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'In the name of democracy'

The paradox of democracy and press freedom in post-communist Russia

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It is not enough to merely defend democracy. To defend it may be to lose it, to extend it is to strengthen it. Democracy is not property; it is an idea.

(Hubert H. Humphrey, US Democratic Vice-President, 1
October 1942)

The twentieth century has commonly been labelled 'the century of democracy' (Freedom House 2000; Sen 1999). Following the first, slow wave of democratization from 1828 to 1926, the century experienced a second (1943–64) and third (1974–90) wave of democratization (Huntington 1993). As a result, 121 of the world's 192 governments are called democracies (Karlekar 2003:8). Post-Soviet Russia, which shed authoritarian rule only in the last wave of democratization, is one of them. Article 1 of the 1993 Russian Constitution names the Russian Federation a 'democratic, federal, rule of law state'.

The worldwide spread of democracy has been accompanied by the expansion of press freedom (Sussman 2003:13). Hence, a free press is assumed to be an essential feature of democracy. A free press operates as a check on politics and as a link between the citizens and their political representatives: it is an instrument for holding governments accountable, and for citizens to get informed, communicate their wishes and participate in the political decision-making. In all dissident movements in Eastern Europe the demand for democracy was accompanied by the demand for a free press. In Russia, Mikhail Gorbachev stressed the importance of *glasnost* (not the equivalent of press freedom but a step in that direction) as a *sine qua non* for democratic reform (Gorbachev 1987:91). Later, Boris Yeltsin affirmed that he could not conceive of a democratic society 'without the freedom of expression and the press' (radio address cited in *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 15 March 1997:1), while Vladimir Putin has also emphasized the relationship: 'without a truly free media, Russian democracy will not survive' (statement to the Russian Parliament, 8 July 2000, cited in Mereu 2000). The principles of freedom of mass information and the inadmissibility of censorship were formalized in the Russian Law on Mass Media (27 December 1991) and the 1993 Constitution.

So much for the good news. The labels given to Russia—ranging from formal democracy (Kaldor & Vejvoda 1999) to authoritarian (Sakwa 1998), delegated (Remington 1999; Weigle 2000), manipulative (Delyagin 2000) or totalitarian democracy (Goble 2000)—suggest a congruence with the democratic model which is at best superficial and imperfect. This comment about Russia coincides with more general

observations. 'If we look beyond the form of democracy', Diamond (1996:31) writes, 'we see erosion and stagnation'. He calls this 'one of the most striking features of the "third wave" [of democratization]' (1996:23): the gap between so-called electoral and liberal democracy or, in other words, the stagnation of liberal democracy.

Similarly, (Russian) press freedom is not absolute. The American organization Freedom House went as far as to lower the status of Russian mass media from 'partly free' in 2002 to 'not free' in 2003. Again, Russia is not an isolated case. Freedom House observes that, worldwide, 'the presence of a minimum standard of electoral conduct does not automatically lead to other attributes of mature democracy, such as strong civic institutions, an independent judiciary, and vibrant and free media' (Karlekar 2003:8-9). The overall trend towards democracy does not prevent 'increased state-directed pressure on the media and a global decline in press freedom', nor therefore 'rising levels of violations of press freedom by democratically elected regimes' (2003:8-9).

Amartya Sen hands us at least a partial explanation for the divergent observations of 'more democracy' but at the same time also 'less democracy', and 'more press freedom' but simultaneously 'no press freedom'. Democracy is a word with a highly positive emotional value that 'while not yet universally practised, nor indeed uniformly accepted, in the general climate of world opinion, has achieved the status of being taken to be generally right' (Sen 1999:5). Like democracy, press freedom is increasingly expected by world culture and international organizations, stimulating countries to have, at least in name, both a democratic regime and a free press.

Moreover, while the general theoretical assumption remains that press freedom and democracy are strongly connected and mutually reinforcing, the process of democratization (in so-called 'new democracies' like Russia) or the protection of democracy (in so-called 'old democracies' like those of Western Europe) is often eagerly seized upon as a justification to (more or less severely) *limit* press freedom, thus creating a kind of paradoxical relationship between democracy and press freedom.

