

# Political Threats to a Free Press in Russia

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Briefly, I would like to present a number of judgments about the threats today to freedom of the press in Russia. I must say that I do not subscribe to the new line of Kremlin propaganda—which has infiltrated the minds of even some of the most educated Americans—that the Reds and the Browns are the main threat to Russian democracy. If we speak about threats, we are not speaking about the Reds because there are not many of them and not about the Browns because there are also few of them.

Let me start with an intriguing episode. In February 1992, we wished to celebrate the anniversary of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. To organize the festivities, I needed three million rubles. The paper did not have enough money so I spoke to three private companies about contributing a million each. They agreed and I told them if the opportunity arose, I would be useful to them as well. It is my principle that if somebody does something good for you, you must respond accordingly.

Later that summer, I discovered that the economics page of our newspaper was to carry an article which had not been discussed by the editorial board. The article was written by the head of our economics department and amounted to an attack on the well-known Moscow journalist Yuri Shchekochikhin. A few months before, Shchekochikhin had published an article in his own newspaper, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, accusing Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov of corruption and direct links to a banking and real-estate group called Most. I knew that in two days Mayor Luzhkov was bringing a libel suit against Shchekochikhin in court. Now it so happens that *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* was founded with the help of the Moscow city soviet and Mayor Luzhkov had been helpful in getting a building for us and other facilities to start the newspaper. Accordingly, I summoned him and asked this question: Why was this article being put into the paper without the knowledge of the editor-in-chief? I will not repeat the whole conversation, for it was a long one, but it ended like this. The head of the economics department said, “Yes they (Most) are my friends and I will be helping them in the way I consider necessary.” My answer was, “Yes, but not in my newspaper.” He submitted his resignation and I immediately accepted it. In the same week, one of Moscow’s weeklies published his article. But two months after that, suddenly, journalists began quitting their jobs at *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* one after the other. They all began working for a newly established newspaper called *Segodnya* (Today). They were offered salaries four or five times higher than the salaries we were able to pay. It turns out that my former economics editor was a personal friend of the head of Most. Now he is deputy editor-in-chief of *Segodnya*, which is published and owned

by Most. And it was that group that actually wooed away most of the journalists from *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. Ironically, Most had been one of the sponsors of the celebration at *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.

I have never told this story before in Russia. But I tell it now to illustrate the fact that the struggle in Russia today is not one that can be defined as democratic, or Communist or anything else. The battle lines have absolutely different parameters. People are fighting for property and power. In this struggle, the media is an effective tool to manipulate public opinion and to

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come to power. Journalists are being purchased in Russia today and some of them are being bought for a lot of money. They are being purchased by buying the editor-in-chief and sometimes the whole newspaper.

Among the most active participants in this struggle are the state and the government—the people who are in power and do not want to give it up.

Our newspaper cannot exist solely on advertising. Because prices are rising so rapidly, we cannot survive solely from advertising revenue or the books we publish and sell. We get no subsidies from the government. Many newspapers in Moscow are getting billions of rubles in subsidies. Since the fall of last year, I have had to appeal to a number of people and bankers for help. There are honest new entrepreneurs in Russia who are not involved in any corruption. I spoke to them out of personal responsibility. I knew them personally, and I knew that they would never be able to change the profile of the newspaper since I would never agree to this.

Three big new banks, which were taking a moderate stand and not joining any of the political groupings today, agreed to transfer to the newspaper's account a sum of money as a charitable contribution. The bank account of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* is in the State Bank, which now functions on commercial principles. But as soon as some initial sums arrived, the managers of the contributing banks started to get hell from one of the senior officials of the Russian president's entourage. One banker was told that if he gave money one more time to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* he could forget about getting any help for his activities from the presidential office.

Another example is worth noting. A few months ago in Moscow an association of editors and publishers was being set up. Such associations exist in many countries, including the United States. I was attending this convention and suggested that the association establish a reasonable framework within which editors and publishers could set the salaries for journalists and other personnel. Journalists are being attracted to work at other places in a simple way—they are offered salaries five times higher than what they receive and it is hard for journalists to resist this temptation. My proposal failed because editors of a number of Moscow newspapers told their counterparts of regional and local newspapers that what the editor of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* wanted would not allow them to give their employees the highest salaries.

