

Media in Contemporary Russia

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- [Introduction](#)
- [Remarks](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#)

Introduction

DAVID SPEEDIE: I'm David Speedie, and our event today is "The Media in Contemporary Russia." Welcome to the Carnegie Council.

Russia, as some of you know, is very much a focus of the U.S. Global Engagement Program, which I direct here at the Council.

We're particularly grateful to the Alfred and Jane Ross Foundation—Alfred Ross is expected to join us—for the support of our work in Russia.

It's an unusual program in that we have ten senior figures from the Russian media here at the Council for this one particular event. They are members of a delegation that's part of a bilateral presidential commission set up by presidents [Medvedev](#) and [Obama](#). It's important to remember that the dialogue and the relationship is more than just arms control and [START](#) [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties]; there are other civil society elements to this relationship that are embodied in the gentlemen you see on this podium.

I'd like to also thank Consul General Yushmanov and Vice Consul Andrey Rogozin for helping us organize this event.

I now want to hand the microphone over to Mr. Mikhail Shvydkoy, who is a special representative in the Russian Federation's Office of the President for International Cultural Cooperation. Mr. Shvydkoy will introduce the speakers.

The forum is that they will each speak, with interpretation, for about ten minutes, and that will give us time for the proverbial questions and answers period.

Mr. Shvydkoy, welcome and thank you, sir.

Remarks

MIKHAIL SHVYDKOY: Thank you very much.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you to our host for this really unusual event. We are very glad to be here this morning, because for us it is not so early in Moscow; it is about 6:00 PM. Thank you for coming, because for you it is a little bit much more complicated to be with us this morning.

I am special envoy for President Medvedev for International Cultural Cooperation, and at the same time co-chairman of the Working Group for Culture, Media, Sports, News, Education, blah, blah, blah, as an exchange between the United States and Russia. My absolutely unique partner is the Under-Secretary of

State Mrs. [Judith McHale](#), who we will meet tomorrow for the meeting of the working groups.

Here in this space, we present the real elite of the Russian press and media, these four gentlemen sitting down at this table. But in this room, there are also some people who are really influential for communicating in Russia, and who create the civil society in Russia. This is very important.

We present here a variety of media from our country.

Mr. Vladislav Fronin is editor-in-chief of the main Russian governmental newspaper, [Rossiyskaya Gazeta](#).

Pavel Gusev is the first pioneer of the private press in Russia. He is editor-in-chief of [Moskovsky Komsomolets](#), a newspaper with more than a million and a half copies per day. He is a very influential figure in Russian civil society because he is chairman of the Commission of Civil Chamber for Media. The Civil Chamber is the most powerful NGO in Russia, which aims to make a permanent discussion with the governmental vision of the press and media in our country.

Mr. Gusman is the director general of the former TASS, and now [ITAR-TASS](#), the Russian information agency. At the same time, he is a TV star and his program is very popular because he interviews top politicians in the world. Four times he has interviewed presidents of the United States. The presidents change, but he has stayed as the host of the program.

Mr. Ponomarev, the youngest of this team, is a very famous TV star too. He is editor-in-chief of information programs of our Moscow Television Network.

In this room, Mr. Azer Mursaliev is editor-in-chief of the Kommersant Publishing House, which was the first private publishing house in Russia. They started more than 20 years ago. They print not just [newspapers](#) but magazines, and are on the Internet, et cetera.

Mr. Mikhail Kotov is editor-in-chief of [Gazeta.ru](#), the most influential Internet publisher in Russia. I said "Internet publishing," which is some kind of contradiction. But I am an old man. It's possible.

And with us is Mrs. Nargiz Asadova. She will present the government opposition, [Echo Moskvy](#) of Moscow. She is editor-in-chief of this radio station, and at the same time she is a very famous journalist in Russia too.

I hope they will say what they want, because we live in an absolutely free country in a free time. It will be interesting. We will listen to your questions, and we will try to answer all of them.

Thank you again, and enjoy.

MIKHAIL GUSMAN: Mr. Gusev is our boss at this table because he is also the president of the Society of Moscow Journalists. It's a very big non-profit organization. We all pay small fees to his organization each month, about 5 rubles.

He is not only editor-in-chief, but he is also an owner of the very popular Russian newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets*. This newspaper also publishes here in the United States with the name *Novom Svete*. Maybe you can buy it, if you want, just across the street.

Pavel Gusev will start.

PAVEL GUSEV [translated]: Dear ladies and gentlemen, I will be speaking in Russian. My English is not perfect.

When speaking about the Russian mass media, I should say that it is very different in its essence. Russian mass media is living through a stage of rebirth.

There are about 70,000 different print media names in Russia which are issued today. Of course, high intensity is seen in the growth and immense force of different Internet media, as well as cable television which is also gaining force.

