

The Russian Media's Time of Troubles

ELIZABETH TUCKER

As parliamentary elections neared last December, Russian voters hoped for insight from a televised debate between the anti-government Communist Party boss Gennady Zyuganov and pro-government Our Home Is Russia party co-chair Nikita Mikhalkov. What they saw instead, as prominent journalist Yevgeny Kisilev “moderated,” were the candidates dancing around hard issues while claiming “deep respect” for each other. With similar coverage nationwide, the communists triumphed. And, as troubling as that was as a harbinger of this June’s critical presidential contest, the media’s performance was even more worrisome for Russia’s long-term democratic prospects.

Diverse theorists of democracy all agree on one point: that an assertive, independent fourth estate is central to an informed electorate and healthy civil society. And observers of today’s Russia, despite their many differences, are similarly united in the belief that change has affected more the form than the content of post-Soviet life. This continuity with communist patterns pertains to nearly all organized activity including, critically, the media.

Russian TV’s political coverage is distinguished more by slick “infomercials” than by probing debate. Central newspapers are unabashed partisans of their sponsors: the government, well-heeled parties, and wealthy businessmen. And the provincial media are even more securely in the pocket—or under the fist—of conservative local bosses. All are manipulated by control over money and advertising, supplies and housing, permits and taxes, and—in some cases—by the threat of violence or even death.

Control “from above” is facilitated by many journalists’ own reflexive preference for slanted reportage and heavy-handed editorializing. This is encouraged “from below” as a confused, angry public often chooses Soviet-style propaganda over fact-filled investigation and balanced analysis.

In short, the Russian media are fighting an uphill battle, on all fronts, against perpetuation of Bolshevik founder Vladimir Lenin’s cynical conception of the press as a “propagandist and agitator.” And, as Russian media analyst Alexei Simonov argues, it is a battle that an exhausted media are losing, acting less like a bulwark of democracy than “an old whore, tired of it all, giving itself to the paying client but without any passion or pleasure.”

Glasnost’s Heroes: Dreams and Disappointments

The hope of Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika was that the media, freed from party control, would become a force for keeping government honest, for filling in historical “blank spots,” and for aiding the country’s transition to democracy.

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Between 1985 and 1991, that promise was largely realized. New publications sprang up, such as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Independent Gazette), that were editorially, if not financially, independent of political structures. Old-guard magazines such as *Ogonyok* (Little Flame) acquired new, liberal editors who backed perestroika. These publications threw themselves behind the building of a new, democratic order and loosely aligned with one or another political party or movement. "Groups formed and the press functioned as a political structure," said Gennady Vychub, a journalism lecturer at Moscow State University and an editor of *Globus*, a private, syndicated news agency based in Moscow.¹

But the media have not functioned as a Western-style pillar of democracy. Despite the proliferation of hundreds of newspapers, magazines,

“. . . the media have not functioned as a Western-style pillar of democracy. Despite the proliferation of hundreds of newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations over the past decade, few are truly independent and most function as partisans of one or another powerful vested interest.”

TV and radio stations over the past decade, few are truly independent and most function as partisans of one or another powerful vested interest. Dire financial and technical problems, a weak advertising market, and smothering government regulations all take their toll. Worse, many journalists have become disillusioned with their lack of impact on the political process as Russian officials—in best Soviet tradition—simply do not hold themselves accountable to the people. "Political reportage doesn't influence anyone," said Arkady Vaksberg, a *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Literary Gazette) commentator. "You can write whatever and however much you want, but it has no effect."

The romance with glasnost began to fade even before the 1991 collapse of the USSR, as the public grew increasingly frustrated by political ineptitude and economic privation. Simultaneously, the media discovered that they could not live by subscribers alone and this drove them into the arms of wealthy "new Russians," who have their own political agendas, or into those of the government. Many politicians, who view the media as illegitimate children in need of parental authority and discipline, were only too happy to oblige.

Most Russian media now fall into two broad camps: those that have sold out to powerful political and business interests and serve mainly to keep in power, or bring to power, those whom their benefactors support; and those more interested in profits than public service. Many nominally independent stations and newspapers—particularly in Russia's provinces where local authorities retain firm control—choose to avoid tough political or economic issues. "They don't want anything to do with the government," said Vychub. "They will fight for the right to privacy—their own privacy, to sit in their kitchens and drink vodka."

Parliamentary and Presidential Interference

The conservative Russian Parliament seems bent on ensuring that the media do not become fully independent. A proposed 1995 law that would have banned government bodies from founding media companies was rejected by the Duma (the lower house). "All the democrats were for it, but the authorities don't want to cede control," said Simonov, head of the Glasnost Defense Foundation, a

media watchdog group. The Duma did pass a law earlier in the year, on "how the press should behave" when covering politicians, said Simonov.

