THE RUSSIAN PRESS IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA:
A CASE-STUDY OF IZVESTIA
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Abstract

The progress of the Russian press in the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras can be described (with apologies to Vladimir Lenin) as "two steps forward, one step back". The flowering of glasnost (openness) under Mikhail Gorbachev led to a "golden age" of Soviet journalism, including an explosion of new publications and a lifting of nearly all state restrictions on journalists' professional activities. However, the collapse of the USSR and the onset of material crisis in 1991-92 quickly produced a winnowing of the press and a retrenchment on the part of surviving publications. At the same time, powerful new forces—especially oligarchs and regional and leaders—arose to vie with the state for influence over post-Soviet media. This paper explores the trajectory of one of the leading newspapers of the Soviet and post-Soviet period, Izvestia, in the light of these broader trends. While Izvestia emerged from the ashes of Soviet communism with formal control over its material plant and journalistic collective, it was soon subjected to a tug-of-war between powerful actors determined to control its destiny—first the Communist-dominated Duma (parliament), and then large corporations and business oligarchs. The struggle led, in 1997, to the dismissal of the paper's editor, Oleg Golembievsky, and the departure of many staff to form Novye Izvestia (New Izvestia)—though this publication, too, was also unwilling or unable to avoid the temptations of a close alliance with one of the leading oligarchs, Boris Berezovsky. The findings are placed in the broader comparative context of the press in transition, based on the author's research into process of media liberalization and transition worldwide.

Resumen

El desarrollo de la prensa rusa en el periodo anterior y posterior al fin de la guerra fria se puede describir, con disculpas a Vladimir Lenin, con la siguiente frase: dos pasos hacia adelante y uno hacia atrás. El florecimiento de la glasnost (apertura) durante el gobierno de Mikhail Gorbachev ayudó al desarrollo de una época dorada para el periodismo soviético, la cual incluyó el surgimiento de nuevas publicaciones y la desaparición de mayor parte de las restricciones a las actividades periodísticas. Sin embargo, el colapso de la USSR y la crisis económica de los años 1991-1992 desvaneció la vitalidad de prensa, como también freno e hizo retroceder a las publicaciones sobrevivientes. Al mismo tiempo, surgieron poderosas fuerzas, como los nuevos oligarcas y líderes regionales, quienes comenzaron a disputarse con el Estado la influencia sobre los medios de comunicación. El propósito de este documento es examinar la trayectoria de Izvestia, uno de los principales periódicos tanto de la era soviética como de los años siguientes. Izvestia surgió de las cenizas de los controles estatales del comunismo soviético sobre la planta productiva y el contenido periodístico. Después, la publicación fue sometida a una disputa entre poderosos actores que buscan controlar su destino. Primero, la Duma (parlamento) dominada por los comunistas buscó controlar el periódico, y más tarde los oligarcas económicos y las grandes corporaciones persiguieron el mismo fin. Esta contienda llevó en 1997 a la destitución del editor Oleg Golembievsky, y a la renuncia de gran parte de los miembros de la redacción, quienes se unieron para formar la Novye Izvestia (Nueva Izvestia). Finalmente también este periódico no tuvo la capacidad o la voluntad de evitar una alianza con uno de los oligarcas más importantes, Boris Berezovsky. Los resultados de esta pesquisa se pueden analizar dentro de un contexto más amplio, que se refiere a la prensa en transición. El modelo utilizado surge de las investigaciones del autor respecto a los procesos de liberalización en los medios y la transición democrática en todo el mundo.
Lise Garon's gloomy 1995 assessment—that the press is "the forgotten actor in transition analysis" (Garon 1995)—retains some of its force today. Nonetheless, scholarship on democratization and political transition in the latter half of the 1990s gradually moved to explore the role of the press and other media in the so-called "third wave" of democratic transformation (see, e.g., Downing 1996, Ferdinand [ed.] 2000, Gunther and Mughan [eds.] 2000, Jones 2001b, O'Neill [ed.] 1998, Popkin 1995, Randall [ed.] 1998). Of all the transitional upheavals of the past two or three decades, the case of Russia has been perhaps the best-studied—in part owing to the significance of the country on the international scene, and in part owing to the substantial scholarly infrastructure already devoted to the USSR when it entered the period of glasnost (openness) in 1985. However, few detailed case-studies of individual Russian media organs in transition have been published.

The case of Izvestia in the 1990s offers one of the best examples of the complex evolution of Russia media in the post-Soviet era—an evolution that I have described elsewhere, with apologies to Vladimir Lenin, as "two steps forward, one step back" (Jones, forthcoming: Chap. 5). Few observers would deny that media across the former Soviet Union are, in general, substantially freer to publish reports critical of government and private figures, and to explore a greater diversity of themes and issues, than was ever possible under the dictatorial Soviet regime. The explosion of independent media outlets in the later stages of Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost underpinned what many Russian journalists look back on as a "golden age" for media in their country.

But enormous pressures on media functioning were swiftly brought to bear following the disappearance of Soviet power. Public interest in and support for the media—which in 1990 had resulted in the extraordinary phenomenon of more than a dozen journalists and editors being elected to the national parliament (Duma)—faded, as typically occurs in transition processes. Simultaneously, the generous state subsidies that had sustained media throughout the Soviet and liberalization eras dried up, or were preferentially distributed to media outlets that toed the line of the new Yeltsin regime. (The trend carried over to the regime led by Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin). The desperate need for subsidies reflected the broader context of economic crisis, again an almost ubiquitous feature of political transitions worldwide. Hyperinflation meant that newspapers were often paying more to the postal service to deliver their product than they were taking in from subscribers. The

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crisis was exacerbated by a weak and underdeveloped advertising market that could scarcely begin to fill the gap in resources left by the dissipation of state support.

Material want rapidly drove numerous media outlets, including eventually Izvestia, into the arms of Russia’s new “oligarchs”—businessmen who amassed vast fortunes, mostly by using political connections to snap up state assets at fire-sale prices after the Soviet collapse. The oligarchs increasingly looked to media holdings as a way of fortifying and extending their political reach. At the regional and local levels, meanwhile, centralized state power (at least under Yeltsin) was often trumped by local and regional leaders exploiting the immense distances of the Russian landmass to establish their own personal fiefdoms. Both nationally-distributed papers like Izvestia and regional or local media felt the effects of political and economic harassment by these elites, including interlinked elements of organized crime, anxious to ensure that criticism of their wrongdoings did not receive media exposure. In dozens of cases, this harassment reached the level of murder by hit-squad, making Russia one of the world’s most dangerous countries in which to practice journalism.

The result of these diverse constraints and pressures has been mass media that, in 2001, appears as compromised and professionally-shrivelled as at any time in the past decade—though the presence of responsible and personally brave journalists, as well as the simple diversity of media “mouthpieces” and their underlying sources of sponsorship, meant that those willing to wade through seas of print or hours of broadcast coverage could piece together a reasonably accurate description of the prevailing state of affairs. The shifting status of the media in general, and Izvestia in particular, serves as an ideal bellwether for this dramatic period of transformation, and for the state of the press and other media in Russia today.

1997: The power-play for Izvestia

Oleg Golembiovsky, chief editor and director of the Izvestia publishing house, welcomed me into his spacious office, and lit the first of a number of cigarettes. As I arranged my tape recorder, I noticed a souvenir ice-hockey stick on the windowledge. It was a memento of the Izvestia Cup, long the most prestigious of Soviet sporting events. The stick linked Golembiovsky to Izvestia’s venerable tradition as a leading organ of Soviet propaganda. After the fall of the USSR in 1990-91, while its “big brother” Pravda teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, Izvestia came dramatically into its own. It established a reputation as one of the most critical and professional newspapers of the post-Soviet era. During the August 1991 coup attempt, Izvestia journalists rebelled against conservative chief editor Nikolai Yefimov, defiantly publishing Boris Yeltsin’s anti-coup decrees over Yefimov’s objections. After the coup, Izvestia successfully re-registered as an independent publication owned by its own “journalists’ collective”. Yefimov was dismissed as chief editor, and replaced
by the man —Oleg Golembiovsky— whom I was now interviewing. Under Golembiovsky, wrote Frances Foster, Izvestia’s editors and journalists repeatedly emphasized the newspaper’s independent status and line. ... They served notice that Izvestia would no longer mechanically reproduce legislation on instruction from above but, rather, would print only those documents “of interest to readers”. ... There was a marked change as well in the content and tone of Izvestia articles. Reporters paraded their liberation from party and state sponsorship in pieces that openly criticized even the highest Soviet and republic leaders and bodies. There was an immediate response from readers and authorities — a noticeable increase in retail sales and bans on circulation by several republic governments (Foster 1993: 681-82).

