

How Free Is the Media in Russia Today?

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Over the last 200 years, the allure of democracy has caused diverse nations in Europe, Asia and Latin America to alter their systems of government through military coup or peaceful transition. In his book *The Third Wave*, Samuel Huntington has identified three separate waves of democratization: the first after the American and French revolutions, especially between 1828-1926; the second wave following in the wake of World War II between 1943-1962 and, finally, the third wave from 1974 to the present. The tendency has not been without its reverses, of course. On occasion, states have moved towards democracy only to reverse course in disillusionment and come back to more authoritarian forms of government.

The third wave of democratization, according to the Harvard University political scientist, began with the military coup in Portugal in 1974 and gathered intensity with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989. This was followed in December of 1991 with the breakup of the Soviet Union and the struggle of Russia and the other former republics to construct new popular governments. The importance of this development can hardly be exaggerated. In a few short months, 40 years of Cold War collapsed with vast implications for international relations. Will Russia now really become democratic? Will Russia and the United States become peaceful friends rather than potential enemies? Or will authoritarian tendencies reassert themselves in Moscow to the detriment of East-West stability?

The process of building democratic institutions in Russia, where experience of incipient constitutionalism has been lost from living memory, is without doubt extremely complex. Ask a Russian what he understands by democracy and the answer is more likely to be a better, more affluent life rather than one-man-one-vote. What is democracy after all? What are its characteristics? What irreplaceable component must be present without which democracy cannot be said to exist?

“Elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable *sine qua non*,” writes Professor Huntington. But elections are not all. Democracy implies many other things: limitations on governmental

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power; willingness to compromise; individual responsibility; human and civil rights; equality of all citizens before the law; a fair judicial process; a reasonably stable economy; an equitable distribution of wealth; wide-ranging political discussion and, in all likelihood, a system of political parties offering a choice of leaders. This latter is grounded in the ability of voters to discuss their leaders' performance publicly and privately under the guarantee of free speech and free media.

We come to the question at hand: How free is the media in Russia today? Both Freedom House in New York and UNESCO have judged the Russian media to be only partially free following the events of 1991. What are the obstacles facing the press, radio and television? What are the controls which the Yeltsin government would seek to impose? What are the threats from former Communists and rabid nationalists of the Vladimir Zhirinovskiy sort? What are the structural weaknesses of the Russian media and the effect of rampant inflation? What can the West do to strengthen the independence of media and thereby assure freedom of political choice in a future Russian democracy?

These questions prompted us to organize a conference in March 1994 to examine the struggle for a free press in Russia. Joined by Dean Robert Lowndes of the College of Arts and Sciences of Northeastern University, we invited a group of editors and specialists to present their views in Boston. Among them were Elizabeth Schillinger, the American co-director of the Russian-American Press and Information Center in Moscow; Alexander S. Meltsaev, former political correspondent of the *Nizhegorodskii Rabochii*; Vitaly T. Tretyakov, editor-in-chief of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*; Alexander M. Lyubimov, principal anchor of Vid Television Company; and Magomedkhan M. Magomedkhanov, an ethnographer from the republic of Dagestan. This section of press freedoms in *Demokratizatsiya* is based on their presentations at the Northeastern University conference.

From their presentations, it is clear that the Russian press today is incomparably freer than it was under the Soviet regime. In 1918, the Bolsheviks suppressed the opposition press and four years later created the Glavlit censorship agency. The combination of Glavlit, secret police terror, a one-party political line and editorial self-censorship amounted to the most rigid system of media/thought control the world has ever seen.

Now that system has been dismantled, and the new Constitution has explicitly stated that prior censorship is unacceptable (except in special circumstances). Although some of the old repressive reflexes live on, editors are not obliged to refer to the index of forbidden subjects. No longer does one-party rule force journalists to consider whether their articles will accord with the wishes of the ruling authorities. Nor do journalists fear that they will be imprisoned for speaking out on subjects which were previously forbidden.