The Duma continues its attempts to control TV networks Russian Public Television (ORT) and the Russian Television & Radio Company (RTR). ORT, the "Ostankino" network in Soviet times, was privatized by a group of banks, but 51 percent of shares are held by the government. RTR is wholly government owned. This March, the Duma "invited" ORT Director General Sergei Blagovolin and RTR Chair Eduard Sagalaev to discuss "unobjective coverage of the Parliament's activities."² Though in conflict with the Duma, Yeltsin apparently shares its attitude toward an independent press. At a February meeting with journalists, he declared that "Those mass media that count on government support must reflect government interests."³

Censorship (self-censorship?) is also alive and well; in late January, ORT "edited" the news program *Vzglyad* (View) to remove portions about the shelling of Pervomaiskoe in a Chechen hostage-taking crisis.⁴

In 1995, Yeltsin slashed the government's traditional media subsidies while a proposed law to replace them with a new system of tax breaks and other incentives

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was rejected by the Duma. The Duma did pass two ostensibly supportive laws late in the year, one reducing taxation of the print media and the other subsidizing publishers to the tune of 1.5 trillion rubles. But in practice they are little help, according to Iosif Dzialoshinsky, a Russian media expert and head of the Independent Newspaper Association.⁵

This is because no money was budgeted for subsidies and any that is set aside will be handled through a "federal register" composed of a few thousand newspapers hand picked by municipal authorities, said Dzialoshinsky. "This means reviving of all that is had in our system—local newspapers will again be totally dependent on local administrations for everything." The new rules on taxation do not help much either. For one thing, advertising, which accounts for up to 70 percent of revenues at many newspapers, is not tax exempt. Further, while the law exempts imported paper and equipment from taxation, it neither stimulates domestic production of these scarce necessities nor places imports within the reach of most publications, he said.

While the print media is losing subscriptions (see below), more than 90 percent of Russians watch TV. And despite the government's financial and political control over major stations ORT and RTR, some Western observers were quick to praise RTR's straightforward coverage of the Chechen war from its outset in late 1994. Coupled with independent network NTV's brutally honest reportage, these observers argued that an independent Russian media had come of age.⁶

In fact, TV still faces extraordinary pressures from Yeltsin, the Duma, and regional and local governments. Few politicians or private media tycoons honor editorial independence. In mid-February, for example, Yeltsin ordered RTR to do an upbeat report on a Magnitogorsk factory after the director complained about negative coverage.⁷

Meanwhile, independent NTV was banned from the Kremlin, the station announced on 12 February. NTV officials say that this was retaliation for its reporting on criticism of Yeltsin. NTV and its majority owner, banker Vladimir Gusinsky, have also been subject to harassment. In 1995, federal agents beat up some of Gusinsky's employees outside his bank offices in downtown Moscow. Prosecutors later launched a case against NTV for a satirical puppet show that allegedly insulted the dignity and honor of government officials. A criminal investigation was also opened against NTV journalist

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—**Manana Aslamazian**

Yelena Masyuk after her interview of Chechen commander Shamil Basayev, leader of a June raid on the Russian city of Budennovsk.⁸

Perhaps the most blatant case is that of RTR head Oleg Poptsov, who was fired in February. Yeltsin's announcement of his removal criticized RTR for lying about events and “blackening” Russia's movement to democracy. According to Poptsov, the real reasons for his ouster included RTR's strong criticism of such policies as Chechnya, his own authorship of an unflattering book (*A Chronicle of the Times of Tsar Boris*), and the influence of “financial groups” aligned with President Yeltsin who seek a controlling interest in RTR.⁹

Ultimately, Poptsov said, he and Yeltsin saw the media's role very differently. Poptsov believed “the best strategy was to be honest” while the government wanted a media that “didn't rock the boat.” A few months before his firing, he told *Izvestiya*: “Unfortunately, first comes freedom and then later its secondary state—a culture of freedom. Our task is not just to get the powers-that-be to listen, but to learn to listen.”¹⁰

Those few Russians fighting for a truly independent media agree that today's officials have no idea how to do that. “Politicians don't respond easily to criticism; they start wars to divert public attention and then file lawsuits against journalists,” said Manana Aslamazian, a producer with Internews, a U.S. non-profit group aiding independent TV in the former Soviet Union. “To fault journalists for their own mistakes shows that they don't know what politics is. They are not patriotic in the true sense but put their petty political ambitions above the interests of Russia.”

Journalists and Their Audience: Stubborn Soviet Legacies

But fault also rests with the public and journalists themselves. While some such as Poptsov view the media as a means to “inspire” the public to pressure the government, others fear that in Russia things are quite the reverse. Viewers and listeners gravitate to those publications and stations that simply reinforce their existing points of view. Said Russian media consultant Marina Dzialoshinskaya: “The media tend to support certain opinions, not shape them. Readers will buy a newspaper or watch a station if it meets their needs by justifying their views. If not, they won't.”

Still unaccustomed to compromise, tolerance, and the sometimes chaotic give-and-take of a democratic political culture, many Russians are still more comfortable with the Leninist tradition of the press as a “propagandist, agitator, and organizer.” The public prefers media in the role of “teachers, advisors, and

fathers," said Dzialoshinskaya. "We still have a bazaar mentality, not a culture of honest disagreement."

Cultural change comes especially slowly when Russian leaders are so resistant. For example, many politicians find it insulting when a lengthy speech

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is summarized rather than broadcast in full. "That's the way it's done the world over," said Poptsov. "But for an official, if the speech is paraphrased rather than broadcast in its entirety, it means he's not respected. That's our level of enlightenment." Few politicians hold the media in high regard, though most are more discreet about it than Zyuganov. The

Communist presidential candidate told the *Washington Post* in April that TV "has no right to comment on me" and is run by "scum who desecrate every holy thing in our history."¹¹

With many politicians sharing such views, journalists—conservative and liberal—often continue to see themselves as Soviet-style partisans in a political struggle, "fighters on the ideological front" concerned less with explaining the issue and getting all points of view into a story than with editorializing. And only about 20 percent are pro-reform, said Dzialoshinsky. "The rest are conservative, varying from socialist or Communist to ultra-nationalist." But it is not just the conservatives who eschew Western-style media ethics. Sergei Blagovolin, who championed Western-oriented reforms under Gorbachev, explained the propagandistic, pro-government coverage of Chechnya by ORT that he now heads: "We don't hide the fact that we want to help to implement the current political course."¹²