This chapter will discuss the paradoxical relationship between press freedom and democracy in post-communist Russia. Post-communist Russia represents a unique historical and socio-political setting, which does not readily allow for generalization. Nevertheless, observations on Russia can contribute to our understanding of the connection between press freedom and democracy in other contexts, especially those of the so-called 'new democracies'. Before looking at the Russian situation—from the sides of the politicians, the media and the public—let us begin with a general discussion on press freedom in relation to democracy.

Press freedom and democracy

At a minimum, democracy is a political system based on free, competitive and regular elections. This 'electoral' democracy presumes space for political opposition movements and political parties that represent a significant range of voter choice and whose leaders can openly compete for and be elected to positions of power in government (Schumpeter 1943). The concept of 'liberal' (Diamond 1996) or 'substantial' democracy (Kaldor and Vejevoda 1999) extends the key element of free competition with a range of political and civil rights (freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of religion, etc.) and the

notions of the rule of law, inclusive citizenship and civil society. The concept of substantial democracy cannot easily be reduced to a set of procedures and institutions but is described as ‘a way of regulating power relations in such a way as to maximize the opportunities for individuals to influence the conditions in which they live, to participate in and influence debates about the key decisions that affect society’ (Kaldor & Vejvoda 1999:3–4). Democracy should not be thought of as an either-or category, but rather as a continuum. The choice is not between democracy or no democracy, but between more or less democracy, which comes down very often to ‘old’ and ‘new’ democracies (Mayer 1989:72). Linz and Stepan (1996) distinguish ‘consolidated’ and ‘transitional’ democracies: consolidation is attained when democracy has become ‘the only game in town’, constitutionally as well as behaviourally and attitudinally (1996:5–6).

A free press is a cornerstone of democracy. Far from being a kind of ‘bonus’ of liberal democracy, it is the ‘basis’ of electoral democracy. In order to be able to vote consciously and freely, citizens need to be aware of all the options and have access to all the relevant information. Providing this information is the *raison d’être* of the press. An essential precondition to fulfil this task is its separation from state and political institutions, and its freedom from inhibiting forms of economic, political or other dependency.

The stress on freedom is not self-evident, nor universally accepted. It might be true that ‘traditional free press theory lacks a prescriptive character’, as ‘it does not in its simple and most basic form say anything of what the press ought to do’ (McQuail 1976:9). But free press theory has had its critics: from the mid twentieth-century Hutchins Commission to the late twentieth-century advocates of public/civic journalism. Central to their criticism is the stress on (social/press) responsibility linked to, or even taking priority over, freedom. John Merrill observes a paradigm shift taking place in the second half of the twentieth century: ‘the shift is basically from the press to the people (or to national rulers)—from press libertarianism to press responsibility’ (2002:17).

Rights carry responsibilities. Thus, naturally, the press does not only have to be free but (professionally) responsible: ‘It is their [the media’s] responsibility to maximize the opportunities for citizens to make political decisions and cast ballots on the basis of informed choice—retrospectively, about the extent to which the government has kept its promises in office, and prospectively, about how rival candidates will act if (re)elected to office’ (Gunther & Mughan 2000:422). This is not a small responsibility: making the best of the information flow necessary for the good functioning of democracy. But for some critics this task is not sufficient in itself, and they want to pass onto the press the responsibility for enhancing/protecting democracy *an sich*. Cohen-Almagor puts this strongly: ‘It is for the media to take a firm stand to defend democracy whenever it is threatened’ (2001:90).

The performance of the media, then, is no longer measured in terms of fullness, completeness or fairness of information but in terms of rightness of information. Hence, full information can undercut rather than promote the reforms undertaken by a democratic government. Frances Foster calls this ‘the defence of democracy theory’—a theory that ‘views democracy as an established system of power besieged by hostile forces intent on its destruction’ (1996:99). This view is not without danger because it is morally loaded. When democracy is morally ‘good’, assumed critics of democracy have to be morally ‘bad’. A ‘responsible press’ then is made a moral judge, allowed to silence inconvenient (‘bad’) views: ones that may slow down the process of democratization or

that doubt the legitimacy of democracy without necessarily being a threat to it. Press freedom plays at a loss; but so does democracy. Thus, democracy needs dissent.

