

Moscow's New Rules

Islands of press freedom in a country of control

BY ADAM FEDERMAN

Late last summer, Ilya Barabanov, a young Russian editor, posted a laconic message on his Web site under the heading, “A Long Story.” A couple of weeks earlier, Russia’s Constitutional Court had ruled, unsurprisingly, that Barabanov’s wife and former colleague, Natalia Morar, could not re-enter the country. “In all honesty, I don’t know and won’t try to predict when Natalia will return to Russia,” Barabanov wrote. It was the final chapter in a case that had

begun in 2007, when Morar was detained at a Moscow airport after a reporting trip to Israel. A Moldovan citizen who had lived in Russia since 2002, she was sent, without explanation, to Chisinau, the capital of Moldova. There she was told she had been denied entry because she was a threat to the security of the state.

Morar was deported not long after publishing a series of articles in *The New Times*, a weekly Russian newsmagazine that specializes in long-form investigative stories, and which spares little in its criticism of the Kremlin. Based on anonymous sources within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the articles portrayed an elaborate money-laundering scheme that included some of Russia’s top banks, high-level officials, and the Austrian Raiffeisen Zentralbank. She also alleged that the 2006 contract killing of Andrei Kozlov, head of Russia’s central bank, was tied to his ongoing investigation of the very same activities—an assertion that the Austrian

Interior Ministry later said could not be ruled out.

The story touched a nerve. Morar said that after it was published she received a warning from sources close to the FSB, Russia’s security and counterintelligence service, who told her, “There is no need to end your life with an article—someone might simply wait for you at the entrance to your apartment building, and they will not find a killer afterward.” This was a good summation of what has happened to several investigative reporters in Russia, including Dmitry Kholodov in 1994, Paul Klebnikov ten years later, and Anna Politkovskaya in 2006.

In a last bid to attain citizenship and return to Russia, Morar married Barabanov in Moldova and the couple flew to Moscow together in February 2008. They were detained for three days at Domodedovo airport, until Morar was again sent back to Moldova, where she still lives. On his blog, Barabanov said that they would continue to appeal the decision. He ended on a note of optimism, saying that Morar had not given up journalism and that he was certain she would return to Russia someday.

Barabanov is the twenty-four-year-old political editor of *The New Times*, which was launched in 2007, not long after the killing of Politkovskaya. It has taken on highly sensitive stories, from the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko to the murder of Kozlov, the head of the central bank, to the Russian-Georgian war. He has a barely visible goatee and blond hair that falls over his eyes, and looks more like any number of Mos-

cow’s young students than the husband of an exiled dissident. A recent graduate of Moscow State University’s journalism school, he’d intended to be a sports reporter. But he started working for the well-known opposition newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, during college and went on to one of Russia’s largest news Web sites, *gazeta.ru*, before becoming a correspondent at *The New Times*.

When we met last year, Barabanov took me to a T.G.I. Friday’s on Moscow’s busy Tverskaya Street, which happens to be in the same Soviet-era building that houses the offices of *Izvestia*, a fiercely pro-government paper at the other end of the ideological spectrum. *Izvestia* was relatively independent throughout much of the 1990s and had a wide readership among the intelligentsia. It published Yeltsin’s dramatic appeal to the citizens of Russia to oppose what he called the “reactionary” and “anti-constitutional” coup that removed Gorbachev from power in 1991, and was openly



critical of the government during the first Chechen war. In many ways, it followed the arc of several post-Soviet papers that went from being Communist Party organs—*Izvestia* was launched in 1917—to liberal pro-democracy newspapers.

Yet today, of Russia's many dailies, and there are more than four hundred, *Izvestia*, with its 235,000 readers, has come to symbolize the failure of the Russian press and its co-optation by the Kremlin, a kind of return to the Soviet model. It is owned by a long-time friend of Vladimir Putin and is slavishly loyal.

Barabanov's *New Times*, with 50,000 readers, in turn, is privately financed and published by Irina Lesnevsky, who made her fortune as co-founder of REN TV, one of Russia's last truly independent television stations. In 2005, though, Lesnevsky and her son (a film producer) sold their 30 percent holding, and the station has since been auctioned off to allies of the Kremlin in what many view as a gentle takeover. But Lesnevsky returned to the world of media and politics with a rather daring gamble: to invest in a highly critical media

venture at a time when most observers are lamenting the death of free speech in Russia.

