



UNDER PRESSURE

The regional press has to fight to maintain its independence, writes **Sergei Bachinin**

HOW FREE IS THE RUSSIAN MEDIA?

An independent regional press does exist in Russia. At least, I can vouch for the fact that my own regional newspaper is independent, and that it exists.

We have had to fight for our independence, and have literally paid for it in blood. In the latter half of the 1990s, I survived two assassination attempts (and subsequent efforts to have me imprisoned) and Tatyana Mokropula, a journalist on my paper *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'*, was forced to emigrate to the US after being brutally beaten up in the entrance to her apartment block, a day after one of her hard-hitting articles hit the streets. I don't suppose there is any country in the world where those in power applaud the exposure of their dirty deeds. Journalists everywhere have to exert themselves very considerably if they want to remain free and independent.

It is a commonplace to say that the Russian regional press needs to be well funded if it is to retain its independence. While this is a necessary condition for genuine independence, it is not a sufficient condition. You may be free of financial problems, but still be fettered by fear, by a desire to continue to belong to a charmed elite circle, to stay on good terms with the powers that be, or by reluctance to cause 'unnecessary problems' for yourself.

In the former USSR, an attempt was made over decades to root out the sense of personal moral responsibility and replace it with a false, cynical ideology. The problems facing any country as it passes through the phase of 'primary accumulation of capital' are to this day made worse in post-totalitarian Russia by the loss of that sense of personal responsibility. For many, money is now regarded as the only value. 'Money talks'. This is axiomatic for an increasing number of those who work in the media. Money is more important to them than freedom of speech.

Many of my colleagues became successful publishers long ago and are now rich, but few risk bringing out publications which take their responsibilities towards their readers seriously, which are not afraid of raising contentious issues, or take the pursuit of the truth to the point where it comes into conflict with the government and economic monopolies.

This was vividly demonstrated by the conduct of the non-government-controlled media of Kirov Province during the election campaign for the State Duma. A number of individuals offered all these media, without exception, substantial 'charitable aid', ranging from tens to tens of thousands of dollars in return for their keeping quiet. They were required for these two months to say nothing negative about United Russia or its candidates or about the

doings of the province's administration, whose governor happens also to be in charge of United Russia's election campaign. Reporting of genuine problems facing the population was also discouraged, on the grounds that the fact that such problems exist might seem to cast doubt on the effectiveness of the current rulers. No one criticised United Russia during that period – apart from *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'*.

It is not easy to publish an independent regional newspaper in Russia. The journalists and editor are regularly subjected to threats of 'unpleasantness' by officials and anonymous individuals. Access to information on the actions of the authorities and major corporations is made extremely difficult. The courts, subservient to the authorities, invariably side with officialdom in lawsuits brought against the newspaper. The editors constantly face the threat of tax or 'fire prevention' inspections, conducted so as to give them as hard a time as possible. Unsanctioned and illegal phone tapping by the security services of all the journalists' conversations and hacking into our computers are an everyday reality and constantly have to be borne in mind.

Two months ago, we received a request from the top officials in the militia department responsible for combating information technology crime. They wanted us to reveal the IP address of a contributor to our Internet forum, who had expressed himself rather freely about the chiefs of the Kirov militia.

We declined, explaining that nobody had authorised us to give out their IP address, and that to do so would be illegal. A week later, agents from this very department arrived to check whether our computer software was fully licensed. Ninety-five per cent of Russian businesses use pirated software, but under the law this is punishable by confiscation of all computers and criminal sanctions against the CEO. By good fortune, we had undergone a software revolution shortly before and moved over to Linux-based open-code software. But for that, the continued publication of *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'* would have been seriously in doubt.

Towards the end of last year, unidentified individuals went out early in the morning and bought up the entire retail stock of our newspaper from newsagents' kiosks. This amounts to around 35 per cent of our total print-run. We subsequently discovered that the rulers of our province had taken exception to a number of reports published in that issue, and had decided to make sure that at least part of the edition never reached our readers. We took some comfort from the fact that the intercepted copies were at least not thrown on the municipal rubbish tip, but put to good use. The bundles of

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newspapers fuelled the boiler at the local government dacha. Let us hope that our bureaucrats felt the heat that evening.