Eduard Sagalaev, the former chief of Moscow's independent station TV-6 and head of an independent TV broadcasters' association, threatened last September to flex his muscles in the political arena—to bring down Yeltsin in favor of others if privatization of the TV industry was not speeded up. If the association threw its weight behind any particular party, "remarkable results" could be achieved, he said.¹³ But Sagalaev was quick to change course and accept the RTR job as soon as Poptsov was fired. Igor Malashenko, like Blagovolin also a champion of democratic reforms under Gorbachev and now president of NTV, joined Yeltsin's special re-election committee in March. How "independent" can NTV's coverage remain when Malashenko's committee-mates range from Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin (responsible for the economy) to Yeltsin aides Alexander Korzhakov and Mikhail Barsukov (widely viewed as behind everything from the Chechen war to high-level corruption)?¹⁴

Such coziness with powerful politicians, together with a desire for cash from political advertising, discouraged in-depth analysis by major Moscow stations—let alone by smaller provincial ones—during the recent parliamentary elections, says Simonov. As in earlier contests, TV "didn't really help shed light on the issues. Instead it gave politicians the chance to lie and manipulate. ORT and RTR are simply going through the motions." The Düsseldorf-based European Institute for the Media, which monitored the December elections, agreed: "Crucial issues were rarely raised, debates and analysis were absent and a

more clarifying role could certainly have been played by the media," its report concluded.¹⁵

The situation was further complicated by election rules that banned "bias" in media coverage, effectively muzzling any real analysis of political platforms, and by outright media corruption, said Sergei Tarasenko, an aide to Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze during the Gorbachev years who now works for Realism in Politics, a Moscow think tank. "I had to pay \$500 to one Moscow publication to publish a column by my boss," he said. "Then I had to pay another \$500 under the table to the journalist seeing it through. There is no such thing as a free press in Russia. TV is even worse, it's corrupt from top to bottom."

Murder and Mayhem

Those journalists interested in the facts—and their intelligent interpretation—sometimes risk their lives. Since the start of the Chechen war in December 1994, 107 journalists have been arrested in Chechnya, 49 had film or equipment illegally confiscated, 10 were beaten, 17 wounded and 15 killed, according to the Glasnost Defense Foundation. Journalists have also been targeted in cases where their coverage grew too uncomfortable for powerful government and business interests.

On 25 January, Oleg Slabyenko, chief producer of the RTR interview program "Moment of Truth," was murdered in Moscow. He had just finished a show on

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corruption that the network refused to air. On 27 December, Vadim Alferev, a journalist for Krasnoyarsk's *Segodnyashnaya Gazeta* (Today's Paper), was beaten to death in the entrance to his apartment building. He had been writing about economic crimes in the region and had received repeated death threats. Investigative reporter Alexander Minkin of *Moskovsky Komsomolets* (The Moscow Komsomoler), who writes on government corruption, was also recently attacked by assailants in his apartment.

In outrage at the authorities' half-hearted efforts to solve these crimes, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* editor Vitaly Tretyakov recently asked: "Who is most interested in avoiding the shadow of suspicion? Of course, those same honest politicians who have been subjected to criticism . . . by the victim."¹⁶

Perhaps the best known murder of a journalist in Russia was the case of Dmitry Kholodov of *Moskovsky Komsomolets*. Kholodov was killed in October 1994 by a suitcase bomb in the wake of his sensational probing of military corruption, an investigation that pointed all the way to the Defense Minister, General Pavel Grachev. Some of Kholodov's colleagues believe military intelligence agents were behind the murder. "Those who blow up journalists are mid-level people currying favor with their higher-ups," said The Glasnost Defense Foundation's Oleg Panfilov.

The very fact of Kholodov's murder was sad confirmation that his articles were hitting home. Some analysts go so far as to speculate that such reportage

helped prompt the war in Chechnya. "The press campaign against corruption in the army detonated the war," said Konstantin Pleshakov, a Moscow-based writer. "Kholodov had concrete documents on how Russian forces withdrawing from Germany were selling off army property and profiteering," he said. "There could have been a real scandal, so instead of firing anyone, they started a war" to divert public attention.

While powerful politicians keep a close watch on investigative reporting that concerns them, influential "businessmen" also keep an eye out for any chance to profit from media ventures. Vladislav Listev, another prominent journalist who had just been appointed director of the newly privatized ORT network, was murdered last winter in a gangland-style slaying. The hit, most observers believe, was ordered by mafiya chieftains furious at Listev's moratorium on millions of dollars in advertising for affiliated production companies, though some journalistic and police sources say that Listev himself was in a position to financially benefit.

Just as Kholodov's death was sad confirmation of the media's real influence when a scandal investigation reaches into high places, Listev's murder was brutal testimony of the progress toward a market. Both old-time ORT bureaucrats and the Parliament continue to resist the network's privatization. While the Duma passed a law in early 1996 to re-nationalize the network, Yeltsin vetoed the measure. ORT has now passed from the hands of "shadow structures," wrote commentator Yuri Bogomolov in *Moskovskiye Novosti* (Moscow News). "Listev was killed because someone decided to slam the door loudly on his way out."¹⁷

Subscriptions, Subsidies, and Subterfuge

Most often the door is slamming not in the faces of powerful bosses, but in those of the media themselves. An entire group of Moscow-based publications announced their closure in 1995, including *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Novaya Yezhednevnyaya Gazeta* (The New Daily Gazette). Both papers scrambled to find new commercial backers and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* has since resumed publication. But even giants such as *Izvestiya* (The News), with a circulation of approximately 600,000, do not reach the provinces because most subscribers cannot afford more than one newspaper and want local news first, said Dzialoshinsky. He estimates that only one in three Russian families reads a newspaper. "No one gets the national papers," he said. "So Russians know little and understand even less about their central government."