This is a common refrain and not surprising, given that serious journalism in Russia faces a sobering list of challenges, not least of which are threats, assaults, and murder. One might reasonably ask why there are journalists left in Russia willing to take on investigative stories. As Thomas de Waal, who covered the first Chechen war for *The Times of London* and *The Economist*, told me, "For every journalist who gets killed there must be twenty who decide that they're not going to write the story that they might have written."

Yet important stories still do get covered. And when reporters continue to face the threat of such reprisals for their work there seems to be a paradox in the claim—made by everyone from Putin to journalists themselves—that independent newspapers and magazines have become irrelevant.

Meanwhile, a rapidly growing community of online readers has made it increasingly difficult for the Kremlin to control the flow of information, even if the Web is hardly able to

compete with state-owned TV. (Roughly 25 percent of the population used the Web as of 2007, close to 60 percent of Moscovites.) Financial reporting has also flourished lately. And stories that in the past would appear only in opposition newspapers—often on social issues such as hazing and abuse in the military, Russia’s crumbling health care system, and even reports from Chechnya and the North Caucasus—are not uncommon in Russia’s relatively new glossy magazines.

Although the last two decades have been deeply troubling for journalism in Russia, young reporters and independent media continue to pursue stories that matter. On the occasion of the one-year anniversary of *The New Times* in 2008, Lesnevsky acknowledged the almost impossible task ahead of her, and the possibilities, too. “A year has passed,” she wrote. “Everyone is alive. And we’re even celebrating.”

IN RUSSIA, CIRCULATIONS SEEM TO RISE AND FALL ALONG with political hopes. In 1990, when the reforms of the Gorbachev era reached their apex, daily newspaper circulation in Russia was 38 million. By the time Boris Yeltsin left office at the end of the decade—when press freedom was already beginning to shrink and the economy had suffered a shocking collapse—that number had fallen to just 7.5 million. Media scholars often refer to the late *perestroika* years and the early days of the Yeltsin regime as a golden age of Russian journalism. Crowds of people could be seen waiting on line every Wednesday for copies of the influential *Moscow News*.

Moreover, the public trusted journalists. They were seen as public servants and truth tellers. According to Andrei Richter, director of The Moscow Media Law and Policy Institute, many journalists were elected to national, regional, and city offices. *Argumenty i Fakty*, once the country’s largest mass circulation weekly and still popular, had fourteen staff members elected to public office. In his study of media and power in post-Soviet Russia, Ivan Zassoursky, a professor at Moscow State University’s journalism school, says that in the late 1980s the concept of a fourth estate was just beginning to take hold. “It was a very exciting period,” Richter told me.

The ebullience of that period, however, was quickly offset by skyrocketing inflation. Newspapers were forced to accept state subsidies early on, creating a dynamic that has become increasingly politicized under Putin. Meanwhile, a number of wealthy oligarchs bought media outlets during the 1990s, paying journalists well and providing a measure of independence. By the Putin era, only oligarchs close to the Kremlin could survive.

The problems Western media face—from budget cuts to the impact of the Web—exist in Russia too. But in Russia the foundation was already shaky. And there is no deep tradition of long form investigative reporting, or the institutions to support it. “We failed to create a new kind of journalism” during the 1990s, Alexey Munipov, editor of *Bolshoi Gorod*, an alternative bimonthly Moscow paper, told me. Readership declined.

And in recent years, it has declined further and advertising revenue has plummeted. In the last year alone, daily papers in Russia lost 17 percent of their readers, and a recent

TNS Gallup survey showed that less than 10 percent of the population bothered to read dailies between December 2008 and April 2009. (In most European capitals the same figure is closer to 50 percent.)

