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Given Russian history and the political culture it engendered, the concept of a legal opposition permitted to express its alternative policy platform in a free press has been and remains entirely alien to autocrats of whatever ideological persuasion. Political opposition was never considered to be a constructive phenomenon. The former Polish Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, remarked to me once: "Even for the most liberal of your politicians, such as Gorbachev, the words 'opposition' and 'enemy' are still synonyms. And given this situation normal political life is impossible."

Indeed, in Russia, normal life, including a normal political life, never did exist. Nonetheless, people now have to adjust to the existence of an extremely broad cross-section of opinion, a spectrum of views that has arisen under conditions of economic crisis and a communist counteroffensive. By mid-1992, the Russian Ministry of Justice had registered over 800 public organizations, including 25 political parties. Whether this makes life easier is another question. A real political culture is still only in the process of gestation, while intolerance has become a major feature of Russian political life.

A free press should help people to understand better what is happening. During the last 12 months, over 1,800 different publishing houses and about 2,000 magazines and newspapers were officially registered in Russia. But in the same way that it is very difficult to classify the various political parties in a country in which until very recently only one party was permitted to exist, it is almost impossible to give a breakdown of the
political sympathies of different publications. Nevertheless, I will endeavor to provide an overview of the situation today.

In the former Soviet Union, the press played a primary role in defeating communism, since it aroused and reformed public opinion as a force in political life. However, it was the press that then became the first victim of the new market economy. Immediately after the disintegration of the old mechanisms of the state-controlled economy, new prices were established that jeopardized the continued existence of the majority of publications. Paper and printing costs went up 10 times, while distribution expenses rose five times. Advertising revenue had never amounted to more than 10 percent of their budgets, and consequently newspapers and magazines that had just broken loose of the state and party monopoly now were obliged to beg for subsidies from the state, which meant turning to former party bureaucrats. Virtually all publications with a circulation over 15,000 were forced to go hat in hand to the government.

Some of them gave up without a fight. As early as January 1992, 20 newspapers and magazines announced that they were "terminating their subscriptions," i.e., they simply folded. Virtually all the trade papers such as Bee Keeping or Horse Breeding ceased publication. Other trade papers such as the Teachers' Newspaper or the Medical Newspaper sent a letter to President Yel'tsin informing him that they were in articulo mortis. The literary monthlies published two or three issues during the first six months of 1992 containing articles about the demise of the literary press in Russia. The Literary Gazette, which had been popular in intelligentsia circles, announced that it planned to sell off paintings from its art collection as a last resort to raise revenue.

In January 1992, President Yel'tsin's press secretary resigned in protest against the government's policy toward the mass media. The problem was not that a number of periodicals were being inadequately subsidized by the political parties which controlled them. The parties themselves were hard put to survive. Journalists began to threaten strikes, holding out the menace of imposing on Russia a "newsless day." Meanwhile, the government kept repeating, "You wanted a market economy, right? Now try to live under
one." Nonetheless, the government did take measures to support the press--measures that can be viewed in different ways.

**Democrats Follow Communist Lead**

Whereas previously the communist party had handed out favors to those who served it best, now the new government of a democratic Russia did exactly the same thing. Government representatives openly stated that priority would be given to helping publications that were most supportive of the cause of national renewal--while only the government was capable of deciding which of them were indeed the most supportive. The authorities assigned a building in the center of Moscow as space for editorial offices and as a result a number of new publications acquired a roof over their heads.

A total of seven billion rubles was allocated as first aid, but the whole amount vanished like water poured into dry sand. By a rough estimate, even in terms of first aid, Russian newspapers and magazines really needed a minimum of 12 billion rubles. But there were so many new newspapers that it became most invidious to try to regulate which would survive. For instance, in place of the one former monopoly paper, the *Literary Gazette*, a total of five literary papers started to come out in Moscow, each of which represented a different group of former members of the now defunct Writers' Union. Which of them was to be given preference?

One-third of the new publications folded during the first half of 1992. However, in their place new papers constantly arose, and their numbers made it unfeasible for the government to intervene in any active fashion. However, at the same time it was impossible to remain indifferent, since good publications were perishing together with the rest, including the famous literary journal *Novy Mir (New World)*. The single nationwide "information space" that had always existed in the Soviet Union was now disintegrating, and the so-called "central press" was dying out.

It is difficult for Americans to understand this situation, since in the United States there is no tradition of national newspapers with huge circulations. Instead, people have the
habit of reading local newspapers. (In my view, the existence of USA Today tends to confirm this rule.) In the former Soviet Union, on the other hand, people mainly used to read the Moscow central press, which had long been one of the props of the totalitarian regime.

Readership Declining

Now the situation has changed. Some of the new independent states--former Soviet union republics--simply prohibited the distribution of the Moscow press in their own territory. But in many cases people just got tired of the constant stream of bad news and lost interest in reading newspapers. From a combination of causes, in 1991 subscriptions to Moscow magazines fell 35 percent, while newspaper subscriptions fell 55 percent. This year, no real analysis of subscriptions is possible, indeed the rate of inflation makes it impossible for periodicals even to announce regular subscription rates. It certainly looks as if there will be a catastrophic collapse--so far this year the 16 most popular Moscow newspapers and the 18 most widely read magazines have lost a total of 25 million subscribers. In particular, the former communist publications have suffered a disastrous drop in readership--Pravda recently had only 84,000 subscribers left, while Sovetskaya Rossiya had 47,000, and Rabochaya tribuna (Workers' Tribune) a mere 19,000.