The outlook is grim. Out of some 9,000 registered publications in Russia, only 13 percent will survive without subsidies, estimated former State Press Committee chairman Sergei Gryzunov.¹⁸ The reasons include skyrocketing costs for needed equipment and paper, sky-high taxes on profits, and an underdeveloped advertising market. Cancelling subsidies altogether without a system of rational tax laws in place—as now seems under way—risks making the media "hostages to the political ambitions of the institutions financing them," Gryzunov said.

As it is, there has been a catastrophic drop in print runs for Russian newspapers and more than 1,500 periodicals folded in the first half of 1995, according to Mikhail Poltoranin, chair of the Duma's Committee on Information Policy.¹⁹ The Federal Service for Postal Communications reported in 1995 that newspaper and magazine subscriptions fell from 220.8 million for national publications and 47.5 million for local publications in 1990 to 20.8 million and 22.8 million respectively in 1995.²⁰ Out of a total of 28.3 million Russian newspaper subscriptions, 19.3 million are to local papers.²¹

This trend toward local news in the print media has been paralleled by the same yearning among TV viewers, especially the young. Roughly 90 percent of the population regularly watches TV. Last year, the first survey of TV viewer preferences beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg, in which 8,021 viewers were polled in twenty-two cities, concluded that local independent stations are becoming ever-more important sources of news and entertainment and are attracting a younger audience (ages sixteen to forty-five) than RTR.²²

But the more solidly financed and professional independent stations based in Moscow and St. Petersburg reach far from every household. NTV is available in about 70 percent of European Russia and about 35 percent of Siberia, while Moscow's TV-6 reaches about 40 percent of European Russia and about 10 percent of Siberia, according to Eric Johnson, a Moscow-based analyst for Internews. The Independent Broadcasting System, a commercial grouping of some 120 independent stations that exchange programming, reaches about 40 percent of European Russia and about 60 percent of Siberia.

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TV stations across Russia—of which there are now about 700—are in a tenuous position. While the strongest of them have more financial, technical, and editorial independence than the print media, “they can’t avoid political games either,” said Simonov, adding that the better heeled of them “become attractive to the mafiya and regional authorities.” The federal government is creating regional commissions composed of local politicians and federal TV regulators who will determine which independent stations get licenses. Only a third of all stations now hold licenses. “This is a cancer that is eating all the live cells around it,” said Simonov.

To make matters worse, most small, “independent” stations remain almost entirely dependent on regional authorities or their allies for everything from offices and studios to signal transmission. They are often penalized for their independence; for example, independent stations pay the Ministry of Communications six times more for signal transmission than do state-owned companies, and many are in arrears. According to Simonov, “Ninety-five percent of TV and 85 percent of radio programming is now broadcast through organizations that belong to regional soviets (local or city councils) or structures governed by them.” The same goes for the print media. “In the provinces, the press is simply virtually under control of local governments,” said Iosif Dzialoshinsky.

The Takeover Craze

In actual fact, there is no such thing as an entirely independent TV station or newspaper in Russia. Within a year, Dzialoshinsky estimates, there will be no more than two or three papers in each major provincial city, down from ten at the beginning of the 1990s. In the wake of closures will come consolidation into regional newspaper chains owned by wealthy backers from the capital. “There will be no independent papers in Russia,” he said. “All the papers will be closely associated with various financial and political groups. All of them.” Some TV stations are also likely to begin forming networks spearheaded by Moscow

stations. And while such consolidation might eventually create healthy competition in the marketplace of ideas, Manana Aslamazian of Internews calls this dependence “despicable” because the alliances between politicians and businessmen backing such stations influence their coverage.

“I don’t think that our own media has been able to serve the higher interests of society,” said Pavel Palazchenko, a longtime assistant to former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. “They’re involved in a clan system and are either totally unable to analyze or completely biased.” As an example, Palazchenko cited the virtual absence of any criticism in the Moscow media of Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. “Not a single critical word has been written in the Moscow media about the mayor in the last eighteen months. It’s incredible,” he said. “Luzhkov controls various channels of support and advertising, and can make life uncomfortable for anyone he doesn’t like.” Observers say that Luzhkov is treated with kid gloves by banker/media tycoon Gusinsky who has expanded his assets beyond NTV to include the radio station Ekho Moskvy, and the newspaper *Segodnya*.

Editors who resist the blandishments of backers with deep pockets find

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themselves unable to keep afloat. Tretyakov’s highly regarded *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* slid into bankruptcy by refusing to run advertisements or accept state subsidies. For months, Tretyakov rebuffed commercial backers and left his reporters unpaid, leading first to the suspension of publication in May 1995, and

then to his ouster by the board in August. A few days later, he returned to reclaim the offices with the help of mysterious armed guards. The guards had been sent by Boris Berezovsky, a businessman and banker whose backing Tretyakov finally accepted. Berezovsky, who is on the board of pro-government ORT, is also closely allied with Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. According to Moscow observers, he has begun to weigh in on programming decisions at ORT, where some sixty-seven programs have been slashed, partly for political reasons. These cuts “bear a distinctly . . . political character,” wrote *Moskovskiy Novosti*’s Yuri Bogomolov on the eve of parliamentary elections.²³ According to former RTR head Poptsov, Berezovsky has his eye on RTR as well.²⁴

Many—but not all—newspapers and TV stations are hungry for investors like Gusinsky. After talks with *Literaturnaya Gazeta* editors stalled last year, the paper’s political commentator breathed a sigh of relief. “The banks can force publication of what they want, can limit criticism of the organs of power and those individual deputies that they would like to protect,” said Arkady Vaksberg. “In Gusinsky’s paper, *Segodnya*, no one attacks Moscow Mayor Luzhkov because that’s like attacking Gusinsky’s bank. Our staff rejected coming under Gusinsky’s control.”

