

Transparency, Accountability and the Fight against Corruption
Nadezhda Azhgikhina
Secretary of Russian Union of Journalists

On the leading edge

Honest and high-quality journalism, free from state control and political subordination, serving the interests society alone, merciless toward corruption and lawlessness, ready to help the downtrodden – the active part of Leo Tolstoy’s “active good” – is the dream of many generations of Russian journalists. The three-hundred year history of journalism is 300 years of totalitarian censorship and the courageous fight against that censorship. The carefully preserved moral traditions of Russian journalism were formed through a close connection between literature and social movements and the development of democratic institutions and the press, which has always elicited great interest from the public. Through the centuries of autocracy and Soviet-style totalitarianism, the culture developed a particular resistance to censorship, and reached masterful heights.

Generations of Russian journalists and readers have been trained in the subtle irony and wordplay of underlying messages, reading and writing between the lines, metaphors and complex chains of literary associations hinting at political change. The best examples of the Soviet press are full of those elements.

It is often said that the liberal media played a decisive role in perestroika. That is largely true. Another factor was that the Soviet Union was not only a country of total censorship, it was also a country of full literacy. People had the skills necessary to seek the truth between the lines in the newspapers. Journalism was held in high esteem.

Interestingly, although unsurprisingly, an unwritten code of honor developed in the journalistic community during the years of Soviet censorship as an alternative to official propaganda. I remember it well from my own experience as a fledgling correspondent for a youth newspaper. Everyone understood what was and was not worthy of respect, regardless of official values. There were clear moral signposts and examples for imitation, and the whole country knew them. The huge circulation of the major newspapers made it possible to find rather brave material about abuses and violations of the law and to see the results of their exposure. (Under the rules of the time, ten days were allowed for responses to criticism in newspapers and other media.) Publication of those incidents had a real effect – people were fired from their jobs or rehired and many everyday problems were settled. Thousands of people, not fully trusting state institutions, wrote letters to the newspapers as a last resort. Trust in journalism was very high. It was seen as an intercessor in the interests of the common man, a defender of high morals and an opponent of abuse.

During perestroika, that trust grew exponentially, as many publications, mainly, but not exclusively, based in Moscow, such as *Literary Gazette*, *Ogonek* and *Moscow News*, began to write about things that had previously been impossible to mention – the crimes of Stalin, human rights, and so on. Corruption in the USSR became a hot topic. Many hung their hopes for successful future development on its eradication.

In the summer of 1988, *Literary Gazette* published an article by its legal writer Yury Shchekochikhin “The Lion Jumped,” which mentioned the existence of organized crime and systemic corruption in the USSR for the first time. Before that, journalists only wrote about isolated occurrences. The hero of the article, police colonel and criminologist Alexander Gurov,

spoke openly about an intricate network of criminal leaders, Soviet officials and hired assassins that in practice controlled several regions. Words like “killer” and “kidnapping” were seen in the Soviet press for the first time. They made it past the censors because they were not mentioned anywhere in their thick guidebooks (which apparently were written decades before). Modern journalism is unimaginable without them. The article had the effect of a bomb going off, both here and abroad. Gurov wanted to be arrested. In the KGB, a working group was formed to discredit the article. Gorbachev saved the day. He thought the article was important and gave the order to pay attention to its content.

Soon the Soviet Interior Ministry established its first ever division to fight organized crime, which was headed by Gurov. Corruption became a popular topic, with Russian newspapers and foreign media searching for new facts. In 1989, readers in the city of Voroshilovgrad (now Lugansk, Ukraine) elected the author of the article to the first relatively independent High Council of the USSR. He joined the ranks of Academic Andrei Sakharov, lawyer Anatoly Sobchak, *Ogonek* chief Vitaly Korotich, poet Evgeny Yevtushenko and other writers and journalists.

People believed that they would change their lives for the better. The popular drama “Speak!,” about a Soviet village, maintained that freedom of speech – the main topic of the day – was an instrument for real change.