But if the transformations generally proved popular with readers and foreign observers, they also brought Izvestia directly into the sights of Supreme Soviet speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov. The parliament, as the successor to the State Presidium, claimed it was the rightful heir to Izvestia’s plant and personnel. The result was an extraordinary tug-of-war, which reached a climax in October 1992. Khasbulatov, furious at Izvestia’s independent posturings, dispatched armed guards to the publishing complex in downtown Moscow. In response, President Yeltsin sent his own presidential guard to engage the interlopers in a “brief skirmish”. By good fortune, “a potentially bloody confrontation” was narrowly avoided (Foster 1993: 701). In the end, the parliamentary forces retreated. The battle shifted to Russia’s newly-created Constitutional Court, which in a landmark May 1993 decision found in Izvestia’s favour, declaring the journalistic collective the rightful inheritors of Izvestia’s name and publishing enterprise.

Meanwhile, though, the paper was staggered by new developments: the 1992 market reforms. The paper supported these staunchly in editorials, earning it the opprobrium of some readers. But the reforms sent prices of paper and printing, among other inputs, skyrocketing. Izvestia joined three other leading papers in petitioning the Yeltsin regime for subsidies and other handouts. Its critical spirit appeared to many to grow less bold as its dependence on the regime increased —although its in-depth, harshly critical coverage of the war in Chechnya was among the best available in the Russian media (MacKenzie 1995). In 1995 it “repeatedly drew attention” to machinations by both Yeltsin and the Parliament to manipulate media in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of that year (and the looming 1996 presidential vote). It criticized “parliament’s move to close down the Judicial Chamber on Information Disputes which provided relatively impartial judgments on fair election coverage, and the Yeltsin administration’s move to harness three state committees (Press, Film and Broadcasting) to the Central Electoral Commission’s pre-election educational campaign”. Downing called Izvestia “after October 1993 a highly independent newspaper” (Downing 1997: 142). As late as mid-1997, Yassan
Zassoursky, dean of the Moscow State University journalism faculty, said he still considered Izvestia “the best, the most serious newspaper” in the country (Y. Zassoursky 1997); The Economist lauded it as “arguably, Russia’s best all-round daily newspaper” (The Economist 1997; see also Gambrell 1992).

But the economic crisis sent Izvestia in search of new sponsors and investors. Things seemed promising in November 1996, when the giant oil corporation LUKoil agreed to purchase 22 percent of shares in the paper—money that could be used to expand Izvestia’s coverage and reach in the far-flung Russian regions. As Golembiovsky and I spoke in the summer of 1997, though, the supposed outside saviour was looking more threatening by the day. In April 1997, Izvestia had reprinted an article from the French daily Le Monde accusing Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin of amassing US $5 billion in unaccounted-for wealth. (Le Monde later retracted the allegation). A few days later, LUKoil’s president, Vagit Alekperov, protested Izvestia’s decision to publish the article. Readers, he said, might get the impression that LUKoil sought to smear Chernomyrdin. The oil company and Izvestia exchanged numerous public broadsides in the weeks that followed. Rumours abounded that LUKoil was seeking to buy up shares from Izvestia journalists and editors, seize control of the board of directors, and depose Oleg Golembievsky and other senior figures at the paper. By March 1997, indeed, LUKoil appeared to have gained control of a full 49 percent of Izvestia shares.

To head off LUKoil’s designs, Izvestia turned to another corporation: Oneximbank, described by its chair (and former First Deputy Prime Minister) Vladimir Potanin as a “private bank with a state mentality.” Despite the widespread concerns about editorial changes made to Komsomoskaya Pravda after Oneximbank acquired control the previous year, the company was invited to purchase 25.8 percent of Izvestia’s shares. Izvestia would hold 25.8 percent more; together the two would be able to counter LUKoil’s 49 percent. There was only one problem, and Golembievsky himself mentioned it in passing during our interview: “There are no intimate relationships in business”. What would happen, I asked, if Oneximbank and LUKoil cut a deal behind Izvestia’s back, combined their shares, and took the paper over? Golembievsky acknowledged the hypothetical danger, but dismissed its likelihood. “We have reached an agreement [with Oneximbank]”, he proclaimed confidently, “in which the editorial and financial aspects of Izvestia will be strictly separated”.

The interview was conducted on 2 June 1997 (Golembievsky 1997). On 4 June, news broke of a charter signed by LUKoil, Oneximbank, and the Izvestia collective that seemed to bolster Golembievsky’s claim. The corporations agreed not to use their shares to “take actions restricting the independence of views [stated] in

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2 The account here benefits from a chronology of “Changes in Editorial Policy and Ownership at Izvestia” prepared by Laura Belin of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and posted to the RFE/RL website, from which it has since been removed.

3 Potanin quoted in Bernstein (1997).
the publication" or "aimed at promoting anyone’s interests through the publications”.

Exactly one month later, a flustered Golembiovsky was calling a press conference in Moscow, seeking to explain the sudden decision of Izvestia’s board of directors to fire him as chief editor. Oneximbank had indeed switched sides, combining its shares with LUKoil and seizing control of the board. It was announced that the procedure to choose a new editor would be altered, reducing the role of the journalists’ collective. In the end, longtime deputy editor Vasily Zakharko was selected. RFE/RL Newsline reported that “most Izvestia journalists were discouraged by the selection process, and have little hope that the new editor will be independent of the paper’s major shareholders”.

Oleg Golembiovsky, meanwhile, defiantly announced plans for a Novye Izvestia —to be located just down the road from the old one. Thirty Izvestia journalists resigned to join him in the venture. Even Golembiovsky, though, seemed to recognize that such a project was unviable in the new Russia without substantial corporate sponsorship. He announced that the principal investor in Novye Izvestia would be none other than media magnate Boris Berezovsky. “If Berezovsky really is behind the new project”, media analyst Laura Belin wrote gloomily, “it doesn’t augur well for the future editorial independence of Novye Izvestia.”4 Indeed, in the paper’s first month of publication (October 1997), journalist Leonid Krutakov announced that he had been fired for publishing an article (in another publication) that criticized Berezovsky.

In retrospect: Izvestia under the Soviets

Much of the constituency and credibility Izvestia was able to carry into the post-Soviet era derived from its reputation as the more liberal “little brother” of the Communist Party house organ, Pravda. As the official organ of the Soviet State Presidium (parliament), Izvestia was the mouthpiece for a body without much of a voice. This appears to have granted it a certain freedom of movement not open to Pravda —though such “freedom” was strictly relative, given the oppressive constraints of the USSR’s propaganda system. Foreign editor Alexander Sychev put the case for post-Soviet continuity in Izvestia’s functioning this way:

Izvestia throughout its history was more liberal during the Soviet period. It was on the left of the political spectrum: it more resembled the capitalist newspapers. It always tried to defend the popular interest in areas like human rights. Izvestia now has the same role; it inherited it from the Izvestia of the Soviet period. But under the

4 See Moscow Tribune (1997), and Laura Belin’s reporting in RFE/RL Newsline, 1, 3, 7, and 21 July, 13 and 20 August 1997.
Soviets, it criticized only the lower levels of government—never the higher. It was liberal enough, but it was never punished, because its criticisms were not so harsh. But it was always pushing the boundaries of what was allowed (Sychev 1997).