Notwithstanding its stark coverage of Chechnya, Gusinsky’s control of NTV has influenced its coverage of issues dear to him—such as foreign banks competing in the Russian market. “NTV had a program on foreign banking that was totally negative,” said Andrei Richter, professor of journalism at Moscow State University. While the station is quick to criticize Gusinsky’s enemies, it also supports his friends. Gusinsky is far from alone in using the media for

personal gain, he said. "Businessmen who own TV stations treat them like PR agencies, as a means of promoting their allies." How long before they are promoting themselves, until one of Russia's new Rupert Murdoch decides to emulate Italy's media tycoon and political boss, Silvio Berlusconi?

A Provincial Media Under Siege

According to some journalists, many communists who control the levers of power in the heartland see a threat to their positions and corrupt business alliances in Yeltsin's government. Their virtually unlimited local authority is something they believe Yeltsin tacitly endorsed in exchange for their support during his armed confrontation with the old Parliament in 1993.

With Yeltsin's subsequent pursuit of political and economic reform—however unsteady—these provincial potentates now feel deceived and take every opportunity to blame Moscow for all economic and social ills via a media that they largely control. "The regional press follows the political line taken by the local authorities," said Viktor Davidoff, head of the Globus syndicated news agency.

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While the poor economic state of the provinces has as much to do with regional leaders themselves as it does with Moscow, the local media is often willing to turn criticism away from their backers. And the readers buy it. "The regional press rails against Moscow without touching the local government with its criticism," said Davidoff. "The audience is largely angry and poor and think they have been taken" and it is easier to blame Moscow than themselves.

At the same time, independent local media have virtually no impact on local politics. "None of the decisions taken by local authorities are predicated on what is in the newspapers or on TV, but on relations between different clans," Davidoff said. For example, a bank wants a building and so advertises in a paper the mayor likes. The "clan system" in the provinces consists of governors who rule vast regions and mayors who control the major towns within them and who are often opposed to these governors. The media plays along, taking money and siding with one or the other.

In a country where freedom of speech is weakly defended, some politicians go so far as to employ bribery or violence to deal with those provincial journalists who question them. "Politicians will excuse an occasional affront from media in their pocket, but they consider it slander when it comes from an independent press," said Simonov. "One paper in the Russian Far East, *Bolshoi Vladivostok* (Greater Vladivostok), suffered eight police searches before finally going bankrupt, and such pressures are only growing."

Distinctions between liberal and conservative regions fade when it comes to the application of such tactics, said Davidoff. "The regional governors wound up with all the power, and their first move was to dismantle any independent press that they could not control." Everywhere—from Vologda in the north to

Vladivostok in the far east—governors rule with an iron fist. If they are not investing in media, then they intimidate them. In Vologda, at the end of 1995, local authorities told Vladimir Pansyrev, editor of *Ruskii Sever* (The Russian North) to vacate the offices he had rented under a five-year contract. The reason was the paper's reprint of an article from *Izvestiya* charging the local governor, Nikolai Podgornov, with distributing more than twenty-one billion rubles to relatives and friends.²⁵

In Vladivostok, officials closed down two local papers and halted distribution of most Moscow publications after a local journalist criticised the ouster of the elected mayor by the town's appointed governor. The journalist was kidnapped by unknown assailants and suffered crushed fingers, cigarette and blowtorch burns, and near-suffocation from a plastic bag placed over his head.

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"Terrified local journalists refused to investigate the incident," wrote Open Media Research Institute analyst Julia Wishnevsky.²⁶ Neither is television immune to such pressure. Commercial TV stations in Voronezh were shut down in December on a licensing "technicality" after one station broadcast a press

conference held by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, whose campaign visit there evidently displeased the local authorities.²⁷

At the same time, "new Russians" and old-style political bosses both understand that control of the media gives them a platform to push their views and their friends. This is a threatening development for independent newspapers and stations. Arkady Maiofis, head of independent station TV-2 in Tomsk, told the *Chicago Tribune* over a year ago businessmen with political connections "want to gobble us up and turn us into passive outlets for their programming, their newscasts, their opinions." That, he said, would deal a blow to political reform.²⁸ This has mobilized some independent stations to take politics very seriously, said Johnson of Internews. "The stations are well aware that if the conservatives come to power, the rights of the independent media, both to be politically free and also to earn money, will be restricted."