When is it allowed to put into operation what Cohen-Almagor (2001: xvi) has called the ‘self-defence mechanisms to safeguard and protect democracy’? And when does the phrase ‘press responsibility’ simply become ‘a code word for restrictions on the news media short of censorship’ (Sussman 2003:23)? In every country and at every moment, fierce debates take place about the borders of press freedom. Free press is in delicate balance with other competing values which spur limitations on press freedom—in order to prevent a threat to public order, or protect the security of the state or of third parties (such as minors). But, while some of the ‘competing’ goals are clearly defined (for example the protection of privacy), the goal of ‘enhancing democracy’ is too all-embracing and morally loaded to be workable.

The paradox of democracy and press freedom

The politicians’ side

The process of democratization in Russia, paradoxically, became a justification to curtail press freedom and keep the media instrumentalized. The instrumental use of the mass media in post-communist Russia is a continuation of the communist past and an expression of the collectivist nature of society. The Soviet media were indeed free from the profit motive, but in no sense free from external goals (the building of a communist society, class homogenization) and external control and pressures (from the Communist Party and the government). Although the external (societal) goal has changed from the construction of a communist society to the provision of support for a new democratic society, the mobilization of the mass media as a means to a goal has remained largely unchanged (de Smaele 2001).

Gorbachev (president from 1985 to 1991) considered the mass media major instruments in promoting his politics of *glasnost* and securing support for his reforms. As before, the mass media mobilized people for the ideology of socialism—but now in a more dynamic way. Yassen Zassoursky, Dean of the Faculty of Journalism of the Moscow State University, has labelled the media model during this period as, successively, the ‘glasnost model’ (1997:3) and the ‘instrumental model’ (1998:16, 1999:29–30). The former expresses an element of change, namely the break with the previous ‘administrative-bureaucratic model’; in the latter, the aspect of continuity is brought to the fore.

Zassoursky describes the first years of Yeltsin’s presidency (which ran from 1991 to 2000) as the era of ‘the fourth power model’. Expectations, however, were pitched too high, and he suggests that from 1995–96 onwards the situation is best described by an ‘authoritarian-corporate model’, as continuity again triumphed over change (Y.Zassoursky 1997, 1998, 1999). Yeltsin was the self-appointed patron of democracy and press freedom. While it is obvious that he ‘allowed’ the press more freedom than any of his predecessors, he never questioned his presumed right to grant such freedom. In exchange, he expected the mass media to support his reforms loyally. Yeltsin embodied the belief that, in order to improve democratic procedures, one has to step ‘beyond’ these

very procedures. In the name of democracy—and following the anti-Gorbachev coup d'état of August 1991, Yeltsin banned a number of newspapers that did not detach themselves explicitly from the coup. In the name of democracy, Yeltsin fired upon Parliament in October 1993 and again banned opposition newspapers. In the name of democracy, Yeltsin ruled largely by decree, ignoring a whole series of 'horizontal checks'. In the name of democracy, Yeltsin blatantly expected the mass media to support and arrange his reelection in 1996. In the name of democracy, Yeltsin presented his 'heir' to the voters/media consumers of Russia in the autumn of 1999.

Like Gorbachev and Yeltsin before him, Vladimir Putin (2000–) tends to seek in the unique socio-political setting of Russia and its process of democratization a justification to curtail media autonomy. In the name of democracy, Putin launched the fight against the independent television stations NTV and TV-6 in 2000 and 2001. In the name of democracy, Putin limited the information flow on terrorism-related topics. Much quoted is the comment of his spokesman Sergej Yasterzhembsky to journalists from the daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*: 'The media should take into account the challenges the nation is facing now. When the nation mobilizes its strength to achieve a goal, this imposes obligations on everybody, including the media' (see Whitmore 2000). Although uttered in the specific context of the Russian war against separatist rebels in Chechnya, the statement testifies to a view of media as instruments and to the prioritization of responsibility above freedom.

