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The Evolution of Russian Media

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Introduction

In May of 2012, the official newspaper of the Communist Party in Russia celebrated its 100th anniversary of publication. Founded in St. Petersburg in 1912, *Pravda* prospered throughout most of the twentieth century, with a "print run of millions in its heyday." After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the publication was banned by Boris Yeltsin, only to be taken over and revived by the Russian Communist Central Party in 1997. (Heritage 2012)

After this hundred-year history, Boris Komotsky, a senior member of the Communist Party with ties to *Pravda*, stated, "We are the only newspaper in Russia today that has not changed its form and content" (Heritage 2012). Refusal to adapt to the constantly evolving cultural climate of Russia is a bad business model, which is evidenced by the newspaper's constant stream of financial troubles and steadily declining readership. But despite its controversial mission statement and the questionable veracity of its content, *Pravda* is a publication that by nature of its distinct history embodies a uniquely Russian persona and perspective for its loyal readers. As David Remnick writes in the introduction to his second book about Russia post-collapse of the Soviet Union, "Language was a foundation

of the old regime. The old Communist Party controlled language absolutely (banning writers, creating the Newspeak of official doctrine and media) and, like God almighty, gave everything its name." (Remnick 1997: 10)

The Russian press post-collapse of the Soviet Union

The end of Communism as the definitive power structure in Russia was welcomed by many Russians, as well as a relief to western powers that feared its sphere of influence on the rest of Europe. But in the twenty odd years since, Russia has continued to define exactly what "kind" of state it is now. Democracy? Authoritarian state? Oligarchy? This evolution is complicated by the constant tendency of western political scientists and journalists to compare Russia's development to transformations that have occurred in other developing countries; the assumption that there are countries, especially the United States, with which Russian can be compared to is inherently flawed. Russia's foray into democracy is relatively recent, while the United States' developed solely within the confines of democratic principles.

An American might look for a parallel in the late eighteenth century, but there are important differences: the colonists could draw on English law and custom to create American political and legal culture; they were also a relatively healthy people, not one recovering from a history of annihilation, propaganda, and neglect." (Remnick 1997: x)

As the structure of the Russian state continues to develop, the role that the press will play in such a state is also in flux.

However, failing to take this into account, "It seems we are expecting the institutions of democracy and the media in Russia to work toward becoming clones of Western democracy and media, in spite of significant differences in historical development, cultural norms, current events and societal structures, and available resources." (Wilson 1995: 2) The decade immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union provided a brief glimpse into what the future of journalism in Russia could entail barring any intrusion from corrupt government or writers discouraged or flummoxed by such a drastic shift in their roles as propaganda pushers to journalists in the western sense.

The press, the mass media, turned into an important, and perhaps the most authoritative, social institution of those years...It was a golden age for freedom of speech; the press could criticize communism as well as the current regime, while being paid quite well by that same regime. You could say whatever you wanted, without thinking about any economic consequences. (Dzialoshinskii 2001: 259)

Russian "democracy" and freedom of the press

"Russia (began) its democratic experiment with a fairly well developed print and broadcast media," but these medium were developed within the Soviet model (Wilson 1995: 2). Therefore, this "golden age" Dzialoshinski refers to as a result of the reforms Mikael Gorbachov introduced under glasnost proved unsustainable without the accompaniment of other key institutions usually present in a developing democracy.

"Glasnost itself needed certain guarantees, the most important of which were a developed civil society, coordinated market transformations, and the development of democratic institutions based on establishing a truly effective judicial and law enforcement system. Absent such guarantees, freedom of the press quickly dried up, and journalists felt deceived." (Dzialoshinskii 2001: 260)

In the Soviet model, the media was a "servant of the society—and therefore of the state," which led to a lack of media objectivity (Wilson 1995: 2). However, once again, "media objectivity" is only one aspect of a journalistic tradition and practice that developed within the vacuum of a democratic West. As LJ Wilson wrote rather bluntly in 1995, "To assume that our particular democratic system and structures are the "pure" practice of democracy and not culturally and historically bound to the unique development of the United States and other Western democracies is appallingly ethnocentric" (Wilson 1995: 3). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian journalists were forced to reconsider their role in a new fragile state. Moldavian journalist Iosif Dzialoshinskii explores the problems journalists had finding "a new professional, spiritual, social, and political identity." In his essay, "What Future Awaits the Russian Press?" he identifies four distinct ideologies that journalists could choose to align themselves with starting during glasnost and moving forward: "(1) messianic, enlightening, and propagandistic action; (2) unprejudiced purveyors of the news; (3) solving specific social and human problems; (4) to earn as much money as possible." (Dzialoshinskii 2001: 261). The two ideologies of particular interest, and the ones that arguably set up the greatest dichotomy, are numbers two

and three. The second ideology, "imported from the West..(entails) getting information and passing it on to society without bearing any responsibility for how it would be used, or by whom." The third is "derived from the best examples of Russian editorial writing" and "requires the journalist to work toward solving specific social and human problems." (Dzialoshinskii 2001: 261)

Grappling with competing ideologies

In 1999, the Institute for Humanitarian Communications held a series of training sessions for Russian journalists during which participants were critical of the "pure information" method inherent in ideology two. They believed this philosophy "accompanied the shift in the public attitude toward journalists as hired hands who could be used to transmit all sorts of information, as long as it had some semblance of veracity." (Dzialoshinskii 2001: 266) During the '90s, journalists' grappling with this ideological struggle was manifested in their handling and promulgation of Yeltsin's rapid rise and decline and Putin's gradual ascendency to the Russian presidency. Dr. John Murray, the head of the Russian and Slavic Studies department at Trinity College, outlined the consequences of the role the press played during this period in an interview.

The journalists worked for Yeltsin to stop the Communists from winning in 1996; (then) they thought Putin was going to be like Yeltsin, so they got him into power. ...When you talk to them you say, 'Well how can you do that as a journalist?' And they'll say, 'Oh well it's just you don't realize what it would be like if that person won the election. We're doing it for the

> greater good.' And I say, 'Well if you did it once, if you say the end justifies the means and you knowingly hold information or distort, then you're on a slippery slope to becoming somebody who can be manipulated quite easily.' Which is exactly what has happened to the press. So in that way it's no better than in the Communist period, I think. They had a golden period under Gorbachev, because Gorbachev was encouraging them to be more open, but at the same time, under Gorbachev, everything was still owned by the state one way or another. (Murray 2012)

The onset of this ideological struggle was synonymous with the overhaul of media models worldwide. Journalists everywhere are becoming increasingly dependent on various technologies, and readers have come to expect an elevated news experience via all platforms. The expectation that Russian journalists could adapt to fundamental editorial changes as well as constantly changing technological ones is perhaps asking too much too soon. It creates yet another opportunity for western media models, which have had a head start in the technological evolution, to exert unwarranted influence over Russia's developing press. As Dzialoshinskii points out,

> Thousands of seminars and training sessions have been held in editorial offices and schools to help journalists understand how to manage and market newspapers, determine editorial policy, and design advertising policy. American journalists were of great help; they visited even the most remote newspapers and patiently explained to their Russian colleagues how to publish newspapers and magazines, or run television and radio stations, under market conditions. However, the American experience did not translate very easily into Russian reality. (Dzialoshinskii 2001: 262)

The infiltration of technology

The belief that increased accessibility to technology is the final step in fully liberating the Russian press is not only overly simplistic and naive but a threat to the few basic civil liberties Russians have acquired over the past two decades. Evgeny Morozov puts this idea forward in his book, *The Net Delusion*, when he asks, "What if the liberating potential of the Internet also contains the seeds of depolitization and thus dedemocratization? " (Morozov 2010: 59) Although it may come across as slightly dramatic, Morozov presents extensive evidence to support such a claim. Censorship in Russia was eliminated under Gorbachov, and despite Putin's increasingly authoritarian rule, it has yet to be formally reinstated. However, the Internet has presented new opportunities for the exertion of Russian state powers that make overt censorship unnecessary.

The decentralized nature of the Internet may have made comprehensive censorship harder, but it may have also made propaganda more effective, as government messages can now be spread through undercover government-run blogs. The opportunity to cheaply encrypt their online communications may have made "professional" activists more secure, but the proliferation of Web 2.0 services—and especially social networking—has turned amateur activists into easier targets for surveillance. (Morozov 2010: 82)

The western emphasis on technology has made it possible for the Russian state to co-opt the technological public sphere for their own use and to prevent certain information from being accessed by the public as well as

being disseminated in the first place. The Kremlin's virtual presence has already been targeted at certain oppositional publications online. Distributed-Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attacks allow third parties to take control of certain publication's websites and temporarily shut them down. *Novaya Gazeta*, which is one of the more widely circulated independent newspapers in Russia, has been subject to such attacks. (Morozov 2010: 107, 108)

Conclusion

At the aforementioned Institute for Humanitarian Communications seminars in 1999, Russian journalists expressed interest in the idea of civil journalism and "the idea that the means of mass communication had first of all to help the public influence politicians to understand the true interests of citizens" (Dzialoshinskii 2001: 266). A move toward this kind of journalism would be a thorough actualization of ideology three, and it is arguably what Russian society needs at this particular point in time. Russian journalists have seen the consequences of their push to get Putin into power in 1999, and the oppositional faction of citizens and writers is continuously gaining momentum because of Putin's actions since then. The independent press's reaction to events such as the persecution of Pussy Riot and attempts to shut down peaceful oppositional gatherings and protests is evidence of this.

Pravda was and still is distinctly Russian, but it no longer reflects the collective consciousness of a Russian people no longer under control of the Communist party. Attempts by Putin to fill the void left by Communism have sparked the onset of a new form of Russian journalism, and the medium that capitalizes on this has the

potential to become the uniquely Russian press that has yet to emerge.

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