department at Moscow State University) and Beijing (Renmin University, Beijing University, and Tsinghua)

about their views on the evolution of critical journalism and state-media relations. Interviews with media regulating officials were carried out in Beijing, including officials based at the Propaganda Department and the General Administration for Publication and Press. Considering the sensitivity of the subject, interviews were conducted through the snowball technique, and the anonymity of interviewees' was ensured unless otherwise agreed upon with an interviewee. Finally, the analysis draws on participant observation experiences at media workshops on investigative journalism and media ethics in Beijing, as well as seminars on media politics in Moscow, and observations of journalists' posts and activities online (Facebook and LiveJournal in the case of Russia and Weibo in the case of China).

Partnership versus Opposition: Two Forms of Contesting the State

Chinese Critical Journalists: Partnering with the State Chinese journalists' notion of partnering with the central state manifests itself in discussions of the roles their reporting serves in the political system—that of facilitating local-level accountability, channeling societal grievances to the forefront, and conceiving solutions to problems—all functions officially welcomed by the central state. As for the former, interviewees expressed the aim of media oversight as that of providing “the government with a small window into societal problems, which officials otherwise might not be able to see.”³⁸ These problems, exposed by journalists, tend to concern local-level governance failures (provincial level and below) and thereby contribute to enforcement of vertical accountability. Media oversight “can force local officials to practice more self-restraint, as they tend to fear being exposed by the media,” noted a journalist at *Nanfang Dushibao*.³⁹ Interviewees share a myriad of examples of local investigations ranging from local officials' mistreatment of petitioners, to webs of official corruption leading up to the school tragedy during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, to Beijing officials' cover-up of the number of victims in Beijing floods of 2012. The author's observations at two annual conferences on investigative reporting (*yulun jiandu huiyi*), as well as the analysis of materials gathered from these conference proceedings, similarly point to the local emphasis of China's media oversight, rarely touching on central-level issues. Many local cases tackled by journalists, moreover, involve cross-territorial supervision (*yidi jiandu*), with journalists from one province investigating governance failures in another, thereby bypassing regional propaganda authorities and serving as an extra “eye” in the field for central government, which struggles in getting timely information from below.⁴⁰ As argued by Chinese media experts, referring to the productive synergy between journalists and the central state: “If media supervision is combined with that carried out by central authorities, it is more likely to bring about some results.”⁴¹

Other than helping to improve local governance, China's critical journalists underscore their role of channeling societal interests to the state. In their presentations to university journalism students, China's famous investigative reporters talk about lives changed through their reporting, emphasizing that one of the driving reasons for

becoming an investigative journalist is that of helping people like themselves—those from rural, underprivileged backgrounds. Some journalists are also active civil society participants, launching foundations and charity organizations alongside their media occupations. Wang Keqin, a veteran investigative journalist from Gansu, for instance, has started an NGO to raise money for miners who suffer from a lung disease,⁴² and Deng Fei, a former *Nanfang Dushibao* journalist, has launched a rural school initiative that has gained wide publicity in China and in the West.⁴³ Others work closely with NGOs and lawyers to promote certain societal agendas in key areas, such as environmental activism, social justice, and education access. During workshops held in Beijing on media ethics and environmental justice, I observed active interlinks across these groups. The societal advocacy agenda of Chinese journalists has been noted by other scholars, who describe some Chinese media professionals as belonging to a category of “advocacy journalists.”⁴⁴ A vivid example of such advocacy journalism work is the “Under the Dome” pollution documentary by Chai Jing that garnered millions of views on social media. The responsibility of transmitting public sentiments is endowed in the very official concept of media supervision or *yulun jiandu*, which directly translates as supervision through public opinion. First invoked by Premier Zhao Ziyang in 1989,⁴⁵ *yulun jiandu* has been repeatedly invoked as an official media policy, alongside media’s guidance of public opinion or *yulun yingdao*.⁴⁶ The significance of this concept, as distinct from watchdog media role in the West, is that media is responsible for representing the masses rather than strictly holding the power accountable. In intending to serve the public, therefore, Chinese journalists also align themselves with the official media policy.