If top journalists in the capital have at least some sense of being a part of the political process, their counterparts in the provinces see themselves as having almost zero impact. In fact, they are overwhelmingly preoccupied with survival. Some seek subsidies and other government support to keep them afloat, independence notwithstanding. "We want freedom, but we [regional newspapers] will not get to our feet without government support," complained Svetlana Rychkova in an *Obshchaya Gazeta* (General News) article. "The local mass media will simply cease to exist."²⁹

According to a Glasnost Defense Foundation survey of 1,300 provincial journalists, most believe that "democratically oriented" mass media provide the most information in regional markets, but say that "doesn't testify to the success of reform and triumph of democracy." Only 17 percent considered it accurate to call the media society's "fourth estate," while 56 percent considered that "an exaggeration." The most critical problem remains the lack of legal protections for the media. According to the survey, the majority of journalists feel

“humiliated, disaffected, exhausted, and poor” rather than “proud, fiesty, satisfied, and successful.”³⁰

Lenin Lives! The Media in Ulyanovsk

Journalists falling into the category of the humiliated, disaffected, exhausted, and poor are numerous in Ulyanovsk, the Volga River town that was Lenin's (Ulyanov's) birthplace. Take Gennady Antontsev, a journalist in his mid-thirties and editor of *Skify* (Scythians), an independent business weekly. His paper drew the ire of local politicians for questioning the motives behind a government-backed smear campaign against Yeltsin's representative in the province. Since then his paper has suffered impromptu “tax inspections,” information black-outs, and now a takeover attempt by another newspaper owner backed by the town's governor, Yuri Goryachev.

Ulyanovsk, a conservative place where the public voted to retain the “Leninist” city name instead of restoring historic Simbirsk, runs according to the whims of its governor. “All income here goes through one wallet—the administration's,” said Antontsev. “Goryachev and his deputies are mafiosi bought and paid for with bribes going between him and the ministers in Moscow.” Reporting on bribery and corruption is all but useless, he said. “You can't get documents.”

He is quick to describe other weapons of choice to suppress an independent media: lawsuits, seizure of offices and equipment, dropping the prices of government-backed papers to squeeze out independents, and strong-arming advertisers not to appear on the air waves or in the pages of undesirable media.

“Goryachev is a little Stalin,” declared Alla Bogdasarova, the fiery former editor of the town's only democratic newspaper, *Simbirskiy Kurier* (The Simbirsk Courier), shortly

before her death from a heart attack last year. Bogdasarova, a democrat and member of the liberal Russia's Choice party, explained that local politics turns on Goryachev's opposition to Yeltsin's reforms. It was one of Yeltsin's representatives, sent like an agent of an eighteenth-century tsar to check up on the scene, that prompted Goryachev to emit a smokescreen of phony charges against him.

“Afraid that details of his corruption and mismanagement would reach Moscow, Goryachev struck out against Yeltsin's man in the media he controls. . . . [He] understands that the key to staying in power is control of the local media.”

Afraid that details of his corruption and mismanagement would reach Moscow. Goryachev struck out against Yeltsin's man in the media he controls. “Goryachev attacks Yeltsin everywhere,” said Bogdasarova, “and Russia's Federation Council [the upper parliamentary house] is made up of anti-reform governors like him. Yeltsin is afraid of them—he understands that all politics is made in the provinces.”³¹ And, as in most other regions, Goryachev understands that the key to staying in power is control of the local media.

As a result, the media in Ulyanovsk are either vociferously partisan or stay away from politics and economics completely. That situation is mirrored in virtually all of the Russian provinces. “All media are politically partisan to a certain degree,” said Moscow State University's Richter. While Ulyanovsk is one of the most conservative of Russia's regions, the behavior of its leaders toward the media is typical for Russia as a whole, he said. Thus, “the

independent media either care about profits and don't about covering politics or they care and find the right sponsor."

Goryachev, the Soviet-era Communist Party boss, continues to rule Ulyanovsk—a region hard hit by defense cutbacks—with nearly undiminished authority through the office of regional governor and as a member of the Federation Council. There, as in thousands of other provincial cities, business privatization and marketization of the economy have been overshadowed by the official corruption, favoritism, and manipulation that stifles truly entrepreneurial activity and diverts most profits into the pockets of the same Soviet-era nomenklatura elite.

In Ulyanovsk, too, despite a liberal national press law, local officials keep tight rein on ostensibly independent media. The government still has a monopoly over printing and broadcast transmission services, for example. Even where some opportunity exists, the combination of control by corrupt political and business elites, popular apathy, and an underdeveloped journalistic ethos stifle growth of the critical nexus between an objective, independent media and a concerned, informed electorate.

Some journalists are only too willing to take "orders" for articles from powerful politicians or businessmen. The Goryachev-sponsored smear of Yeltsin's representative in the province "was an official order," said Yevgeny Charny, editor of *Narodnaya Gazeta* (People's Paper), the Ulyanovsk government newspaper. Charny refused to run the story. Instead, the administration turned to another newspaper that it backs—*Simbirskiye Gubernskiye Vedomosti* (Simbirsk Provincial News). The editor of that paper would not grant an interview.

"Goryachev told that editor, 'You can do your own thing,'" said Nikolai Poftarev, a local businessman who ran for Parliament on the Russia's Democratic Choice ticket last December and helps to support *Simbirsky Kurier*. "But then Goryachev says, 'when I need it, you do as I say and pour dirt on who I say,' and he does it."

In towns where the majority of local media are still backed by local governments, information is fed to the public that makes them feel comfortable. And what makes many comfortable is good news about how local authorities

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still honor a Soviet-style "social contract," i.e., assurances of cheap food and other basic services. If politicians can provide this minimum—and in Ulyanovsk they do so with food ration coupons and subsidized prices—chances are the public will turn a blind eye to the building of palatial summer houses and posh apartments, the appearance of government-owned Mercedes

Benzes on potholed streets, and even vote-rigging by local politicians.