During the same years, the end of the 1980s, two proposed laws were widely discussed. They concerned freedom of speech and glasnost. The latter was never passed, perhaps because of its scope – it suggested complete transparency in all decisions and all government agencies, open elections and opportunities for all citizens to express their opinions about current events. A law on media was passed in the summer of 1990. In December 1991, its basic points became the foundation for the law on media in force today, essentially the first Russian legislative act that enshrined democratic principles and the independence of journalism from the state. The significance of the law cannot be overstated. For the first time in Russian history (aside from a few months at the beginning of 1917), freedom of the press was declared, censorship lifted, citizens were given the right to create their own media, concealing information and obstructing the work of journalists were made subject to legal sanction and journalists were given the right to refuse assignments that conflicted with their personal convictions. Experts say the law is one of the best in Europe, in spite of the fact that it failed to take account of many factors that have arisen in Russia since its passage.

Many thought then that the declaration of freedom would lead by itself to the immediate dawn of an age of high-quality, independent media. Many also believed, with complete sincerity, that the very presence of a free market (which, like freedom, never existed in the USSR) would guarantee a healthy economy and prosperity for all. I remember well how, at *Ogonek*, the standard-bearer of perestroika, we dreamed of a time when we would be free of *Pravda*, which published and distributed us at the time, and transferred subscribers from us, the country’s most popular publication, to party publications such as *Communist* magazine.

Freedom of the press had consequences, some expected and some not. In 1992, more than 400 new media were registered – that is, every day a new newspaper, radio station or television station sprang into being. Of course, many of them were short-lived. The majority of the new publications were devoted to topics of limited interest and little importance – beauty, celebrity gossip and so on. An immoderate amount of erotic came out, all of low quality. Thousands of people poured into the field of journalism without any preparation. They were semiliterate and knew nothing of quality, ethics, information gathering and other essentials.

The market did not guarantee the prosperity of high-quality media. They were rather quickly forced into relationships with state agencies, which still held most of the production capacity, or else they fell in with financial groups and became dependent on them. This led many editorial offices to reduce their fact-checking and proofreading staffs. As a result, readers were as shocked by their declining quality as they were by their skyrocketing prices. Nor was that the end of it.

At the beginning of the 1990s, many media, including those that had until recently taken pride in the quality of their information, began to publish unchecked facts, speculation and sometimes completely unsubstantiated material. Readers were in a quandary over how to tell real investigative reporting from speculation and fantasy. Newspapers became a prime field for political and business battles. Corruption among journalists and managers in the media was limited in Soviet times by censorship and party control, as well as principles imposed by society. But now it grew to a threatening scale. In the middle of the 1980s, publishing an article for money would be grounds for dismissal from a respectable publication, and would certainly cost the author the respect of his colleagues. A decade later, that practice was widespread.

The new law on the media contained no mechanism to guarantee ethical standards or quality in journalism. Of course, that fact reflected the general situation in the country – the stolen fortunes, the lack of transparency in the law and economy, and society's disorientation. On the other hand, corruption in the media was a direct result of the poor condition of the industry, the lack of instruments with which to maintain companies' independence and a lack of solidarity. The difficulty in organizing into a union was caused by a prejudice against everything that resembled Soviet practices and the nontransparent relations between employers and employees as a whole in the 1990s, when salaries in the majority of private companies, and many state companies, were paid in cash, without tax withholdings, which gave the employer a measure of control over the employee.

Emerging social divisions, which picked up momentum toward the end of the century, affected journalists as well. While television hosts on the national channels were well paid and rewarded, sometimes even better than they could have expected in the West, employees of regional publications were literally scrambling for bread and were ready to serve state and commerce as propagandists. That became a regular practice in election campaigns. Trust in the print media plummeted. Journalists ceased to be seen as thinkers and defenders of glasnost.

Many former defenders of freedom began openly, without the least compunction, to serve the interests of business. The so-called media wars (especially between the Berezovsky and Gusinsky empires) also have a sad notoriety. During the 1996 elections, they showed television viewers an extreme example of cynicism and contempt for norms. Investigation became a part of political and economic battles. The airwaves were filled with "black PR" that was completely obviously intended to serve someone other than the audience. Sociologists estimate that only 6% of the public trusted the media by the end of the century – a true disaster.

Of course, not all journalists forgot their professional duty. Many continued to fight for the truth, and many fell in battle. The first murders of journalists occurred in 1990. They were mainly critics of corruption and the government. Two tendencies emerged among journalists. Some served the government and business, while others uncovered corruption just as much fervor. The latter were subjected to various forms of censorship and harassment.