In late 1995, I had a long, frank discussion over a glass of beer with Boris Fyodorov, the finance minister in Yegor Gaidar's government. I was in difficulties at the time because a goods wagon full of paper, which the newspaper had already paid for, was being held up at the factory. The Federal Tax Service had brought in yet another ill-thought-out innovation which effectively stopped enterprises from being able to settle invoices between themselves. For two weeks, the Russian economy was at a standstill. Expecting moral support from Fyodorov, who by that time was opposing Yeltsin's policies, I started laying into our then president for his failure to get federal institutions working efficiently.

Fyodorov interrupted to ask what I had been doing five years ago. I told him I had been loading loaves at a bread factory. 'And how much did you pay for the delayed consignment of paper?' he enquired. 'Fifty thousand dollars.' 'Are you sure then,' he asked, 'that you should be complaining about Yeltsin?'

I mention this to make the point that ideal democracy exists only in people's minds. In reality, it is always a flawed process with many components which can go wrong. As far as my own newspaper is concerned, I have to say that our current situation is a good deal more stable and less fraught with danger than it was ten years ago. At that time, the philosophy, frequently implemented, was, 'Get rid of the man and you get rid of the problem.' The murder of a troublesome journalist caused no surprise. Today, when gangsters or corrupt officials decide to sue us, we breathe a sigh of relief that at least our physical survival is not threatened.

Of course, today's Russian newspaper market is still far from perfect. In order to keep the mass media under control, the state and oligarchs continue to pump billions of dollars into them. This is the main problem affecting all the media. Low-quality, biased, but extremely cheap or even free newspapers sponsored by the regime and the major economic institutions represent serious competition for the independent press, which is not cheap. The problem is compounded by the fact that half the population has no interest in paying for quality. People with limited means and a consumerist mindset invariably go for whatever is cheapest.

It is not all bad news. Four local printers are competing for the contract to print our newspaper. Rospechat', a formerly state-owned distributor that has the most extensive retail network, sells more copies of *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'* than of any other periodical. The state-run post office has no

problem with handling subscriptions to our newspaper. Nobody forbids advertisers from availing themselves of our pages, and those making paid announcements include the city administration and several federal institutions. In stores owned by the local commercial oligarchs, whose right to own those stores we dispute, you will find counters selling *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'*.

To this day, the federal authorities have neither officially nor unofficially prohibited the publication of independent regional newspapers. Their fate has depended, on the one hand, on the degree of arbitrariness of local officials and, on the other, on the courage and tenacity of the representatives of the press. The fact that *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'* has managed to survive in an economically depressed region with 'conservative', pro-communist leaders demonstrates that an independent press can exist even under extremely difficult conditions.

The local administration and the local elites contain diverse factions, each of which may be pursuing interests which deviate from the 'party line'. Furthermore, all these forces urgently need, if only for their own self-preservation, to be able to publicly state their case in an influential publication which derives its authority from not being a priori committed to any one faction. Even the enemies of an independent press find they have an objective interest in preserving it.

The independent regional press has one other unseen, but undoubted, supporter: the federal government, that same Russian government which strangled the press freedom of the national mass media. In post-Beslan Russia, when the Kremlin went to extreme lengths in centralising power and created its top-down 'executive pyramid of power', the feedback between society and the state was disrupted. The presidential administration cannot trust, and is right not to trust, the reports from regional officials, or even from the institutions which are supposed to monitor them. Everyone is terrified of being punished and accordingly lies shamelessly. The independent regional press finds it is one of the government's major sources for assessing the real situation. Moreover, these newspapers stop regional barons from pushing their thievery and corruption beyond all reasonable limits, and ignoring the economic situation and needs of the people. This too benefits the federal government.