In Ulyanovsk, *Simbirsky Kurier* exposed vote-rigging by Ulyanovsk politicians in 1993 local elections and found the public utterly disinterested. The newspaper's reportage did prompt a court decision directing the administration to redraw electoral districts. They were redrawn so as to give reform-oriented youth as much of a voice as conservative pensioners in city elections. The admin-

istration's response was to not even bother holding elections at all. When Goryachev was campaigning in 1993, "the national station was turned off and only positive local TV programs on Goryachev were shown," said Antontsev. Most residents could not have cared less, he said. "We are in a dead-end position; our role will be nil in any election," said Gennady Yakimchev, a *Simbirsky Kurier* correspondent. "This paper was intended for people who think, and it turns out that there aren't many of them."

Newspaper subscription rates in Ulyanovsk confirm that a majority back the local administration. That with the most subscribers (97,408, according to an administration spokesman) is *Simbirskiye Gubernskiye Vedomosti*, published by a shareholder company backed by the local government. Its coverage is loyal to the governor and his economic policies. (The editor would not grant an interview to this analyst during a visit to Ulyanovsk.) Another popular paper, with 96,500 subscribers, is *Zhizn' i Ekonomika* (Life and Economics), a newspaper founded by Oleg Kazarov, the former second secretary of the regional party committee who now runs an Ulyanovsk savings bank. Kazarov is a close ally of the governor and a staunch defender of conservative economic policies. (He, too, was unavailable for comment.) *Narodnaya Gazeta* (People's Paper), the administration's propaganda sheet, has 25,000 subscribers. Finally, *Simbirsky Kurier*, backed by "democratic" forces and highly critical of the local government, has only 15,601 subscribers, the town's fewest.

"Criticism is silenced in myriad ways in Ulyanovsk."

Ultimately, the media will reflect the politics of their financial backers, especially in Russia's provinces. "Coverage will depend on how democratic the local government is," said Dzialoshinsky. "The media have no money, so they will assume the position that is demanded of them." The same goes for media backed by commercial groups. In Ulyanovsk, for example, the local jeep factory backs a newspaper, *Grad Simbirsk* (Town of Simbirsk). The paper receives rent-free editorial offices and other favors in exchange for running free auto ads. Factory higher-ups "will drop by unexpectedly and huddle with us over candidates in upcoming elections," reports deputy editor Nikolai Maryanin.

Those journalists who have tried to take an independent tack in covering politics have run into trouble. One local TV bureau chief for RTR found his equipment and office confiscated for criticizing the local administration. "I've stopped being a tough critic," said Gennady Dyomochkin. "Before, I was on the side of the 'democrats' and criticized the absence of visible reform. Now I will be even-handed."

Governor Goryachev has tightly sewn up the town to favor his own business associates and relatives, granting them licenses, association chairmanships, and other privileges. He has shut down street stalls where liquor and other goods were readily obtainable. And Goryachev keeps a hand in everything lucrative. When the local jeep factory was privatized a few years ago, his administration wound up holding an undisclosed—but substantial—stake. A German offer to invest \$700 million in the plant was rebuffed.

To keep pensioners and other low-income residents happy, local farmers—dependent on the administration for credits and technology—are forced to "donate" meat, milk, butter, and eggs to the local government at below-market prices. They comply, too scared to complain. Businesses are forced to pay taxes or donate a portion of their output to a special fund "to stabilize the economy," used by the administration as it sees fit and with no oversight.

But even “friends” like Gennady Geimor, a businessman and TV broadcaster with a license to deal in products ranging from Chanel perfume and Gucci handbags to oil and gas, have to watch their step. At the beginning of 1995, Geimor likened his TV station to an insurance policy—he did not mind promoting the local government on TV as long as he got a green light to do business. “You can’t do business without the protection of local politicians,” Geimor explained. “The process is not very democratic when it comes to getting licenses. . . . TV opens doors to higher levels of authority that are difficult to access.” Geimor suggested that if the administration became uncooperative, he might turn the station that now promotes local policies into one that criticizes them. “In Russia, it’s a long way to rule of law but the mass media can help guarantee it,” he said. “The local administration is careful toward my Channel 2 and the tax inspectors are too—I won’t stop at anything if it becomes necessary.” Less than a year after this bravado, Geimor’s station was shut down.

Criticism is silenced in myriad ways in Ulyanovsk. *Simbirsky Kurier*, sued four times for “moral damages” in 1994 alone, now eschews commentary and simply publishes incriminating documents in their entirety. Nevertheless, “the paper is dying,” said Pofitarev, largely because of deep price cuts by government-backed competitors, intimidation of would-be advertisers, and the inability to generate interest among readers.

Grad Simbirsk finds itself threatened on a regular basis. “We wrote a story that both the governor and a banker friend were moving into nice new apartments. We ran a photograph and asked ‘What is this house about? Who lives there?’” said deputy editor Maryanin. “They went crazy; they threatened to shut us down.” Another story prompted a sudden visit by the fire inspector, who said, “You don’t meet regulations so you’re closing down.” Maryanin recalled. The newspaper has subsequently been banned from publishing in the city because of a lawsuit by Governor Goryachev over publication of a photograph from a Communist Party rally showing a poster that labeled the governor (and, incidentally, Yeltsin) “fascist.”

