

The Moscow Press: Vanguard of Democracy?

IVAN ASCHER

When Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to the United States in the early nineteenth century, he turned to newspapers for insights into Jacksonian America and the nature of democracy.¹ From reading the first articles he found in *Vincennes' Gazette*, he was able to answer subtle questions about American society, political culture and institutions, and the mechanisms of democracy in general. Remarkably enough, it is not impossible a century and a half later to put similar questions to the Russian press and obtain substantive answers about the nature of Russian democratization.

What does the Moscow press tell us about Russian democracy? The purpose of this inquiry is twofold: to understand better the mechanisms of politics in Russia, and to gauge what expectations part of the Muscovite elite may have of democracy. The present article is a reading of news articles and commentary published in the Moscow press during the weeks preceding the parliamentary elections of December 1995. It attempts to identify what political actors, institutions, and events are deemed important by the Moscow press, and to analyze their coverage for insights into both these institutions and actors, and the print media's own idea of democracy.

What Do the Papers Say?

Although this article does not aim to analyze the press's opinion of individual candidates and parties, a few words should be said on the topic by way of introduction. As could be expected in a preelectoral season, Moscow newspapers in November and December 1995 carried interviews with various political candidates, along with opinion polls and a number of political forecasts. While interviewers seemed to privilege candidates of a liberal and democratic bent,² the more substantive and lengthy commentaries and profiles were often reserved for the nationalist party of Alexander Lebed and the Communist Party led by Gennady Zyuganov. Although the newspapers' partisan biases, apparent in their coverage of the candidates, are important and noteworthy, they are not surprising in light of the liberal tradition of the Muscovite press, nor are they particularly specific to the Russian case.

More striking than the treatment of individual candidates and their programs was the analysis of the electoral process itself and the attention given by the press to certain events and institutions. Three state institutions in particular received considerable coverage in November and December—the Central Electoral Commission, the Constitutional Court, and the president. Whether this was dictated by events or by the prejudices of editors, the prominence of these institutions as a topic of commentary only reflects the importance of their role in the electoral game.

Ivan Ascher is a member of the Strengthening Democratic Institutions project at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

The Power of State Institutions

The Central Electoral Commission (TsIK) became the focus of some attention in late October when it denied a number of parties a place on the ballot, including Yabloko, the reform-minded party led by economist Grigory Yavlinsky. The TsIK's decision came as a surprise to most and prompted a strong reaction of protest from many Russian and Western commentators. Among the democrats who denounced the selection process as a sham, the leader of Russia's Democratic Choice and former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar threatened to withdraw from the race if Yabloko was not allowed to run. The case was eventually closed and the matter put to rest when a Supreme Court ruling overran the TsIK's initial decision, allowing Yabloko and others to participate in the elections. The debate surrounding the incident, however, had already brought to light some underlying concerns among political observers.

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Significantly, the criticism of the TsIK made by some commentators was not so much a defense of the forbidden parties as an attack on the TsIK for having

allegedly disregarded the law. In its account of the TsIK's decision, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* chose to herald the complaints of a party excluded from the race, and echoed its claim that the TsIK had “unlawfully refused to accept all of the documents and lists of signatures submitted by the bloc.”³ As for the journalists who sided with the TsIK, they too explained the TsIK's decision less by attacking specific parties than by invoking the “normal” power of the TsIK. In *Kommersant*, for instance, one author challenged the various “conspiracy theories” developed to explain the TsIK's decision and remarked: “It is impossible to understand why the public should have become so excited after realizing that the TsIK wielded some power. This is only natural. The commission was created in order to see if parties and associations have legal grounds for taking part in elections rather than in order to automatically register all comers. Control always implies power.”⁴ Elsewhere, introducing an interview with TsIK Chairman Nikolai Ryabov, one journalist wrote similarly: “Why are we so surprised by the TsIK's power? . . . Relations between the TsIK on the one hand, and parties, movements, blocs and candidates on the other, are largely based on precedent,”⁵ arguing that Ryabov was but espousing the role set by his predecessors in the late Soviet era.

