

POLITICAL JOURNALISM IN POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA

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This is an attempt to trace the evolution of political journalism in post-Communist Russia to envisage how it might respond to a crackdown on the freedom of press. Such a crackdown seems to be inevitable, but there is still time before the freedom of press is infringed upon.

1. From freedom of expression to modern journalism

Free press was the first palpable result of Gorbachev's perestroika. Yeltsin inherited and strengthened it, and today it is one of the very few unarguable successes and lasting effects of the Russian reforms.

The role of the press in the collapse of Communism was tremendous. It disclosed previously hidden historical truth, it introduced democratic values, it brought forward new leaders. Interest in the media in those years was immense. But if we take a closer look at the Soviet newspapers of that period, we will see that the journalism then was mostly about opinion or essay (*publitsitika*), not reportage or investigation. Much in the vein of *shestidesyatniki*, those early authors of the free-speaking Soviet press, were too eager to express their own ideas and share their own thoughts than to cite somebody else's.

First major breakthrough was the first Congress of people's deputies held in May 1989. This noisy, motley crowd of almost Babylonian proportion, each deputy dying to get his message to the nation provided invaluable material for political journalism. The reporters covering the Congress soon formed a close group. They were mostly young, with little or no experience of working for the Communist-censored press, many of them did not have any professional training. Among them there were academics, theater critics, chemists. When back in 1990 Vitaly Tretyakov had a daring idea to start a new

independent daily, first ever that was not a Communist party establishment, it was on the Congress premises that he found his staff. Their lack of experience was to their credit (the same casting principle was used by the Russian managers of McDonald's restaurants: the requirement was No experience with Soviet catering service, or any Soviet services for that matter). His instinct proved to be right. He formed a paper that he called of course *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (The Independent Newspaper) and he put together a bunch of young and enthusiastic journalists. Unlike their senior colleagues from other papers, they did not have the fear of the regime (because of a different background); to them it was too absurd to be frightening. They did not have to get rid of the habit of writing in Communist *novoyaz*, because they did not have it. Instead they were inventing their own newspaper language just as they were inventing their own paper. They invented the concept of sources, the concept of references to "informed", "unnamed", or "close to" sources, the concept of quote, the concept of competition for being the first to get the stuff (*shestidesyatniki* were focused on ideas, rather than information, so there was no such competition before, not to mention the Soviet press). Those who remember those days in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* recall a long debate on whether the word "administration" was OK to be used instead of "apparat" referring to the government.

That was the time of "economic romanticism". Market reforms had not yet started, prices had not been liberalized and everything (newsprint, rent, etc.) was very cheap. Starting a newspaper may have been a daring act, but economically it was an easy one.

Not surprisingly it was a reporter from *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* who in 1991 asked the historical question at the press-conference of the coup-plotters. "Do you realize that

you have committed a state coup?” She was barely 20 years old, and that question immediately made her a star. The press was not only opposed to the regime, not only did it defy it, but it was also stronger than the Communist power. The plotters had no answer to this question, they looked confused and frightened, the young woman defeated them before they lost their last attempt to hold to power.

The collapse of Communism was followed by a brief of romantic attachment between reporters and democratic politicians who had taken over power. They belonged to the forces of good that had jointly defeated the forces of evil, both sides were open-hearted and eager to help each other. Government sources were anxious to share everything with a reporter who was also a fellow-liberal, and the reporters were genuinely interested, shared the politicians’ enthusiasm and were motivated by nothing else but a genuine desire to tell the exciting story to the reader. The story was indeed exciting, and the investigative instincts emerged promptly and naturally. To give one example, a reporter from *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* discovered a secret lab located in *Staraya ploshchad’* (formerly, the Communist Party main headquarters) which produced false beards for communist spies as well as a variety of seals stamps of all sorts of foreign organizations.