We are aware that the day the Internet version of *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'* appears, it is closely studied both in the presidential administration on Staraya Ploshchad' in Moscow and in the office of the president's representative in the Volga Region in Nizhny Novgorod. The governor of Kirov Province and the mayor of Kirov City start their working day by reading

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ВЯТСКИЙ

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2007 ГОДА
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Найди ВРЕМЯ выбрать БУДУЩЕЕ

Vyatsky Nablyudatel'. Their subordinates are forbidden from reading our newspaper, but collect money and pass it to a junior member of staff to go out to the kiosk and buy it. They read it under the desk, so as to know in advance what they are likely to get it in the neck for from their bosses.

The more consistently our publication maintains its independence, the more objective and professional it is, the more meticulously it performs its social role, the easier and more secure its existence becomes. We feel we are walking across a narrow log above a roaring torrent. We cannot allow ourselves to give in to fear or commit a professional blunder. We have constantly to ensure that the newspaper's information is as valuable as possible, balanced and objective, without bias or emotional self-indulgence. A failure on these counts will mean we lose the trust of our readers and our authority. If we do bottle out and lose those, we can easily be crushed.

Until now, nobody has been much bothered what local publications say about the president or United Russia. Nobody has stopped them reprinting items from the oppositional *Novaya Gazeta*, or reports of their own on the undemocratic nature and corruption of the federal government. The Duma elections saw that latitude coming to an end. Recently, an official I know in the presidential administration amicably advised me to cool my ardour in criticising United Russia. Without Putin, he suggested, the party was one thing, but now Putin was heading the list of election candidates it was quite another. An oligarch close to the 'government party' advised me to start making myself useful to the putinoids right now. 'When we finally come to power, we will take a close look at how people have been behaving all these years. Anybody who has been insufficiently obliging to us can start right now preparing for "purposeful" tax and fire prevention inspections.'

Queen Victoria is said to have been displeased that visitors to Hyde Park Corner were making disrespectful remarks about her, and to have commanded that the public's debates should be terminated. When people headed for Hyde Park as usual, they found the area cordoned off by police. The citizens then supposedly broke stakes out of the park fencing to beat the police with. The debates continued, and the following day the queen was obliged to rescind her edict.

Contemporary Russia is still a very long way from that level of maturity, and this effective lack of a civil society is the Achilles heel of the independent press. If the regime shuts down even the most popular newspapers tomorrow, nobody will openly protest, whether from fear or indifference.

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The regime's desire to maintain at least the appearance of democratic procedures in the Duma election and, if possible, to win 'fairly', without blatant ballot-rigging, also works in the independent press's favour. Even if open repression did not lead to public condemnation, it would undoubtedly have an adverse effect on the government party's share of the vote.

In our Kirov Province, one other circumstance made it impossible for an open attack to be mounted against *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'* during the election campaign, even though we continue to criticise Putin's policies.

In August, one of our regional government officials became very hot under the collar when he discovered that some members of the local grass hockey team, who, incidentally, rank sixth in the world, were being paid more than the governor of Kirov. A number of uncomplimentary remarks about the official appeared on the hockey club fans' Internet forum, after which he ordered the police to close the site down.

The website of our peaceable and law-abiding fans was judged to be 'extremist', and actually was shut down, but this only led to the fans opening a new website within a few hours, where the main topic was the professional incompetence of the province's government. It also became clear that the bureaucrat's repressive efforts had redounded to the discredit of United Russia, and that, on election day, tens of thousands of hockey fans and members of their families would take great satisfaction in voting against it.

The hockey website episode has served as a lesson and a warning to our local authorities, and I am hopeful that *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'* will be left in peace.

On 19 August 1991, on the first day of the anti-democratic putsch in Moscow, a KGB officer arrived at the works where our newspaper was printed. He told the print workers there was no point in their bothering to print it, as *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'* was closing down. Sixteen years later, and that same officer (a very sweet man!) has become an entrepreneur in the new Russia. We have mutual acquaintances and occasionally drink together at rowdy parties. To this day, *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'* is alive and well, and has no intention of closing down. □

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