The means to pressure the media and keep them instrumental are numerous. The president and the executive have *direct* control over the media via the appointment (and dismissal) of media functionaries, especially the chairmen of the national television channels ORT (*Obshchestvennoe Rossiskoye Televidenie*, Russian Public Television, known more recently as *Pervyi kanal*, the First Channel), RTR (Russian Television and Radio) and *Kul'tura* (Culture). Another means of direct control are the state organizations directly subordinated to the executive. In addition to the Media Ministry (which has changed name and structure four times since the origin of the independent Russian Federation), these include *ad hoc* institutions such as Yeltsin's 'Federal Information Centre of Russia', which was actuated by the crisis between the Russian Parliament and the president and which existed parallel to the Ministry of Press and Information from December 1992 to December 1993, and the 'Russian Information Agency', created in 1999 to control press coverage of the war in Chechnya. Institutions which may appear to have less direct authority over the media can also play a role. The Security Council, formed in 1992 mainly as a discussion forum and consultative body, was turned by Putin into a more important policy instrument; the 'Commission on Information Security', for example, deals extensively with mass media policy.

The possibilities for *indirect* control are even greater. There is the financial dependency of the media on (state) subsidies or (corporate) sponsorship, either open or secret. There is the dependency on state facilities such as printing houses, transmitters and satellites, and on state organs instead of independent organs for the issuance of licenses. Expensive court cases (especially concerning slander and libel) scare off 'nasty' media, and the (all but transparent) accreditation procedure of journalists and even the use of violence against them can be seen as effective control mechanisms. To this we can add the legal insecurity due to the rapid succession of presidential and governmental decrees and orders, that often include contradictory measures, as well as the

unpredictable changes in policy and practice of, for instance, tax collection (massively allowed tax evasion followed by strict enforcement).

The side of the media

It does not appear fair, however, to pass the responsibility for this system exclusively onto the authorities. Are the media—in the terms of Merrill *et al.* (1990:59)—‘forced’ or ‘free’ partners of the authorities? The question of guilt is inappropriate. We can only observe and conclude.

In the early years of the Russian Federation (1992–93), which were marked by the conflict between president and parliament, ‘most of the Russian media appeared to adopt a strongly pro-government stance’ (Benn 1996:472). A content analysis of central television programmes in the run-up to the referendum of 25 April 1993 showed ‘the obtrusive partisanship of state television’ (Mickiewicz and Richter 1996:119). The majority of the media *voluntarily* opted for the new—and hence democratic—partiality. Their leaders approached Yeltsin on their own initiative to request protection (of press freedom) and promised loyalty (meaning partiality) in return (Chugaev 1992).

The presidential elections of 1996 are a well-documented case in this sense. Again, the majority of journalists and media professionals rallied behind Yeltsin and *voluntarily* agreed with the mobilization function of the media. As Shevelov, vice-president of television channel ORT, stated: ‘you can only refer to pressure if there is resistance. There is none’ (cited in Lange 1996:15). The journalists adhered to partisanship not only for material reasons but also out of normative considerations. Igor Malashenko, then president of the private television station NTV, joined the Yeltsin re-election campaign in April 1996 as chief media advisor and explained this logic as follows: if the private media had provided ‘unbiased, professional, and objective’ campaign coverage, Zhuganov would have won the election and journalists would have lost their freedom permanently. Better, he argued, to become a temporary ‘instrument of propaganda’ in the hands of the Kremlin. *Partijnost’* was justified for the protection of democracy and consequently press freedom. In the name of democracy journalists voluntarily gave up their autonomy and their freedom (Belin 1997; European Institute for the Media 1996:8; I.Zassoursky 1999:105).

In general, and outside the election context, empirical research has confirmed the voluntary alliance between journalists and authorities (for example Juskevits 2000; Kuzin 1996; Manaev 1995; Svitich and Shiryayeva 1997). The average Russian journalist does not reject the paternalistic character of power and therefore accepts its tutelage in mass communication. The concept adhered to is that of the active or participant journalist, as described by the Hungarian writer Janos Horvat (in Gross 1996:111): someone who wants to influence politics and audiences according to his or her political beliefs. The restriction of their activity to the presentation of mere facts is indeed often regarded as a devaluation of the profession of the journalist (Voltmer 2000:478).