Comparative study of the press in transition lead one to seek out powerful personalities, usually directors or chief editors, in explaining the institution’s evolution and functioning. In Izvestia’s case, several staffers and other commentators pointed to both high points and low points in Central Committee selections for the top editorial post. The combination of forward-thinking leadership and maximum political freedom clearly came during the tenure of Alexei Adzhubei (1959-64). Adzhubei, son-in-law of Premier Nikita Khrushchev, was shifted from Komsomolskaya Pravda to take up the Izvestia post. He sought to apply to Izvestia some of the innovation and exploration that his father-in-law was now permitting in the wider culture. As a result, said veteran “Izvestian” Stanislav Kondrashov, “All Izvestia people, if you talk to them, will remember [Adzhubei]:

Under the previous editor-in-chief, Konstantin Gubin [1948-59], Izvestia was a strictly bureaucratic newspaper, the official organ of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Of course, under Adzhubei it preserved its position as an official organ, second only to Pravda, because Adzhubei was Khrushchev’s son-in-law. So we became equal with Pravda, and sometimes it even looked as if we were a little bit ahead of Pravda, because of those close family connections between Khrushchev and our editor-in-chief. ... Adzhubei changed Izvestia in many ways. The newspaper became a little more vivid, more interesting; its circulation increased. Izvestia’s writers had more freedom, though the conception of freedom at that time was a rather narrow one (Kondrashov 1997)."
A more detached perspective was offered by the young Reuters journalist Dmitry Soshin:

I think the best time for Soviet journalism was in the '60s, the Khrushchev years, when Khrushchev moved his sometimes-very-talented relatives into journalism. Khrushchev's son-in-law, Adzhubei, was editor-in-chief of Izvestia, and I think that was the best time for Izvestia under the Soviets. Because he enticed some very good people over from other publications. He created an excellent staff, and apart from being this streamline for the party, they were very good at human-interest-stories. They covered economics nicely; they had a staff of brilliant political commentators and analysts (Soshin 1997).

The era, though, ended abruptly with Khrushchev's downfall in 1964. Izvestia's glory days ended with it. Something of a nadir appears to have been reached during the regime of Pyotr Alekseyev (1976-83), which Financial Izvestia correspondent Igor Kovalev recalled as "the worst": "Everybody was unhappy under him. It was really a black time at Izvestia. ... He was too conservative, too inhuman" (Kovalev 1997). Alekseyev's tenure coincided with the broader cultural and economic "stagnation" under Leonid Brezhnev. This period may actually have seen improvements in the professional calibre of Soviet journalism, reflecting (among other things) détente and greater contacts with the outside world. But such transformations were not likely to be reflected in a newspaper run by a chief editor handpicked, in turn, by a conservative and culturally philistine Central Committee.

Izvestia's performance during glasnost, however, showed that the energies evident under Adzhubei had not entirely dissipated. The paper leapt to the forefront of the breathless period known as the "golden age". A new generation of journalists at the paper coalesced around the figure of Oleg Golembiovsky. But the more conservative group that had flocked to the conservative Alekseyev was still powerful at the paper. Moreover, it had a firm alliance with the chief editor, Nikolai Yefimov. Thus, when the political reaction against glasnost gathered steam, many at Izvestia proved ready to roll with the forces of reaction.

The confrontation came with the coup attempt of August 1991, in a scene described by David Remnick in Lenin's Tomb (Remnick 1994: 469-71). Under Nikolai Yefimov, whom Remnick calls "a shameless sycophant", Izvestia had become "one of the most paradoxical institutions in the country" — "brimming with talent", but with many of the most talented feeling estranged from their boss. Tensions had been rising for some months before the coup-plotters struck. They work somewhat more along the lines of so-called quality newspapers in the rest of the world" (Paasilinna 1995: 28).
arose from the Supreme Soviet’s appointment of Yefimov over the preferred candidate of the Izvestia collective, deputy editor Oleg Golembiovsky (Komsomolskaya Pravda 1991a). Yefimov immediately set about trying “to remove several leading journalists”, including Golembiovsky; but the Izvestia editorial board, still smarting from the imposition of the new editor over their objections, bluntly “suggested to Yefimov that he leave instead” (Komsomolskaya Pravda 1991b).

When the coup began, Izvestia, because of its regime affiliation, was spared the banning that other papers suffered. But when Izvestia reporters brought back Boris Yeltsin’s appeal to the Russian people at the height of the abortive coup attempt, in the early-afternoon hours of 19 August 1991, Yefimov’s underling, Dmitry Mamleyev, refused to print it. Yefimov, for his part, had missed the start of the battle because he was racing back to Moscow from his vacation house. As soon as he walked through the door, a small group of reporters surrounded him and demanded he publish Yeltsin’s statement. Yefimov said there was no way and yanked the metal type from the printing press. Ordinarily, Yefimov would have had his way. But now the printers ... said they would sooner quit than give in. They would sooner destroy the presses than publish Izvestia without the appeal of Boris Yeltsin. Twenty hours late, Izvestia appeared on the streets of Moscow and in every city and village of the Soviet Union. The Emergency Committee’s [coup-makers’] proclamations blared out from page one. Yeltsin’s appeal to resist the coup was on page two.

Key to the resistance were the Izvestia “printshop workers, typesetters, makeup personnel, press operators and stereotypers” —a reminder that the actors in such media battles do not always come from the editorial side of the operation (Ovchinnikova 1991). For editors and journalists, though, “this was an important example of our genuine professional worth. ... We lived those three days in the relentlessly brilliant light of conscience” (Ovchinnikova 1991). On 22 August, Izvestia renounced its chief editor, publishing a resolution to the effect that “in light of the position taken by N.I. Yefimov” during the coup, he was to be removed “immediately” from office. The Supreme Soviet Presidium, which had “failed to ensure the newspaper’s free operation during the period of the unconstitutional putsch”, saw “its status as founder” of Izvestia suspended—at least in the eyes of most staff. Workers also resolved “to postpone ... the question of [naming] Izvestia’s editor-in-chief until I.N. [Oleg] Golembiovsky ... returns from official assignment”

8 “During the coup”, the paper editorialized on 24 August, “we saw once again that the editorial staff constitutes an indivisible whole with the large staff of the printing and publishing facilities and all their services”. See Izvestia 1991b.
In the meantime, the journalistic collective would stand as the “official founder of the newspaper”. It was duly accorded registration certificate number 1057 by the Ministry of the Press and Public Information of the Russian Federation for a publication to be called simply Izvestia (News), rather than the more partisan “News of the Soviets of USSR People’s Deputies”, its former official moniker. A charter was adopted in which Izvestia staff pledged to avoid “dependence on political parties or other public associations that pursue political ends” (Izvestia 1991b).

When Golembiovsky returned from “a brief assignment abroad”, he was confirmed as the new chief editor (Izvestia 1991b). Izvestia staff rejoiced, proclaiming on 24 August:

Henceforth we, and we alone, will bear responsibility for every word that appears in our pages. Our confidence that this will be so is bolstered by a key fact—from now on we will be under the supervision of an editor-in-chief whom we ourselves have elected. Nothing like this has ever happened in Izvestia’s history. We are proud and happy that it has fallen to the present generation of staffers to write a new page in that history. And we are confident that our newspaper will be open to different kinds of political thinking, clashes between the most dissimilar points of view, honest debate and —most important—100 percent truthful information.

“Dear readers!” the editorial exclaimed. “We are starting a new life. Our own life, Izvestia’s life and, we hope, yours too. We congratulate ourselves and you on this new beginning. ... To our freedom and yours!” (Izvestia 1991b).

The battle with parliament

Izvestia’s unilateral declaration of independence in August 1991, and its re-registration as a journalistic enterprise controlled by its staff collectively, only deepened the ambiguity of the paper’s status. It laid the foundations for a showdown between the paper and the Russian parliament under the leadership of Ruslan Khasbulatov. This meant, in essence, a confrontation between the executive and legislative branches of the Russian federation, since the Yeltsin regime had already shown itself willing to back Izvestia in a showdown with “reactionary” forces.

The events of April 1992 to May 1993 have been expertly chronicled by Frances Foster, upon whose work the following account draws heavily (Foster 1993). Izvestia became “the catalyst for direct confrontation between Russia’s First
and Fourth Estates” on 10 April 1992, when Supreme Soviet chief Khasbulatov—furious at Izvestia for “deliberately driving a wedge between the Parliament and the President”\(^{10}\)—announced his intention to “restore” Izvestia to its former status as the official organ of the legislative branch. A bill introduced and passed in July of the same year sought to negate Izvestia’s declaration of independence and declare the Russian Supreme Soviet, as the supposed “successor” to the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, the rightful owner of the paper.\(^{11}\) Izvestia appealed to President Yeltsin, who duly “expressed ... his unequivocal and resolute support for Izvestia’s collective”\(^{12}\). Yeltsin’s Press Ministry refused to implement the parliamentary resolution, referring the matter instead to the newly-created Constitutional Court.