The legacy of a “pay to play” model dating from the oligarch-dominated era of the ’90s, in which newspapers and magazines accept money for “articles,” has further weakened public trust. Called *dzhinsa* (Russian for “blue jeans”), the practice has become institutionalized; newspaper managers or editorial board members are often paid directly. “Newspaper type has become the weapon of the banker and the politician,” a journalist wrote in the mid-1990s. “The journalist has been transformed into a mouthpiece.” The public has become so suspicious of placed articles that reporting or reviews are often assumed to have been paid for. Maxim Kashulinsky, the thirty-six-year-old editor of *Forbes Russia*, says he still has to persuade people that *Forbes* doesn’t sell entries to its list of Russia’s one hundred richest businessmen.

Perhaps worse has been the state’s gradual domination of print publications. First, over the course of Putin’s presidency, a number of large-circulation dailies, including *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Kommersant*, and *Izvestia* were sold to Kremlin-friendly business groups, including the state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom. At the same time, state subsidies for newspapers gradually became tied to content and ideology. Until a few years ago, Russian newspapers received uniform support from state and local budgets for print costs and distribution, regardless of size or political orientation. In 2005, however, a new law changed the funding system; money would be distributed through a competition for grants administered by the Federal Agency on Press and Mass Communications. The grants were not based on objective criteria, but on the kind of stories publications printed—whether they were sufficiently sympathetic to those in power.

This has created a vicious circle: opposition papers don’t even bother to compete for state funding, so the pool of applicants has decreased; thus the loyal large-circulation dailies get an ever-larger sum of federal money, which ultimately allows them to undersell their competitors. And the resulting wider circulation means they’re more attractive to advertisers. The Kremlin’s approach to print media is simple, Richter says: “If the press wants to help us, we shall help them. If the press doesn’t want to help us or it’s against us, let them die.”

Meanwhile, access to information and sources within the government has greatly diminished. This is particularly true with the intelligence community. Andrei Soldatov, the founder of the investigative Web site *agentura.ru* (modeled on Steven Aftergood’s Project on Government Secrecy), has covered the FSB and national security issues for more than a decade. In the early 1990s, he says, intelligence agencies feared that they would be disbanded, as happened to the East German Stasi. In an attempt to preserve their power, they established press offices to deal with journalists and the public in the name of transparency.

But under Putin, a career intelligence officer and head of the FSB from 1998 to 1999, those fears subsided and “the FSB just decided to forget about this filter,” Soldatov said. Today, the FSB gives out an annual award for the best book or film

about the security services and has been behind the production of at least one major movie, *Countdown*, that was little more than propaganda. According to Soldatov and others, the FSB's Center for Public Communications refuses to answer media queries, despite a 2006 law that says they must.

Soldatov, who covered Beslan and the Nord-Ost theater siege for various Moscow papers, confesses that over the last couple of years he has found only a few new sources within the FSB. At the end of our interview, in a noisy café not far from the offices of *Novaya Gazeta*, where he once worked, Soldatov takes out a copy of James Bamford's *The Shadow Factory*, a 400-page history of the U.S. National Security Agency from 9/11 to the present. When he reads books like this, based on a rich archive of documents and sources, he says, it makes him jealous. Nonetheless, Soldatov and his colleague Irina Borogan are working on a book about the Russian security services to be published (in English) this year, titled *The New Nobility*, a phrase coined by former FSB director Nikolai Patrushev to describe leaders of the newly empowered security service after Putin came to power.

IN THE YEARS SINCE PATRUSHEV SPOKE OF A NEW NOBILITY, several high-profile journalists have been murdered in spectacular contract killings, none of which have been successfully prosecuted. In 2004, just three months after the first issue of *Forbes Russia* was published, its founding editor, Paul Klebnikov, was shot on a quiet street outside of the magazine's editorial offices. Two years later Anna Politkovskaya, the reporter for *Novaya Gazeta* who wrote about war crimes and human rights abuses in Chechnya, was shot in the elevator of her apartment building. During her trial, human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburova, a twenty-five-year-old *Novaya Gazeta* freelancer, were gunned down in broad daylight on a busy Moscow street (in November two suspects, alleged to be members of an ultranationalist group, were apprehended in the killing).

