

Russia

BY HELLA ROTTENBERG

With the introduction of his policy of glasnost in the mid-eighties, Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev opened the door to the freedom of expression. Journalists had been working under strict censorship for many decades. They knew which topics were permitted, which were forbidden and which were obligatory. Although the skill to read and write 'between the lines' was highly developed under the Soviet system, mass media as such were merely instruments of state and party propaganda. To know what was going on, one had to listen to foreign radio stations and simultaneously to decipher the Soviet news.

The policy of glasnost brought about a radical change in the character and role of the Soviet media. People started to speak their minds, at first carefully, later more and more boldly. They passionately discussed the past, present and future of the Soviet Union and Russia, and set in motion an avalanche of discussion of themes that had been suppressed for so long. Newspapers, journals and television programmes became the outlet for a wide variety of opinions. Not before long, the media identified themselves as platforms for liberal, conservative/communist, nationalist and authoritarian ideas. Censorship was completely abolished after the failed coup attempt in 1991.

It was an exciting period for journalists. They learned to ask questions, to investigate, and to speak out. Some of them learned quickly. Newspapers and journals were eagerly bought and read, some television programmes became national events. Journalism, however, in many cases lacked professionalism and ethical guidelines as a result of years of dictatorship. Opinions, rumours and facts were often mixed in news reports. Journalists longed to communicate their personal opinion. Establishing facts came on the second place. In combination with the chaotic political developments, it became a challenge for the public to make sense of the many different versions of events that were presented.

During the early nineties, more sophisticated newspapers (such as *Segodnya* and *Nezavisimaya*), radio stations (*Ekho Moskvy*) and television companies (such as NTV and TV-6) were founded that were owned by companies that were independent from the state. Journalists of these media, many of them newcomers, no longer suffered from the inhibitions or self-censorship that had characterised the Soviet era. Reporters used their independent position to criticise the authorities freely. The first war against the rebellious Caucasian region Chechnya that president Yeltsin started in December 1994 was the subject of fierce debates and criticism in the media. At the time, independent reporting on and investigations into the war were possible, even on television.

Russia at a glance

+ Inhabitants	143.2 million
+ Population density	8 per km ²
+ Capital	Moscow
+ GNP per capita, PPP	US\$ 9,000
+ Language	Russian
+ Access law	no
+ Corruption (10 is low, 1 is high)	2.8
+ Democracy rank	121
+ Freedom of the press (0 - 100)	68 (not free)
+ Newspaper circulation	no data available
+ Circulation per thousand	no data available
+ Circulation per household	no data available
+ Newspaper reach among adults	7 percent
+ Number of newspapers	449
+ Dominant business model	mixed
+ Commercial TV since	1991
+ Journalists' education	-
+ Journalists' knowledge of English	rare
+ Female journalists	-
+ Newsroom hierarchy	-
+ Journalists' political involvement	-
+ Politicians' media involvement	strong
+ Investigative journalism organisation	none
+ Number of members	-

Information on the sources of these data can be found in the Introduction

Things changed in 1996, during the presidential campaign. Liberal-minded journalists viewed Yeltsin's re-election as a guarantee for press freedom. 'Journalists were so happy with their newly gained freedom that they no longer kept their distance from the Russian government', says veteran Moscow journalist Leonid Velekhov. 'They became propagandists and thus lost part of their recently-won independence and credibility.' NTV, once the most critical TV channel, changed overnight into a mighty propaganda machine for Yeltsin's re-election.

Newspapers tried hard, but did not manage to make ends meet in the new economy. Fierce competition with radio and television, lack of advertisements, loss of subscribers, sky-high costs for printing and distribution were the main causes for this failure. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (The Independent Newspaper) had to stop publication in 1995; it re-emerged a few months later as part of the conglomerate of the Russian billionaire Berezovski. *Izvestia* that first went through a phase as a shareholder company owned by its employees, was bought in 1996 by the oil concern Lukoil.

These developments would not have been a problem if the oligarchs had seen the media as a commercial enterprise, while respecting their editorial independence. However, instead of doing so, they used the television channels and printed media as tools in their struggle for the division of state-owned property. Only a few months after Lukoil became shareholder of *Izvestia*, editor-in-chief Golembiovski was dismissed. He had printed an article, taken from *Le Monde*, in which the Prime Minister and energy tycoon Chernomyrdin was accused of self-enrichment. This example of interference by the oligarchs was to set the tone.

