

Russian Reporters— Between a Hammer and an Anvil

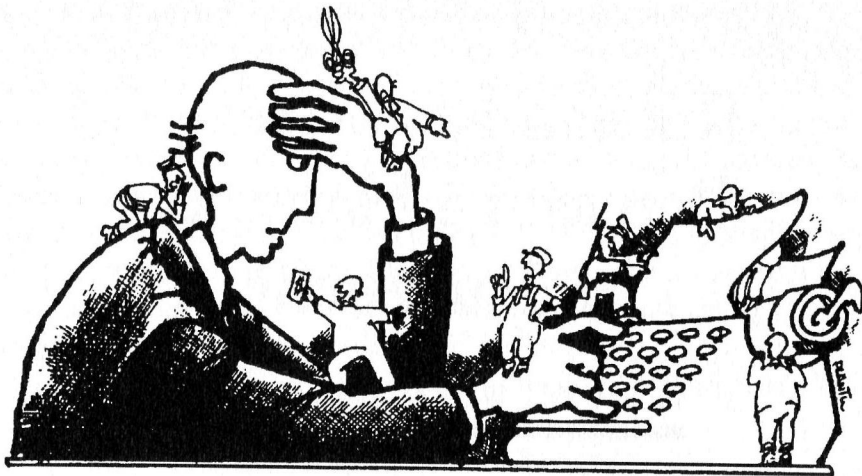
IOSIF M. DZYALOSHINSKY

IN 1995, the Forestry Committee of Leningrad *Oblast*—a region of Russia—sued a number of newspapers in defense of its reputation. According to the Committee, the newspapers *Nevskoe vremya*, *Segodnya*, *Vecherny Peterburg*, *Reklama-Shans* and *Smena* damaged the reputation of the Committee and its chairman, Andrei Gosudarev, by publishing the Russian Green Party's charges that the transfer of protected state land to small farming plots was illegal.

As became clear during the hearings, the Committee did not dispute any of the facts. It only demanded that in the future any publications about the state of forestry management in Leningrad *Oblast* be checked ahead of time with Mr. Gosudarev.

The events in Leningrad *Oblast* are an extreme yet illuminating example of the challenges that journalists face in Russia when they confront government authorities accustomed to the compliant media of the communist era. Worse, such holdovers from the mind-set of the old regime are not the only challenges to independent and uncoerced reporting in Russia.

Iosif M. Dzyaloshinsky is chairman of the Standing Commission on Freedom of Information, a program of the Russian-American Press and Information Center. The Center is a project of New York University's Center for War, Peace and the News Media. This essay was translated by Conrad Hohenlohe.



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Ten years of *perestroika*, radical market reforms, democracy and the breakup of the Soviet Union have given Russia freedom of speech and the independent media to guarantee it. Yet the condition of the mass media in Russia is still shaky, and sometimes the price of independence is fatally high. The mass media and journalists are caught between the market, with its economic pressures, and the authorities, who try to control them by withholding information, issuing economic threats and pressuring journalists.

Nevertheless, while the situation of the Russian media is fairly typical of post-Soviet states, Russian journalists are more prepared for survival in market conditions and struggles with authorities than their colleagues in other republics because Russia has advanced further on the path of economic and political reform, and consequently its journalists are better prepared to meet the challenges of the post-Soviet order.

In early 1996, new Russian laws on state support for the media came into force and signaled the larger transformation of a press created to serve the needs of a totalitarian society into a press striving to become an integral part of a market economy and a democratic state.

First, the structure of the mass media has changed. Before *perestroika* the most influential medium was the print press. Now, it is

television. Rising newsprint prices make papers expensive, while television is free for the watching and television sets are cheap. The shift from two channels to as many as seven and improved programming have made television more attractive to viewers.

Overall, there is a tendency for more and more Russians to read local newspapers and watch national television. Print press merits special attention, however, because Russians tend to find it more credible than broadcasting and because it is their primary source of local news.

