

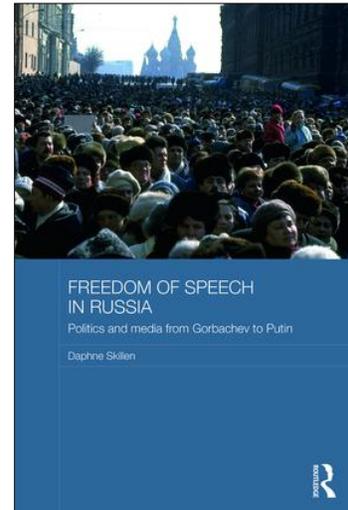
Daphne Skillen, **Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin**, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017, 363 pp., \$27.99 (paperback), \$128.00 (hardcover).

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Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin is a large-scale study of the emergence, progression, and decline of freedom of speech in modern Russia. It covers the history of Russian media over a period of 31 years, from the beginning of so-called *perestroika* in 1985 to the present day. Whereas the main focus of the book is on free speech in the nationwide media, the study also attempts to examine the hidden rationale behind its status, aiming at framing the current state of national media freedom in the broader context of post-Soviet Russian history.

Although the book raises a number of questions, the central one, as formulated in the introduction, runs as follows: “Why and how did the dream of democracy and free speech go so wrong, and what can be learned from it?” (p. 1). The author rightly states that media play a crucial role for democracy and identification. She provides a rare overview of the underlying factors and events that resulted in the “gradual but relentless erosion of the freedoms” (p. 1) gained in the first years after the collapse of the USSR, up to the current political situation, when the mainstream media are no more than “Kremlin mouthpieces” and the television channels in particular are “instruments of war and hate” (p. 1). The high professional insight of the study is based on both the professional training of the author, Daphne Skillen, who holds degrees from London, Sydney, and Colorado universities, and her experience of many years living and working as a journalist in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union.

The book is composed of two parts, with the first discussing the broad issues related to media freedom and the second inspecting the condition of the national media in various periods of modern Russian history. The first chapter addresses the question of liberties and rights and briefly discusses the history of political thought and literature in Russia, quoting Radishchev and Dostoyevsky and comparing them with prominent Western authors such as J. S. Mill. “For both Mill and Dostoyevsky freedom was the highest value, but within wildly divergent cultural narratives” (p. 15), states the author. The Russian narrative—for instance, the absence of traditions of free speech and the permanent bureaucracy—is discussed in the subsequent paragraphs of the first chapter. The author also mentions the two notions of freedom existing in Russia, namely, “svoboda” and “volya,” and discusses their specifics alongside an overview of the Constitution and human rights in the country up to the trial of Pussy Riot—“a moment when the modern, western, secular mindset clashed with religious obscurantism” (p. 27) and the latter won.



Going back in history, the author attempts to examine what led Russia to this point and concisely explores all three centuries of Russian journalism and censorship, beginning with Peter the Great and covering both revolutions, of 1905 and 1917, and the Soviet period. The current national law of the mass media and new laws against extremism, adopted already under Putin, are then discussed. Putin's way to power, the reasons the public supports him, and the Putin–Medvedev tandem are also analyzed in the study in relation to media freedom.

Finally, the first chapter of the book introduces the notion of "glasnost" that was understood as "great autonomy and independence for the media" (p. 122) and discusses what the most difficult task for the media professionals was in the first years of democracy after the Soviet Union—namely, to build the foundations of a democratic media for the first time in the country's history. The author also attempts to provide a Russian point of view on the role of journalists and analyzes why "a journalist in Russia is more than a journalist" (p. 66) or why he or she is pushed into "becoming the 'conscience' of society" (p. 66). The first chapter concludes with the overview of the high-profile assassinations of journalists in modern Russia, the normalization of lying, and the emergence of the media propaganda war against Ukraine: "The act of political lying is tied to the process of normalising what is unnatural" (p. 95), states the author.

In the second part of the book, more specific issues are examined in close connection to modern Russian history, in chronological order. The author begins with the Gorbachev era and investigates the condition of central television at that time and once again proceeds to glasnost and the radical transformation of the political system. The study then covers the period of the coup in 1991 and analyzes the perception of it 20 years later, concluding that "over the last two decades people have lost the confidence they had in themselves as political actors" (p. 164).

The Yeltsin era is discussed in great detail in the book, as it was the time when the country "enjoyed a degree of free speech unprecedented in scope and duration" (p. 187). A transition from a Soviet to a democratic state is called in the study "nothing short of revolutionary" (p. 189) and Yeltsin himself "a liberal reformer" (p. 191). Under his rule, the country attempted a conversion toward democracy and dismantled old Soviet television. The process of new media empire-building, however, quickly deteriorated and changed course. That was accompanied by the assassination of Vlad Listyev, general director of the ORT channel and a prominent journalist, the "nation's favourite" (p. 214), in 1995.

Last, the study proceeds to the Putin regime and to the destruction of media pluralism under it. Increasing control over the media and reviving the "Russian national idea" are examined in the context of presidential elections in the year 2000, the war in Chechnya, and adoption of the dangerous Doctrine of Information Security. Once in power, "Putin declared that journalism was like spying" (p. 279) and began the Kremlin's war with the media, states the author. The rise of suspicion and paranoia in modern Russia is explored in the study together with the fate of the once-independent channel NTV and the emergence of the new state-controlled media. The "Kremlin's obsession with media and with controlling its image" (p. 301) became especially evident and horrifying in times of the most terrific events in modern Russian history, such as Kursk, the Nord-Ost siege, and Beslan. The latter is called in the book a "Rubicon for Putin" as "it meant acceptance of Putin's increasingly authoritarian regime in exchange for rewards" (p. 304). The second chapter concludes with an overview of the role of the contemporary Russian media in

the protest movement of 2012 and coverage of the Ukraine crisis and the war in Syria. The fate of another once-independent news outfit RIA, Internet censorship, and the resurrection of free speech enemies—religious dogma and conformism—under the third term of Putin’s presidency, which “plunged Russia into its darkest period” (p. 316), conclude the study.

Overall, the book comprises dozens of stories from modern Russian history, related to the process of building democracy and media freedom—“one step forward, two steps back” (p. 344). The author recounts a number of prominent public figures who contributed to this process both positively and negatively and summarizes scores of related interviews with them. As such, the study can be highly recommended to media professionals, academics, and students engaged with the issues of media and freedom of speech and to everyone interested in the history of contemporary Russia and in understanding it.