Still another issue is the state monopoly in Russia over the dissemination of media and even the state monopoly over the printing presses and the production of newspapers. There is no single large private publishing house in Russia today. All the big publishing houses in Moscow are owned by the state, which means they are being controlled by the new authorities. In the past, they also belonged to the state—only then it was a Communist state. I am waiting impatiently for the new democratic authorities to abandon at least one powerful publishing house and allow for its privatization. There are a lot of stupid people there, but let me assure you that they are not so stupid that they do not understand their interests. Let me assure you that they will never abandon control over the publishing houses.

On the eve of the referendum in March 1993, the Moscow soviet was still in existence and it was one of the founders of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. However, as chief editor I was not under their control at all. The chair of the Moscow soviet was harassed for many weeks by the members of the presidential entourage urging him to use one of the articles of the Law on the Press to remove or reappoint the editor of this newspaper they had founded. This was a serious discussion, a semi-instruction conveyed over the Kremlin telephone. After the events of October 1993, the same people from the same presidential entourage began discussing how to remove me from the position of editor-in-chief.

In conclusion, it is very dangerous to fail to see that freedom of speech and freedom of the press are not being threatened by Communists, fascists and all sorts of other groups. Let me say, too, with full knowledge of what I am talking about, that the threat comes first of all from those who are striving for power. And it is those who have power in their hands who are the most scared about losing it. Why they are scared is a topic for another speech. Freedom of expression and freedom of speech do exist today in Russia. But this is not because of President Boris Yeltsin's struggle for democracy. It is because all those groups fighting for power find it beneficial and profitable to use the media as a weapon against their opponents. They need freedom of speech to destroy their opponents.

Democrats, in the true meaning of this word, obviously exist in Moscow. But in this dirty struggle, they are not the people who are defining the political climate. Someday the system will stabilize and will become more humane and more democratic. As an editor, I would like the Western media and other institutions to be concerned about the fate of democracy in Russia. They can help in the following ways:

First and foremost, Western colleagues must produce immediate reaction to all the attempts to impose limitations on freedom of speech and press in Russia. Those attempts will continue, and, unfortunately, the Kremlin leaders react faster to statements issued by the presidents of France and the United States, and the prime minister of Great Britain, than to those of their own constituents. Second, I repeat what I wrote in my article called "Advice to the West." Do not give stupid advice to the Kremlin. We have enough idiots in our country. To be concerned about the rights of a free press in Russia and simultaneously to approve the bombing of the

Parliament building must be obvious to you that they are mutually contradictory. Third, I believe that it would be desirable to create a big, purely commercial, publishing house in Moscow not controlled by the Russian government. This publishing house should be owned 100 percent by Americans. This would be a serious contribution to crushing the state monopoly on printing.

In addition, journalists should be invited to the United States and to other foreign countries from our newspaper—which has no hard currency

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to send its correspondents abroad—in order to live there longer and get to know the country better. I think this is extremely important because otherwise the journalists will still want to go and see those countries and they will

end up looking for ways to go that are not related to the editorial board of the newspaper. And very often those are not the best paths at all. Further, we need help with everything that is related to advertising, management, the functioning of different technological systems, communications and computers. Moscow journalists do not have to be trained on how to write and how to understand what is going on in Russia. But experts like the aforementioned are really of a lot of help.

Finally, I appeal to all those Western correspondents who live in Moscow and who write about Russia—write what is really going on. Do not try to write it differently for American readers who do not really know much about what is going on in Russia. The way some American newspapers are presenting developments based on the propaganda of American foreign policy, the way America understands its foreign policy interests—this will not and never will help freedom of speech in Russia. It is easy to write that there are democrats—“the goodies”—and there are Communists—“the baddies.” The struggle between them has been the usual description of what has been going on in Russia for the last nine years. But it is far from the real, complicated truth. It is as if I were telling you that the main threat to democracy in the United States was the threat from the Communists and the fascists.