THE FINANCIAL SITUATION of the mass media is less hopeful. All publications are required to register with the government, and 85 percent of all registered publications receive state or other subsidies that provide economic sustenance but compromise independence. In the 89 regions that comprise Russia—republics, *krais* and *oblasts*—almost all publications receive some form of subsidy from the state, local authorities or so-called sponsors. Among publications that circulate nationally, the situation is better: 40 percent claim complete financial independence.

The federal government has always subsidized national newspapers directly, but its role in subsidizing local newspapers was simply to mandate to the local governments which newspapers would be supported without providing any of the funding. In 1995, the federal government decentralized the subsidies, allocating to the local governments decision-making authority in granting subsidies. But at local levels of government, funds for the press are typically the lowest priority in budgets, providing for neither newer newspaper equipment and printing presses nor minimum salaries for journalists, whose profession is one of the lowest paid in Russia.

While the best-paid Russian journalists earn the equivalent of \$5,000 a month, most earn \$100 to \$200 a month. (A secretary working for a commercial firm, as opposed to an agency in the poorly paid state sector, might earn as much as \$350 per month.) Because of their unprofitability generally, newspapers are not in a financial position to pay their journalists even average wages.

With journalists' salaries and honoraria so much lower than the

rates that commercial firms, political parties and other organizations pay for illegal information services, the level of corruption and payoffs among journalists and editors is inevitably rising.

In addition to the state and political parties, there is a third channel of support for the mass media: sponsorship by entrepreneurial, commercial and financial structures. It is no secret that large financial groups and individual banks seek to play a more active role in the press business.

There is nothing wrong with this, but society has a right to know who, and at what level, provides financial and material resources for whom, especially when talking about such a sensitive area as the media. There are currently no legal means or organizational mechanisms that would allow oversight of this process.

ALONG WITH all the economic problems of the press, journalists must also contend with the growing complexity of relations with the government. Authorities still try to legislate media activities, oversee observance of legislation and interfere constantly with the activities of journalists. Their means: the 1991 Law of the USSR on the Press and Other Mass Media, and the Law of the Russian Federation on Mass Media, which enshrined the concept of publications' "founders." A holdover from the days of communism, a founder—which can be a person, organization or local government—can appoint or fire an editor.

In late 1991 and early 1992 most founders who were heads of government structures preferred to show that they were liberals by founding mass media and not interfering in their activities. In 1995, however, founders—especially at the level of regional or local administration—contemplated the prospect of elections and concluded that media subordinated to their interests would help them at the polls. At the same time, the founders were caught up in a general trend throughout Russia towards strengthening the executive branch of government at all levels.

Throughout Russia, there have been attempts to prevent journalists from writing about certain topics or people. Freedom of information questions have acquired unexpected resonance. Flaws in Russian press law allow officials either to hide objective information or to dispense disinformation without breaking any existing rules.



AP/WIDE WORLD

Boris Yeltsin at the Forum of the Democratic Press, September 1995: Will his policies steer the Russian press toward greater independence?

Information was, of course, hard to acquire earlier, but what has happened in the past few years, especially related to the war in Chechnya, has made the problem even more obvious.

Speaking at the Forum of the Democratic Press on Sept. 1, 1995, Russian President Boris Yeltsin said that many state agencies hide valuable information from journalists and demanded that official bodies become more open with information. The president did not say anything new to the journalists, but the fact that the head of state focused attention on the matter points out that this issue has, as they say, ripened.

Research conducted by the author in 1995 showed that about 70 percent of journalists working in the regional media have confronted situations in which authorities refuse to divulge information. Since then, the figure has risen to 80 percent. Journalists rate law enforcement the least responsive of government agencies. As a result, many journalists now consider it normal to buy information from officials and paid sources.

As the conflict intensifies between supporters of the old, authoritarian way of dealing with the media and advocates of new, more democratic forms of journalism, there has been a sharp rise in physical pressure on journalists in both outlying regions and big cities. Irina Chernova, a young journalist who was investigating police corruption in Volgograd, was beaten unconscious by police. In Tarusa, another journalist, Tatyana Fedyaeva, was carried out of a supposedly open government meeting by police officers.

And there are new threats: One can accidentally harm the interests of powerful financial or criminal organizations and within hours lose one's job with no hope of finding new work. Cases of direct physical violence, including murder, have become more common for journalists. Grenades explode in journalists' apartments. Square-shouldered young men with crew cuts appear in the offices of editors of provincial newspapers investigating certain dark stories and quietly suggest putting an end to the investigation. The police in Volgograd have organized, at great expense, round-the-clock protection for the journalist Chernova, who dared to inform the readers of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* about the connections of the several local law enforcement agencies with organized crime.

All this is painfully reminiscent of the foreign detective novels we read in our youth. Today, in Russia, they are a reality.

JOURNALISTS ARE POORLY PREPARED to act against such attacks because the old unity of journalists has fallen apart. In its place there is the snobbery of Moscow journalists and the envious resentment of their regional counterparts. The media are further divided into those that receive state or other subsidies and those that do not. Journalists denied access to this feeding trough are irritated. And those who receive budget money do not hide their derisive attitude toward those who receive financing from private capital.

The difference between the Moscow media and regional media is obvious. The financial resources of the country are concentrated in Moscow, along with Russia's best intellectual forces, information sources and communications technology. But most importantly, authorities in the Kremlin and Moscow have always refrained from crude methods of managing the media.

Of course, Moscow media are not completely free from the influence of the authorities. Sometimes the heads of the Moscow media are invited, collectively or individually, to high offices. Representatives of the elite and heads of the media now meet at informal lunches and dinners, a relatively new phenomenon for Russia. These are seen as civilized, accepted methods of lobbying.

But Moscow journalists can resist attempts at pressure. Rank-and-file Moscow reporters, despite their complaints, are independent enough and always have the opportunity to move to another paper. And in the top ranks, Moscow editors have shown that they can not only argue with the authorities but also fight with them.

The situation in the regions is significantly worse: Typical Soviet methods of press management are still common. Editors are called in to see the governor or the president's representative and threatened with a funding cut, revocation of a lease or withdrawal of printing privileges. A typical example: Gov. Chub of the southern *oblast* of Rostov, angered by the appearance in a city paper of three simultaneous articles critical of President Yeltsin, ordered the immediate sacking of the editor in chief.

Journalists, weak and divided as a profession, are practically unable to defend themselves from the encroachments of local tsars. Reporters from independent regional newspapers and broadcasters are not accredited at major events and are not given official information.

Despite calls to preserve unity in the ranks of the Union of Journalists of Russia, there are more and more associations of professionals that keep formal ties to the Union but that are in reality sailing off in other directions. Since *perestroika*, the Union has lost the funding and government links that once made it helpful to journalists. Instead, reporters curry favor with government officials. This is not the best way to achieve independent journalism, but it does provide breathing room for reporters who have to deal with their immediate crises. Organizations like the Glasnost Defense Fund do important work to protect the rights and freedoms of journalists, but they are too few and too weak.

The mood of journalists is also affected by the fact that the mass media have lost their Soviet-era influence as "collective propagandist organizers." During the *perestroika* period, critical and politicized

journalism brought success. But with the collapse of the democratic euphoria, journalists have lost their leading role and come into conflict with society.

SINCE THE LATE 1980s, many Russians have lost their belief in notions of democracy and market economics that invigorated the *perestroika*-era press. For many people, the market means poverty and democracy means chaos.

In this situation, journalists are left with two choices. One is the easy but very dubious and almost masochistic path to success—to become purveyors of social disenchantment while maintaining a democratic image. The other choice is to rethink radically the journalist's role, and seek not to convince the people to vote for a particular candidate but to monitor the power structure to help the electorate make a free and informed choice.

Journalists found themselves in a particularly difficult situation during the recent presidential elections. Many foreign and some Russian journalists are very critical of the fact that many famous journalists, well-known for their adherence to the ideals of objective and unbiased journalism, announced their support for Yeltsin quite openly. Responding to such accusations, Igor Malashenko, president of NTV (Independent Television, the only national nongovernmental television network) said: "The dilemma is very simple: If we follow the rules by being strictly objective, professional, unbiased and non-partisan and tomorrow Zyuganov [the Communist Party presidential candidate] wins, then we will know that we have dug our own grave with our own hands. If, to avoid this scenario, we stand on the side of Yeltsin and start to help him, this means that the mass media will have become mass propaganda. There are pitfalls everywhere."

Although the conception of the press as a player in political struggles has been widespread in journalistic circles, common sense has won out and the press has turned away from the great honor of considering itself to be part of the power structure. In this formula, journalists should accurately reflect reality and not concentrate on what happens in the swollen minds of some of our commentators.

But the legal status of journalists in Russia is still uncertain.

While there is no First Amendment in Russia, there is a special law on the media (which recently celebrated its fifth anniversary) that fully conforms to accepted democratic standards. There are also, however, other mutually contradictory laws, most of which are designed to defend the authorities from being tried in the court of public opinion. The media are also governed by many presidential decrees and governmental regulations whose authors completely ignore previous laws and decrees. When the need for these temporary regulations ends, the authorities forget to invalidate them and leave them there to clutter the legislative landscape.

Of course, things could be worse. In other post-Soviet states the condition of the media is even more difficult. Russian journalists may criticize the president and the government for their indifference to the problems of media professionals, but they understand that such indifference is better than the great attention to press affairs shown in places like Belarus, where President Alexander Lukashenka has fired editors, and Turkmenistan, where government pressure induces journalists to conform to an official line.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD? The most pessimistic scenario assumes that social conflict interrupts plans for the country's transition to a market economy and democracy. If this happens, Russia will be threatened with both internal and external catastrophes. A totalitarian system of control over the mass media will be restored and publications like *Pravda* will be preminent.

The other scenario, which many specialists consider more probable, assumes that for the foreseeable future Russia will be a measured authoritarian state with a mixed state-capitalist economy. In this scenario, the state will at first try to control the mass media through economic and legal levers. There will be special state programs to support the press.

But there is simply not enough money in Russia to do this, and the prospect of journalists scrambling for limited government funds is unattractive. Ultimately, the government must create the conditions for the media to survive on their own and replace direct subsidies with tax breaks.

In 1996 new laws will be passed to regulate media relations with all elements of society. In all likelihood these measures will fail to bring the expected results. The state will then reject attempts at direct regulation of the mass media, which will allow the full development of market mechanisms for the media.

The press will then be forced to appeal for financial help not to the state but to commercial structures and directly to the readers. Newspapers and magazines will become normal commercial enterprises acting by the laws of the market.

The most mass-oriented and dynamically developing medium will continue to be television. As market reforms progress, many print media will close, forcing firings and cutbacks. Periodical publications that survive will become more businesslike and modern and will respond to the changing demands of the readers. The publications with the greatest chance for success are local, independent, general-interest, depoliticized, largely informational publications with a serious, businesslike tone.

Changes in professional work conditions will demand the resolution of several problems related to the legal regulation of the print media. Most of all this means that reliable and simple access to socially important information must be ensured for journalists, including those who are not accredited to specific newspapers or television or radio companies.

Great effort must also be applied to make sure that the legal concept of hindering the professional work of a journalist remains in the criminal code and is actually enforced.

The Russian press, as in other post-Soviet states, is moving fitfully toward the model of relations between government, society and media that are characteristic of countries with established market and democratic traditions. The faster the press can move along this path, the more confidently we can speak of the irreversibility of the transformations that will ensure both freedom of speech and independent journalism in Russia.