Overall, the discussion surrounding the TsIK and its decisions suggests a concern among journalists over the proper role of this institution. Whether or not it was “surprised by the TsIK's power,” the press could not but remark upon it and at least wonder with *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* whether the TsIK was changing “from the election organizer into one of the participants of the political struggle.”⁶ Underlying this muddled debate were different understandings of the TsIK's authority and relation to the law, or perhaps different understandings of authority and the law in general. According to the TsIK's defenders, the commission's assigned task of registering parties on the ballot seemed a sufficient source of authority to place it virtually above criticism; according to the TsIK's critics, on the other hand, the commission was but an instrument of the law, and as such could well be challenged and put to the test of the law.

A similar analysis can be made of press coverage of a second important institution: the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation. Already a frequent topic of discussion, the Constitutional Court found itself in the limelight when it received (and turned down) a request sent by the Supreme Court and a hundred Duma deputies that it examine the constitutionality of the election law. Much like the TsIK, the court unwittingly sparked an animated debate in the press where most commentators seemed more preoccupied with questions of political legitimacy than with the adequacy of the election law proper. First, the discussion was over the judiciousness of amending the law; once the request had been turned down, the matter became one of assessing the intelligence of the court's decision.

Among the supporters of the request to the Constitutional Court, TsIK Chairman Ryabov and the speaker of the Federation Council, Vladimir Shumeiko, figured prominently. Their argument for putting the election law to the test of the Constitution prior to the December election was that "all disputable disputes would be resolved before the elections and nobody would doubt the legitimacy of the new State Duma afterwards."⁷

According to some cynics, the motivation for challenging the election law was not so much to assure the legitimacy of the new Duma as to "torpedo the elections altogether"⁸ by contesting the law so shortly before they were to take place. This suspicion only fueled another argument against the request that amending the law would signify to voters "the State Duma's inability to properly perform its functions in the field of law-making,"⁹ thereby delegitimizing the legislative body that is the Duma.

One might have expected the discussion to cease once the court rejected the request. To the contrary, political figures and commentators went on to focus on the consequences of the court's decision, just as they had debated the implications of the initial request. *Rossiiskiy Vesti* noted that the decision had been made in a closed session, a practice normally reserved by law for matters involving state secrets, security, or public morals. This anomaly, according to the newspaper, only aggravated the decision, which had already failed to "dispel the doubts in the constitutionality of the election law."¹⁰ Those who shared these doubts included *Nezavisimaya Gazeta's* Ivan Rodin, who wrote that "the long-awaited clear verdict on the elections' legitimacy was never heard,"¹¹ and presidential aide Georgy Satarov for whom the legitimacy of the law could be established only by the Constitutional Court.¹²

Critics of the court were not the only ones who invoked the principle of political legitimacy in support of their argument; even those who favored the court's decision, such as Sergei Filatov, head of the presidential staff, praised the court's refusal to consider the inquiries as "the proof of the law's adequacy."¹³ In other words, it seemed that whatever they thought of the electoral law, and whatever the court's final decision, analysts were likely to invoke the latter as proof or disproof of the legitimacy of the law, the pre-election Duma, or the future Duma.

The third institution to fall victim to the criticism of the Moscow press was none other than the president himself. Although technically not a participant in the parliamentary race, Boris Yeltsin was, by virtue of his position and power, at the heart of much speculation. Vitaly Tretyakov, for one, the notoriously anti-Yeltsin editor-in-chief of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, rarely hesitated to analyze decisions made by any state body in light of Yeltsin's probable political interests. Commenting on the TsIK's failure to register Alexander Rutskoi's Derzhava party, he described the decision as being "in all likelihood . . . simply

a manifestation of the president's universally known dislike for his former deputy."¹⁴ But Tretyakov was not alone in his suspicions, and the irreverent daily *Moskovsky Komsomolets* put the matter bluntly in an article discussing a presidential edict that raised the status of the TsIK's staff. The headline simply read: "How the President Bought the TsIK."¹⁵

