
Continuing to document and explain Russia – Interview with Étienne Bouche

Description

Étienne Bouche is a French journalist and author whose work stands out for its in-depth exploration of the realities of Russia and the post-Soviet space. He has covered Russia from Moscow for over seven years. Here, he talks about the changing face of journalism in a country where repression no longer spares anyone.

Having arrived in Moscow in the spring of 2013 as a freelance correspondent, Étienne Bouche has traveled the length and breadth of this vast country to go beyond simple news reporting and immerse himself in the cultural, social, and historical aspects that shape Russia. Passionate about questions of identity and the Soviet legacy, he has also reported from Estonia, Moldova, and Uzbekistan. His literary approach to journalism and concern for historical accuracy make his writings valuable for understanding the evolution of the former Soviet republics and their relations with contemporary Russia.



***Regard sur l'Est*: what is the weight of the Soviet legacy in the current configuration of civil society in Russia and beyond?**

People's attachment to their environment runs deep in a country like France. Cuisine, architecture, and religion have reinforced regional identity over the centuries. These traditions anchor people to their native land. Russians, on the other hand, have often been displaced across this immense territory. They were cut off from their roots. And the Soviet system deliberately contributed to this phenomenon. In the big cities, for example, it did its utmost to prevent the emergence of communities. If an individual was housed in one part of the city, other family members could be housed in a different area. The aim was to prevent individuals from forging links with each other and developing a sense of belonging to a group or community.

Stalin set out to bind different peoples around a supranational identity, values, and ideology: communism. This imperial administration was applied in the Caucasus and Central Asia, with administrative divisions that did not correspond to cultural and historical realities. The consequences were disastrous, as evidenced by the many conflicts and territorial disputes that erupted after the end of the USSR. Nagorno-Karabakh is a case in point. The North Caucasus, which remained part of the Russian Federation, was also divided, with no regard for cultural realities. Conflicts persist today, notably between Ingushetia and Chechnya.

In 2023, I went to the western part of Uzbekistan—to Karakalpakstan, an autonomous region that officially has the status of a republic. It's a poor region situated in the desert. The Karakalpaks had their own identity, but Stalin arbitrarily incorporated their land into the Soviet republic of Uzbekistan. Yet these identity claims have not disappeared with time: Uzbekistan's sovereignty is still contested there, and in 2022, demonstrators opposed to the authorities in Tashkent were severely repressed. Despite these challenges, the resilience of the Karakalpaks and their continued assertion of their identity is truly admirable.

As for the displacement of populations, this has led to very complex situations over the long term, which are now being exploited by the Russian state, whether in the Baltic States or, a fortiori, in Ukraine.

How did you settle in Russia as a journalist?

I spent seven and a half years in Moscow, where I arrived in the spring of 2013 as a freelance correspondent. At first, I didn't have a career plan, as I had just finished journalism school and had no clear idea of what I wanted to do. However, journalism in Russia still generates a lot of interest among readers because it's a country that intrigues and leaves no one indifferent. And this interest existed long before the large-scale war against Ukraine. Russia attracts people with its culture, its intellectuals, and its geography as much as it arouses rejection for its contempt for human rights and its imperialist nature.

A combination of circumstances enabled me to get a replacement. It wasn't easy to register as a journalist in Russia then, but that was nothing like today's difficulties. There was never a shortage of news in Russia, but I aimed not to write constantly about current affairs. My interest in Russia was more cultural. For me, journalism was more a pretext for living in the country and discovering it.

As the political life of the Kremlin is often impenetrable and difficult to interpret, even for Russian specialists, I prioritized reports. I took advantage of my experience in Russia to travel as much as possible and talk to many people on the spot. My main work consisted of four —or five-minute reports for the radio. I aimed to give the French listener a better understanding of a particular aspect of Russia.

Has your work as a journalist become more complicated as the regime has become more authoritarian?

Yes, working as a journalist in Russia has become more difficult. Working there requires a proper visa and accreditation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, journalists go to Russia knowingly and have never been surprised by these numerous procedures. Complications have primarily targeted Russian journalists, particularly after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. At that time, foreign journalists still enjoyed a relatively privileged status, which has changed. The case of journalist Evan Gershkovich is emblematic: correspondent for the Wall Street Journal in Moscow, he was imprisoned for over a year before being "convicted of espionage" on 19 July 2024 in a case fabricated against him and sentenced to 16 years in prison.