Trading *kompromat*

A new vocabulary, such as 'black PR', originated to indicate methods for blackmailing and blackening one's opponents. Virtually all major mass media were involved in the so-called 'information war' between the oligarchs. The big banks and industrial conglomerates employed their own intelligence service to spy on opponents and gather compromising information, so-called *kompromat*. When it was considered expedient, this *kompromat* was made public through the media owned by the oligarchs or by journalists whom they bribed with large sums of money. According to Moscow journalist Leonid Nikitinski, from 1995 on, most Russian publications that were labelled 'investigative stories' were nothing more but one-sided information, neither checked nor independently investigated.

Trading information was big business. Transcripts of private conversations between businessmen and politicians were sold by people

with connections in the various branches of the Russian secret service. Private data on income and tax payments, police records: practically everything became available on the market. In the heyday of the struggle for state property, incredible sums were offered for publishing or withholding pieces of damaging information. Journalists in Moscow and St. Petersburg told me that they had been offered amounts, varying from 25,000 to 150,000 US dollars. These prices were paid for publications in the printed media. Prices for television must have been much higher.

The information war died down when the oligarchs managed to get a hold of their share of state property. The massive leaking of information stopped and the number of revelations dropped sharply. 'We had something like eight or ten centres of influence', says Leonid Nikitinski. 'Now only one centre, the Kremlin, is left. Politics has gone underground.' Pluralism is disappearing, especially after Yukos boss Khodorkovsky was arrested. The rest of the oligarchs took it as a signal that they should obey the Kremlin, and they instruct the media they own to act according to the rules too.

Private data are still widely for sale; only the price has dropped. One journalist showed me a price-list for data on cd-rom that elsewhere would either be freely available, like phone numbers, or not available at all, like bank accounts, police records and information on tax payments. These data on all major cities in Russia are on sale. Mostly they are at least a year old; for up-to-date information one needs special connections.

The struggle for the ownership of state property has been utterly destructive. Corruption has permeated all strata of society, the media not excluded. Journalists are well aware that the credibility of the mass media has been undermined and their profession has become seriously discredited. The public is not naive and is well aware that it is being cheated. When it concerns the genre of 'investigations' in particular, one can expect cynical reactions. Nobody knows who and what to believe anymore. Revelations are seen as simply another hail of bullets in the foggy war that the powerful are waging. The first question people ask themselves is: in whose interest is this bit of dirt being made public? Another effect of the information war is maybe just as alarming. Russian journalists are deeply suspicious of one another, making it easy for authorities to divide and rule.

Those who are still active in investigative journalism sometimes work as well-paid detectives for private firms: publishing information is considered just a sideshow. A group of Moscow reporters, for example, earn their income by writing reports for private firms about other firms or persons. They may publish (part of) this information on their website and in their monthly journal with the apparently ironically intended title *Kompromat.ru*. They see themselves as independent journalists,

who do their own research, while at the same time they write commissioned articles. They do not think these activities might be incompatible. Other investigative journalists work in close cooperation with the police and secret service, which makes it impossible for them to maintain their independence.

Nevertheless, there are still individual journalists and media outlets that manage, against all odds, to maintain a reputation of honest investigating and reporting in an increasingly hostile political climate.

Clean pencils

Leonid Nikitinski, who works as a legal affairs reporter at *Novaya Gazeta*, set up a programme for investigative journalists in 1998 with the telling title 'Clean pencils'. George Soros' Open Society Institute financed this programme. Nikitinski invited journalists to submit plans. After a consultation with an advisory board he would decide if a plan was good, and the journalist would receive a grant of one thousand dollars for expenses and fee. As a condition for receiving the grant, journalists had to send the draft article for comment to the other side, usually the accused party. This elementary rule was thought necessary to obtain a guarantee that the article was not commissioned by an interested party. The programme closed down in 2001 when Soros left Russia. 'It is a pity, because the programme was quite successful', Nikitinski says. A collection of 'Clean pencils' articles in book form reveals which themes were selected for investigations in Russia: abuse of position by high state officials (i.e. enrichment), corruption among army generals and judicial authorities, criminal gangs and high-profile murders, collusion between big business and the state authorities and fraudulent business deals. Some of the authors who participated in the programme are still working as investigative journalists, but quite a few gave up and are now analysing events, teaching, or working as general reporters.

Conducting investigative journalism in a corrupt, criminal, violent and undemocratic country is very tricky business. Many incidents have been registered in recent years in which journalists were threatened, obstructed, poisoned; some disappeared, a few were even killed. Cases remain unsolved for years. Official investigations into disappearances and killings have not led to the conviction of one single murderer.

When asked how they protect themselves and how they find the courage to continue with their work, respondents said that there is hard to find out why certain journalists have been killed. However, journalists do adhere to certain rules, such as: never engage in deals in which information is used as a commercial commodity; don't ever try to blackmail a person using your knowledge; see to it that you are never the

sole bearer of damaging information; never go to risky meetings alone. They seemed to comfort themselves with the thought that the political climate in Russia is becoming more civilised. They are convinced that when they adhere strictly to the rules, the risks are minimal. Still, intimidation and disappearances continue to take place, and it doesn't just happen to unknown reporters somewhere in a faraway provincial town, but also to well-known journalists in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Broadcast media

Russian television is mainly concerned with entertainment. The authorities strictly supervise news and background information. The Kremlin nowadays controls all five federal television channels. A journalist in St. Petersburg summed up the change of regime in the Kremlin in a simple manner: 'When Yeltsin didn't like a program he switched off his television set. When Putin is irritated, he switches off the network.'

Newspapers are deemed relatively unimportant because of their limited circulation. They therefore still enjoy some freedom of expression. Television, however, is the top priority for the Kremlin. Broadcasts are watched closely. Since 2002, satirical programmes have been taken off the air, discussion programmes have been banned; some television personalities have even been declared off-limits.

Top managers of the federal channels are summoned on a weekly basis – and frequently more often – to the Kremlin and there, they are given 'precious hints' by the authorities. According to Aleksei Simonov, director of the Glasnost Defense Fund, Soviet censorship was in a way easier to bear, because the instructions were clear and the same for everybody. 'Today you never know why something is forbidden and on whose orders. Those vague hints tend to frighten people. Self-censorship has a more prohibitive effect than state-censorship.'

In such a climate it is hard to imagine how investigative reporting can flourish. There are still a few programmes on federal TV that could be labelled 'investigative', but the content, however, is not very exciting. The once famous investigative programme 'Top Secret' is now a shadow of its former self; the programme 'Man and Law' is closely connected to police and justice authorities, and it is rumoured it receives large sums for 'commissioned' programmes.

Besides the federal channels, about a thousand local and regional channels air programmes on television. In small towns, local TV falls under the authority of the local council, which usually means that the channel is tightly controlled. In big cities, the regional or local networks are owned by big industries and private businessmen, besides by the

regional and local authorities. As a consequence, in big regional cities there is room for competition between the networks and sometimes even for independently edited news, background programmes and even some investigative reporting.

TV2, in the Siberian city of Tomsk, is considered the best regional television network in Russia. The imprisoned business tycoon Khodorkovski owns it. Contrary to other regional networks, TV2 deals exclusively with news and background stories. Tomsk has a large student population and it used to be a town where political exiles were sent to. Thus, the population in majority has a liberal outlook. Local authorities do not interfere too much with television reporting. Investigations are a regular part of the work of TV2's twenty reporters. 'The public trusts us and frequently phones in to report abuses', says director Arkadi Mayofis. What makes his life difficult are the frequent lawsuits his network has to cope with. He employs a battery of legal experts to analyse programmes before they go on air, and to defend the network in court. In its thirteen years of existence TV2 lost only one case, Mayofis proudly recalls.

In radio broadcasting, investigative journalism is not a tradition. If one wants to be informed, however, some radio stations stand out as good and reliable. *Ekho Moskvyy* should be mentioned first of all: it specialises in high quality talk radio with a large audience: 750,000 listeners in Moscow and another 750,000 across the whole of Russia. *Ekho Moskvyy* is especially good at broadcasting talk shows, ironic columns and analysis. Many of Russia's finest journalists work for this station. But the freedom of expression is at risk at this station too. *Ekho Moskvyy* was owned by billionaire Gusinsky, whose media empire was taken over by the state-owned gas company Gazprom. The radio station tries to fend off interference by giving airtime to a wide variety of opinions, varying from extremely nationalist to outright liberal.

Print media

The newspapers and journals that flourish commercially belong mainly to the yellow press. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Moskovski Komsomolets* and *Argumenty i Fakty* publish funny stories, articles about sex scandals, gossip, human-interest stories and entertainment. For the few surviving serious, critical or opposition papers life is often made miserable through economic harassment. Sometimes advertisers are 'urgently advised' by shady persons to break their ties with a paper. Or, as happens more and more often, papers are ordered in court to pay incredibly high damages for having published 'false information'. Thus, the quality paper *Kommersant Daily* – a liberal newspaper owned by the run-away billionaire Berezovski – was fined over 10 million dollars in January 2005 for an article that the owner of Alpha Bank disliked. It had

reported that many clients had been trying to draw money from their accounts. With Berezovski as its financier, *Kommersant Daily* can afford such a fine, but for the much less affluent opposition paper *Novaya Gazeta* – financed by a pool of businessmen – it would probably have been a deadly blow. *Kommersant Daily* does not engage in investigative journalism, but *Novaya Gazeta* practices investigative journalism systematically.