The euphoria of the victory over the communists that kept all doors open and all mouths unsealed did not last long. The new state began to take shape, creating its own bureaucracy. Also with the beginning of economic reforms, economic interests began to emerge. The first change in the journalists’ practice was the appearance of press-services. Every official, big and small, stopped answering his own phone. The access to state officials that just recently had been so easy, suddenly became a problem. Those in the

press-service would protect their boss from reporters showing excessive curiosity. More often than not the boss himself, would no longer act as a fellow-democrat. Instead he would try to use the reporter to smear a rival or boost his own image. If the reporter complied, he would be generously compensated. These practices had a sobering effect on some journalists urging them to develop their own ethical standards. Others proved unable, or unwilling, to withstand the pressure. Corruption that spread all over the country did not spare the journalists.

The market reforms made things a lot harder. Suddenly, everything was expensive. The subscription money paid in 1991, in 1992 was worthless. The subscription just simply collapsed. From millions of copies all through perestroika, the newspaper runs dropped to pathetic tens of thousands practically overnight. Suddenly, money was important, and the journalists' salaries were, of course, small. That was the time when the Russians nationwide realized that in order to survive you should hustle and make money on the side. There was barely a good Russian reporter at the time who wouldn't work for Reuters or France press in addition to his own paper, sometimes with unclear priorities. This was certainly detrimental to reporters' loyalties, but this at least was selling their skilled and honest work - if to two masters. Much worse was the growing practice of providing reporters' services on order.

Not to create a wrong impression, all the above were side effects. It cannot be denied that free press - with strong and uncompromised backing from President Yeltsin became the inalienable factor of the new Russia. The Communist press briefly banned never evolved into anything significant. The overwhelming majority of the press was liberal which did not prevent it from criticizing the government fiercely.

2. The liberal press as the defender and the opponent of Yeltsin's regime

In 1993 when Yeltsin issued his Decree 1400 followed by the siege of the Russian Supreme Soviet it was a matter of pride to many a young reporter to break the encirclement and get inside. They were driven by professional challenge and those who got inside had to deal with a personal conflict: the besieged deputies were political and ideological enemies, but those enemies were illegally kept in captivity, without the electricity and at times even without water - and they had to receive a fair coverage. Another aspect of the conflict: the operation of the government, which was still regarded as the political ally as opposed to the Communists, was hopelessly bungled and irresponsible, and the reporters covered that too. (One of the best stories of those days was a piece by Sergei Parkhomenko, then a political reporter and columnist in Segodnya daily, and currently editor-in-chief of Itogi newsweekly. He described the confusion, lack of coordination and political will inside the Kremlin following the decision to besiege the seat of the Supreme Soviet.) 1993 was an important trial for the Russian journalism, and it passed the test, at times with excellence. It is not common for Russian journalists to write books, but one was written by Veronika Kutsillo, a woman reporter who covered those days in September-October 1993 for Kommersant Daily. Her book written simply and candidly conveys the atmosphere among the journalists covering the 1993 coup: their team spirit, their honest effort to meet the tough professional challenge, but also their frustration and their bitterness.

The war in Chechnya that began in late 1994 was to Russian reporters a training ground for reportage. Since all access to the Russian soldiers was barred by the top military officials, the reporters got to the Chechen side and told horrible stories of the war

on a day-to-day basis. Risking their lives, some getting killed, but providing honest coverage. The Russian army not only lost the battleground war, it also lost the propaganda war. The Chechen leaders were quick to realize the importance of publicity, and the result was that the Russian coverage was largely pro-Chechen. When two months into the war the Russian army finally realized it had made the mistake, it was too late: whether or not they sympathized with the Chechens there was barely anyone in Russia who supported the Russian government's cause in the war.

During those years from 1994 on, the position of the media in Russia grew strangely ambiguous. The same publication would be both pro-government and in opposition to it. This "split personality" of the press resulted from the co-existence of conflicting forces inside the government itself. On the one hand, it was still the same president who had defeated the Communists, he still defended the freedom of press and pledged allegiance to the course of reforms. On the other hand, the government as a whole was further and further drifting away from the democratic image that loomed in the minds of the liberal reformers in the early 90's: Yeltsin's new circle included more and more anti-reform and corrupt characters headed by Yeltsin's monstrous bodyguard Korzhakov. The Kremlin became almost inaccessible to the press, which naturally antagonized the journalists and put them for all practical purposes in opposition to the government. Meanwhile, there was still the main enemy, the Communists, and the Duma where they constituted the majority. So if the press was anti-government it was only up to a point, since it would never speak in one voice with the Communists.

Another factor that made questionable the status of the press was the absence of feedback between the press and the government. Quite a few cases may be cited when a

thorough journalistic investigation revealed a corrupt official, but this made no difference. To give one example: a reporter from Segodnya daily found out that deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets owned stock of a factory in Siberia. Segodnya ran his piece supported with good evidence and facsimile copies of pertinent documents. But there was never any government reaction to this publication. Gradually the journalists grew discouraged, and the investigative spirit was fading away.

In later years under the guise of investigative reporting some newspapers began to publish compromising materials leaked to them by important government sources. One example is the sex scandal Russian style: Valentin Kovalev, the justice minister, appeared naked in the company of equally naked women. A heavily blurred photo was the so-called *operativnaya s'emka*, shot by secret police agents. The reporter did not even pretend that she had taken those photos herself. When princess Diana was killed the discussion of the paparazzi role had reached Moscow. However, to the question how far paparazzi may go, in Russia the answer is: our paparazzi are FSK (current name of the KGB) agents, and how far THEY may go is a somewhat different question.

Another “journalistic” genre that developed shortly after the 1996 presidential election was the publication of transcripts of secretly recorded tapes. Again the reporters did not even pretend they got them - planted the bug or in any other way were involved in getting the transcripts. They would receive the tape from a client, would not even care to rewrite it, would not contribute any professional skill to the publication.

So far Russia has not produced its own Woodward or Bernstein. An investigative reporter who pursued his selfless quest for truth never became a character on the Russian scene. It should be noted that the circulation of newspapers is quite low for a country as

big as Russia, and the regional press is usually heavily dependent on the local regional bosses.

3. The effect of the 1996 presidential election

Such was the climate by early 1996 when the presidential campaign began. The campaign contributed a great deal to the corruption of journalistic profession. To say that the press supported Yeltsin is to say nothing. Barely anyone saw the dilemma. The universally acknowledged self-justification for taking sides in the campaign: the Communist victory will mean absolute catastrophe, end of the freedom of press and personal threat to liberal journalists. All of this was true. But it was also clear that once you have taken sides it will be very hard to reject the newly assumed loyalties. You allow yourself to be a tool once, how do you say no next time when your contribution is badly needed. And money was also involved: a pool of reporters was formed who were writing unsigned propaganda articles. They did not even know where their stories would run. It was “campaign stuff”, and this “stuff” was very well paid for.

The 1996 election had a heavily detrimental effect on the Russian journalism. The major compromise involved in unequivocally supporting the very president that they had castigated for almost three years before that, was damaging to the journalists’ ethics. Also, as recent surveys show, in the eyes of the public the press is closely associated with “them”, the administration, the government, those who enriched themselves at the expense of the people.

After Yeltsin’s victory, the big tycoons, the so-called oligarchs, received their spoils in terms of lucrative privatization deals. Their influence in government decision-taking grew immensely. They began building new media empires and enlarge and

reinforce those already existing. When an attempt was made by deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais, the oligarchs' former ally in Yeltsin's campaign, to encroach on their privileges they counterattacked using the full might of their media. After the successful presidential campaign they knew what a powerful tool they possessed. Eventually the media instrument proved to be effective. Chubais was defeated and fired from the Cabinet.

