



**Maria Eismont**

## Towns without censorship

Just as Russia's economic growth has obviated talk of democracy, the media's financial successes leave no place for ethical debate. While market imperatives often do the censors' work for them, counter-examples exist, reports Maria Eismont.

Most regional newspapers in Russia focus on lighter, less risky content, preferring entertainment and consumer news to politics and investigations. Some publishers, however, have chosen another path, trying to address readers as citizens, not just consumers. What the readers themselves prefer is still up for debate. The most important question is whether Russia's privately owned press is sufficiently strong, influential and independent to represent a serious threat to an increasingly centralised government and to resist authoritarian pressure.

In November last year, *Novaya Gazeta* in Samara, the regional branch of the Moscow-based oppositional publication, was forced to close after police raided its office and confiscated computers and financial documents. The editor is now facing criminal charges for allegedly using unlicensed software.

Although it is possible that the newspaper was working with pirated Microsoft programmes (as do the overwhelming majority of Russian organisations in general and newsrooms in particular), that is unlikely to have been the real reason for the raid, but rather a pretext used by local officials to disarm the opposition ahead of the Duma elections in December.

The timing supports this suggestion: police first visited the newspaper's offices in May, on the eve of the Dissenters' March planned by The Other Russia opposition movement. The editor's 21-year-old daughter was among the local organisers. Later, after the newspaper had already closed down, she was arrested for six days, together with her friends, on the eve of election day.

Another newspaper, *Novy Peterburg* from St Petersburg, announced that its 22 November issue would not appear, because the printing house refused to publish it. The paper had placed an appeal on its front page from The Other Russia leader, Garry Kasparov, to come to the city's Dissenters' March on 25 November. Two days later, its owner was sentenced to two months in prison for slander. The paper was later also closed down.

*Novy Peterburg* is a different sort of publication from *Novaya Gazeta*: a right-wing, anti-Semitic, nationalist newspaper known for its support of young people accused of racist killings. If it is in opposition to the Kremlin, it is primarily because it finds the Russian authorities insufficiently nationalist.

However different these newspapers are, the incidents have common ground: it was their strong links with the opposition that led to repression. But it looks as if the authorities are focusing on fighting opposition activists, for the most part leaving the media be (at least for the time being). In St Petersburg, for example, the independent community newspaper *Moy Rayon*, owned by a large Scandinavian media group, does not openly support The Other Russia, or any other political party, but is known for its strong criticism of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party and President Vladimir Putin himself. With its weekly circulation of half a million copies, it did not get into any trouble for publishing information about the Dissenters' March. "We are aware of how much they hate us in Smolny," said Diana Kachalova, the editor of *Moy Rayon*, referring to St Petersburg's city hall. "Officials refuse to talk to us. Sometimes they convince our partners not to advertise with us. But so far we have not experienced any serious, 'physical' pressure."

A similar answer was given in mid-November by another independent regional publisher, Sergei Bachinin in Kirov [see pp131–138]. His newspaper, *Vyatsky Nablyudatel'*, one of the few regional print media outlets that has a relatively strong investigative strand, was trying to provide its readers with independent in-depth coverage of the Duma elections, and, according to Bachinin, enjoyed increasing popularity. But two days before election day, the entire print run was confiscated and barred from distribution.

Given the general nervousness and uncertainty in Russian society, it has been extremely difficult for the professional media community even to recognise the fact of pressure itself, much less to agree on a strategy of collective resistance. The constant barrage of conflicting messages has divided media professionals into two camps: those who do and do not feel a real threat to their existence and editorial independence. At the beginning of November, I asked 20 independent editors and publishers from different Russian regions whether they were experiencing increased government pressure ahead of the elections. Around half responded negatively. By the end of the month, closer to election day, some of them changed their opinion and reported threatening phone calls or invitations to talk with the FSB, Russia's secret service. However, there were still a number who either felt no pressure at all or who called it "usual" and "bearable".

"Usual" means a set of standard instruments that Russian authorities use against the media at various levels when they feel it appropriate. This includes refusal to provide information or comment, denying any revelations appearing in the press, "confidential" talks with publishers and editors, convincing (or forcing) significant advertisers to withdraw, lawsuits for libel, raising rent and preventing distribution. Going after unlicensed software is one of the more recent tactics.