The beginning of the 21st century was marked by an anticorruption campaign and the creation of the vertical of power. And there was the Doctrine of Russia's Information Security. That doctrine, created as part of the war on terrorism, imposed significant limitations on journalists. Berezovsky's and Gusinsky's national empires crumbled and were reformed after falling into the

hands of the state, either directly or indirectly. The state became the most significant figure on the media market, taking full control of national television and much of the press, and suppressing much of the local press.

It became harder and harder to criticize the government and the companies associated with it. Judicial prosecution of journalists and independent publications became an everyday phenomenon. The law on fighting extremism made it possible to accuse someone of extremism for criticizing a representative of the government. The independent Dagestani newspaper *Chernovik* is the latest case.

The authorities began to talk more and more about the need to control the media, usually in connection with the preponderance of violence and vulgarity on the screen. The journalism community suggested an alternative: principles of self-regulation to maintain quality and ethical standards.

In 1994, the Code of Ethics of Russian Journalism was passed by a congress of the Russian Union of Journalists. It is based on the principles of UNESCO and the International Federation of Journalists. At the following congress, it was decided to make observance of the code a basic condition for membership. Unfortunately, not everyone follows the code in reality.

The founding of the Russian Union of Journalists Grand Jury in 1998 was a landmark in self-regulation. The jury consists of experts and journalists and is intended to settle intercorporate disputes. Not all media recognize its jurisdiction, however. Regardless of that, the Grand Jury has made a number of decisions that clearly define society's position on moral standards. At the end of the 1990s, Sergey Dorenko was even forced off the air. He was one of the most odious participants in that decade's media wars. The Grand Jury has been petitioned over political blackmail, ethical violations and ethnic and gender discrimination.

Many sessions of the Grand Jury become events in and of themselves. Another positive step was the creation of the Public Collegium for complaints against the press (following the British model). It consists of journalists and members of the public and has met 40 times. The number of petitions the collegium receives is not great, which hinders the development of that system of self-regulation. The fact is that journalists rarely appeal to organs of self-regulation or to the court when they are obstructed by the government. The number of suits filed against newspapers remains stably high, however, at hundreds per year, and the claims against authors remain unreasonably high at hundreds of thousands or millions of rubles.

The economic crisis has had an impact as well. In Russia, it has sometimes had an effect similar to elsewhere in Europe and other times has had a completely different effect. As in Europe and North America, there have been closings of publications, cuts in circulation, changes in format – mainly among independent publications – and the advertising market has collapsed. But the total number of media in the country has not changed. New research has shown that, in many regions, the government has been using its own funds to create new publications, and sometimes even television stations, as propaganda outlets. The harm this causes independent journalism is apparent. A year ago, analysts suggested that the crisis could become a sort of cleanup for the market and weaken the role of the state. But research has shown that state pressure on independent media during the crisis has only intensified, resulting in some publications reducing the number of investigations they conduct and turning to the yellow side – presenting “light” information in place of more incisive material. The investigative genre has had a more modest presence in recent years than it did in the 1990s.

Uncovering corruption still leads to attacks on journalists. The Glasnost Defense Fund has counted more than 20 forms of censorship in the country, from self-censorship (which is practically universal) and economic and political dictates from the ownership to citations from the fire inspector or for using pirated software (up to 70% of computer programs in the country are pirated). One of the worst of the numerous ways to violate journalists' rights is violence.

As of today, the Russian Union of Journalists has counted 321 colleagues who have been killed. Their names are in the database in Russian and English at www.journalists-in-russia.org. The list was compiled with the assistance of the International Federation of Journalists. The majority of the murders are still unsolved. Several of the dead have become symbols of press integrity: *Top Secret* editor and television host Artem Borovik, tireless critic of corruption in the government of the Republic of Kalmykia Larisa Yudina, critic of the general staff and Defense Ministry Dmitry Kholodov, author of many articles about the tragedy in Chechnya Anna Politkovskaya. Yury Shechekochikhin, the author of the first article on organized crime in the USSR and investigator of corruption in the upper echelons of power, died under strange circumstances in 2003 while carrying out a controversial investigation. The investigative department of *Novaya Gazeta*, where he worked, has been named after him.

Beatings and intimidation of journalists occur regularly and also go unpunished. The lack of punishment for those responsible for the killing of journalists and other forms of violence against them and violation of their rights is a serious illness in society. It is quite clear that there can be no movement forward without a solution to the problem. Now the Russian Union of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists are developing a program to overcome this lawlessness.