Khasbulatov and the parliament responded by shifting the focus from the attempt to seize control over the existing Izvestia, to attempting to register a new version of the paper, the full name of which—“News of the Soviets of People’s Deputies of the Russian Federation Supreme Soviet”—made its intended function plain. Central to any such strategy, of course, would be control over the newspaper’s physical plant.

Yeltsin countered by instructing Anatoly Chubais, chair of the State Committee for Management of State Property, to recognize a new entity—the Izvestia State Newspaper-Publishing Complex. Oleg Golembievsky was appointed general director. The controversy now clearly pitted Yeltsin’s executive authority against Khasbulatov’s legislature, which in October 1992 formally approved a resolution transferring control of the publishing enterprise and plant to the Supreme Soviet. There followed an ominous instruction: the legislature called out the Supreme Soviet guards, “a 5000-person armed unit under ... Khasbulatov’s command”, to secure the facilities of Izvestia Publishing House. The climax came on 27 October, when an extremely volatile scene unfolded at the Izvestia plant:

... The Supreme Soviet leadership decided to back up its demands with force by dispatching its troops to the shared premises of Izvestia Publishing House and Izvestia Editorial Office. At this point Boris Yeltsin reentered the arena. In a presidential directive of October 27th, he declared the parliamentary guards an “illegal armed formation” and ordered their immediate disbandment. After a brief skirmish between governmental and parliamentary forces, Khasbulatov’s guards withdrew from the Izvestia facilities, thus avoiding a potentially bloody confrontation between the executive and the legislature (Foster 1993: 701).

\(^{10}\) Khasbulatov’s words, quoted in Gambrell 1992: 60.

\(^{11}\) The draft resolution, signed by Khasbulatov, is reprinted in Izvestia 1992.

\(^{12}\) In the words of his press secretary. Quoted in Izvestia 1992.
It was a close call, but a turning point. Hereafter, the conflict between the executive and legislative branches would move to other arenas, culminating in the military showdown of October 1993, when troops loyal to the executive shelled the parliament into submission. As for Izvestia, the Constitutional Court in May 1993 “finally issued its long-promised decision and ruled in favour of Izvestia on all counts” (Foster 1993: 701). The paper’s independence, it seemed, was guaranteed. In fact, though, the events left the paper heavily in the debt not only of President Yeltsin, but of Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais, masterminds of the Russian privatization, behind-the-scenes, supporters of Izvestia’s new pro-market orientation, and vital lobbyists on the newspaper’s behalf. In fact, “combining all the assets of the former USSR-owned Izvestia publishing company into one ‘government newspaper-publishing complex’” briefly turned Izvestia into “a government-owned enterprise”! Eventually, though, shares in the complex would be distributed among Izvestia staff and various regime-affiliated banks (Gambrell 1992: 61). Such affiliations, when interwoven with unfriendly corporate takeovers, would eventually prove fatal to the Izvestia that emerged from the ashes of the old order in 1992-93.

Key to that post-1992 era, though, was an extensive housecleaning facilitated, in part, by the economic crisis that descended with the Gaidar reforms. As millions of subscribers and newsstand buyers were erased from Izvestia’s constituency; as the mass public abandoned newspapers to devote themselves to private concerns, so was a radical restructuring of the paper’s orientation and staffing deemed to be in order. One aspect of the response was Izvestia’s role, along with three other leading dailies, in petitioning the Yeltsin regime for relief from the new economic measures that they all supported editorially. Despite Golembiovsky’s March 1992 pledge that “We simply will not accept any government subsidies”, his paper by that point had been accepting them for several months, and would continue to do so as long as regime generosity lasted (quoted in Foster 1993: 721).

Internally, it was clear that a newspaper that had fallen in circulation from 12.5 million to 600,000 copies could not support anything like the payroll it had during the “golden age” of glasnost. But Izvestia’s new guard could take the opportunity to rid the paper of recalcitrants. Andrei Zolotov’s summary is concise, and bolstered by other testimony:

I know that Golembiovsky has been making a lot of staff changes over his whole term of office. I think their direction was to create a more politically- and stylistically-solid staff, which would be like a party, in a sense. ... The task they were facing was very difficult. They wanted to maintain the name and the reputation of Izvestia, but in fact create a new newspaper. The way they were going to do that was to keep a couple of “sacred cows” and at the same time get rid of a group of journalists who were very honest and professional, but in an old-Izvestia way (Zolotov 1997).
Golembiovsky himself acknowledged that in cutting *Izvestia*’s staff from 1600 people in 1991 to 483 in mid-1997—that is, by 75 percent—“we cut the staff that were connected with the old Soviet governmental system”, and “tried to retain the younger age [group] of ‘Izvestians,’ to release older people” (Golembiovsky 1997). By “older people,” one suspects Golembiovsky meant “older mindsets.”

The end-result of the “restructuring” was also to concentrate power in a group around a single figure (Golembiovsky), perhaps more than was true during Nikolai Yefimov’s tenure. By the time of our interview in June 1997, Golembiovsky, 61 years old, had worked at *Izvestia* for 31 years, “starting from the most basic position of reporter and ending as chief editor” (Golembiovsky 1997). Over the years he had also served as the paper’s Mexico correspondent and a reporter on the economics beat. The 1991-93 events did for him at *Izvestia* something of what they did for Boris Yeltsin on the national stage: brought him to power on a wave of democratization. His personality and ambitions also seemed important in explaining *Izvestia*’s functioning through to Lukoil/Oneximbank crisis of mid-1997—and well-informed commentators cited Golembiovsky’s role as no less significant in the crisis itself.

Some staffers voiced concerns and criticisms of this centralization of power. Yuri Feofanov, despite his generally favourable estimation, conceded that *Izvestia* was “very much under the control and direction” of the chief editor. The journalistic collective, so key to the conflict with the Yefimov regime within the paper, now seemed vestigial. Its role was “almost nothing”, in Feofanov’s view. There was “no representation for staff—a body that would help people to express their opinions” (Feofanov 1997). Of particular concern was Golembiovsky’s dual function as chief editor and director of the *Izvestia* publishing enterprise. As at a number of other post-Soviet dailies, Golembiovsky came to combine functions that in western models at least are normally separated, at least formally. More skeptical observers saw this as an ideal means for Golembiovsky to fortify his personal position within the paper. Able to reappoint himself whenever he chose, Golembiovsky was secure from any internal revolt by staff. Only *Izvestia*’s board of directors could—and eventually would—remove him.

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In the meantime, Golembiovsky’s daily round became a whirlwind of interwoven managerial and editorial functions. “It’s very difficult”, he said in the interview. “I spend more time on management concerns, because there are good people on the editorial side to take care of those issues, and I trust them completely”
Jones/The Russian Press in the Post-Soviet Era: A Case-Study of Izvestia

(Golembiovsky 1997). Whatever the perceived advantages of the arrangement in stabilizing Izvestia after the turbulence of the early 1990s, it seemed to have outlived its welcome by mid-1997. Stanislav Kondrashov was frank in stating that Golembiovsky’s two positions, as the manager or president of the company, Izvestia, and editor-in-chief ... have to be separated. ... We want to return to the previous stage [of Izvestia’s functioning], where the editor-in-chief is elected by the staff of the newspaper. That is Golembiovsky’s idea too. And it would be a good counter to the commercial structures which are so influential in the newspaper right now. It would be a good counter to LUKoil or Oneximbank, if they wanted to suppress our editorial independence (Kondrashov 1997).

Golembiovsky indeed voiced his own criticisms of the dual-function arrangement, telling me he expected the duties to be formally separated at the board meeting scheduled for 22 June 1997. In the end, of course —on 4 July 1997— the board unceremoniously sacked him from both posts.

