Press in Russia: Precarious Freedom

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Pledging the abolition of advance censorship and the de-monopolization of the mass media, the first USSR "Law on the Press and other Mass Information Media" of 12 June 1990 guaranteed the press freedom to "express opinions and beliefs, to seek, select, receive, and disseminate information and ideas," thereby emancipating it from the chains of the censor. However, optimism over the legal guarantees of these extensive liberties was subdued by the realization that extralegal barriers which had previously checked press freedoms remained intact. The CPSU retained its monopoly over newsprint, thus ensuring its availability for official publications, but left the independent press to contend for the supplies that remained. Exacerbating the general lack of newsprint was the skyrocketing price for available sources—a 74 percent increase from 1990 to 1991.

The obsolescence of printing facilities too posed a limitation on the publication of journals. According to the RSFSR Minister of the Press and the Mass Media Mikhail Poltoranin, "Almost 60 percent of the paper combines have been in operation since the end of the last century and the beginning of this one. And 65 percent of the equipment is 100 percent obsolete. . . Our machine building does not produce 182 of the 362 kinds of equipment necessary for printing. And that which is produced is 50 years behind the times."(1) Regardless of this obsolescence, the printing industry fixed an 84 percent increase for its services for 1991.
Distribution remained under the control of the governmental agency *Soyuzpechat*, which was responsible for the subscription fulfillment and mail delivery of all periodicals. When in August 1990 its workers demanded higher wages, *Soyuzpechat* significantly increased its tariffs. In order to survive, independent newspapers and journals were forced to introduce price increases—for example, the price of *Ogonek* rose 250 percent in October 1990. Independent periodicals, now operating on a profit-and-loss basis, had great difficulty covering spiraling printing and distribution costs.

The frailty of the guarantees of free press and glasnost was revealed when press coverage of the bloodshed in Lithuania led the authorities to question the desirability of the independence of the mass media. (This development received graphic illustration in the appointment by Gorbachev of Leonid Kravchenko as television tsar with paralyzing effect on coverage and programs.) At a session of the USSR Supreme Soviet on 16 January 1991, President Gorbachev proposed the suspension of the press law. Although he soon retracted the move, the reaction of the Supreme Soviet to the proposal was not one of immediate rejection. The attitude of many prominent parliamentarians was seen also in a motion passed by the Supreme Soviet Committee on Questions of Glasnost and Citizens' Rights and Appeals "on the basis of citizens' letters:"(2)

The press, except for the party press, is replacing pluralism of opinions and glasnost with the kindling of hatred for the ideals of socialism, is mounting shameless propaganda against the CPSU, the soviets and the USSR. . . The press has forgotten patriotic education, is distorting the truth, focusing attention on negative pages of the past, putting salt on our wounds, and engaging in frank discrediting of the path we have traveled. . . Many items in the press have an adverse effect on society's moral state and corrupt our young people, who must be saved.

In the wake of the failed putsch of August 1991, Russian Federation president Boris Yel'tsin suspended the publication of a number of pro-junta journals, including *Pravda* and *Sovetskaya Rossiya*. This decree produced massive protest and Yel'tsin was
accused of reintroducing censorship. In response to this outcry, Poltoranin stated "All this has been done within the framework of the law on press, which says that monopolization of mass media is impermissible. At present the CPSU holds around 70 percent of the mass media, which means that it has a full monopoly."(3) Within two weeks, the ban was lifted, but shortly thereafter CPSU property was confiscated, depriving party newspapers and magazines of their offices, publishing houses, printing facilities, and all funding.

Yel'tsin then announced the establishment of a state inspectorate for the protection of press freedoms under the Russian Press Ministry and submitted to the Russian parliament a draft law on the freedom of the mass media. According to Mikhail Fedotov, deputy minister for the mass media, the state inspectorate was to be based on the USSR censorship agency Glavlit and to be tasked with "guard[ing] the law. . . to see that the media do not call for a forcible destruction of the system or fan ethnic enmity. . . [t]o protect the press against those who want to suppress information. . . [and to] keep state secrets."(4)

At the same time, Yel'tsin vowed to veto the Russian law on the mass media adopted by the RSFSR Supreme Soviet in December 1991 as he considered it to be far more restrictive than the USSR press law of June 1990. "Indeed so far the press law has been proceeding in an unsatisfactory way in the [Russian] Supreme Soviet. It is turning out worse than the union law. We cannot permit this. . . I shall have to put my right of veto into operation."(5) The RSFSR Supreme Soviet ultimately removed some of the more restrictive amendments to the law, such as the governmental right to force journalists to reveal their sources and the license for law enforcement agencies to search newsrooms.

At least one case of direct intimidation of a newspaper by the government has received wide publicity. In the fall of 1991, the notably nonconformist paper Nezavisimaya gazeta received an official warning from the Ministry of the Press and Mass Information for publishing an interview with a high-ranking Ukrainian official who raised the possibility of
a Russian pre-emptive nuclear strike against Ukraine. Poltoranin indicated that a
second such incident might result in the newspaper's being permanently closed down.

Some members of the Russian government have suggested that Yeltsin call on the
press to propagate a supportive stance vis-à-vis governmental actions. According to
_Dagens Nyheter_,(6) four memoranda had been submitted by government officials to the
Yeltsin cabinet regarding the use of the media as an instrument of propaganda for
economic reform. These documents also propose that the press take an active role in
creating the image of Yeltsin as a "forceful and tough president" and recommend the
establishment of contacts "with local enterprises heads and organizations to see
whether they are willing to 'finance propaganda, " as well as with "religious leaders and
representatives of various confessions with the aim of influencing public opinion through
this channel too." Gennadi Burbulis, Russian Federation State Secretary and first
deputy chairman of the government, stated at a meeting in January with
_Komsomol'skaya Pravda_ correspondents, "I would formulate the task of the press as
follows: to convince every Russian that the reforms that are underway are vitally
necessary and practicable and. . . to convince people that this is for all our sakes, . . .
that there is no time for doubting or scoffing, no time to hope, Soviet fashion, for a
miracle."(7) Poltoranin has been even more explicit, "The policy of state favoritism will
be carried out in respect of editions working for the revival of Russia."(8)

A policy of government subsidization of newspapers and magazines opens up great
latitude for aligning the Russian press with the government. According to TASS, during
the first quarter of 1992 the government gave approximately R3 billion to unnamed
publications.(9) Under a recently announced government program, an additional R7
billion to subsidize the cost of newsprint for Russian newspapers and periodicals is to
be provided. The government denies that there will be political discrimination and a
state council with the participation of media representatives is to select those
publications to receive financial support. Nevertheless, a Gosteleradio deputy chairman
has spoken of the government's intention to cut subsidies to publications which are too
critical of it. At the same time, greatly to the resentment of independent publications, the
government boosted the circulation of its own newspaper Rossiiskaya gazeta by giving it a monopoly on the publication of policy statements of vital interest to the public.(10)

After it had already radically cut its frequency of publication, bankruptcy recently forced Pravda to suspend publication indefinitely. The great majority of publications are resorting to every possible means of reducing expenditure in order to remain afloat. Efforts to survive have included reducing the frequency of publication, cutting print runs, laying off staff, increasing prices to levels unaffordable for many, as well as terminating distribution contracts with Rospechat (successor of Soyuzpechat) and seeking alternative distribution channels.

Many Russian newspapers and periodicals have established or are endeavoring to set up joint ventures with Western firms to ensure availability of newsprint and funding for distribution. Izvestia has an agreement with the Hearst Publishing Company and Kommersant, the leading business paper, with The Wall Street Journal. Ogonek is actively seeking Western business partners. Komsomol'skaya Pravda concluded an agreement with Russian paper mills for newsprint at fixed prices in return for hard currency. In the future, the Russian mass media may become fully self-sufficient and able to behave as a true watchdog of the government, but at present it is clear that extralegal obstacles to free publication and dependence on governmental goodwill create serious problems for freedom of the press in Russia.
### Circulation Figures for Major Newspapers and Periodicals

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This information was provided by Professor Matthews of the University of Surrey, England, during a lecture at the Harvard University Russian Research Center on March 9, 1992.

### Notes:


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