

**Boston University**

**OpenBU**

<http://open.bu.edu>

---

Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology and Policy

Perspective

---

1993-12

# Secrets of Russian Journalism

---

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/3500>

*"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."*

## PERSPECTIVE

Volume 4, No 2 (December 1993)

# Secrets of Russian Journalism

By DR. JOSEPH GIBBS(1)

*Secrets of Journalism in Russia: Mass Media Under Gorbachev and Yel'tsin*, by George N. Vachnadze (Commack, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 1992), 437 pages, \$69

Recent events in Russia, peaking with October's failed revolt and continuing through the troubled election campaign, have renewed interest in continuing official attempts to control and influence the Russian press. The siege of the Russian parliament was followed by the forced closure of virulent opposition newspapers, and by the beating of several journalists by forces ostensibly loyal to President Yel'tsin. Additional concern was aroused by the Russian leader's subsequent comment to the effect that media coverage of criticism of the proposed constitution by candidates would not be tolerated.

Russia's mass media today still offer a wide range of political views, but even with a new constitution guaranteeing press freedoms the picture is complicated. Journalists have recounted tales of intimidation by security officials; television reporters have again faced pre-broadcast censorship.(2) As of November, the Russian Ministry of Justice was reportedly working on a new draft law concerning state secrets for submission to the new parliament, and for implementation by the Press and Information Ministry.(3)Some journalists cite fear of economic pressures from the government through the grant or denial of press subsidies, while Russian organized crime, with burgeoning political ties, has developed as another threatening factor.

On the assumption that the Russian media are still in transition, George Vachnadze's book is a sturdy primer on the beginning of a difficult new stage. Chronicling the dynamic tension between media change and official reaction in 1990 and 1991, the

book covers the first serious steps in the development of post-Soviet Russian mass media. A senior researcher at Russia's Institute of Social and Political Studies, the author/editor leans heavily on articles and interviews (drawn mostly from the independent press) to describe the rocky transition, in the twilight of the USSR, from Gorbachev's limited, conditional *glasnost'* toward something approaching Western-style freedom of the press.

The first three chapters deal mostly with the final CPSU efforts to retain or reimpose control over the Soviet mass media. Here, Vachnadze emphasizes attempts to muzzle print and broadcast material after the 1990 law on the press theoretically abolished information control. Surprisingly, there is very little here about the history of Soviet press controls before 1990, and almost nothing concrete concerning the *modus operandi* of *Glavlit* or its post-law-on-the press successor body.

Vachnadze does, however, discuss the modern control and organizational roles of venerable media institutions, such as TASS and *Pravda*, with the former treated in particular detail. He notes, for example, on p. 40, that TASS directives to republic press organs continued as late as November of 1990.

In the sections that provide a relevant starting point for a study of official media constraints in the waning days of the USSR, he also presents evidence of faked paper shortages, disingenuous subscription rules, and outright intimidation and coercion. When discussing the print media, Vachnadze provides ample detail about maverick publications that broke with the center, both those on the "liberal" wing, such as *Izvestia*, *Moscow News*, and *Ogonek*, and the hard-line *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, *Den'*, and *Molodaya gvardiya*.

The book's second half addresses the gradual self-assertion of independent forces in Soviet broadcasting, tracing events under the Gostelradio head, Mikhail Nenashev, and his controversial replacement, Leonid Kravchenko. Several chapters are devoted to new, often overlooked Russian media forms, such as the growing business press and

the revitalized book publishing industry. Vachnadze offers surprising insights into Soviet modem telecommunications, such as intercontinental hotlines and the Kremlin telephone systems, and includes details (courtesy of excerpts from *Argumenty i fakty*) on eavesdropping and bugging techniques.

Other sections look at past controls on photocopying and provide details concerning Soviet procedures with regard to surface mail. "Correspondence within the Soviet Union is examined selectively, while international mail is looked at in the majority of cases," usually by female KGB sergeants, Vachnadze notes at one point (p.413). Such scrutiny continued into the summer of 1991. Ironically, as recent correspondents will know, mail may have moved faster in Russia when it was still being opened.

Stylistically, Vachnadze's reliance on lengthy excerpts sometimes makes the book seem derivative rather than original. His concise commentary, however, usually is enlightening. To cite one example (p. 381):

*Prior to 1987 it was dangerous to watch video films, and even more dangerous to own a VCR, in this country. Catching the "criminals" red-handed was very easy. Electricity was turned off, the militia rang the bell and entered your flat, under a suitable pretext. And that was that: the cassette stuck in your VCR almost always had some nude shots, which was [sic] regarded as pornography punishable by several years in prison. Since the owners of the VCR usually watched films together with their friends, they were charged with popularization of pornography with the aim of making money, corrupting minors, etc.*

Those laws remained in force as of the writing of his book. "The unlucky ones who were imprisoned...are still sitting behind bars, while those who have been released have not been rehabilitated."

Such anecdotes appropriately put the issue of press freedom into a broader political context. The author, who occasionally compares the CPSU with the NSDAP, is partisan

in his positive feelings about the new independent media. Still relevant is his concern that Russian society as a whole has failed to grasp the Western meaning of freedom of the press.

The fear that Russian publications could revert to "command-administrative media" can be sensed throughout parts of the work. Yet his selection of materials indicates that late Soviet-era journalists were courageous enough to print and condemn official abuses, as do today's Russian journalists. As interesting as Vachnadze's commentary can be at times, its occasional shortcomings reinforce the view that the book's strength lies in the primary sources Vachnadze cites.

Several problems must be noted in assessing this book as a scholarly work. Rather than employing reference notes, the author inserts source data (such as a periodical's name and date of issue) into his commentary. Unfortunately, a date or author's name occasionally is missing. Page numbers are never given for these references, although sometimes readers are told that an article appeared on the front page of a publication.

A more serious problem than the editing and proofing flaws concerns the index, which amounts to a disaster area. Many listings are incomplete, particularly of major figures who often fail to appear on the pages specified. To cite only one problem, Kravchenko is listed not only under "K" ("Kravchenko, Leonid") but also under "L" ("Leonid Kravchenko"), with different pages cited next to both listings. His name actually appears many times throughout the book, but in only one of the four places mentioned in the index. This flaw is unfortunate because Vachnadze's book could have constituted a solid reference work on Russian journals and journalists at a critical point in history.

Despite its shortcomings, *Secrets of Journalism in Russia* does provide an interesting collection of personal insights and translated source material. Analysts seeking to understand the roots of media problems in the Yel'tsin era may use it as a viable starting point.

**Notes:**

1 Dr. Gibbs is a former Earhart Fellow of the Institute.

2 A. Knyazev, "Spetsssluzhby i zhurnalisty," *Argumenty i fakty*, No. 44, 1993, p. 3

3 Oleg Vishnyakov, "Backstage Story," *Novoe vremya*, No. 44, October 1992, pp. 4-9:  
FBIS-SOV-92-213, 3 November 1992, p. 6

Copyright ISCIP 1993

Unless otherwise indicated, all articles appearing in this journal have been commissioned especially for  
*Perspective*. This article was originally published at <http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol4/Gibbs.html>.