Finally, China’s critical journalists manifest their partnership with the state by producing solutions-oriented or “constructive” (*jianshexing*) reporting. Interviewees underscore the importance of providing in-depth analytical assessments behind governance failures and offering solutions to problems. The following excerpt from an interview with an editor at *Caijing* magazine and later *Caixin* contrasts watchdog journalism practices in the West with practices in China:

Beyond reporting facts, I think it is necessary to think through how to solve issues, how to move forward. I think Western understanding of journalism is often very focused on revealing facts and problems as the primary goal of journalism. In China, however, because it is now in a developing, transitioning phase, constructive and balanced criticism is much more valuable than merely reporting facts. I think by doing this we can avert multiple political pressures, and also have a stronger influence on societal development.⁴⁷

Another journalist explains that critical reporting “is not just about exposing the problems, but about considering what happens after that, the best investigations should contribute to some progress.”⁴⁸ My analysis of Chinese investigative reports found that regardless of the paper or the reporting genre, critical articles tend to incorporate some hopeful sentiment, either by concluding with potential ways to resolve a crisis, or by documenting steps already undertaken by authorities to do so. *Caijing*’s famous investigations of the coal-mining disasters over the past decade, for instance, carried a

direct policy recommendation of marketizing the mining sector,⁴⁹ and the magazine's powerful investigation of the school collapse during the Wenchuan earthquake advocated for establishing a better system of supervision over public construction that would allow for more input from the public.⁵⁰ In addition to providing suggestions, these articles also underscored the central state's efforts at holding local officials accountable, pre-empting disasters, and demonstrating concern for public interest by appearing at disaster scenes and interacting with victims.

Constructive journalism fits perfectly into the journalists' nexus with the central state as, on the one hand, it echoes the party's vision of constructive critique consistently promoted in official statements, while, on the other, it is conditioned upon self-censorship, as journalists carefully toe the line by infusing a hopeful sentiment into otherwise negative stories. As for official endorsements, the term constructive has appeared in many official speeches on media oversight role or *yulun jiandu* in the past three decades.⁵¹ The party's support for media supervision through public opinion echoes Lenin's original notion of "signals from below," whereby public expression of opinions could translate into self-correction of the party.⁵² "Media supervision has to be constructive," explained a high-ranking official from the General Administration of Publication and Press,⁵³ further noting that "constructive" signifies an emphasis on progress and solutions. At the same time, constructive criticism calls for a degree of caution on behalf of critical journalists, as they navigate the ambiguous construct of positive or hopeful critique. Some journalist interviewees directly note that by engaging in constructive reporting, they anticipate political reactions, while others admit that constructive critique is less provocative and thereby less sensitive to authorities.⁵⁴ By trying to be constructive, journalists both potentially assist officials in finding solutions to problems and keep their critique milder and less threatening.

Chinese journalists, therefore, position themselves as partners of the central state by aiding in enforcing local accountability, channelling societal concerns, and incorporating solutions. In doing so, these journalists do not stray away from contention, as they actively attempt to outrun censorship, spill their stories online, work with civil society actors to mound pressure on the state, and even occasionally openly protest censorship.⁵⁵ This contestation and negotiation between journalists and officials, however, takes place within the larger framework of collaborative governance documented above and should not be mistaken for oppositional practices vis-à-vis the regime. The *Nanfang Zhoumo* protest—the most dramatic organised expression against censorship in the past decade—introduced at the beginning of this article is the prime example. The famous media outlet has publicly spoken out against Tuo Zhen, the local censor that changed the paper's reflective New Year editorial into a propaganda piece, sparking a wave of support from citizens and micro-bloggers. Journalists, however, blamed local officials, while appealing to central authorities to uphold their space within the system, cautiously abstained from a larger movement, and quickly returned to work as usual.⁵⁶ Furthermore, while social media expressions can manifest more extreme criticisms and sarcastic political remarks in contrast to mainstream journalists, studies of media activism still highlight that the majority of online postings tend to feature creative

irony and subtle discourses, purposefully avoiding direct confrontations with the state.⁵⁷ Overall, both journalists and social media users tend to pragmatically and symbolically align with the central state, even if they privately harbour deep dissatisfaction with the system.

In partaking in this collaborative governance axis with the state, journalists express hopes for state acknowledgement of their suggestions. Interviewees referred to their exposés as “opportunities for the government to enact change”⁵⁸ or as helping to make the government “more efficient.”⁵⁹ More broadly, some journalists highlighted the benefits of *yulun jiandu* for official adaptation and resilience. “Of course, *yulun jiandu* benefits the government ... one of the defining characteristics of authoritarian regimes is their simplification ... the more the media conveys the genuine public opinion to authorities, the more the party-state can address the relevant issues and adapt itself through self-improvement,” noted a well-known editor based in Beijing.⁶⁰ In a way, journalists convey cynicism about being indirectly used by the government to uphold stability and remain in power. Journalists envision the official response directly to their reports as a way of pre-empting further public discontent.

Russian Journalists: Opposing the State In contrast to Chinese critical journalists, Russian critical journalists tend to directly or implicitly associate themselves with political opposition. Their oppositional orientation is manifested in their vision of the media as a horizontal accountability mechanism, as a channel for unifying alternative voices, and as a symbol of press freedom for the regime.

Some interviewees readily identify themselves as “opposition,”⁶¹ while others reveal that they hold anti-establishment views in private.⁶² Interviewees link their opposition stance directly to their ambition and willingness to expose official wrongdoings. Unlike their Chinese counterparts, who acquiesce to a role of facilitating vertical accountability, however, Russian interviewees appear, albeit reluctantly, to embrace the horizontal accountability function, whereby they unnerve the system as a whole, not just local-level failures. As evident in the excerpt below, Russian critical journalists in part view themselves as replacing non-existent democratic institutions that are supposed to hold the executive accountable in democratic societies:

It was very hard to come to terms with the fact that while we are living in the 21st century, our political role is now similar to what we had in the 1970s, which involves fighting against the regime. I still feel it’s unproductive, and find it stupid. This should be done by the political parties, and they should fight for power and authority, not against the regime. But we are forced to be doing this because of the changing circumstances.⁶³

The interview suggests that journalists do not necessarily embrace their fight against the state, but rather see themselves as squeezed into this role involuntarily, as other political institutions are atrophying under Vladimir Putin. Interestingly, while the collaborative-governance model was prevalent into the late Soviet period,⁶⁴ this interviewee associates himself with underground dissident voices rather than with mainstream professionals, who have largely cooperated with the party-state. Russian journalists

explain their association with the opposition by the fact that they are forced to take a political stance given the incompatibility of the current political system with their visions of what is “right” and “wrong.” A senior correspondent at *Novaya Gazeta* notes how opposition is not an inherent quality of critical press, but rather an almost fatalistic consequence of being part of a hopeless society:

I want to comment that being part of opposition is not necessarily a pertinent quality, or a principle of free press, or my own principle. The position of press is neutrality [*otstrannionost*]—looking from the outside—but because we see so many things going wrong, we end up sounding more opposition-like. Oppositional orientation stems from the fact that we see things going wrong [*bezobrazie*], and we say that it is wrong.⁶⁵

On the one hand, this interviewee embraces the Western principles of neutrality and objectivity; on the other hand, she claims that the Russian context is exceptional because it calls for a more explicit ethical and political stance, forcing journalists to take sides. To this journalist, exposing the wrong almost equates to opposition, given that the “wrong” applies to socio-political processes at large, not just individual incidents. In describing the types of issues they hope to publicize and contribute to resolving in more detail, it is apparent that Russian critical journalists aim at systemic, deep-rooted failures that have no easy solutions:

We want to help people live freely, so that government changes and becomes more transparent, more dynamic. We wish for the judicial system to work more professionally, we want to help eradicate corruption, stop terrorism against our own citizens, not only on the public level but also on a personal level.⁶⁶

All the problems listed above reflect the weaknesses of Putin’s regime highlighted by the opposition and Western media, such as the opaque decision-making apparatus, a weak rule of law, rampant official corruption, and state abuse of military power. The targets of Russian investigations are significantly higher and more sensitive than those of their Chinese counterparts. Russian media has probed topics as sensitive as Putin’s personal corruption,⁶⁷ governance failures behind the Sochi Olympics,⁶⁸ and state violence in Chechnya.⁶⁹ Most recently, Russian critical media covered such controversial topics as the detention and killing of Chechens accused of homosexuality,⁷⁰ planned forced demolitions by Moscow authorities,⁷¹ and the earnings of Putin’s son-in-law.⁷² Beyond the high-level targets, the tone of criticism and analysis differs from that found in Chinese media. Rather than playing up and appealing to the responsiveness of central authorities, Russian investigations either directly point to the lack of accountability at higher levels of power or analyse how a given scandal would benefit or hurt Putin’s public support.⁷³

The overtly confrontational stance of Russian critical journalists is further manifested in their awareness about serving the function of unifying the oppositional segments of society. Though akin to the Chinese journalists, their Russian counterparts aspire to helping disadvantaged groups, many admit that they end up appealing to

voices already critical of the regime or to the converted believers. They do so by often featuring opposition voices, as well as by speaking to the issues of most interest to these groups. The articles by the now deceased opposition leader, Boris Nemtsov, and the recently released former oligarch turned political opposition leader, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, for instance, have regularly appeared in *Novaya Gazeta* and the *New Times*. *TV Rain* has similarly featured politicians, activists, and intellectuals that see themselves as excluded from a state-controlled media apparatus. Russian critical media further play the role of disputing the state's version of attacks against opposition leaders by publicising alternative opinions and investigations. A *Novaya Gazeta* report, for example, discusses a new suspect of green dye attack against Alexei Navalny, the only remaining viable contender of Vladimir Putin.⁷⁴ By focusing on systemic ills, described above, moreover, Russian journalists inevitably appeal to those recognizing these ills and injustices. Speaking of the reach of critical media, investigative journalist at *Agentura.ru* noted that they "influence those who aren't the right targets . . . the kind of targets that are already supporting the same ideas."⁷⁵ A scholar and long-term observer of Russian society and politics at Russia's independent polling center, the Levada Center, further explained this dynamic of critical media as mainly empowering and representing the marginal vectors of the societal fabric:

Independent outlets . . . they do have a direct information influence in very narrow circles of individuals who hold fairly alternative outlook on politics and economics, alternative perceptions on where Russia fits in the world. These independent editions inform such people who don't accept the current state of things. They serve to unite such alternative societal layers, even if just digitally or abstractly.⁷⁶

This notion of marginal, selective representation of societal interests echoes in scholarly depictions of Russian critical media as "islands of press freedom," whereby the regime intentionally isolates them from mainstream publics and tolerates them only in so far as they appeal to intellectual, critical voices that do not transcend into the mainstream society.⁷⁷ That association, of course, was shaken up in January 2011 when critical media mobilized and unified voices beyond narrow opposition groups. The opposition movement, however, has now largely faded, and the state has persisted in isolating critical media into spaces left invisible to the general public.

Finally, unlike Chinese journalists who see themselves as consultants of the regime, Russian critical journalists view their political role cynically as that of symbolizing freedom of speech in Russia. While most editors of critical news outlets claim that high-level officials read their reports, this reading rarely yields a constructive or satisfactory reaction. When speaking about affecting change through their reporting, journalists referred to the difficulty, if not the inability, to produce any practical outcomes. "The main problem is that Russian press, and critical media more broadly, can barely influence anything. In every edition of our newspaper you can find plenty of opportunities for initiating small governance reforms, but nothing happens," commented an investigative journalist at *Novaya Gazeta*.⁷⁸ Others described the rupture with the government by referring to it as the "other side": "When you tell the government what to do, you feel

stupid because it is not listening. Everybody knows that . . . you cannot reach to the other side.”⁷⁹ The very invocation of the phrase “the other side” speaks to the evident and insurmountable disconnect between the journalists and officials.

Despite not seeing themselves as solutions-oriented critics or consultants, many journalists demonstrate awareness that they are being used by the regime to legitimize a more democratic or liberal image domestically and internationally. Some have introduced the metaphor of a business card (*vizitnaya kartochka*) in describing the role of critical outlets, like *Novaya Gazeta*, in the current regime. “Someone might be imprisoned in Russia for their articles, but *Novaya Gazeta* will continue to exist and showcase to the outside world that we do have freedom of speech in Russia. If someone criticises the lack of freedom of the press, authorities can point to *Novaya Gazeta* as a counter-example,” commented one interviewee, a long time media practitioner and an observer in Moscow.⁸⁰ Indeed, President Putin has dismissed Western criticisms about press freedom in Russia by pointing to the pluralism in views presented in Russian media,⁸¹ and *Novaya Gazeta* in particular has been frequently noted in Western press as a symbol of critical resistance in the Russian media sphere. Other journalists depicted the Russian system as that based on “partial rape,”⁸² whereby some narrow spaces for critique are left alone in order to serve a political function of positive image-production.