And those are only the most well-known cases. The Committee to Protect Journalists, whose estimates tend to be somewhat conservative, has identified seventeen journalists killed because of their work in the last nine years across Russia. In only one of those cases have the killers been convicted, and the masterminds remain at large. In that same period, at least forty journalists have been deported or refused entry to the country. According to the committee, Russia is the third most dangerous country in the world for journalists, trailing only Iraq and Algeria. And it is somewhat unique. Executive Director Joel Simon says that in most countries where press freedom is deeply compromised, it is usually the result of state repression (China) or violence and impunity (Mexico). Rarely do the two merge as they have in Russia.

Yet lately the faint outlines of a new paradigm seem to be emerging. Several independent magazines and newspapers, including *Newsweek*, *Forbes*, *The New Times*, *Vedomosti*, and *Novaya Gazeta*, have survived longer than might have been expected given the circumstances. And they usually publish what they want, free of interference from the state. At the same time, Russia's president, Dmitry Medvedev, has made a point

of reaching out to critics, even granting *Novaya Gazeta* the first full-length interview of his presidency, an unimaginable gesture under Putin.

"We live on islands in Russia," Maxim Trudolyubov, the opinion-page editor of *Vedomosti* tells me in a quiet café not far from the subway entrance where Markelov and Baburova were shot last January. He's referring to the large body of state-controlled media—what he calls a continent—and the small handful of independent newspapers and magazines that publish freely. Last June, *Vedomosti* launched an investigative desk, headed by Irina Reznik, a leading expert on Gazprom, who writes frequently about Putin's circle of friends. "If you do it the right way, usually you can do it and get away with it," Trudolyubov says.

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Outside of Russia, the best known of these "islands" is probably *Novaya Gazeta*, a thin paper published three days a week. *Novaya Gazeta* has a small but stable readership, and focuses largely on investigations of abuses of power and human rights, as well as corruption. Since its founding in 1993 by a group of about thirty journalists who parted from *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, an influential and widely read tabloid, the paper has taken a sharply adversarial tone. Four of its reporters, including Anna Politkovskaya, have been killed.

In 2006, the paper sold 49 percent of its shares—to pay salaries and debt—to Mikhail Gorbachev and Alexander Lebedev, a former KGB spy who recently acquired the *London Evening Standard* and has served in the Duma as a member of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party. Lebedev invested \$3.6 million of his own fortune in the paper. So, like *The New Times*, *Novaya Gazeta's* livelihood is largely tied to a single investor. In May, Lebedev announced that he was unable to pay staff salaries for a week after financial problems with his German airline venture (though he had no problem paying staff at the *Evening Standard*). At the same time, very few tycoons are willing to risk their personal fortune on highly politicized publishing ventures. For most, it would mean the end of their business careers.

The most promising venture of the past decade appears to be Trudolyubov's *Vedomosti*, launched in 1999, not long after the collapse of the ruble, with the backing of the *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and Independent Media,

which also publishes the English-language daily, *Moscow Times*. “The appearance of *Vedomosti* has changed things and moved them forward in a way Russian journalists were not doing before,” says Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Economist*’s Moscow bureau chief. “Some of the reporting that *Vedomosti*’s done on people with Kremlin connections who have serious financial interests has been outstanding.” *Vedomosti*, he says, has achieved what few publications have been able to do in Russia: create a documentary record of the Putin years.

In addition to *Vedomosti*, several Russian Web sites have become increasingly important as both sources of information and public forums. Newsru.com and grani.ru are the pet projects of Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, respectively, exiled oligarchs and media moguls who were early casualties of the Putin era. According to a 2008 Reuters Institute report on the Web in Russia, both sites “carry generally reliable and often critical information and comment.” Meanwhile, other large news sites—including *gazeta.ru* and the liberal-leaning *lenta.ru*—have expanded their presence.

For now the Web is a largely unregulated and open space. In 2007, when the FSB unofficially tried to force Moscow Internet providers to block access to a host of Web sites, including *kasparov.ru*, a political news site founded by Garry Kasparov, the chess legend, only a handful acquiesced. Oleg Panfilov, director of Moscow’s Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, who is working on a study of the Internet and freedom of speech in Russia, says that even though the authorities are starting to use legal measures, such as a relatively new law against extremism, to intimidate and even silence bloggers, it is too late for them to turn the Web into a kind of state-run media monopoly. “It is technically impossible to control the Internet in Russia,” he told me. Unlike China, Panfilov says, Internet service providers in Russia are privately owned, and have largely resisted efforts on the part of the state to manipulate content.