Any kind of publication belonging to a political party giving a single view instead of providing a variety of opinions has lost all standing in the eyes of the population--this is a phenomenon that was only to be expected. In place of party papers, new publications have begun to come out, such as Nezavisimaya gazeta, which offers a fairly broad cross-section of opinion and is coming to enjoy more and more authority. Several weeklies, such as Stolitsa (Capital), Kuranty (Bells) and Megapolis, that have adopted the same policy are also successfully winning new readers. At the same time, the aggressively reactionary, indeed often openly fascistic newspaper Den' (Day) is also being sold on every street corner. This paper is calling not merely for a change in the government, but for the physical elimination of the reform leaders. In its October 17 issue it gave a list of persons who needed to be "looked after" as a matter of priority,
and I could not resist a feeling of pride at finding my own name on the list right after the names of the ministers of the Russian government. Another newspaper, *Russkoe voskresenie* (Russian Resurrection), printed the home addresses and telephone numbers of people who in its view merited punishment, including my own--I would be interested to know where they got this information from in my case, since it is not available in any unclassified reference publications.

Violent political disputes are an everyday occurrence in Russia, greatly encouraged by the fact that the government is doing virtually nothing to counter the rapid growth of a squalid, destructive press that openly advocates a *coup d'etat*, anti-Semitic pogroms, and the restoration of communism. Many people find it difficult to understand properly what is happening, and they are vulnerable to such propaganda.

The fact remains that Russian readers now have the right to a free choice of what they will read, and as a result it is unlikely that in future newspapers will ever again have daily circulations of 25 million, 20 million, or 18 million copies, as *Trud* (Labor), *Pravda*, and *Komsomol'skaya pravda* had at one time--reflecting a situation in which people were coerced into subscribing to papers. The current record figure of over three million copies for *Izvestia* now represents, I believe, the maximum circulation possible for a daily paper published in the capital. It is not that former subscribers have deserted the central press in favor of local newspapers--the bulk of people who no longer subscribe to a newspaper have simply lost the habit of reading a paper on a daily basis. Everyday life in Russia inexorably puts them face to face with all the country's problems--and the impossibility of resolving them. They are not interested in reading about how the communists ruined the economy, since now even after the end of the communist regime there is still nothing to buy in the stores. A recent poll showed that only two percent of those surveyed were capable of saying anything coherent about recent legislation and government directives.

It is unfortunate that there are still no real newspapers for businessmen in the same class as the *Financial Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*. The Moscow newspaper
Kommersant remains a popular paper without intellectual pretensions rather than a valuable source of business information, while the Finansovaya gazeta and Delovoi mir (Business World) are not widely distributed. Foreign businessmen in Moscow have been driven to publish their own monthly Moscow themselves in an attempt to understand what is happening.

In the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union the situation is even more complex, since even in earlier years, when it received government subsidies, the press in languages other than Russian scarcely managed to survive. Today grants of official subsidies permit the new nationalist governments to control virtually the entire press in their republics. Even so, however, interesting newspapers are beginning to be published, notably in Ukraine. In addition, in Central Asia an informative weekly, Asia Business, is now appearing.

Politicians Attempt to Control Press
Everywhere the new political leaders are attempting to subject the press to their control. The most famous scandal involving politicians and the media blew up around the newspaper Izvestia, which the speaker of the Russian parliament has been endeavoring to make his own court publication. Khasbulatov has been fighting with the newspaper's staff—as well as the President of Russia—over this issue for over a year. To cater to a jaded public, a yellow gutter press has sprung up. Newspapers for homosexuals, such as Tema, or fascist publications, such as the previously mentioned Russkoe voskresenie, or Pul's Tushina (Tushin's Pulse), are sold everywhere in Moscow, even though individual issues may be banned by the authorities.

The newspaper Den' was given space for its editorial offices at a military base and was being subsidized by army extremists, thus avoiding any effective public control. The sources of the funding of many publications remain mysterious. However, as a semi-official government publication, Rossiiskaya gazeta certainly does receive state funding and consequently has a more prosperous appearance than the rest. Recently, a Greek millionaire became the controlling stockholder of Pravda, the principal communist
newspaper, thus again raising the question of where the CPSU’s legendary money disappeared to, and through what channels. One wonders in what forms these party funds will return home, and to what uses they will be put ...

Today not a single political party in Russia can boast of having a clear or consistent platform. Even the former communists are expressing widely differing views, from out-and-out social-democratic ideas to cast-iron Leninist-Stalinist concepts. Even the fascists belonging to the Pamyat’ (Memory) movement represent a broad spectrum of noisy but mutually feuding groups. The political life of democratic Russia--a new political culture--is still in the process of formation. I fear that totalitarian tendencies will remain a threat to us for a long time to come. But this will make following the future fate of the press all the more interesting.

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