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Russian Media: Victors or Victims?

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The Russian Imperial government that was overthrown by the Bolsheviks 77 years ago consisted of 20 ministers. When Gorbachev came to power less than 10 years ago, there were over 600 (sic) officials of ministerial rank. However, despite this bureaucratic explosion, these 600 did not include a single "minister of propaganda." Propaganda remained exclusively the prerogative of the communist party, and the famous "Agitprop" of the CPSU Central Committee controlled the press as well as all publications in the Soviet Union. The party never let the mass media out of its hands. It was only when it finally lost power--after holding onto it to the very last moment--that it released its grip on the press and on broadcasting.

Even during the years of Gorbachev's glasnost' Russia never had what the rest of the world calls a "free press." The mass media turned out to be the first victors that emerged from the defeat of communism, yet at the same time they have proved to be among its first victims. After rejecting the totalitarian political system and a command economy, the press in what was the Soviet Union is now fighting for survival in a market economy and a world of new political realities.

A Declining "Central Press"
The character of information itself has changed. A phenomenon unknown in the United States is disappearing--the so-called "central press," i.e., a number of publications distributed from Moscow that prescribed the required political views. One result of the breakup of the country is that distribution of the Moscow press has been halted completely in many former Soviet republics that have now become independent states.
During the course of the summer several republics, including Estonia, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan, stopped relaying the Moscow Ostankino television channel. Ukraine cancelled the accreditation of television reporters from Moscow whose programs displeased government officials. In Turkmenistan, it is possible to subscribe to the Moscow press only if the subscription is paid in Russian rubles—which under the republic's laws may not be accepted in payment. In Kazakhstan, one is permitted to subscribe only to Russian-language publications which are printed in the republic and subject to control by the Kazakh authorities. In Moldova, a law on the press was recently adopted which includes about 15 separate prohibitions with severe penalties for disseminating information "directed against the Moldovan state," or "distorting [its] domestic and foreign policy."

Journalists do not have the right to conceal their sources of information, and in some cases may be subjected to fines of up to 1,000 times the monthly minimum wage. A group of journalists in Kiev recently sent a panic-stricken letter describing a censorship clampdown on Ukrainian television, the closing down of a number of programs, and the persecution of liberal reporters and commentators.

**Tightened Censorship in Central Asia**

In fact, in the majority of the former Soviet republics, censorship has become more acute. In Central Asia, e.g., in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, journalists have been fired, arrested, and tried in court. In Tajikistan 36 journalists have died during the course of the last two years.

In Russia itself, the areas receiving the Moscow central press have diminished considerably. Russia is becoming more and more decentralized; indeed many regions are now dreaming of acquiring the same rights as US states. Many provincial leaders take a peculiar view of their new independence, and are endeavoring to free themselves of federal norms, while they have no interest in seeing more liberal Muscovite views propagated. At the same time they are trying to subdue their own recalcitrant journalists, without being too selective about the means they employ.
In this regard, a curious episode occurred on September 16, 1994, in Vladivostok. The entire editorial staff of *Krasnoe znamya (Red Flag)* went underground. The governor of the Primor'ye Region, which includes Vladivostok, had issued a directive closing down the newspaper. However, its editor declared, "Governors come and go--newspapers remain," and came to an agreement with the printers for the underground publication of the paper, which will be distributed illegally. The same editor also sent to every Russian newspaper copies of a letter protesting against political censorship.

Where the local editors are on good terms with the authorities, strange episodes of a different kind can occur. At the present time, subscriptions for 1995 are being actively solicited, and the administrations in a number of Russian regions have given instructions that the population be obliged to subscribe to newspapers under the authorities' control, the cost of the subscriptions being deducted at source from pensions and wages. Subscriptions to Moscow-based publications are discouraged.

In general, the question of distribution has become the most difficult problem for Russian periodicals. Today the Russian Federal Ministry of Communications has a monopoly on delivery practically everywhere, and in many places the cost of mailing amounts to over two-thirds of a newspaper's or magazine's purchase price. As a result of delivery costs and inflation, subscription prices for the second half of 1994 have increased by 500-600 percent compared with the first half of the year. Average wages rose only 180 percent over the same period, while per capita income went up 205 percent. Five years ago, a family might spend 20-30 percent of its total monthly income on annual subscriptions to newspapers and periodicals. This would be enough to subscribe to up to 10 different publications. (It was a tradition to subscribe to a lot of periodicals, and almost everybody did--I personally subscribed to 16.) Now a typical six-month subscription to a newspaper or magazine has become vastly more expensive, so that even a third of one's salary would suffice only for five or six different publications. By the end of this year the maximum number is likely to decrease to a mere two or three
titles. The way things are going, very few will subscribe to more than one newspaper--just as in the United States.

Financial Dependence of the Media
Both at the federal level and locally, official government structures today are in a position to exercise great influence on the mass media, which in the majority of cases are not financially independent. The Duma recently passed a law requiring one of the national television channels to allot 45 minutes of prime time to parliamentary proceedings on a regular basis, while any commentary on deputies' statements is prohibited. The Duma also voted for state support of television, and for the right to participate in deciding whether or not financial support should be given to individual publications. A joint commission has been set up for the allocation of subsidies, and this body determines who will get funds for expansion and who will not. The commission meets twice a week and reviews the lists of candidates for assistance, which currently include about 800 newspapers and 400 magazines. There are some publications, however, that have not requested help, since they are self-supporting. These are either papers like Moskovsky komsomolets, Moscow's biggest-circulation newspaper, which constantly teeters on the edge of being a sensational tabloid, or Izvestiya, a paper that is living off its formerly high reputation, but nevertheless has been losing circulation. Recently, Izvestiya was obliged to stop publication of its English-language newspaper We-My.