The attitude of the individual journalist suits the media owners, who, under the ‘protective banner of freedom of press’ (Foster 1996:100), protect their own freedom and their particular interests. Since the majority of media holdings are part of larger financial-industrial groups and money in Russia is still made through political connections,

political, economic and media interests go closely together. Political and economic elites try to secure via the media their own wealth, status and influence. Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky are the classic—although nowadays disgraced—examples of political-economic media oligarchs. When Gusinsky's media outlets became the target of prosecution, he immediately declaimed that press freedom and, by extension, democracy was endangered. His alarm was taken up by other journalists in Russia as well as in foreign countries (the USA in the first place). There were, however, also sceptical voices. Robert Coalson (2000) wrote in a column in *The Moscow Times*: 'Gusinsky has shown very little genuine concern for press freedom. Like the other oligarchs, he only appears when his own interests are directly at risk'. In the same way Sergej Markov (2001:24) noted with reference to a rally on freedom of speech: 'all speeches by NTV stars were about NTV's freedom. Such egoism could not inspire champions of freedom of expression'. 'The concept of freedom of speech has become hackneyed after Gusinsky and somewhat awkward to use', concludes the not entirely neutral General Director of Gazprom-Media, Alfred Kokh (2001:20).

And the public?

As Price and Krug (2000:4) state: 'for free and independent media to "work", the community in question must value the role that the media play'. Much of the Russian population, however, seems either hostile or indifferent to independent journalism. It is telling that 'independent' media in Russia are identified with 'opposition' media. Media independence is considered illusory, and partisanship the norm. The Russian audience—which Mickiewicz (2000:115) calls 'exceptionally media-literate'—responds to mass media information not by asking 'is this true' but '*komu eto vygodno?*' (who might benefit from it?). News is interpreted in function of the source of news, be it Berezovsky's, Gusinsky's or the government's channel, or Potanin's, LUKoil's or the Communist Party's newspaper. In addition, state-controlled media are trusted more than private ones (Coalson 2001). The view of media as instruments of support (president, government, 'the system') is commonly accepted, as polls throughout the 1990s and early 2000s have repeatedly shown. 'In today's Russia, media freedom is...not the most fashionable and popularly supported notion', declared television presenter and journalist Evgeny Kiselev in an interview with Jeremy Drukker (*Transitions Online*, 10 July 2000). Elena Androunas points to the absence of 'freedom as a state of mind' (1993:35).

The result: 'genuinely pluralistic unfree media'

The result is a pluralist but not an independent press. In the sense of the representation of a broad range of political expressions, opinions and interests, post-communist Russia is hardly less pluralistic than older democracies and probably even more so. In his book on media policy in Western Europe, Peter Humphreys (1996:312) points at a systematic decline of pluralism in the twentieth century, caused by a de-ideologization of traditional politics and a commercialization, standardization and concentration of the media. While the Russian media system is also characterized by a high degree of concentration, this concentration is not at all linked with de-politicization. As Alexei Pankin says: 'money in

the CIS is still made through connections in the government, and in this game it helps to own newspapers and stations as instruments of political influence' (1998:33). Ivan Sigal (1997) has called Russian news coverage 'a part of politics'. 'In such circumstances', says *Izvestiya* journalist Sergej Agafonov, 'a free independent press is doomed, but an unfree and dependent press can flourish' (cited in Banerjee 1997:59). Pankin speaks of a unique result: 'genuinely pluralistic unfree media' (1998:30). However, a pluralism that derives the right to exist from the presence of different power groups in society is an uncertain pluralism. Hence, when the different power groups join forces because they feel threatened in their positions, as was the case in the 1996 presidential elections, this pluralism dies.

Any opinion that is presented claims to be the 'right' opinion. Every side in the power struggle claims to be on the 'right' side—and thus to have democracy on its side. In the power struggle at the beginning of the 1990s, both Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament pictured the opponent as an 'antidemocratic force', while justifying their own action as a defence of democracy. Ten years later, both Putin and Gusinsky equally consider their opponent an enemy of democracy. The pluralism present in the Russian press is not only an uncertain pluralism, but also a highly opinionated and morally loaded pluralism. The greatest victim of this kind of pluralism is (factual) information. Every newspaper and every television channel brings its own *versiya* of the facts. In order to get an accurate picture of what happened, one has to read some six newspapers and watch several television stations daily, claims Andrei Fadin (1997). But who does?

On the one hand, the presentation of information with the in-built intention of promoting 'democracy' (national security, personal interests, etc.) is a distortion of the 'pure' information function of mass media—'what has happened and why did it happen?' To be able to fulfil their information function, media need to be free from external goals and clearly separated from external (political and economic) power groups. On the other hand, press freedom presumes that, although independent, the press is not shielded from government and industry. A necessary precondition for the media to function autonomously is their guaranteed access to (political and economic) information and transparency of governance. Worldwide, a correlation can be seen between press freedom and transparency, and between transparency and democracy:

Information gathering is a vital component of freedom of information. Without access to information, journalists are engaged primarily in the presentation of opinions. And while openness in the statement of opinions is an important element of democratic society, it is not sufficient for its development and maintenance. The possibility for an informed citizenry depends on the ability of journalists to have access to sources. Without this kind of journalistic effectiveness, a society can have free and independent media, but their utility toward advancement of democratic institution-building might be severely limited.

(Price and Krug 2000:19)

Access to information in Russia

A climate of open access to information clings to the principle of information as a universal *right*, adjudged to everyone on an equal basis according to laws and procedures (universalism), whereas a culture of secrecy approaches information as a *privilege*, dependent on position or connections (particularism). Russia has always been characterized by a culture of secrecy rather than transparency. In the Soviet Union, journalists had extremely limited access to information in the first place, and the information acquired had to pass through several strict (mainly political/ideological) filters before appearing in the news. A limited flow of information was the norm. In addition, information was not available to everyone on the same conditions. Access to news sources depended on one's hierarchical (Party) position. The privileges of the *nomenklatura*, or 'first-class' citizens (Novosel 1995:11–12), not only encompassed material benefits (such as housing, food, health care and education) but also enhanced access to information, ranging from access to 'forbidden' films or books (those that were not considered suitable for general distribution—see, for example, Benn 1992:9) to the receipt of special foreign news bulletins, put together on a daily basis by TASS and distributed in different colours according to the degree of detail and intended readership (Lendvai 1981:129–31). Although highly placed officials could obviously claim access to more information, they too received information only on a 'need-to-know' basis (Bauer *et al.* 1959:43). The overall result was an information deficit. Information was one of the most sought after commodities in the Soviet Union (Ellis 1999:6). Informal networks, oral communication and rumours filled the vacuum (Banai 1997:252; Bauer and Gleicher 1964; Inkeles and Bauer 1959:163–5).

In the transition to a free market economy, privileged access to information played a crucial role in the process of privatizations which became known as 'insider privatizations'. Privileged information remains important in post-communist Russia, where the right to information and inadmissibility of censorship are included, nevertheless, in the 1993 Constitution (Article 29) and in the 1991 Russian Federation Law on the Mass Media (Article 1). The Law on Mass Media assigns the right to receive information directly only to the mass media: Russian citizens have the right to receive true information on the activities of state organs, public organizations and officials *via* the mass media (Article 38.1). State officials, in their turn, are obliged to inform the media about their activities: on demand, but also actively via press conferences and the distribution of statistical and other materials (Article 38.2). Refusal to provide information is allowed only in case of state, commercial or other law-protective secrets (Article 40.1), and this has to be clearly communicated (Article 40.2). The Penal Code (Article 144) fixes high penalties for unlawful refusal to provide information and for hindering the professional activity of journalists.

The notion of 'state and other law-protective secrets', including commercial secrets, thwarts and subverts the general right to information as written down in the 1993 Constitution and the 1991 Law on Mass Media (de Smaele 2004). The broad interpretation of secret information allows for a large measure of control. The panellists that the International Research and Exchanges Board brought together to discuss the

media situation in Russia agreed unanimously that ‘access to some publicly relevant information is not free: authorities continue to view information as their property, and want to control access’ (2001:196). In the annual overviews of violations of journalists’ rights, compiled by the Glasnost Defence Foundation since 1993, violation of the journalists’ right to information—namely denial of information to journalists, refusals of journalists’ accreditations and refusals to admit journalists to press conferences and certain locations—remains a frequently quoted problem (www.gdf.ru/monitor/). Surveys cited by Svitich and Shiryaeva (1997:157) confirm this finding as well as a deterioration in journalists’ rights of access to information throughout the 1990s. Especially difficult to obtain are bare facts, figures and documents. Little has changed in this respect since Soviet times. The executive has the worst reputation with regard to openness of information, followed by the security services, commercial companies, state companies and financial companies (Svitich and Shiryaeva 1997:154–60).