Political orientation and independence

Izvestia is kind of a special paper, with a specific political direction. So people working here usually have the same political views. Q. How would you define that political direction? It’s a deep understanding that Russia can do nothing without drastic changes in all spheres: political, social, and economic.

-Oleg Golembiovsky (Golembiovsky 1997)

The reputation for professionalism and political independence that Izvestia garnered in the first half of the 1990s was considerable. Attesting to this is the high praise meted out by the dean of MSU’s journalism faculty and the London Economist, quoted earlier. On a couple of prominent occasions —the 1991 attempted coup; the 1994-95 war in Chechnya— a core of Izvestia’s staff showed themselves willing to withstand outside pressure and advance a more crucial and autonomous journalistic project. The paper proclaimed the validity and necessity of such a project throughout the post-1991 era. Izvestia tended to frame crucial controversies in its post-Soviet life —the battle with the parliament in 1992-93; the decisive crisis with LUKoil and Oneximbank in 1997— as a “just war” waged by the journalistic collective against the forces of darkness.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the assessment of many interview subjects and outside observers varies sharply from such a depiction (and
self-depiction) of Izvestia's role. Typical is the critique of Eric Johnson of Internews:

I'm not that big a fan of Izvestia. I don't think it's the kind of journalism that the country needs. It's too much commentary-based, and by definition that means it's going to be pushing a particular point of view (Johnson 1997).

The "particular point of view" that Izvestia consistently advanced was a solidly pro-market, pro-democracy line that increasingly associated it with the "reformist" wing of the Yeltsin regime, notably Anatoly Chubais and Yegor Gaidar. The paper's support for harsh reform measures announced in January 1992 (while it sought to evade them through back channels) may have cost Izvestia a sizable chunk of its traditional readership, as we will show. But its "modernizing" orientation won it important supporters within the regime—supporters able to mobilize successfully on Izvestia's behalf through the struggle with Khasbulatov's parliament. The Izvestia collective under Oleg Golembiovsky emerged with legal control over the material and "intellectual" structure of the enterprise. But as noted, this also left the paper even more indebted to the reformist camp. When Obshchaya Gazeta reporter Ivan Zassoursky, for example, chose to argue that Izvestia "was always very close to the government", he cited the 1992 events as constituting the essence of the bond. For Zassoursky, the alliance had led the paper into a Manichean view of the forces contending for power in Russia. As with all quasi-religious discourses, Zassoursky argued, specifics tended to be sacrificed to abstractions:

Izvestia is a bad newspaper, extremely bad. It is very old-fashioned; it is very engaged in politics. Lots of journalists from Izvestia still think that a good journalist is an agitating journalist. ... They are very old-fashioned in terms of selecting one political line, and then fighting for it, like communists. ... They're thinking about politics all the time. It's not good for journalists to think about politics all the time, I think. It's not professional. Because they think of politics not from the point of view of a person who voted in the election and demands that power deliver on the things it promised. They look at it in terms of processes. Reform, or no reform. Democracy, or totalitarianism. People's capitalism or monopoly capitalism. You can't do anything with these abstractions! They're not good for judging the situation anymore (I. Zassoursky 1997).

Moscow Times reporter Andrei Zolotov also pointed to both the political affiliations of the paper as helping to spawn an unprofessionally partisan rhetoric:

Izvestia, though it claims to be objective and a flagship of the free press, has always been a very partisan newspaper. Since the
beginning of the 1990s, *Izvestia* was ... associated with the liberal wing of the government, with the "westernizers": Gaidar, Chubais and company. ... The style pretended to be more information-driven, but it was still very propagandistic (Zolotov 1997).

For such critics, the nadir of *Izvestia*’s political coverage came when it joined nearly all the other Russian media in slavishly supporting Boris Yeltsin in the 1996 presidential elections. As with the defection of NTV’s Igor Malashenko from the opposition camp to the Yeltsin campaign, *Izvestia*’s “comprehensive display of craven servility” towards Yeltsin contrasted poorly with the hard-hitting, agenda-setting coverage it had provided during the wretched military campaign in Chechnya (Murray 1997). Like many other Moscow editors, Oleg Golembiovsky defended the decision to dispense with a critical stance during the elections as a simple necessity, taken

only because we didn’t want Zyuganov to come to power. Western countries and societies don’t understand that Russia hasn’t yet arrived at [the point of having] a truly democratic system. The danger of communism returning to power is still very high. I would rather see Bill Clinton elected president of Russia, if a Communist was running against him (Golembiovsky 1997). ^13

The most detailed exploration of *Izvestia*’s performance during the elections, however, was disinclined to let Golembiovsky and his fellow staffers off the hook. John Murray described *Izvestia* as “pull[ing] out all the stops” after the first round of the elections, in which Communist Party candidate Gennady Zyuganov overcame an “information blockade” to run a close second to Yeltsin. The paper began to publish interviews in which “the journalist warned the subjects that they would lose out if Zyuganov won”, and articles that “attempted to blacken Zyuganov by associating him with the Soviet past”. A “negative stereotyping of all communists” was evident. ^14 Meanwhile, information unfavourable to the Yeltsin campaign —such as the candidate’s failing health— was systematically ignored, though space could be found for a photograph of “a young woman ... kissing an election poster showing a very healthy-looking Yeltsin”. *Izvestia* also allowed its logo to be used in a Yeltsin

^13 Media Columnist Irina Petrovskaya (1997): Q. *Was that a controversial decision among staff of the newspaper [to support Yeltsin]?* “Actually, there was no real controversy, because we had to choose between communists and democrats, and we decided to choose the least worst option”. Political commentator Otto Latsis was equally straightforward: “We tried to be upstanding in this [election] fight, but we did not promise to be impartial. To stop the party of revanche was the most important question of our lives”. Latsis quoted in Henry 1996.

campaign TV ad, “above the mock headline, ‘Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin: President of All Russians’” (Murray 1997).

In the wake of the successful push to elect Yeltsin, Izvestia, like other Moscow dailies, returned to “criticisms of Yeltsin’s policies” and a focus on the president’s health. Murray was cynical about the turnaround. Izvestia and other Russian media, he argued, “in fact became the very thing they said they would become if the communists ever won, namely a creature of government” (Murray 1997).

**The new/old constituency: plus ça change ...**

With the internal configuration of authority and the broad political “line” of the newspaper solidified after 1992-93, Izvestia faced the challenge of retaining a sustainable core of readers and advertisers. This could not by itself preserve Izvestia from political and corporate machinations—not forgetting its own energetic and deliberate involvement in those machinations. But it could provide Izvestia with some bargaining power in dealings with the regime and non-regime actors. In this respect, Izvestia’s traditional constituency was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it gave the paper a still-impressive national reach, which remained a cornerstone of its professional identity. The economics of post-Soviet production meant that sales and subscriptions generated relatively little direct revenue. But the reader demographics provided a reasonably attractive market for advertisers, a constituency Izvestia had courted from early on.

Interview subjects characterized Izvestia’s core constituency as upper-middle and upper-class intellectuals and professionals, including decision-makers. Perhaps the most nuanced description was provided by media columnist Irina Petrovskaya:

I get a lot of letters from readers [gesturing at a pile on her desk]. I learn from those letters that [the average Izvestia reader] is usually an intellectual, in his forties probably, with some liberal political views on the situation; who has a habit of reading newspapers that he probably got from his parents, because this newspaper is eighty years old. They’re willing to learn about events not from the yellow press, but from a serious newspaper, with solid expertise and respectable opinions. ... I think [Izvestia’s readers] are “Old Russians”, not like the “New Russians” who are tempted to read Kommersant Daily for more business-oriented news. Younger readers tend to read paper like Moskovsky Komsomolets where they can learn about scandals, who’s sleeping with whom, criminal stuff. Izvestia tries to avoid

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15 Belin, “Changes in Editorial Policy ...”, (see note 1).
16 “Izvestia’s relative success is due, in part, to a brave decision to carry advertising in 1988. Almost immediately, it was a roaring success”. See The Economist 1994.
these topics, but it’s hard to do, because it’s really easy to attract readers with this kind of coverage (Petrovskaya 1997).