Some publications have been subsidized by banks. These newspapers, which exist precariously and pay their staff very badly, include such formerly popular papers as Literaturnaya gazeta. In this respect a report in a recent issue of Moscow Times is fairly typical: "One of Russia's largest private banks, Stolichny, has cut off a major credit line to Segodnya, but that influential daily's editor said Friday that he had secured a promise from another backer to make up for the shortfall..." Incidentally, Moscow Times is one of two English-language dailies based in the capital. In addition, the city has three weeklies and several monthlies published in English--no fewer in fact than are published in Boston.
Some statistics, which at first sight may appear paradoxical, are significant for understanding the present situation. By last summer about 3,700 newspapers and magazines had been registered with the Russian Press Committee (Rossiisky komitet po pechati), while the country has a total of some 14,000 different publications of all kinds. Despite the difficult conditions, a publishing boom has swept the country--earlier this year in two months alone (April and May) 70 publication licenses were issued. Unfortunately, however, this is not necessarily an indication of an improving "information culture."

**Profitable Pornography**

Until now the area of the publishing business that has proved the most profitable has been what is called in Russia "narcotic literature," i.e., pornography--both "soft" and "hard"--and violence. There are no longer any restrictions on the importation of periodicals into Russia, so that material which cannot be printed within the country is simply published abroad. Thus the publication *Yeshcho* ("More"), which in the US usually would be displayed under plastic cover, is published in Latvia, while a magazine for homosexuals, *Inachei* ("Queer"), is printed in Poland. American publishers have broken into the Russian market with a glossy Russian-language edition of *Penthouse*, rather than--shall we say-- *The Wall Street Journal*. Of course, it's easier to make money that way; after all, in a market economy this is what counts.

Moreover, newspapers are losing their former role as mass media. According to surveys, over 80 percent of the population receives all its information from television. In many towns alternative TV channels are available in addition to the regular Moscow programs. In Moscow, CNN can be received 24 hours a day. ITN, BBC, and ABC broadcast about five hours a day and can be seen all over Russia. As far as radio stations are concerned, Radio Liberty and the BBC Russian Service are available. There are even two French radio stations in Moscow that broadcast 24-hour music programs.
Mysterious Sources of Finance

Consequently a population which was not used to having any alternative, non-official sources of information was suddenly overwhelmed with options. Now many are simply tired of the flood of depressing news and seek refuge in questionable newspapers and radio programs. Such people buy cheap fascist and communist publications that are subsidized by mysterious sources. Large numbers of such papers are being published and sold, some of which do not bother to go through the formalities of official registration. Among the hundreds of titles in this category is the former principal communist newspaper *Pravda*, which curiously enough has been acquired among other papers by a mysterious Greek millionaire, Yanis Yannikos, while the anti-Semitic newspaper *Al Kods* is published by an equally mysterious Palestinian millionaire, who has rented editorial space for the paper at the offices of the communist newspaper *Sovetskaya Rossiya*.

These newspapers are able to appear even though last July the Russian Federation Presidential Judicial Chamber on Information Disputes issued a decision titled "Mass Media Publications Inciting Social and Nationality Irreconcilability," sharply condemning extremist xenophobic and communist publications. The Judicial Chamber recommended that these publications be penalized, and in a number of cases even closed down in accordance with the relevant legislation.

At present the Russian press is oscillating between extremes--from the complete absence of any state regulation on the one hand, to governmental attempts to control the mass media on the other hand. At the one extreme, many of the most revolting publications are able to appear without being required to declare their sources of financial support. One can buy *Mein Kampf* in Moscow or St. Petersburg more easily and more cheaply than works by Tolstoi, Sakharov, or Solzhenitsyn. At the same time, over the last two years more than 160 children's libraries have been obliged to close for lack of funding, while last year alone the total number of children's books printed fell by 41 percent.
In reality, there is still no government policy on publishing, despite the fact that the greater part of publishing capacity remains in the central government's hands. Recently, a policy on publishing houses and publications began to be developed by the authorities--but the job was left indiscriminately to a succession of different high officials ranging from former Vice Premier Vladimir Shumeiko (who called on journalists to exercise self-censorship in the interests of the government) to the recently departed Press Minister Boris Mironov (who openly supported the communists and nationalist extremists).

In Russia today, the mass media already constitute a large segment of the economy. At the same time the plethora of newspapers and magazines holds up a vast mirror reflecting the country's life. However, the enormous flood of information that satiates every possible demand has proved to be psychologically disturbing. After being cut off from information on politics, culture, and science for decades, the Russian population was suddenly given everything indiscriminately: Solzhenitsyn and Lawrence, Sade and Goebbels. Novels and essays that had been banned for many years were published. On Sunday television American evangelists rage away, their sermons dubbed into Russian. The sidewalks are piled with religious literature produced by every conceivable sect, while the government goes about its business, remembering the press only when it needs support during electoral campaigns. Meanwhile in the south, Turkish and Iranian influence is invading areas that formerly belonged culturally and informationally to the Soviet Union. The Islamic revolution is at our doors, and the vast Moslem belt extending across the Transcaucasus and Central Asia is turning in its direction. With the disappearance of the single information space that formerly existed, it can now be said that the Soviet Union is finally dying.