Outspoken Russian journalists, therefore, position themselves as opposition-like critics, who aspire to affect political change at the level of the system, yet, at the same time, exude apathy about their capacity to actually achieve these goals. Russian journalists’ manifestation of political aspirations clearly differs from that of their Chinese counterparts: whereas the former see themselves as being inevitably at the opposing side of the state, the latter position themselves on the same axis as the party. While there are some outlets in the Russian national media sphere that may exist in some uneasy accommodation with the state, such as *Moskovsky Komsomolets* and *Kommersant*, and thereby carry more moderate attitudes vis-à-vis the state, this study focused on contrasting journalists operating at the margins of permissible in the two contexts, which uncovered the more oppositional attitudes of Russian journalists. The following discussion examines how these distinct positions and aspirations feed into journalists’ broader conceptions of political change that are rooted in recent historic experiences with democracy.

Contestation as Embedded in Visions of Political Change

The distinct modes of contesting the system by critical journalists in China and Russia feed into journalists’ divergent expectations for political reform, which appear to be in part rooted in the two nations’ recent experiments with democracy. Namely, while there may be multiple explanations behind journalists’ divergent positioning vis-à-vis the state, ranging from the distinctions in media markets and political controls, to different types of people who might end up becoming journalists, the discussion that follows grounds journalists’ perceptions and practices at the intersection of present and past experiences with political transitions. Whereas in China, the suppression of democratic

uprisings has obstructed a vision for political alternative and engrained the notion of political reform as that of gradual reinvention of the party-state, in Russia, a decade of democratic governance in the 1990s appears to have been one factor that empowered journalists with a realistic conception of an alternative political reality that requires a radical break from the status quo.

Interviews with media practitioners as well as media scholars and intellectuals in China and Russia reveal that media contestation feeds into the larger visions that critical journalists hold out for political change—a piecemeal approach in China and a radical approach in Russia. In China, journalists envision incremental political change, by which they understand specific improvements in the party’s governance. In describing the political disposition of a famous editor of *Caixin* magazine, for instance, her colleagues referred to her as a “woodpecker,” whose “purpose is to transform the system from within, to improve it, rather than to criticize for criticizing’s sake.”⁸³ Her colleagues further stressed that she belongs in the political mainstream, not amongst the dissidents, a theme that resonated in other interviews. “I don’t want to be a dissident, observing and critiquing from afar, I want to be actively involved in shaping and remaking this system,” shared a long-time media expert.⁸⁴ This interpretation of the role of dissidents as excluded from governance processes echoes official campaigns against dissidents in China, but also in Soviet Russia, where dissidents were actively marginalized from the mainstream society and political apparatus.⁸⁵

Russian critical journalists, in contrast, associate a complete political upheaval with their own empowerment. As already noted in the introduction, Russian journalists supported and mobilized the protests against Vladimir Putin in January 2011. My interviews further reveal journalists’ understanding of Russia’s democratization as the only acceptable political transformation, which in turn would enable media to drive societal change. “How can there be free media in an unfree country?” noted a former op-ed editor of *Kommersant*. “When there is no politics happening, there is no movement, no competition, and the free elements begin to sink. The inertia was growing gradually as political processes become more and more narrow. . . . To break this trend, we need political change,” he concludes.⁸⁶ Whilst most Russian interviewees see a radical political breakthrough as unlikely, they consider pointing out the wrongs as building a foundation for that movement. Their vision of themselves as Russian patriots is delinked from that of the political regime. “Some people think we are not patriotic . . . I think it’s the opposite, we are patriotic. . . . The more we show the true side of Russia, the better,” noted a young journalist from *Novaya Gazeta* in discussing public imagery of critical journalists in Russian society.⁸⁷

The gradual versus radical approach to change is intertwined with journalists’ conception of political alternatives. In China, while many interviewees express discontent and disappointment with party governance, pointing to endemic corruption, a skewed incentive structure within party bureaucracy, and selectively responsive officials, journalists are ambivalent about the democratic substitute for China’s communist state. Many invoke the official rhetoric of “chaos” as being inevitably tied to democratic transformation—something they see as unfavorable, as it could produce a fragmented polity, dividing China along ethnic or regional lines. Others echo the official

discourses about democracy as a weak system when it comes to implementation and China's unique configuration being unsuitable for democracy. Overall, even those Chinese journalists who have had extensive exposure to Western democratic models through media sources and visits to the United States and Europe and who support democratic ideals in theory, struggle in explaining whether and how democratization might be appropriated in China. Interestingly, despite the Soviet collapse story being a subject of intensive study for Chinese party officials,⁸⁸ critical journalists did not explicitly bring it up as reasoning for their ambivalence towards democracy.

While there are many possible interpretations behind journalists' ambiguity towards democratic upheaval in China, it is apparent from the interviews that China's limited and traumatic experience with democratic movements has played a role in shaping journalists' political expectations. The only memory of a democratic movement in recent Chinese history, the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, is marred by a blurred sentiment of disappointment and acquiescence to the status quo. A number of interviewees, especially those in their forties and fifties, noted that Tiananmen marked their conception of what is possible in China. Largely dismissing Tiananmen protest as a futile, tarnished, idealistic attempt at overturning China's political trajectory, this experience has undoubtedly taught critical journalists the inevitability of political compromise. Other studies have further demonstrated that beyond accepting the gradual, within-the-system transformation, some Chinese activists express remorse about participating in the democratic experiment. "I really believe this kind of excitement in the streets is not constructive. . . . If there is another choice other than this, I would choose it, rather than what happened in 1989," stated a former Tiananmen activist cited in the analysis.⁸⁹ These inclinations to deny Tiananmen legacy, of course, have been magnified by routine official repression and channeling of pro-party narratives.⁹⁰ Younger activists and journalists who only have a vague recollection of Tiananmen are still shaped by repetitive encounters with the limits of state tolerance and the long-term experience with the same one-party system that seems to have no expiration date.

In contrast to China's critical journalists, Russian journalists hold a clear and uncompromising position on democracy as the preferable alternative to Putin's neo-authoritarianism. In criticizing the current system, journalists frequently make democratic comparisons, treating democracy as a standard, not an exception. As evident in the interview excerpt below, Russian journalists draw direct contrasts with democracy as an aspired yet elusive model for Russia:

Overall, the press is useless in Russia because there is no mechanism of fair elections, which the press could influence, as it does in democratic countries. . . . In democracies (in principle, there is no pure democracy), the press affects the electorate and through electorate it can shape official policy. We don't have the electorate, we don't really have elections, so there is no point for the press.⁹¹

As with other interview fragments included in this article, it is evident here, that a democratic system is seen as the sole solution for political ills, including that of a weak or ineffective critical media. Echoing the ambivalence of Chinese journalists towards

their Russian counterparts, Russian critical journalists did not invoke China as a model for aspired political governance. In hearing about the collaborative relations between critical journalists and the party, Russian interviewees in part dismissed this nexus as echoes of the Soviet era, but in part appeared surprised to hear that journalists have some influence on party affairs in what they see as a more authoritarian system than their own. This contained curiosity about media practices in China did not translate into aspirations or re-conceptions of media-state relations in the Russian context, with democracy being viewed as a superior system despite recognized flaws.

Like Chinese journalists, their Russian counterparts' conception of alternative political models is rooted in recent experiences with democracy. Namely, the *glasnost* period under Gorbachev and the turbulent, democratic 1990s under Yeltsin are invoked with nostalgia by Russian media professionals. Journalists reminisce about their higher societal status, the more dynamic political landscape, and the presence of channels for affecting change. The interviewees contrast the apathetic public attitudes towards free press in today's Russia with public enthusiasm and respect for journalists in the late 1980s and early 1990s when "the importance of freedom of press . . . was completely acknowledged."⁹² Journalists further describe the Yeltsin and Gorbachev period as a "fascinating time for political reporting" in comparison to the current period, in which the media and society have largely been stripped of the layers of the "political," as the system has become opaque and largely inaccessible to journalists and the public.⁹³ "During Yeltsin period, every door was open—one didn't need permits to enter everywhere. After Putin came to power things have started to change, and you need a permit absolutely everywhere," commented a sociologist and long-time media analyst and observer at the Levada Center in his discussion of journalists' access to power-holders.⁹⁴ While journalist interviewees acknowledge that the tight media nexus with power holders in the 1990s has also, in part, eroded public trust in the media, associating free press with oligarchy and corruption, they seem to implicitly prefer Yeltsin era to that of Putin. Characterizing Russian democracy in the 1990s as fragile and imperfect, Russian critical journalists still long for that transitory aspiring phase of democratization that afforded more hope for media and political activism. As with Chinese journalists, even the interviewees of younger generation (post-1990s) have implicitly integrated some elements of Russia's democracy experience, through older colleagues, collective memories, and the very notion that democracy was achieved and had persevered in Russia for nearly a decade. Putin's claim to a democratic system via electoral institutions has further sparked cynicism about cooptation of democracy by authoritarian leaders, making it challenging, if not impossible, for Russian critical journalists to envision a gradual opening-up of the current political system and to accept their role as allies of the state.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on in-depth analysis of perspectives of contentious actors to illuminate distinct modes of probing an authoritarian system, both those carried out in