One clarification may be needed here: there is a big difference between censorship as we know it from the Soviet times and the owners' interests. Unlike the Communist party which determined every aspect of life and therefore demanded that every published piece be checked for ideological correctness, the oligarchs tend to use their media when they seek to achieve a specific goal, such as getting rid of Chubais. Outside that goal, the coverage might be quite fair, and the story quite exciting. It should be also noted that the oligarchs mostly pursue different goals, so on the whole the Russian media offer a diverse picture and if you read several papers rather than one you may get a good idea of what truly goes on. Also, some media are more subtle than others in meeting the oligarchs' needs. Boris Berezovsky's media especially are notorious for acting as undisguised propaganda tools. Ironically, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* once founded as the unique fully independent has been shamelessly used by Berezovsky, who now owns it, whenever he deems it necessary.

4. The first effects of the crisis

Paradoxically, the Russian press benefited by the current crisis, at least some publications did. The crisis has forced the owners to take a more pragmatic, economic attitude to their media (one example is the merge of *Izvestia* and *Rusky Telegraph*, two

mainstream liberal dailies owned by the same owner, Unexim Bank). Also as the balance of power shifted away from the oligarchs, the liberal press has been free to take a definitely oppositional stand: with the oligarchs no longer involved in government decision-taking, there is no need to make reservations in the coverage of the government, the Kremlin, other parties.

Interestingly, the investigative zeal of the early years of democracy is returning. Back in 1991 a young reporter of Nezavisimaya Gazeta stole the draft of the new, reformist program of the CPSU, leaving Mikhail Gorbachev stunned and enraged. In October 1998, as the new Cabinet was secretly preparing its economic program, reporters from Kommersant Daily stole a copy and published it. The anti-reform nature of the program caused a storm of criticism, and Yevgeny Primakov was forced to revise the program. This time unprecedented security measures were taken to avoid a leak, but the revised version appeared in Kommersant anyway.

This may sound refreshing, but is not likely to last long. A new election period is coming, and the media services will be in high demand.

5. Press scene after Yeltsin

So far the media have effectively repelled awkward attempts of the new government to crack down on the freedom of press. They also forced Prime Minister Primakov and Communist members of his Cabinet to talk to reporters. The new government has learnt over the past months that the media was a factor not to be ignored. Yet, they are alarming signs of what may happen to the freedom of press after Yeltsin's era is over, the era when -in large part thanks to Yeltsin - democratic freedoms were proclaimed and, at least as applies to press, strongly backed by the president.

One of the likeliest winners of the next presidential election is Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov. During his years in office he has been the ultimate master of his city whom no newspaper dares criticize. At present, apparently in view of the forthcoming elections, he is building up his own media empire. He appointed a new man as head of his TV channel. One of the first statements the new man made was: I hate the polyvalence of the channel (and to those who could not grasp the meaning of this chemical term he explained: this is when there is a great deal of different opinions). He also suggested that his staff regard themselves as commissars rather than journalists.

Yuri Luzhkov is barely an advocate of democratic freedoms. Should he become the next Russian president, he is more than likely to crack down on free press. To do this he will not have to introduce censorship in the old Soviet sense. There are other methods he can enforce short of imposing direct bans.

By way of economic pressure: turn the media business unprofitable and eventually unaffordable (raising the price of the TV signal transmission, increasing the rent of office space, cancelling tax and customs privileges; after that, give out discounts and privileges back to the selected, more compliant publications).

By way of legal pressure: file suits against “intractable” publications (during his years as Moscow mayor he has sued newspapers repeatedly and has never lost a single suit).

By way of “communal pressure” – find faults with newspapers for “improper” use of utilities (imposing fines and bans on the use of office space).

By way of ensuring strong loyalty of his administration (his Moscow administration has invariably demonstrated very strong loyalty to Luzhkov).

Should all this come true, it will create a new environment for the Russian media. Some publications and journalists will certainly yield to the pressure. There has been too much corruption, moral and economic, to expect too many to resist. But there is enough professional pride, too. And a truly professional journalist will be humiliated – and bored - to be told what to write. Also, there is bound to be at least some public protest in case of a crackdown on the freedom of press.

This will create a divide between pro-Luzhkov and anti-Luzhkov press. So in a matter of a few years high-quality opposition press of democratic leaning may appear on the Russian scene.