Business readerships and the younger audience were targeted early on as potential growth markets. The paper expanded its business coverage, most notably with Financial Izvestia, the high-profile supplement first published in October 1992. The courting of younger as well as more prosperous constituencies was assisted by the staff restructuring after the 1992 economic reforms. As noted, this concentrated disproportionately on older, ostensibly more “conservative” staff. Over the following couple of years, the paper’s appearance was somewhat streamlined and modernized. Oleg Golembiovsky pointed with pride in 1997 to his recent appointment of “a 25-year-old editor of the culture section of the newspaper”, and claimed “the most active group of Izvestia reporters” was “mostly from 20 to 30” years of age (Golembiovsky 1997).

There was also a risk, however, of alienating traditional constituencies by flirting with new ones—including political constituencies along the lines referred to in the previous section. In particular, Izvestia’s constant trumpeting of the merits of economic reform, at a time when these were causing great popular hardship, may have discouraged readers who sought from their newspaper a more balanced and empathetic treatment of their plight. “Many traditional readers of Izvestia could not accept the very and sometimes too liberal orientation of the newspaper”, said Stanislav Kondrashov. “Let’s say, our coverage of economic reforms under Gaidar. We were too enthusiastic about this reform, especially in its first stage, which caused the most suffering”. Likewise, said Kondrashov, traditional constituencies had difficulty accepting “the total denunciation of our recent history” in Izvestia’s pages:

They lived with their history; it was a part of their lives. So they could not accept that overly simplistic approach to the past. Now, we are more sober and moderate in our judgments; but at that time, in 1991, ’92, ’93, that is where we lost [readers]. Now, many of them find it difficult or almost impossible to return to Izvestia; but one of the difficulties is that we haven’t been able to find a new and more or less stable audience [to replace them] (Kondrashov 1997).

The result was a living-standard at Izvestia that was sufficient to cover subsistence needs, but permitted only limited expansion into new markets, technologies, and constituencies. The strategy had succeeded as of 1997 in giving the paper “a zero balance” economically—“no profit, no loss”, according to foreign editor Alexander Sychev. But Izvestia was left with “only enough money for the necessities”. If it was to expand, or even limit its contraction, it would have to seek outside investment. Hence, Sychev said, the paper went “looking for a partner who could provide money for projects that would make the newspaper more profitable”.

17
It turned, first, to LUKoil, which promised an investment “without any conditions attached” (Sychev 1997).

The search for sponsorship

With Izvestia’s life’s-blood still flowing, albeit anaemically, the decision-makers around Golembiovsky decided it was time to make a concerted push into the Russian regions. Izvestia’s reputation, in considerable part, depended on its national reach. Golembiovsky and his senior staff sought to bolster the paper’s presence in (and reporting on) the regions, thereby transcending some of the limitations of the old mobilizing model, which had strictly separated national from regional media.

Nothing is known (to this author, at least) about the early negotiations between Izvestia and LUKoil, the para-statal oil giant headed by Vagit Alekperov. But the talks culminated, in November 1996, with a joint agreement that LUKoil would, through its pension fund, purchase 19.9% of the shares in Izvestia at a price of US $16-$18 million (Golembiovsky 1997). (The state was the largest shareholder in LUKoil, and it was thus possible to view the investment as a continuation of regime subsidies to Izvestia by indirect means). Relations between the paper and the corporation were “quite good” for the first several months, according to Golembiovsky. But in his account, it was not long before Izvestia learned it “had not a partner, but a firm that wanted to be master of the newspaper” (Golembiovsky 1997).

The precipitating event—the spark for this most significant of post-Soviet press transitions—was a brief story published in Izvestia on 1 April 1997, reprinted from Le Monde’s edition of 29 March. The snippet accused Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin of amassing a fortune of some US $5 billion through his association with the state natural-gas monopoly, Gazprom. The Chernomyrdin camp responded with outrage. Senior government spokesman Igor Shabdurasulov claimed to be “deeply saddened and hurt by the utter oblivion of [sic] professional ethics illustrated by such a sound and respectable newspaper as Izvestia” (Zaks 1997).

There is no question that the item resulted from sloppy reporting on Le Monde’s part—it quickly issued a retraction—and that the damage was compounded by Izvestia’s dubious decision to reprint the article unchecked. Igor Golembiovsky in June 1997 defended the decision to publish (Golembiovsky 1997). A number of other staffers voiced disapproval. Even one of the critics, though—Stanislav Kondrashov—allowed that the article at least “clarified the situation” with LUKoil (Kondrashov 1997).

It did that. On 7 April, Vagit Alekperov, LUKoil’s president, denounced Izvestia’s decision to reprint the article. Coming not long after LUKoil’s purchase of shares, he said, it could be seen as an attempt by LUKoil itself to defame Chernomyrdin. There could be few people within the government whom LUKoil was less anxious to defame. Chernomyrdin, the former head of the Soviet gas monopoly,
was key to the awarding of lucrative drilling contracts—including one that had apparently been the subject of delicate behind-the-scenes bargaining when the snippet about Chernomyrdin was published in Izvestia. Thus, "implicitly there was a condition" underlying Valekperov's protest, said Alexander Sychev: "Don't say anything bad about the government or the oil industry". It was, to Sychev's mind, outright "censorship" (Sychev 1997).

Izvestia dug in its heels. It offered no apology for, or retraction of, the offending article. In an editorial of 15 April, it directly accused Lukoil of serving as Chernomyrdin’s "censor". Three days later, it published an open letter signed by prominent intellectuals and media figures protesting Lukoil's attempt "to bring Izvestia to its knees". The company's "general objective", alleged the signatories, was "to change the newspaper's political line and turn it into the obedient mouthpiece of its new owners". For Russian media, it augured "a new totalitarianism" (Izvestia 1997a).

Izvestia's approach struck many as confrontational. Lukoil's surely was. The company now sought to consolidate its shares, apparently bidding to acquire a majority on the Izvestia board of directors and strategic control over the institution. When Izvestia delayed its annual shareholders' meeting from 22 April to 4 June, Lukoil held one regardless. By then it felt confident enough of its position to announce—erroneously, it seems—that it had purchased more than 50 percent of shares, and thus had the right to appoint a new board of directors. In this spirit, it announced the appointment of four Lukoil representatives and three Izvestia staff to a new board. The decree was symbolic and had no effect on Izvestia's functioning. But Lukoil's intentions were now unmistakably clear. Izvestia now turned to another major corporation—Oneximbank, the para-statal banking group—to head off Lukoil's thrust. Leaving aside the issue of whether regime actors were pulling the corporate strings, this meant all three players in the Summer 1997 battle over Izvestia were now on centre-stage.

The resultant struggle for control of the newspaper can be pieced together only in fragmentary form. Even seasoned observers of the Moscow media scene were perplexed by the murky, rapidly-unfolding events. In the light of the economic collapse of mid-1988, moreover, these machinations seem of declining historical interest in themselves. I therefore concentrate on the broader question: whether Izvestia's strategy of approaching Oneximbank was a viable one.

In hindsight, but also reflecting sentiments that I and others voiced at the time, there were grounds for caution. Izvestia was not the first national daily to attract Oneximbank's interest. Throughout early 1997, it had sided with a faction of staff at Komsomolskaya Pravda led by the commercial director, Vladimir Sungorkin, against then-chief editor, Valeri Simonov. Simonov had already courted the gas monopoly, Gazprom, tied (as we have seen) to the Chernomyrdin faction of the regime. By late 1996, Gazprom had already invested some US $12 million in the paper. According to broadcast journalist Dmitry Babich, who then worked at Komsomolskaya Pravda, "in return for this... investment, [Gazprom] was planning
Figure 1. Oneximbank and LUKOil prepare to carve up Izvestia, Summer 1997. Cartoon from The Moscow Times.
to buy 20 percent of the newspaper’s stock” at the April 1996 shareholders’ meeting (Babich 1997). But Sungorkin engaged in backroom wheeling-and-dealing that led, shortly before the meeting, to Oneximbank’s announcement that it planned to buy 20 percent of KP shares. These were duly purchased from the paper’s employees, at vastly inflated prices. Oneximbank and Sungorkin emerged victorious; Simonov was deposed from the chief editor’s post at the shareholders’ meeting on 7 May 1997.