Whether the accusations leveled at the president were directed at Yeltsin the individual or at the institution he embodied, they were indicative both of the president's power and of the press's dissatisfaction with it. This became most apparent in late October and early November, when public interest in the presidency rose as Yeltsin's health declined. The president's heart attack and his convalescence forced a number of sweeping institutional questions, prompting the public to ask who would hold the reins of power in the interim, and what mechanisms exist for the transfer of power. *Kommersant* reported that as Yeltsin found himself in the hospital, "Viktor Chernomyrdin sought to reassure the

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public: While the president is sick, the power ministers 'do business with me.' Note, they do not 'take orders,' but 'do business.'"¹⁶ The paper further lamented the lack of "a legal procedure" for the transfer of power, just as Otto Latsis did in *Ogonek* where he wrote that "the mechanism of the transfer of power is not clear" and that Russia "needs laws regulating

state management in the upper echelons of power and preventing mistakes."¹⁷

Apparent from the above quotes is a preoccupation among analysts with the instability of Russian institutions and the volatility of the political order. Although not all liberal journalists in Moscow could be said to hold Yeltsin in high esteem, many among them seemed to take at least some comfort in his relative predictability and political accountability.

In summary, the actions of the TsIK, the Constitutional Court and the presidency as recounted by the Moscow press are proof that these institutions have a power that is far-reaching and unpredictable. As for their coverage in the press, it suggests a keen awareness among journalists of the importance of legitimacy to a viable democratic order, and a desire on their part for greater transparency and accountability in political affairs.

The Role of Money and Television

In addition to the state institutions discussed above, two new players on the Russian political stage—money and television—caught the eye of the Moscow press. The importance of finances and TV advertising, while a matter of some banality in the American system, remain a source of bewilderment to much of the Russian public. The excessive cost of a political campaign, in particular, was deplored by most newspapers. Two crucial questions were indirectly posed in the discussion of money and the electoral process: Where does power reside in Russian society? and What implications does the importance of money have for fairness and integrity in the Russian electoral process?

With regards to the first question, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, and *Segodnya* all sought to determine who was funding whom, and to trace the existing financial links between the corporate and political worlds.¹⁸ In

their efforts, the newspapers also encountered—and described in some detail—the inadequacy of the control mechanisms that might have ensured the legality of each party's funding. The TsIK, deemed unable by one paper to keep the parties' expenses under control,¹⁹ was described by another as being seriously understaffed. The banking system was criticized for its "opacity" which made it "virtually impossible to keep tabs on illegal investment." With regards to the second question, one contributor noted that democratic candidates, being among the least affluent, were at a risk of "losing . . . their life if they drop[ped] out of the paid-for race," having "already promised their sponsors to pursue a particular line in the Duma."²⁰

The picture sketched by the press of the role of money in politics is not dissimilar from the reality familiar to established democracies, where power and political opportunity are not always distributed as equitably and democratically as constitutions might suggest. As for the role of television in politics, it too was the source of some

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chagrin among journalists, who complained that "electoral associations and blocs remain[ed] true to the former tradition of TV propaganda," and that their political advertisements were designed only to manipulate the "voters' subconscious."²¹ For some commentators, the use of television and paid advertisements for political campaigning mainly raised the doubt that it might not be "realistic . . . to achieve equity in assigning air time."²²

Conclusion

This concern for fairness—already evident in the media's discussion of party financing—is only one of the principles espoused by the liberal press. As the above discussion makes clear, newspapers in Moscow are dissatisfied with the corruption ambient in the political system and the weaknesses of its institutional checks. Political commentators widely express the desire that institutions be legitimate and stable, and demand more transparency and predictability.

This list of democratic principles shared by the Moscow journalistic elite could no doubt be extended to include the importance of political participation, institutional accountability and genuine popular representation,²³ as many of their articles suggest. Lengthening the list could be misleading and blur the larger picture, however, lest one think the democratic commitments of the Muscovite press reflect the reality of Russian politics. One cannot forget that the Moscow press no longer has the political impact it once had, and that the opinions of Moscow's journalists neither shape nor represent those of voters outside the capital (or, for that matter, of most Muscovites). That is not to say, of course, that the press is unaware of its limitations or that its efforts are inconsequential. A commentator from the provinces put the matter eloquently last November: "What I do like about the Moscow press is its ferocious naïveté, its militant confidence that it is at the center and that it can still somehow influence the minds and convictions of the broad masses of our population."²⁴

The Moscow press may be as weak as it is ambitious, but it deserves credit for providing its readers with both political insights and democratic hopes. In the same way as the American press enlightened de Tocqueville about the workings of democracy, the Russian press informs us of the dynamics and difficulties of democratization. And while Russia's nascent democracy, as portrayed in the press, clearly lacks the institutions and habits that would ensure its stability, the

press's vigilance and sustained attacks on the failings of the system point to the existence—if only within a small elite—of the political culture indispensable for a genuine democratic order to succeed.

Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 278.
2. It may also be that liberal candidates were simply more agreeable to being interviewed than their opponents. Examples of liberal newspapers that carried interviews include: *Moskovsky Komsomolets* (31 October 1995) and *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (December, 1996) carried interviews with Yegor Gaidar, while *Vechernaya Moskva* (December 1996) printed an article by Gaidar himself; *Moskovskie Novosti* (5-12 November and 12-19 November, 1995) interviewed Boris Fyodorov, leader of Forward, Russia! as well as Duma Chairman Ivan Rybkin, whom *Segodnya* interviewed a few weeks later. Some newspapers, like *Moskovskie Novosti* (26 November-3 December, 1996) also carried interviews with campaign officials such as Sergei Belyaev, chief of the electoral staff of the party Our Home Is Russia.
3. Konstantin Katanyan, «Ostalas' poslednyaya nadezhda. Vyigrav sudebnyi protsess, 'DemRossiya' otkazalas' ot uchastiya v vyborakh v pol'zu 'Yabloka'», *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2 November 1995.
4. *Kommersant-Daily*, 3 November 1995.
5. Ivan Rodin, «Vse nedovol'ny tsestrizbirkomom, krome nego samogo i tem ne menee Nikolai Ryabov prevratilsya v odnu iz vedushchikh politicheskikh figur Rossii», *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 22 November 1995.
6. Katanyan, «Ostalas' poslednyaya nadezhda. . .»
7. Yelena Tregubova, *Segodnya*, 11 November 1995.
8. Georgy Bovt and Natalia Kalashnikova, *Kommersant-Daily*, 10 November 1995.
9. Larisa Yefimova, *Vek*, No. 44, 1995.
10. Felix Babitsky, «Itogi Nedeli. Paradoksy i Istiny», *Rossiiskie Vesti*, 28 November 1995.
11. Rodin, «Vse nedovol'ny tsestrizbirkomom. . .»
12. G. Bovt and Maxim Zhukov, *Kommersant-Daily*, 22 November 1995.
13. Ibid.
14. Vitaly Tretyakov, «Igra v poddavki po-krupnomu. Kazhdyi dumaet, chto on znaet, chto khochet president», *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 31 October 1995.
15. *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 11 November 1995.
16. Georgy Bovt, Natalia Kalashnikova, *Kommersant-Daily*, 1 November 1995.
17. Otto Latsis, «Bolezn' prezidenta», *Ogonek*, No. 45, 1995.
18. *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 6 December 1995; *Segodnya*, 5 December 1995, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 5 December 1995.
19. *Business Segodnya*, No. 45 and Rustam Narsikulov, «Zhirinovskiy bogache prem'era v 124 raza. Izhiratel'nye obedineniya nakopili v Sberbanke 17,2 milliarda rublei», *Segodnya*, 25 November 1995.
20. Konstantin Popov, «Dogovor dorozhe deneg, no . . . Kandidaty riskuyut poteryat' ne tol'ko koshelek, no i zhizn', esli zakhotyat soiti s oplachennoi distantsii», *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 29 November 1995.
21. Ivan Rodin, «Bledno i banal'no. Pervye poyavleniya kandidatov na ekrane uzhe vyjavili nekotorye zakonomernosti predvybornoi agitatsii», *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 17 November 1995.
22. *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 14 November 1995.
23. See for example, *Moskovskie Novosti*, 22-29 October 1995.
24. Marina Bernatskaya, «Na 101-m kilometre. Vzgl'yad iz provintsii na predvybornuyu kompaniyu» *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 17 November 1996, 2.