Journalists do not receive rights by laws, but by the personal preference of (state) officials and press services, observes Vladimir Ermolin (2002:7). By law, the media are equal—but, by preference, some are more equal than others. Code words in the process of information-gathering in Russia remain ‘trust, relations, and integration’ (Banai 1997:242). Authorities have relations with some media professionals who enjoy ‘privileges’ to receive information unavailable to the rest of the media. Among the ‘privileged media’ in the Yeltsin era were, according to Gulyaev (1996:14), news agencies such as ITAR-TASS and Interfaks, daily newspapers such as *Kommersant* and *Izvestiya*, and weeklies such as *Argumenty i fakty*. The most important private channel, NTV, has had various relationships with the president and his administration, having been a ‘neutral’ or ‘opposition’ channel in 1994–95, a ‘supporting’ channel in the presidential elections of 1996 and, again, an ‘opposition’ channel in 2000. With each phase, the levels of access to information shifted accordingly. In the early years, when NTV adopted an oppositional stand, NTV journalists were on occasion denied access to the Kremlin (*Omri Daily Digest*, 13 February 1996). In September 1996, however, the ‘collaborating’ channel received its broadcast license for the entire fourth channel by presidential decree, and enjoyed privileges such as the same transmission rates as the state channels and increased access to information. When it began to act again as an opposition channel, NTV saw its privileges, and ultimately its future, disappear. A more recent illustration is the way in which the Kremlin handled the disaster with the sunken submarine Kursk in the summer of 2000. Media coverage of the disaster was restricted, with only one journalist from the state-controlled television channel RTR granted full access to the disaster scene. Ivan Konovalov (2002:51) says that the Kursk disaster was crucial in dividing journalists into ‘ours’ (*svoi*) and ‘others’ (*chuzhikh*). Journalists of state media, like RTR, belong to the category ‘ours’ and consequently enjoy an enhanced access to information. Konovalov then ranks the television stations, in order of declining closeness to the Kremlin, as: RTR, ORT, NTV, TV-Centre.

Very few journalists or media organs claim their right to receive information before court (Svitich and Shiryaeva 1997:160). Maintaining privileged relations is the preferred means of overcoming the information barrier, with the main alternative being to bribe officials or openly purchase information from them. Finally, according to the Presidential Judicial Chamber for Information Disputes and the Union of Russian Journalists, ‘if these methods are beyond them, they resort to fabrication and conjecture’ (from the 1995 Joint

Recommendation on the Freedom of Mass Information and the Responsibility of Journalists, cited by Price *et al.* 2002:339–42). Indeed, the Recommendation passes on responsibility for the dissemination of untruthful information in the media to the closed administration, recording that ‘Unreliability, incompleteness, and distortion of information very often results from the inaccessibility of sources of information’ (Price *et al.* 2002:341).

Conclusions

We started from the common understanding that press freedom and democracy are closely associated concepts. Neither concept, however, is unequivocally defined. Democracy implies participation of the citizens in the decision-making process, or at least in the election of the government—but gradations are legion. Press freedom implies media autonomy: freedom from external goals and controls. Again, gradations are numerous. Having said that, the correlation seems to exist: in the sense that there was ‘no democracy’ and ‘no press freedom’ in the Soviet Union and there is only ‘partial democracy’ and ‘partial press freedom’ in postcommunist Russia. A third concept should be added, that is crucial to both press freedom and democracy, namely the right to know or the right to information coupled with transparency of governance and administration. Information has to be considered a key concept in democracy and, at times, an antidote to opinion. Rather than ‘in the name of democracy’ the media should report ‘in the name of the people’s right to know’.

The close integration of democracy with press freedom and, by extension, of politics with mass media has to be seen not only in terms of manipulation and force but also in terms of sharing a common political and information culture. The concept of culture suggests some communality of values: politicians, media workers and the public share the same political culture and, in addition, the same information and communication culture. The concept of culture also suggests some continuity over time: not only throughout the communist and post-communist period but also dating back to the time of the czars. Culture is not unchangeable, but high expectations about the role of the media as triggers of democracy are doomed to fail. The media and society develop together and in coherent patterns.

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