The possible implications for the editorial independence of Komsomolskaya Pravda seemed clear enough to Izvestia when it published its appeal to Boris Yeltsin on 22 April, requesting Yeltsin to take measures to ensure that shareholders did not interfere in KP’s—and Izvestia’s—editorial independence. Nonetheless, Oneximbank’s offsetting alliance with the Chubais faction, and its readiness to come aboard on short notice, apparently redeemed it in the eyes of Izvestia’s leadership. An alliance with Oneximbank was duly announced on 14 May 1997 (Zolotov 1997). The next day, Izvestia trumpeted its supposed victory over LUKoil by publishing an exposé of the company’s operations, accusing it of criminal links and profiting from Viktor Chernomyrdin’s patronage to the tune of more than US $200 million in overlooked debts (REF/RL Newsline 1997).

At this point, admittedly, things looked rosier for Izvestia than they had for some weeks. It was also at this point that the majority of interviews for this paper were conducted. “There is no question of [LUKoil] dictating to us”, proclaimed foreign editor Alexander Sychev confidently (Sychev 1997). But even before the corporate endgame that brought a close to the Golembiovsky era at Izvestia, there was a question to be posed about the longterm practicability of using one corporation to head off the ambitions of another. Golembievsky, as noted at the beginning of this case-study, dismissed the danger. But Ivan Zassoursky of Obshchaya Gazeta offered a much more far-seeing outside appraisal. “Soon”, Zassoursky predicted, Izvestia would “find out that it’s a lot easier for investors to negotiate with each other than with journalists. Investors have lots of spheres where they can cooperate, and they’ll make journalists do whatever they please. ... In a couple of months I expect these investors will dismiss Golembievsky. Everything is pretty simple” (I. Zassoursky 1997). So it proved.

Coup and aftermath

On 4 June 1997, Izvestia published the text of a “Charter on Relations Between the Newspaper ... and the Publication’s Shareholders”. Signed by twelve representatives from Izvestia, three from Oneximbank, and two from LUKoil, the Charter “recogniz[ed] the social responsibility of the press, respectful of the principles of freedom of speech and of the press”:

No one is to take any actions aimed against freedom of speech or of the press. The newspaper is to bear full responsibility for the articles
it publishes and for the reliability of the facts it reports. ... No one is to take actions restricting independence of opinions in the joint-stock company’s publications. Editorial decisions are to be made without external influence. ... Journalism and promotional activity are incompatible (Izvestia 1997b; see also The Moscow Tribune 1997).

Anyone tempted to see the charter as a true entente between Izvestia staff and their mobilizers, though, was disabused of the notion within a month. At a meeting on 23 June, a new board of directors was elected, consisting of three representatives from LUKoil and two each from Oneximbank and Izvestia. The paper’s autonomy was entrenched, but perilously — “between two fires”, as it were. At the same meeting, a new president of Izvestia Publishing House was chosen. Oleg Golembiovsky had decided not to run, apparently owing to the longstanding concerns over his dual role as president and chief editor. The new Izvestia president, Dmitry Murzin, was the former editor of Financial Izvestia.

On 1 July, a new dispute between Izvestia and LUKoil broke into the open, with the paper’s published accusation that LUKoil had failed to abide by the terms of the autonomy agreement. The company was allegedly pressing for revisions to the process by which chief editors were selected, to reduce the role of staff in the process (Belin 1997a). On the same day, Izvestia fired another salvo, this time lashing out at Anatoly Chubais—the First Deputy Prime Minister whose program of economic “reforms” it had long acclaimed! Izvestia’s story charged Chubais with having received an interest-free loan of about US $3 million.

The motives for publishing the Chubais piece remain unclear. It may be that Oneximbank chair Vladimir Potanin had decided to turn against Chubais—though if so, Izvestia’s renewed strong support for this regime figure after 1997 is difficult to fathom. It may be that Oleg Golembiovsky, sensing the way the winds were blowing, had decided to depart with a final broadside against the pro-Chubais alliance of Oneximbank and LUKoil that would shortly defenestrate him. It is also possible that the Chubais article precipitated the final crisis at Izvestia: that Chubais, while publicly ducking the accusations, worked behind the scenes to assist in the takeover of the paper. What is known is that within three days of publication of the Chubais piece, Oleg Golembiovsky was no longer chief editor of Izvestia. In a meeting on 4 July, the Izvestia board voted to depose Golembiovsky and revise the editor-selection process along LUKoil’s proposed lines. Obviously, negotiations had taken place between LUKoil and Oneximbank, resulting in a decision to sell out the mutual partner—Izvestia’s journalistic collective—and impose a new order at the paper.

Golembiovsky was absent when the boom was lowered, having suddenly announced a two-month leave on 1 July. Vasily Zakharko, a former correspondent in Bulgaria who had served as Izvestia’s deputy editor since February 1996, replaced him—supposedly as a stopgap measure. On 10 July, Golembiovsky finally reappeared at a Moscow press conference. He acknowledged ruefully that “Izvestia
found itself defenceless before the new owners”, but defended the decision to publish the article on Viktor Chernomyrdin. Golembiovsky, officially still chief editor of Izvestia, said he would leave the paper rather than contest any new election for the post.

Meanwhile, other Izvestia staff were scrambling to adjust to the new reality at the paper. Over the previous week, they had worked to form a trade union, “to combat possible diktat by the investors” and work towards regaining a controlling share of the newspaper (Nezavisimiy Gazeta 1997). But Izvestia journalist Stepan Kiselyov, writing in Moskovsky Novosti, stated succinctly what was now obvious to all:

*Izvestia*’s journalists have lost the shares war and completely lost control of their own newspaper. The new collective owner ... has already replaced the president of the company and now intends to replace the editor-in-chief [both posts held by Golembiovsky]. ... Once the new board of directors adopted its rules for electing *Izvestia*’s editor-in-chief, even a child could tell that the days of democracy at the paper were over. ... The staff remained, to face the new order alone. ... Our last line of defence is the independent trade unions. Ten of *Izvestia*’s leading journalists ... declared their right to organize only a week ago. Now there are almost 50 of us. We understand that our new employer would be more comfortable dealing with an amorphous collective than with organized trade unions. ... The president [new *Izvestia* president Dmitry Murzin] represents the interests of the owners who appointed him, and he owes his allegiance to them alone. If they tell him to fire half the *Izvestia* staffers and replace them with other journalists, he’ll do it. Not because he’s evil, but because that’s his job (Kiselyov 1997).

Yet the potentially incendiary question of Golembiovsky’s successor fizzled. The *Izvestia* board had the right to choose any of three candidates presented by the journalistic collective. But on 18 July, the board accepted Zakharko, the candidate who received the largest number of staff votes —thereby heading off a clash with *Izvestia* staff, many of them newly-unionized. Though it appeared Zakharko was not the ideal candidate for shareholders and board members, he was nonetheless “an eminently electable figure”. Accepting his candidacy allowed the chairman of the board, Onerximbank’s Mikhail Kozhokin, “to announce proudly to the *Izvestia* staffers that the collective’s opinion was ‘sacred to the investors’” (Tutushkin 1997a). Turnout for the elections were heavy, but an observer nonetheless described the mood among staffers as “dispirited”. Many may have voted for Zakharko as a compromise candidate, aware of his reputation for caution. Many may also have feared their jobs were at risk if they took too strident a stand. On 28 July, seven of twelve members were axed from *Izvestia*’s editorial board. All in turn lost their jobs.
with the newspaper. "There were no professional, editorial or production-related reasons for this 'revamping' of the editorial board", protested Stepan Kiselyov (Pravda-5 1997). Along with Sergei Dardykin, he had pushed to found the Izvestia trade union; now both were out in the street.

At the very time that the new/old Izvestia celebrated publication of its 25,000th edition, Kiselyov and Otto Latsis joined Oleg Golembiovsky and three other defenestrated editors in announcing a new enterprise to be known as Novye Izvestia. It would employ 32 former Izvestia personnel, and seek to capture Izvestia readers alienated by the departure of the paper's "backbone" staff (Tutshkin 1997b; see also Belin 1997b). The project claimed US $40 million in financial backing—"quite a sizable sum", Kommersant noted, "considering that the cost of publishing the average national daily newspaper in Russia is currently on the order of $9 million a year" (Tutushkin 1997b).

Novye Izvestia, "put together at breakneck speed" (Dunayeva 1997), published a pilot edition late in October, and its first issue on 1 November 1997. In several ways it sought to distinguish itself from its rival. Izvestia's logo and design changed notably after the failed coup attempt of 1991, but remained monochromatic. Novye Izvestia, though, adopted a jazzier logo. In shades of Barricada's post-revolutionary marketing strategy, it also became the first Russian newspaper ever to publish colour photographs. The circulation, though—100,000 copies—was barely a fifth of the old Izvestia's. Inquiring minds wanted to know: where had the money come from? Who was the sponsor for a project that seemed unlikely to cover its extravagant costs for a long while?

The apparent answer was no surprise to anyone who had followed developments in post-Soviet media, but it disappointed those who hoped for a press institution less constrained by powerful mobilizers. The main investor in Novye Izvestia was widely reported to be media magnate Boris Berezovsky. For public consumption, both media barons denied involvement. But there were indications even before the new paper hit the streets that sponsors would have a decisive effect on Novye Izvestia's "line". On 29 October, three days before the scheduled launch of Novye Izvestia, the paper's reporter Leonid Krutakov told Komsomolskaya Pravda that he had been fired because of an article criticizing Berezovsky that he had published in Moskovsky Komsomolets. Golembiovsky, contended Krutakov, had expressed his unwillingness to criticize one of Novye Izvestia's key investors.

The Izvestias and Russian media since the coup

Since the dramatic events of mid-1997 focused both national and international attention on Izvestia and its Novye Izvestia offshoot, both papers have drifted to the background of media controversy in Russia. The renewed round of economic crisis in 1998 did not topple either publication, but the transformations at the original Izvestia were substantial: its new owner, Oneximbank, chose to merge the paper
with another of its press holdings, Russkiy Telegraf, and some 50 percent of the staff of each publication was laid off. At the same time, the collapse of the advertising market led Izvestia to cancel the Financial Izvestiya supplement.

Under the regime of Vladimir Putin, who took power in December 1999, the mass media as a whole continued to play their role as a leading bellwether for liberalization or, alternatively, repression and crackdown. Putin quickly made it clear that he would be less tolerant than Yeltsin of Russia’s diffuse and decentralized power structure, with business “oligarchs”, along with regional and municipal leaders, all contending for power and influence. Accordingly, he launched campaigns not only to bring the regions and municipalities back into the centralized fold, but to clip the wings of the high-flying oligarchs. And what better way to do so than to target their media portfolios? First to feel his feet tugged toward the fire was Vladimir Gusinsky of Media-MOSTL. Gusinsky was owner of the independent NTV television station, which had taken a stand against Putin and others in the regime for alleged corruption, and for their conduct of the renewed war in Chechnya. In May 2000, only a few days after Putin’s victory in national elections, the corporate offices of Media-MOSTL were raided and documents seized, purportedly as part of an investigation into the operations of the company’s private security services, as well as its tax situation. The Russian Union of Journalists immediately denounced the raid as “a link in a chain of many attempts by the authorities to limit freedom of expression in Russia” (Moscow Times 2000). The following month, Gusinsky was briefly jailed on charges of “overstating company assets in exchange for loan guarantees” from Gazprom, and left Russia for Spain after being released (Associated Press 2000; see also Lambroschini 2000).

In a comment clearly aimed at Gusinsky, made shortly after the raid, Putin alleged to Izvestia that key big-business owners of media outlets were “vying for the preservation of their influence upon the state rather than fighting for freedom of expression and the press”. He argued (in UPI’s paraphrase) that “the media in Russia cannot be truly free because they are financed by big business”. “One of the main problems of Russian journalism was its dependence on capital”, Putin told Izvestia. “The mass media should be made really independent. Then they will show life as it is, instead of presenting events the way clients wish to see them” (United Press International 2000). The regime’s leading instrument in the campaign against Gusinsky was the state-dominated gas monopoly, Gazprom, which “fiercely denied” accusations that it was “working on behalf of the Kremlin to destroy ... by far the largest and most outspoken journalistic voice not under state control”. In April 2001, Gazprom “completed a boardroom coup by taking over the headquarters” of NTV, leading to the resignation of some 350 employees, “including 85 percent of the journalists” (Karush 2001). It then joined with a former ally of Gusinsky, Vladimir Biryukov, to close down Segodnya. Lastly, at Gazprom’s behest, “dissident

17 One of the core elements of this campaign was an attempt to draw regional and local media onto the side of the new regime through the distribution of subsidies: “the unspoken agenda is to shift the allegiance of the press from the regional overlords to Mr. Putin” (Gordon 2000).
shareholders seized his popular national newsmagazine, Itogi, and fired its staff" (Wines 2001).

A secondary target of the campaign against the media moguls was Boris Berezovsky, who in August 2000 had joined with eight other prominent business leaders to publish an open letter in Izvestia warning of a "drift to dictatorship" under Putin (Agence France-Presse 2000). Berezovsky subsequently resigned his seat in the State Duma and took refuge abroad, where he "launched a furious verbal attack on [Putin,] his former ally", claiming that "The President is trying to impose his control over the mass media, with the goal of setting up a regime of personal power. He has turned the country over to secret services and bureaucrats. ... I'm forced to choose between becoming a political prisoner or a political emigré" (quoted in York 2000). In January 2001, Berezovsky finally succumbed to pressure to sell his 49% stake in the ORT television network to Roman Abramovich, "a leading oil and aluminum magnate and close business colleague who ... is reputed to have close ties to the Kremlin". The transaction would obviously help to bring ORT under state control; one ORT journalist said the station was "being handed to Putin like a gift" (Moscow Times 2001).

Less high-profile instances of harassment were also visited upon recalcitrant press outlets, and it was at this time that Izvestia returned briefly to the spotlight. In December 2000, the paper dared to publish "letters from representatives of the intelligentsia that were strongly against reinstating the old Stalinist [national] anthem that Putin favored". According to longtime crusading journalist Yevgenia Albats,

The next day, Izvestia's management was told that the Kremlin's powerful management department ... had filed a suit in the arbitration court questioning the legitimacy of the privatization of Izvestia's main building. As is the case with every other media outlet that existed during Soviet times, Izvestia's building was state property and came to be owned by the paper during the wild privatization of the early Yeltsin years. Most of these privatization deals, of course, can hardly withstand close scrutiny — although those of many businesses that have fallen from grace since Yeltsin resigned face exactly that prospect. ... In short, the suit has since been put on hold (but, significantly, not withdrawn) after certain compromises on the part of Izvestia's management. Whether or not the suit is revived will clearly depend on the paper's contents in the future.

"For Putin, media are good only to the extent that they endorse the state's policies without questioning them", Albats summarized. "When they don't, they become the state's enemies" (Albats 2001). Putin's policy preferences became clearer still later in 2001, with the floating of a media-law amendment that would oblige journalists "to reveal their sources to police whenever asked"; The Globe and
Mail described the measures as "another warning shot across the bow of Russia’s dwindling independent media organizations" (York 2001).

Clearly, the structural effects of the collapse of 1998 and the renewed media-government conflict of the Putin era would be years in playing themselves out. Available evidence suggests, though, that the media—in Russia as in many other transitional societies worldwide—remain one of the most reliable gauges of the character of that transition: whether liberal and tolerant, reactionary and repressive, or each by turns. At the same time, the experience of media outlets like Izvestia suggests the importance of the broader political-economic context—particularly the prevalence of economic crisis—in shaping the behaviour and allegiances of key societal institutions. To depict the functioning of Izvestia and other transitional media as a purely dependent variable, however, overlooks the ideals of professional independence (along with narrower personal calculations) that frequently draw media workers into conflict—not only with the state and other external actors, but with their own sponsors. The upheavals at Izvestia in mid-1997, like the coup at the Nicaraguan newspaper in Barricada in 1994 (see Jones 2001a and 2002), attest to the vulnerability of all such media actors confronting powerful opposed forces within and without. But they also point to the importance of media as actors, and the significant role they play in shaping their own destinies—for better or for worse—amidst the flux and uncertainty of political transition.
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