Another obstruction in the journalist's mission is that many write about corruption in the country and its government today, with facts, copies of documents and bank statements and, after that, nothing happens. One example of this is investigation conducted at *Izvestia*, the oldest national newspaper, by well-known journalist Boris Reznik, who is now a member of parliament and on its committee on the media. He worked on his investigation almost a year and uncovered ties between the prosecutor's investigative committee in Khabarovsk Territory and the local mafia. After its publication, the author sent an enquiry to the Russian Prosecutor General's office. Nothing has been done yet.

Experts say that a legislative initiative could change the situation. For instance, by making a response to criticism in the media obligatory. That requirement is contained in the new version of the law on the media that has been before the parliament for a year now. Notably, the law's authors, Baturin and Fedotov, are the same ones who drafted the current law. They took many of the wishes of representatives of the community into account, as well as the technological revolution, while preserving the spirit of the document – faithfulness to the independence of the media and protection of the rights of journalists. The new version also includes punishment for violation journalists' rights or for causing harm to a journalist, just as for causing harm to a civil servant or law enforcement agent.

Punishment is increased for state officials who hinder the work of journalists or refuse to provide information. The new draft is already in the parliament and is being prepared for consideration. Experts say it is a type of "road map" for legislative change to guarantee the free development of the media. It even contains a draft law about public broadcasting (which does not yet exist in this country), changes to the Criminal Code and an exclusion from the law on slander (which at present is practically not enforced, but is a potential threat).

Improvements to the law are necessary but insufficient, however. The law will be a success only when it is accompanied by mechanisms to implement it and with support from the society. In that light, it is hard to overstate the role of self-regulation and public participation in the media. That is all the more pressing in the age of the Internet and new media.

President Dmitry Medvedev speaks of adhering to the values of a society based on law and the firm principle of media independence. He has repeatedly said that new technologies, the Internet and digital television by themselves practically guarantee freedom of expression. But the Internet today presents a problem, if not a threat, for high-quality journalism, and the rules for licensing digital television channels make them inaccessible to independent regional broadcasters, with priority remaining with state agencies.

Clearly, international experience has to be taken into account to use the new technologies adequately. For Russia, which is only beginning on the path to the democratic development of the press, international experience and cooperation is extremely important. That is why collaboration between the Russian Union of Journalists and UNESCO is so important. Participating in UNESCO projects and discussions has been good training for Russian journalists. In recent years, the Russian Union of Journalists has carried out more than ten joint projects – symposia, training and publications on ethics, the culture of tolerance, gender equality, extreme journalism and ethical principles of the coverage of new topics. The Russian Union of Journalists' work with the International Federation of Journalists has been a great aid in the development of ethical principles and the defense of journalists. The Ethical Journalism Initiative was widely discussed in Russia.

Another necessary condition is the participation of civil society in a discussion of media strategies. That is essential in Russia, where public passivity is one of the hindrances to the development of high-quality, responsible journalism and independent investigation. In Moscow and the Russian regions several years ago, the Citizen Club was founded, which created a discussion space for journalists, representatives of civil society and experts. A national media forum that meets in January in the Russian regions was created to stimulate a discussion of the role of journalism and the media in society and to involve as many people as possible, not only professionals, in the discussion.

A media literacy and media education project is another vital aspect of the joint work between the Russian Union of Journalists and UNESCO. The most important strategy is the development of a culture of journalistic investigation, training of young colleagues in international standards and cooperation between journalists and the judicial community. The Guild of Court Reporters has joined in this work.

It is also time to involve participants in new media in a discussion. Bloggers may become journalists' allies if they adopt their ideology and principles of ethics and quality. Blogging schools led by the country's most popular bloggers, Rustem Agadamov and Grigory Pasko, are already operating.

Collaboration between traditional media and the Internet in investigating and prosecuting corruption gives uniformly high results. The most notable examples have been *Free Course* newspaper's action with the Altaipress website concerning poaching by high-placed officials in the mountains of Altai, which resulted in the resignation of regional leaders, and the Caucasian Knot website, which has repeatedly attained justice.

Russia is a huge country with more than 200,000 journalists working in it. (The majority of them today are women.) The country is highly varied as well. There are independent media, the

elements of civil society and a dialog between the public and the state in some regions, while lawlessness, favoritism and almost medieval conditions predominate in others. But journalists live and work in all of those regions and consider it their duty to serve society and fight all forms of injustice. Those people have to be supported. They are our future. They are, as always, on the leading edge.