conjunction or in co-partnership with the state and those conducted in isolation from or through opposition to the system. These distinct approaches or types appear to be fused with journalists' wider perspectives on political transitions, rooted in recent historic experiences with alternative political models. Namely, this article demonstrated that the more cautious practices of Chinese journalists, strategically aligned with interests of the central state, are in line with their visions of incremental political transition, spearheaded by the party, the only vision made conceivable in the past three decades. Russian critical journalists' oppositional contestation, whereby they see themselves as inevitably fighting the regime, in turn, is linked to their aspirations for a drastic political shift or democratization, a vision in part enabled by a decade of democracy in the 1990s. While recognizing the multiplicity of factors shaping journalists' defiance, this study underscores the importance of interplay between modes of resistance and visions for political transformation, which can reflect recent political trajectories, setting the benchmark for what is possible in the minds of contentious actors.

In offering a new lens for thinking about contestation in authoritarian regimes in comparative perspective, this study further holds implications for grasping the dynamics of authoritarianism that appear invisible from the top-down. Specifically, the analysis here suggests that while the oppositionist mode of resistance holds higher risks for authoritarian durability in the short-term, as evident from the Russian protests in 2011, in the long-term, contested partnership can present more challenges or vulnerabilities to authoritarian systems. Namely, whereas the Russian state can manage critical voices via a strategy of ignorance and suppression, the Chinese state is forced into a cycle of responsiveness to public demands by co-opting critical voices into the party's nexus. As evident in the discussion of interviewees' perceptions, Russian respondents hold little expectation for state response. Chinese interviewees, on the other hand, expect a responsive central state, invested in addressing societal issues. This informal pact with the central state puts the Chinese Communist Party under constant performance pressure that is bound to escalate over time with the rise in social media. As we already see under President Xi, there are signs of the party's loosening of its contract with civil society in favor of more Putinesque style of top-down supervision, which speaks to the insecurities of high-ranking officials in upholding their intensely interactive relationship with demanding societal actors. While overt and oppositionist defiance tends to be more readily linked to democratization potential, this study suggests that a more subdued and collaborative form of contestation can be equally if not more challenging for authoritarian rulers to manage in the long-run.

Finally, the analysis of contestation from the bottom-up holds implications for our thinking on varieties of authoritarian governance. Whereas the current dominant categories in the literature are primarily those of electoral or competitive authoritarian regimes and full or closed authoritarian systems, the China-Russia comparison of critical journalists suggests that we may need to conceive of new categories based on the forms of contestation and state-society relations. Namely, journalists' relationship with the state reaffirms the more consultative/deliberative authoritarian system in China and the more classical neo-authoritarian system in Russia. What appears as the most striking

difference between the two cases is that the regime exudes concern and interest in journalists' investigations in China, whereas it remains oblivious to criticisms from the bottom-up in Russia (at least externally). This difference is reinforced by the two nations' recent experiences with political transitions—whereby China has continued to revamp its one-party state in the past three decades and Russia moved from a democracy to a personalistic authoritarian state. Taking into account the nuanced dynamics experienced from the bottom-up helps illuminate these elusive distinctions across authoritarian regime types. Future scholarship needs to delve deeper into analyzing to what extent China is unique with respect to its state-society configuration and how can we further theorize and measure the differences between responsive and unresponsive authoritarian systems.

NOTES

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54. Interview CJ15; 18; 22.

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59. Interview CJ54.

60. Interview CJ46.

61. Interviews RJ03; RJ09.

62. Interviews RJ06; RJ08; RJ02; RJ13.

63. Interview RJ06.

64. Wolfe.

65. Interview RJ05.

66. Interview RJ03.

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92. Interview RJ07.

93. Interview RJ14.

94. Interview RJ06.