The paper, published twice a week, concentrates on journalistic investigations, human interest and the war in Chechnya. *Novaya Gazeta* regularly receives telephone calls from anonymous callers telling them the paper had better not publish certain information. And sometimes even nastier methods are applied to prevent reporters from doing their work, like when Anna Politkovskaya was poisoned in the airplane on her way to Beslan in September 2004.

The fate of *Novaya Gazeta* is very much in the balance. If the Kremlin authorities want to ruin the paper, they would only have to start a series of lawsuits. ‘Courts do whatever they’re asked to do’, says Sergei Sokolov, assistant editor-in-chief. He recalls a case against *Novaya Gazeta* in which the judge decided in favour of the Minister of Atomic Energy Adamov, although the paper could fully document its accusations of self-enrichment against the minister. The judge motivated his ruling by pointing to the fact that the documents referred to Adamov by his first name and second initial, instead of his full patronymic. So this Adamov could be another person, couldn’t he?

Publications on the abuse people in high places exert have no effect whatsoever in the real world, says Sokolov. ‘The secret service is in power, it knows whatever it wants to know and holds the top dogs in its grip. The system is totally corrupt. Not one single publication by *Novaya Gazeta* has led to a criminal investigation, no matter what damaging documents we’ve presented.’ All Moscow and St. Petersburg journalists I spoke to echo his words: whatever you discover, it is ignored. This is at least true for the central levels of power: regional authorities sometimes seem to be more responsive.

Even so, *Novaya Gazeta* continues to do investigative stories, because according to Sokolov ‘we are good at it’, and because ‘maybe somebody somewhere sometime’ will look at the information and act upon it, for instance abroad. Four journalists at the paper are only involved in investigative stories, they write mainly on high-level bribing and corruption, the role of the secret service and the military, the abuse of state funds, and on crime. The other desks engage in investigations now and then if and when it concerns their own specialities.

According to Roman Shleinov, one of *Novaya Gazeta*’s investigative reporters, the field for investigations is endless, but the possibilities of

getting hold of information and checking stories are decreasing. The Kremlin discriminates against critical journalists. They are not included in the pool that receives invitations from the Kremlin; requests for interviews and documents are routinely refused. And since the State Duma (the Parliament) is completely dominated by Putin supporters, it has lost its function as an additional source of information. 'The system has become monolithic', comments Shleinov.

The Agency for Journalistic Investigation, AJUR, is unique in Russia. Andrei Konstantinov, a famous journalist and author of real crime and detective stories founded AJUR in 1998. He teaches popular courses and seminars on investigative journalism and wrote a textbook on his speciality, titled: 'Journalistic investigations: the history of a method and its modern practice'. AJUR currently employs 60 persons, some 25 of whom are reporters. It runs a press agency, a website, and a weekly magazine; all of them specialised in criminal affairs in St. Petersburg and surroundings. AJUR is renowned for its spectacular criminal investigations and the ensuing results. It even handed over notorious criminals to the police after having elicited confessions from them. 'It had to be done', says Konstantinov, 'as an act of civil service.'

AJUR seems to work very systematically. As a rule at least two reporters work on an investigative story. All data are recorded during the investigation, a librarian is included in the team, a dossier and an analysis of the gathered information is made. Only when this procedure is followed, the story is written. Before publication, legal experts analyse the material.

AJUR, however, is not merely a successful journalistic enterprise. The agency earns its income for a large part through its activities as a detective agency and consultancy bureau. AJUR has got a very well documented archive and a professional analytical department, with specialists who once worked in the secret service and police and who therefore still have close ties to their former employers. Foreign and Russian business firms can order dossiers on individual persons or fields of economic activity. Or they can ask for a special investigation to be conducted. According to director Konstantinov there is no conflict of interest with the regular journalistic work of AJUR. 'We always say to our clients: you can order an investigation, but you cannot order the outcome.'

Concluding remarks

The climate for investigative journalism in Russia has deteriorated severely. Media companies have been used as tools and in the process they have lost their independent outlook and integrity. Corrupting practices undermine the credibility of a large part of the media. And

Putin's administration has become more and more authoritarian. Putin has put federal television under his control; he can restrict the free press if he so desires. Yet, at some newspapers and smaller media outlets journalists still work as investigative reporters. But nowadays it is not particularly rewarding. When journalists discover and reveal abuse, the authorities mostly ignore their findings. Initiatives for independent reporting launched by regional groups of newspapers or by individual journalists or regional and local television channels, however, are beacons of hope.