For me, there was an acceleration of the tightening after the 2018 Football World Cup organized in Russia. After this international showcase, numerous measures were taken to step up surveillance of civil society. Labels of "foreign agents" began to be handed out, and Russian-speaking media space was sterilized. Emblematic newspapers, such as *Vedomosti*, a leading business daily, were affected. However, contrary to its reputation, Russian journalism has not always been under wraps. Before this takeover, we could read editorials critical of the policies being implemented and reports depicting the country's reality.

TV Rain (Dojd) is a textbook case: in 2013, its newsroom was still located on Red October territory, right in the city center, very close to the Kremlin. Ten years later, the channel went into exile to escape Russian control.

Since 2022, many journalists have left Russian territory, and some media outlets have covered Russia abroad.

So, has media coverage of Russia changed considerably?

In 2013, there were relatively few French journalists in Moscow, mainly for administrative and cultural reasons. It isn't easy to settle in Russia without knowing the language, which is essential for communicating with the population. It is no coincidence that many foreign journalists already had a cultural knowledge of Russia before moving there; some have a personal history or family link with the country.

At the time, there was constant media interest in Russia, and as there were only a few of us, there was work for everyone, so there was little competition. There was even solidarity and mutual aid between journalists. Since the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many journalists have chosen to leave, which has unfortunately reduced the

diversity and depth of media coverage of Russia. This is a worrying situation. With so many journalists leaving and living in increasingly difficult conditions, only a few major media outlets remain. The research community is also suffering and lacking knowledge from within. Russia is in danger of becoming a territory difficult to understand from the outside.

I left Russia in 2020, and despite my many years there, I feel that my connection with the country is already weakening. Interpreting reality was very important for me, who devoted three-quarters of my work to reporting. From the outside, I try to tell the story of Russia differently. Journalism in Paris is very different: it lacks the sensitivity of the field.

But even from the outside, it is essential to continue documenting and explaining Russia. I'm exploring documentary production in particular. I also report from the so-called 'post-Soviet' region because while it's important not to see the countries in this area solely through the Russian prism, some issues intersect. It's fascinating to observe the trajectory of these different societies.

What are your favorite subjects?

In my reports and in my book, *Memorial face à l'oppression russe* (Plein Jour, 2023), I try to shed light on the legacy of the USSR and the shared history of the former Soviet republics. In Russia, the USSR has not been critically examined, and this history is often internalized or hidden because it is difficult to come to terms with. This legacy interests me most, as well as how neighboring countries construct themselves about Russia.

In Estonia, where the Soviets sent Russian populations to settle after the war, questions of identity are troubling society. Since the country regained its independence in 1991, these Russian-speaking populations have not disappeared and find themselves in the middle, torn between the two. The Estonian government has to face up to this reality, knowing that the Russian state is using it to destabilize the country and that Vladimir Putin has succeeded in confusing Russian speakers with Russians. Having lived through the Soviet occupation, the Baltic States have wiped the slate clean of their shared history with Russia. This assertion of identity was a question of survival, and today, it is Russia that is held responsible for the tragedies committed by the Soviet state. Russia as a state.

This vision is rejected by Moscow, creating incomprehension that is now insurmountable. The war against Ukraine also has its roots in the past. All this goes back to the lack of critical examination of the Soviet regime. Too many things are taboo, and too many tragedies have remained unspoken. For 70 years, the story was not told as it happened. There was a leaden blanket of censorship, and in the 1990s, we should have put these horrors on the table to try and build healthy relations with neighboring countries and a calmer civil society. Boris Yeltsin made a timid attempt to do this but was soon overtaken by the crisis and chaos of the time. He launched the war in Chechnya and returned to imperialist practices.

In Russia, admitting the facts would mean finding those responsible, and they would be the Soviet state, whose heir is the Russian state. This idea is untenable for the Russian government, as it would question V. Putin's legitimacy.

After the Second World War, Germany had to repent and acknowledge its mistakes to move forward. It was a challenging but necessary task. Who would have thought that, 70 years later, one of France's greatest allies would be Germany? The Russian Memorial organization was pushing for this work, but the idea was rejected by Putin, who repeated that without the USSR, Europe would not have won the war against the Nazis. The Russian government believes that Russia, which was on the winning side then, does not have to justify itself. Unfortunately, this rewriting of history is part of the foundation of Russian power.

At the end of the 2000s, even Stalin began to be exonerated of his faults. Today, his figure is glorified, and monuments again pay tribute to him. If these are not direct initiatives by the state, the latter is letting them happen.

Russia's vision of power is very different from our own. In Europe, governments are considered to serve the people, but in Russia, civil society is not accountable to the state; the state uses the people for its ends.

Thumbnail: Etienne Bouche (© Ksenia Yablonskaya).

[Link to the French version of the article](#)

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