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The freest and the most impotent--this is the way to describe today's Russian press, since the reality in which it now operates would not fit any stereotype. The press is hated by the authorities, but they dare not strangle it; the generals would turn their machine guns on the journalists, but the time is not yet ripe; the criminals are already shooting reporters, but it is still short of full-scale war...

The Russian press finds itself on a desert island, from which all attempts to reach the mainland or to be heard there have proved futile. When journalists expose generals who rob the Russian army behind the smoke screen of guns bombarding Grozny and at the same time build villas--nay palaces--for themselves near Moscow, there is no reaction. Government officials are not fulfilling their promises to serve society and the law; instead, the press shows, they have covered themselves with a sticky web of corruption, yet, again, there is no reaction. The Russian populace, on its part, is enmeshed in a web of apathy, fear, and despair. The masses remain mute even when informed that generals with a monthly salary of $300 are building million-dollar mansions.

Frequently, the situation is not affected by the facts as reported in the media, but rather by subsequent (political) considerations. For example, when Moscow News last year published revelations concerning the fascist leader, Aleksei Vedenkin, and his close connections with the former communist elite, no one paid attention to this investigative report. Vedenkin continued to flourish as a businessman, multiplying his capital. Six months later, the authorities decided to go through the motions of doing something about fascism and published a special decree on the subject. The only result was that
Vedenkin was (briefly) detained after making a grossly inflammatory statement on television.

The murder of Vladislav Listyev widened the gap between the authorities and the press. The journalists declared that the state machinery was helpless and that the president's words about his "personal involvement in the investigation" constituted another empty statement (during the last few years none of the major criminal cases in Russia has been solved). Starting on March 1, some Russian newspapers, on their front pages, have begun displaying the number of days that have passed since Listyev was murdered. However, the authorities are unlikely to respond to such an overt reproach.

The press has done all it could to portray the Chechen war as a national tragedy. Yet its appeals to the public and to the authorities again have added up to no more than unheard cries from a remote island. The war in Chechnya has become another emanation of the dilapidation and disintegration of current Russian society: The tenth anniversary of the initiation of perestroika coincided with the war, the murders of journalists, and the ignored wave of terror resulting from organized crime. Moreover, it is precisely this decade of reforms that is being blamed in certain quarters for Russia's present plight.

It should be stressed that the freedom of speech exercised by Russian journalists is perceived by the West as a logical continuation of democratic reform, whereas in Russia this freedom is viewed often as an unnecessary luxury. "Irrespective of what journalists write, life does not become better or safer," is the average reader's reaction.

Confined on its "island of free thought," the press confronts the specter of becoming an extinct species. There is no politician--from the president to provincial governors--who has not promised the press help and protection. None of them, however, has made a move to translate words into action. The press continues to be dependent on state monopolies--yes, journalists are free, but the means of publication are owned by the state. Local newspapers are affected most of all. If a paper has published anything to
displease a provincial governor, he can order the printing plant to shut off the presses for the next issue. The largest scale operation of this kind was undertaken by the president of neighboring Belarus', Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who in a single day closed the printing presses of all opposition newspapers in that republic. In Russia, a country with an abundance of forests and wood derivatives, paper is more expensive than elsewhere in the world! It is impossible to speak of a free market and of competition when paper import is blocked by disproportionate duties.

Russia’s media consists of three sectors: state-owned media, media sustained by private corporations, and independent media. If, two years ago, all three sectors had an equal share of the market, today the independent media component is decreasing rapidly. The Chechen war has had a major impact on the economy. As a result, the amount of commercial advertising in the media is diminishing constantly, shutting off a major revenue source for independent publications and broadcasts.

When the press was unanimous in its opposition to the Chechen war, the (avowedly democratic) government took an extreme step: All the budgetary resources normally allocated to support the Russian press as a whole (82 billion rubles) were given to just one government publication—Rossiyskaya gazeta, the platform of which reflects not only communist, but also overtly militaristic, propaganda. Thus, ironically, the taxpayers, most of whom oppose the war, have to support a newspaper that demands more fighting.

Russia is a country for which no long-term predictions can be made. This inhibits forecasts of what will happen to the "island of the press." For the time being, it manages to survive the stormy waves assailing its shores; we can be certain only of the fact that this island is not an immovable part of its current environment; on the contrary, it is drifting--farther and farther from censorship, uniformity, and servility, in other words, away from the communist past.