Indeed, it seems that today it is opposition parties and movements, such as The Other Russia or the Union of Rightwing Forces (SPS), that the Kremlin sees as its main adversaries. The independent media in and of itself is not seen as a real threat to the elections. That does not mean, of course, that at various levels of the hierarchy there may not be officials who would hesitate to take on media outlets considered dangerous or simply annoying. Indeed, there are numerous cases. But there was no evidence of an organised, centrally planned and coherent campaign by the Russian authorities against the independent press in the run-up to the Duma elections.

Why, is another question. Pessimists predicted that repression would follow the vote, depending on the results and media coverage. But many observers think that repression is simply unnecessary. Control over central television channels — the dominant source of information for the majority of Russians — is sufficient for the ruling party to close its eyes to a few dissident newspapers. Nationwide independent newspapers have a small circulation, while local newspapers are too insignificant for the Kremlin to bother with. There is also a third possibility: perhaps editors' caution, on the verge of self-censorship, which traditionally increases ahead of elections, makes them harmless.

In an interview with *Le Monde*, Alexei Venediktov, editor-in-chief of Ekho Moskvy radio, said there was no independent print media in the Russian regions: "As for the regional media and local newspapers, they belong to governors or administrations, which make them instruments of propaganda".<sup>1</sup> At a round table ahead of the 59th World Newspaper Congress in Moscow in June 2006, a well-known newscaster for the main state-owned RTR TV, Nikolai Svanidze, claimed that the Russian regional press "doesn't need freedom, it needs financial well-being".<sup>2</sup>

Neither statement is true, but if the first one is easy to disprove — hundreds of regional media outlets are officially and financially independent of the local authorities — the second is not so easy to dispute.

In September 2004, a private regional newspaper, *Sloboda*, organised a question-and-answer hotline with the local FSB chief. The event was set up long before the hostage crisis and ensuing siege at the elementary school in Beslan, and by coincidence fell on the day of the assault.

The newspaper's owner, Vera Kiryunina, who was also editor-in-chief at the time, recalls: "He was sitting here answering the phone calls when the first disturbing pictures of the assault appeared on state TV. We thought: 'Now they are going to cross the line and our guest is going to have a hard time.'" But out of dozens of phone calls, only two were about Beslan'. All the others kept asking how to get a job with the FSB and how much they pay.

The managers of *Sloboda* like to tell this story at meetings of publishers and editors, as an illustration of the readership's interests and needs, and as proof that their concept is the right one — a concept that the owner defines as a "quality tabloid of positive news". It is difficult to dispute: more than 100,000 copies sold weekly in a town of less than 400,000 inhabitants is a strong argument. After the Duma election, *Kommersant* reported that WAZ Group, publisher of the Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung and one of the biggest German publishing houses, invested \$12–13 million in *Sloboda* and is planning to start similar projects in other Russian cities. (This news, however, has yet to be officially confirmed.)

Thanks to western media management theories, Russian managers have learnt to be businessmen. Market research, training in ad sales, business plans and media kits have become common even in smaller towns. Thanks to the economic growth and advertising boom in the regions, many of the regional media companies have become profitable, and have attributed their financial success to having chosen the right vector of development. In its latest annual report, the Federal Agency for the Press and Mass Communications quoted experts predicting investment activity in the Russian periodical press market to remain high, likely to reach \$2.5 billion.

Just as Russia's economic growth has obviated talk of democracy, the media's financial successes leave no place for ethical debate. Many media assistance theories were based on the prediction that financial sustainability of media companies would eventually lead to editorial independence. But reality has proved this rarely to be the case: success in business leads only to a more business-oriented approach.

To entertain and to be useful to readers: this is how more and more regional editors see their mission. Positive news and consumer-related stories: that is what they assure us their readers want. Just as Russian TV became addicted to ratings, Russian newspapers rely on market research. "We are businessmen, we can't take the liberty of producing a product that the market does not demand," goes a typical refrain. Indeed, investigations and political analysis are not only politically risky, but simply unprofitable. Investigative reporters are difficult to find and expensive to hire, investigations are extremely time-consuming for usually understaffed newsrooms, and do not bring immediate profit to the company like widespread *zakazukha* (a Russian term indicating paid advertising masquerading as news), not to mention the danger of losing an important advertiser by investigating his business.

But there are other examples as well. In Berdsk, the main owner of *Berdskiy Kurier* initially pulled an article about Galina Zyryanova, an elderly woman who was severely beaten by the deputy police chief, because the deputy was his friend. The paper published the story two months later — without the owner's consent — alongside an editorial that explained the delay and apologised for the editors' "faint-heartedness". "The most important thing to us, dear readers, is that it is impossible not to print the truth in this newspaper," the editorial said and "that we continue to talk about people like Galina Zyryanova who are easy to humiliate and offend."



Liudmila Bykova, mother of a 19-year-old conscript serving in the far east, was exactly that kind of person. She walked crying into the office of newspaper *Kurier Sreda. Berdsk* — a new publication started by the editorial team of *Berdskiy Kurier* after they left the previous owner — and told them her son was put into a psychiatric hospital after a suicide attempt. She could not reach him by phone; neither could she reach his commanders. With a monthly salary of 1500 rubles (about \$63), she could not afford a ticket to go and find him.

The paper launched an appeal to its readers and in several days raised 53,650 rubles (almost \$2,200). One of the donors, the widow of a Second World War veteran, had buried her own grandson three years earlier, also a conscript, who returned home in a coffin. She brought Bykova 4,000 rubles (around \$165), a significant part of her small pension, and said that 2,000 would be from herself, and 2,000 on behalf of her deceased grandchild.

"Together we did a great deed," the newspaper wrote. "We helped the mother to snatch her son out of the hands of [his abusers]." The soldier, alive and recovering, told the newspaper how he was continuously beaten in the army. Readers reacted with letters of support and anger.

In November 2006, in Khanti-Mansiysk, the publisher of newspaper *Gorod hm* pulled a story about the embezzlement of public funds allocated for the

reconstruction of a local factory. High-ranking local officials were suspected of involvement. The subsequent resignation of the editor and his staff was covered by many Internet news sites and newspapers in other regions. While Moscow-based colleagues were discussing the fate of Khanti-Mansiysk journalists, predicting they would either leave the profession or sell themselves to the highest bidder, the rebellious editorial team pooled their funds and started a new publication. The arrival of the new independent newspaper was marked by graffiti all over the town: "My town is a town without censorship". The story about fraud was published on the front page of the new publication, on their home computers and, with the help of colleagues, in other regions.

Today, the newspaper, whose name translates as "My town without censorship" (*Moy Gorod bez cenzuri*), sells more than 3,000 copies weekly, earns more than \$10,000 in monthly revenue, enough to pay salaries, rent and printing facilities, and is still criticising officials and investigating alleged fraud.

Across the country, even in small, remote towns, local journalists are addressing issues that national television channels stopped covering long ago, and which rarely appear in the national press. Moreover, readers seem to admire this stance, suggesting that those who produce information and those who consume it can still choose to support a free press.

The story of Private Andrei Sychyov, whose legs had to be amputated after a brutal hazing incident at the Chelyabinsk Armor Academy two years ago, first appeared in *Vecherny Krasnoturinsk*, Sychyov's home-town paper. It was not covered by national and international media until two weeks later.

In March, some national papers ran articles based on the Defence Ministry's version of events, according to which Sychyov's injuries were the result of a genetic defect that predisposed him to severe blood clotting. The editor of *Vecherny Krasnoturinsk* uncovered medical records that showed Sychyov had never suffered from a serious illness. She also interviewed Sychyov's mother, who said her actions were being closely controlled by the hospital administration and that only selected journalists had access to her son.

Given the low quality of regional journalism on the whole, many ambitious, small independent media outlets also suffer from a sense of isolation and inferiority. Often regional newspapers lose their most talented journalists to Moscow or other cities, or to better-paid professions, such as public relations.

But it is the absence of a professional community capable of exerting peer pressure on its members, and of honouring the best journalism and shaming the worst, that can smother responsible journalism faster than oligarchs' money and authoritarian pressure.

The isolation of editors helps those who try to scare them. "The sad thing is that fear is spreading among independent editors," says Yuri Purgin, director of Altapress, one of Russia's leading regional publishing houses. "I can see Aesopian language returning." Purgin strongly opposed Nikolai Svanidze's dismissal of the regional press at the World Newspaper Congress. In December 2004, he was among the masterminds and organisers of an open letter of protest against the pressure from the Kremlin to smear Vladimir Ryzhkov, an MP from Altai and an opponent of President Vladimir Putin. The letter was entitled: "The press will not play the fool with the people" and was signed by more than 100 journalists in the Altai region, including those working for the

state-owned media. Purgin's main, general-interest newspaper, *Svobodny Kurs*, covered some of the stories of pressure on voters during the Duma election campaign. It is of course impossible to prove causality, but his region was among the ten where United Russia got the smallest percentage of the vote.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0,36-978437,0.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gipp.ru/openarticle.php?id1/412882>

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