Others have simply stopped covering politics. Of the five TV stations that operate there, one is owned and operated by the local government. Many say the government station was financed through forced business donations. The rest are either run by enterprises that handle local administrators gingerly, or by Moscow media organizations that have chosen to stay away from nitty gritty issues. The Ulyanovsk independent station, 2x2, an affiliate of the Moscow-based company, avoids politics altogether, and that includes running ads for the gadfly *Simbirsky Kurier*. “If we show an ad for *Simbirsky Kurier*, the administration says we sold out to the wrong people,” said Vladislav Sovetkin, local director of 2x2. The station has to watch its back. “The administration could get rid of us easily.” Instead, the station airs any paid commercials it can get to support sports and entertainment programming. “TV is a fragile business and reporting on politics is just not worth it,” said Sovetkin. Antontsev, the print journalist, learned that the hard way. For a year now, ever since receiving a threatening telephone call from the governor’s spokesman, he has stayed away from tough articles on politics or the economy in his weekly *Skify*. “Journalism is fast becoming a dead-end profession in Ulyanovsk,” he lamented.

Future Prospects

The U.S. government, through the Agency for International Development and the U.S. Information Agency, and non-governmental organizations have tried to help independent media in Russia and other republics of the former Soviet Union

via direct programs of technical assistance, training, equipment donations, and cash.

Yet, whether the media in Russia evolve into a powerful system of checks and balances on government, as they have in the United States, for example, remains contingent on the overall pace and direction of reform in Russia as a whole. That, in turn, will influence prospects for curbing the clan ownership of the media and for its development as an impartial mirror for the benefit of society. So far, Americans have been reluctant to invest in the Russian media on a large scale because of great political and economic instability.

Many Russian journalists say what they need are not training programs and computer donations but large-scale help so that media outlets can gain protection from the control and influence of local political bosses and businessmen—such as bankers—who represent the most criminalized sector in the Russian economy.

“As far as foreign investment goes, it seems to me that many stations today, in a political sense would be better off with foreign investment . . . because, unfortunately, financial groups in Russia are, as a rule, politicized,” said Maiofis of TV-2 in Tomsk. “As a result, they will interfere more in the programming, as opposed to foreign investors, who are more concerned about profits.”³²

Only with such investment can the media become a real fourth estate, say some. “When Western media companies come in and invest on a large scale then the independent media will be a real political counterweight,” said Globus’s Davidoff.

For now, the nomenklatura party, made up of parliamentarians from the old party elite, is still firmly in control. As long as these members of Parliament and government officials consider their own political and economic interests to be above those of the public, democracy will continue to hang in the balance. That bodes ill for a loosening of controls over the media, both political and economic.

But the Russian media must also overcome its own internal problems. Journalists still engage in self-censorship, bribe-taking, and paid smear campaigns. Although a number of watchdog and public interest groups have sprung up in recent years to address internal problems ranging from ethics to business issues, the media has a long way to go on everything from professionalism to professionalization.

According to the Glasnost Defense Foundation’s Simonov, for example, the industry still has no comprehensive health or life insurance, leaving war correspondents like those in Chechnya and their families unprotected in case of injury or death. But perhaps the most damning assertion is that the media sometimes behave as the politicians themselves do, recklessly, unfairly, in a biased manner, and without regard for the public. “No structure can make the media independent because the fourth estate considers itself the fourth estate and doesn’t understand that it exists because of the people,” said Simonov. “They don’t consider themselves obligated to the people and no structure can help them do it. The problem of the press is inside of it.”

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, the interviews cited in this article were conducted by the author in Moscow and Ulyanovsk between December 1994 and December 1995.

2. *OMRI Daily Digest*, 23 March 1996.
3. *Izvestiya*, 18 February 1996.
4. *Segodnya*, 23 January 1996.
5. *OMRI Daily Digest*, 4 January 1995. See also "Analysis of Media Support Laws," *Media Developments* 11 (February 1996) published by the U.S. Information Agency Media Assistance Clearinghouse.
6. See Ellen Mickiewicz and Dee Reid, "Russian TV's Freedom Fighters," *New York Times*, 21 January 1995.
7. *OMRI Daily Digest*, 17 February 1996.
8. See *Monitoring the Media Coverage of the 1995 Russian Parliamentary Elections: Final Report* (Düsseldorf, Germany, 15 February 1996).
9. *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 6 March 1996.
10. *Izvestiya*, 14 July 1995.
11. *Washington Post*, 10 April 1996.
12. *Post-Soviet Media Law & Policy Newsletter* 18 (1995).
13. *OMRI Daily Digest*, 1 September 1995.
14. *OMRI Daily Digest*, 24 March 1996.
15. European Institute for the Media (Düsseldorf), press release, 18 December 1995.
16. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 22 February 1996.
17. *Moscow News* 38-39, 6-12 October 1995.
18. Interfax, Moscow, 3 May 1995.
19. *Izvestiya*, 22 June 1995.
20. *Obshchaya Gazeta*, 20-26 April 1995.
21. ITAR-TASS, 27 December 1995.
22. The survey was conducted in March and April by BBDO Marketing, Ratings R, and the Public Opinion Foundation, with funding from the Russian-American Media Partnerships program.
23. *Moscow News* 38-39, 6-12 October 1995.
24. *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 6 March 1996.
25. *Izvestiya*, 9 September 1995.
26. See Julia Wishnevsky, "Manipulation, Mayhem and Murder," *Transition*, The Year in Review: 1994, Part II, 37.
27. *Post-Soviet Media Law & Policy Newsletter* 24/25, 1996.
28. *Chicago Tribune*, 15 December 1994.
29. *Obshchaya Gazeta*, 20-26 April 1995.
30. See *The Journalist and Journalism in the Russian Provinces* (Moscow: Glasnost Defense Foundation, September-December 1994).
31. For more information on Ulyanovsk's political situation, see *Izvestiya*, 3 December 1994.
32. *Media Developments* 13, 1996.