The Web is also becoming an increasingly important platform for print media. One of Russia’s most promising publishing ventures, both online and in print, is *Bolshoi Gorod* (Big City), a city paper devoted to art, culture, and politics. Owned and published by Afisha, a successful arts and entertainment weekly, *Bolshoi Gorod* is openly liberal but far less antagonistic than *The New Times*. When I visit, *Bolshoi Gorod*’s small, one-room office resembles the post-production space of a college newspaper or literary journal, with half-empty coffee cups on every surface and a foosball table covered with old issues. Munipov says the paper’s founders imagined *Bolshoi Gorod* as a kind of *Moscow Village Voice*: a free, black-and-white weekly. Nearly eight years later the paper, published in an oversized art-house format, comes out every two weeks, in color, and costs about forty rubles (about \$1.30), and is accompanied by a simple, appealing Web site.

Alexey Munipov, at thirty-two the oldest editor at *Bolshoi Gorod*, says that the publishers are generally supportive of what they do—long-form narrative journalism—but would prefer if they focused more on lifestyle issues. “Nobody tells you that you cannot write something,” Munipov says. “But you know that if you write about certain things, there will be problems.” Yet it has its journalistic triumphs.

In August 2008, two weeks after Russia’s war with Georgia came to an end, *Bolshoi Gorod* published a striking twenty-four-page collection of first-person accounts of the conflict that Munipov says people still reference. He doesn’t feel the issue was particularly dangerous, nor was it overtly political, but it challenged the monochromatic view of the war that the Kremlin put forward on state-run television and online through its own army of paid bloggers (a relatively new phenomenon). According to Thomas de Waal, the author of two books on Chechnya, it provided some of the best eyewitness reporting on the war.

The paper’s editor in chief, Philip Dzyadako, is twenty-seven, and its style and content reflects a youthful sensibility. Like Barabanov, Dzyadako is part of the first truly post-Soviet generation of journalists; they’ve come of age under both the rise of Vladimir Putin and the Web.

“They definitely are in conflict with the older generation. They’re in conflict with both the Soviet approach and the corrupt, paid-up-to-the-gills, nineties approach,” Michael Ido, the former *Russia!* editor and a contributor to *Bolshoi Gorod*, told me. “And this is why I’m really optimistic about magazines like *Bolshoi Gorod*. What they do is they tell individual stories instead. A mosaic of what Russian life is really like does gradually reveal itself from the stories that they tell.”

In a recent column, *Forbes Russia* editor Maxim Kashulinsky wrote that, “The dynamics of Russian media are hard for outsiders to understand.” He was referring to the dichotomy that has emerged between the increasingly powerful state-controlled media and the handful of independent newspapers, magazines, and Web sites that usually publish without interference. There is little to suggest that this imbalance will change soon, but Kashulinsky remains optimistic.

“There’s nothing we can’t cover,” he told me in his small office on the outskirts of Moscow, which he shares with two deputy editors. “We can write about Putin’s friends, thank goodness. As long as we have the evidence, we can write about it.”

The greatest obstacle journalists face, he says, is penetrating the closed worlds of business and politics in Putin’s Russia. Still, in August 2008 *Forbes Russia* published a sharply written profile of Yuri Kovalchuk, a long-time friend of Putin who has amassed a vast personal fortune through the acquisition of state-owned assets, as well as a sizable media empire that includes *Izvestia* and REN TV. Today, as head of Bank Rossiya, Kovalchuk is worth roughly \$15 billion.

There are stories *Forbes* won’t pursue, but that has more to do with a lack of resources—they have roughly twenty editors and reporters—and access to information than to the sensitivity of the subject matter itself. Kashulinsky says he’s had to turn promising stories down simply because he knows they’d stretch the magazine’s limited budget and he doesn’t have the resources for projects that would likely only lead to dead ends. When I ask him if he can provide me with some examples he pauses and says, “There are several, but someday we’ll do them.” **CJR**

ADAM FEDERMAN, a *Russia Fulbright Fellow* in 2003-2004, is a journalist based in New York City. Research support was generously provided by the Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute.