

PRESS FREEDOM IN RUSSIA

Anna Politkovskaya's execution-style murder almost one year ago in Moscow sent a message of unprecedented brutality to all Russian journalists and journalists working in Russia, one clearly designed to discourage them. The economic interests of western governments, as well as strategic and ideological considerations, had made us forget too readily the fragility of the democracy established in Russia and the continuing presence of violence in its society.

Key facts:

- Gazprom Media, the government's main tool for getting control of news and information, is in the process of becoming Russia's No. 1 media group.
- The independent or opposition media today include *Vedomosti* (which is protected by foreign capital), *Novaya Gazeta*, *Novye Izvestia*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets* and radio *Ekho Moskvy* (Echo of Moscow).
- A total of 21 journalists have been killed since Vladimir Putin became president.

Russia has been dismantling press freedom for some time

1 - Behind the statistics, a determination to reestablish control over the media

Key statistics:

According to press ministry figures, the Russian media consists of 26,000 newspapers, 16,500 magazines, 1,466 radio stations, 2,254 TV stations and 12,350 electronic media¹.

The biggest-selling daily is *Argumenty I Fakty* with a circulation of 3 million. The TV stations with the most viewers are *Pervy Kanal* (Channel One) and *Rossia*. There are many news agencies at both the national and regional level and with varying degrees of specialisation. The leading ones are *Itar-Tass* (state-owned), *Ria-Novosti* (state-owned) and *Interfax* (privately-owned).

An estimated 20.9 million Russians use the Internet (about 13 per cent of the total population). Most of them are young people, aged 16 to 25. Electronic media such as the online newspapers *Gazeta.ru* and *Russky Zhurnal* have become very well established in recent years.

Media influence on the population

Television has continued to grow in importance and has become the main news source for 70 to 80 per cent of the population. It is available throughout the country (unlike the Moscow newspapers and the Internet). Watching TV is also less expensive than buying a newspaper in a country in which energy has long been abundantly available. Most Russians can receive at least two national TV stations, a regional station and a local one.

¹ Rosokhrankultur Ministerstvo figures, 1 October 2005, as quoted in the IREX Media Sustainability Index 2005.

The Russian national television, *ORT*, which is 51 per cent state-owned, is seen in more than 98 per cent of homes and has around 140 million viewers.

The second national channel, *Rossia*, which is completely state-controlled, has 50 million viewers and can be seen in 98.5 per cent of homes.

NTV, which was bought by Gazprom, is the only privately-owned national channel – a status it obtained in 1996 when it was owned by Vladimir Gusinski, an oligarch allied with Boris Yeltsin who was later prosecuted and fled to Israel. It covers 95 per cent of the country and has nearly 110 million viewers.

“Telephone law,” under which highly-placed officials call editors and tell them which news should get priority, continues to apply. TV news focuses on western Russia, above on Moscow and St. Petersburg. The regions and their particular problems are almost totally ignored.

The news media thrived and multiplied in the latter part of the Yeltsin era but now a plateau seems to have been reached. The print media’s influence is on the wane. A sizeable share of the approximately 20,000 officially-registered newspapers (including 200 national publications) are in fact state-owned and are used for electoral promotion. Many others specialise in leisure, life-styles or small ads. The “district” newspapers are a good example. They are well-established at the local level, with loyal readers who are often subscribers. But their content contains little you could call news.

The newspapers with real news struggle to survive. The leading independent or opposition media today include *Vedomosti* (which is protected by its foreign investors), *Novaya Gazeta* (which is privately-owned – 51 per cent by its staff and the rest, since June 2006, by Mikhail Gorbachev and Alexandre Lebedev, a wealthy businessman and Duma representative), *Novye Izvestia*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets* and radio *Ekho Moskv*.

The situation in the provinces is marked by even stronger government control due to the overlapping of political and economic power and its concentration in the hands of relatively few people. The way local officials harass such media as the weekly *Permsky Obozrevatel* (Perm Observer), the only independent newspaper in the Perm region (in the Urals), is evidence of the strength of the chain of authority in Russia.

2 - How control over the media is being reaffirmed

Acquisitions and takeovers in the media market have reconfigured the landscape and consolidated the emergence of a single view of Russian reality.

The gas industry conglomerate Gazprom has acquired many news media through its subsidiary Gazprom Media:

It bought *NTV* in 2001 (which led to the disappearance of the political satire programme “Kukly”), followed by *TV6*. After it acquired the news daily *Izvestia* (where Politkovskaya worked before joining *Novaya Gazeta* in 1999), the editor was fired. All the staff were fired after it bought the magazine *Itogi*. The editorial staff of the daily *Sevodnia* were also changed after it was bought. In what was a new development in the state’s reacquisition of media, the magazine *Kommersant*, one of the last jewels of the independent press, was bought on 31 August of this year by a metal industry magnate who runs a Gazprom subsidiary.