Since the failure of the 1991 hardline putsch and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian newspapers have gone through major transformations. Independent tabloids and broadsheets have appeared which have, on occasion, celebrated sensationalism and pushed their new-found freedoms

to excess. The great central newspapers which circulated throughout the Soviet Union are in decline, while provincial newspapers, as Meltsaev describes, are in the ascendant. Away from the capital, other intriguing developments are occurring. Magomedkhanov describes how Islamic publishing is being revived in Dagestan and an Islamic newspaper may be created in Moscow for national circulation.

Nonetheless, contemporary economic conditions and traditional institutions have made newspapers vulnerable in a variety of ways as detailed by Schillinger and Tretyakov. Current areas of concern are: (1) The

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high rate of inflation has caused newsprint to soar. (2) Newspapers have appealed for, and many are, receiving government subsidies with all that implies for government influence, especially in times of crisis. (3) Newspapers continue to rely on the state postal system

and Rospechat for distribution at exorbitant prices. (4) Printing houses and broadcasting towers continue to be owned and operated by the state.

This means that the Russian government has the means at its disposal to hinder, if not to shut down, most media operations. The Law of the Press, adopted in 1992, permits legal action against newspapers which indulge in defaming or insulting (read: criticizing) government officials, the national flag and other state symbols; engaging in hate-mongering; war propaganda; or pornography. Radio and television are even more vulnerable. To maintain order on the airwaves, radio and television frequencies must be allocated by government. Furthermore, broadcasting reaches the vast majority of the Russian listening audience. Russia's leaders look on television as a powerful tool for shaping popular opinions and securing political support. The government is able to cut off or block broadcasts it considers undesirable. Lyubimov, who urged citizens over TV to return to their homes during the 1993 October crisis (and was therefore regarded as disloyal by the Yeltsinites), recounts governmental efforts to assert control and keep him off the air until May 1994.

Earlier this year, a considerable amount of broadcasting was stopped on the grounds that many stations, especially in Siberia, had not paid for their transmission services. The new Law on Television, furthermore, states that broadcasts which are deemed unhealthy for the population may be stopped. This loose definition means that in a crisis, the state would likely stop broadcasts which it considers inflammatory.

Although the Russian media has moved out from under the rigid censorship of the Communist regime, it is clear that the Yeltsin administration would like to retain a modicum of control. Significantly, officials of the Ministry of Press and Information talk about assuring a plurality of views rather than unlimited freedom of expression. Russia today seems to want a reasonable diversity of expression where reasonable is defined by the authorities.

Can the West help strengthen independent media in Russia? All of the participants provide suggestions. Thomas Winship, former editor of *The Boston Globe*, who has been involved in aiding Russian journalists on the scene, also presents the result of his experience. Most of these proposals are summarized in the at-a-glance box. The proposals suggest that the West may offer a range of useful advice and help. But in the end, Russian journalists will have to shoulder the major burden. And Russian government officials will have to value the independent media while suffering the more than occasional slings and arrows.

On this delicate balance, whose equilibrium point is still uncertain, the future of Russian democracy hangs.

Proposals at a Glance

- 1) Create in Moscow an American-controlled publishing house, completely independent of the Russian government, capable of printing numerous daily and weekly newspapers.
- 2) Improve "horizontal" communications in Russia, probably through electronic mail and satellite transmissions so that the 89 regions can communicate with each other independent of Moscow.
- 3) Research the operations of the media in the regions of Russia and create a comprehensive data base, capable of describing the development of the post-Communist media in detail.
- 4) Encourage the development of Russian press associations as instruments for self-improvement.
- 5) Urge the Russian government to enact indirect subsidies to newspapers through concessionary postal rates and favorable tax conditions.
- 6) Provide consultation on management, advertising, distribution personnel management to Russian media organizations by sending specialists to Russia on relatively long-term basis (one month to a year). Editors and publishers, particularly, may need "mind-broadening" training.
- 7) Urge Western colleagues and press associations to speak up quickly and strongly when abuse of the media occurs in Russia.
- 8) Urge American correspondents and editors in America, to avoid stereotypes and over-simplification in telling the story of Russia today.
- 9) Organize seminars in Russia on media ethics.