Gazprom Media properties now include the *NTV*, *TNT* and *NTV plus* television stations, the *Ekho Moskv*, *Radio Troika* and *sPort-FM* radio stations, the magazine *Itogi*, a film production company, and a publishing house. This year it reportedly overtook Pro Media to become Russia’s leading media group.

≡ The state’s recovery of control of the media at the local and regional level is being helped by the recent switch to provincial governors being named by presidential decree instead of chosen by voters in elections. It has been accompanied by the closure of the newspaper *Gubernia* in Petrozavodsk and the persecution of military reporter Grigori Pasko.

The steel conglomerate Severstal controls regional media in Vologodsky and Cherpovets. It also owns radio and television stations (*TV7*, *TV12* and *Provintsia*) and such newspapers as *Rech* and *Kurier*.

At the same time, media legislation falls far short of international standards. Newspapers (such as the Kaliningrad-based *Novye Kolyosa* in August of this year) have been closed down for articles allegedly violating the confidentiality of judicial investigations. Outright closures are often preceded by libel suits and measures that create printing and distribution problems.

The online newspaper *www.cursiv.ru* was closed down by its Internet service provider on 22 May, three days before the state prosecutor of Ivanovo (near Moscow) began formally investigating its editor, Vladimir Rakhmankov, for “insulting a state representative” under article 319 of the criminal code in an 18 May article entitled “Putin – Russia’s phallic symbol.” He faced up 12 months hard labour in trial that began on 21 September.

Recent legislation arouses our concern :

On March 15, President Vladimir Putin has decreed the creation of a new super-agency to regulate media and the Internet, which arouses worries among press freedom activists and journalists of a bid to extend tight publishing controls to the relatively free web. This decree merges two existing agencies into one entity that will license broadcasters, newspapers and Web sites and oversee the editorial content. It unites the organisation supervising media and culture (Rosokhrankultura) with the federal body controlling telecommunications and information technology (Rosvyznadzor).

Andrei Vasilyev, editor of *Kommersant*, commented this move as part of the Kremlin drive to consolidate power before parliamentary and presidential elections in the next 12 months.

≡ **Internet:** Independent news websites have been harassed on the pretext of fighting terrorism. In March of this year, for example, *Pravda.ru*, *Bankfax.ru* and *Gazeta.ru* were accused of “disseminating extremist ideas.”

3 - Murder of 21 journalists since Putin was elected president in March 2000 – Abduction of 8 journalists

Most of these murders have not been solved. Dmitry Ermakov’s death by defenestration was deemed to have been suicide. No convincing account has been produced for the murder of Paul Klebnikov, the editor the Russian version of *Forbes* magazine who was gunned down outside his office on 9 July 2002. In the case of Alexei Sidorov, the editor of the regional daily *Toliattinskoye Obosrenie* who was stabbed to death on 9 October 2003, a suspect was acquitted for lack of evidence in 2004. The case took a new twist in February 2005 when *Izvestia* reported that Samara deputy prosecutor Yevgeny Novozhilov had reopened the investigation. Reporters Without Borders reacted by calling on Russian Federation public prosecutor Vladimir Ustinov to take over the case. For the time being no further information is available. Sidorov had taken over as editor after his predecessor, Valery Ivanov, was murdered in similar circumstances on 29 April 2002.

→ **The recent decision taken by the Moscow court that concluded to Ivan Safronov’s death by suicide has raised suspicion and doubt among the colleagues and relatives of the late *Kommersant* editor. So did the recent developments in Anna Politkovskaya’s assassination investigation.**

Conclusion

Violence against journalists, the takeover of influential media by industrial groups linked to the government and the reaffirmation of “top down” authority in legislative and administrative provisions are alarm signals for press freedom in Russia. Investigations into murders of journalists do not result in satisfactory trials. This (like the attacks, threats, closures and fines) shows that a climate of impunity is taking hold, one that is incompatible with basic democratic values. The defence of the rule of law and the basic freedoms of expression and right to inform and be informed must be sustained and strengthened.

The adoption of new legislation on non-governmental organisations in January 2006 was one more step on the road to authoritarianism, and illustrated the suspicion with which all human rights and press freedom activists are viewed. Media coverage of the elections due to take place in the next months (legislative in December 2007 and presidential in March 2008) will provide key pointers as to the degree of news control that Russia’s leaders have attained.