Russia is the largest geographic country in the world, which leads to great difficulties in communication. Today, we still have some territories where there is no TV coverage, for instance, to say nothing about the Internet, which definitely benefits only the central part of Russia, more or less.

Today the Russian mass media is versatile. Nobody has ever banned freedom of speech in Russia. But in

one way or another, 70 percent of the print media belongs to the state. Why does this happen? The reason is that the advertising market in Russia is so far, very weak.

President Medvedev has recently stated that all state-owned mass media should go private. Of course, this cannot happen overnight. If, for instance, tomorrow we let 70 percent of the media which is in one way or another owned by the state go to the free market, 68 percent of those will simply die because they will have no financing to exist.

On the one hand, we admit that in the regions the authorities have a very great influence on the mass media. But, on the other hand, we have to admit that it would be impossible to move away from this control within a very short time.

Everybody admits that one of the most liberal and democratic laws which exists in contemporary Russia is the one which was adopted back in 1991, during the first year of the new Russia after the Soviet Union, and that is the [Law on the Mass Media](#).

The reason that there is no ban on freedom of speech in Russia, is that, according to the Mass Media Act, freedom of speech does exist.

So why do democratic organizations criticize the mass media in Russia for not being free? The reason is that due to a number of preconditions, mass media does have some influence from the state.

However, I should provide you with some other information. Over the past year there have been about 70 different amendments submitted to the law on mass media. Each of those amendments would definitely kill this law.

But they were not adopted. They did not enter into force. The reason for that is the public expertise, the discussion on the public level, in which I participated actively myself—due to this evaluation and the estimation by the public, those amendments were not adopted. This is a grand achievement where public organizations have attained contacts with the authorities.

Having said this, I am prepared to take your questions and leave my colleagues an opportunity to speak too.

MIKHAIL GUSMAN: We'll continue. You have four minutes.

VLADISLAV FRONIN [translated]: When introducing me, Mikhail said that I am editor-in-chief of the governmental newspaper. But I am telling you that I am not responsible for the government. I am only editor-in-chief of the newspaper.

Some 20 years ago, I don't think one would imagine even in the most dreadful dreams that the representative or editor-in-chief of the governmental newspaper would sit here on the podium; however, the opposition's newspaper would be seated somewhere in the corner. But this is also needed because we have different media.

Ms. Nargiz is representing the opposition on the radio, and the authors on her station are also columnists in the state-owned newspaper.

In the morning, I checked the Website of the *Rossiyskaya* newspaper and was happy to see that, as usual, Mikhail Shvydkoy, the regular columnist of the newspaper, is there on the website. And there is a special columnist of the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* who will be celebrating his 80th birthday tomorrow, and that is [Mikhail Gorbachev](#). He has done a lot for the whole world and made a grand contribution to Russian journalism and its news media.

As here in the U.S., the press in Russia is living through difficult times, and the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* had to reduce its network in the regions by 20 percent. But this year we have managed to stop the recession in circulation.

The reasons for the drop in the number of copies, in the volume of circulation, are numerous. I will give just a couple of examples.

The newspaper which is owned by Pavel Gusev costs 25 cents here in the United States and it costs 50 cents back in Moscow. Income is definitely lower in Russia than in the U.S., and so people sometimes cannot afford to buy newspapers. The newspaper which is represented here today by Azer Mursaliev costs one-and-a-half euros, which is about \$2.00. It is the cost and the high price of newspapers that has led to

the reduction in the number of copies.

But we are glad that in the case of the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* we have managed to keep all those 42 points where the newspaper is printed.

Having said this, I would be glad to answer your questions, if you have them.

MIKHAIL GUSMAN: You mentioned the name of the great man and former Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev. You can imagine how respected this gentleman is that in our delegation, we have four members who are named Mikhail—Mr. Shvydkoy, Mr. Kotov, Mr. Ponomarev, and myself.

Now, I ask Mikhail Ponomarev to take the floor.

MIKHAIL PONOMAREV [translated]: I will dwell a little bit on what has been touched upon by my colleague Pavel Gusev so that we understand why sometimes we are criticized due to the limited freedom of speech in Russia.

We often say that Russia is a very young country—it is only 20 years old—while the United States is definitely a much older country, being over 200 years old. But of course Russia in its statehood existed for many centuries. However, we have a date in fairly recent history as a point in which we can understand why we have differences in the media and in circulation.

In 1791, the [First Amendment](#) to the Constitution was adopted here in the United States, which has clarified any doubts, if there have been any, about the eternity of the freedom of mass media. Thirteen years later, in 1804, in Russia we had the [Law on Censorship](#) adopted. That was the law that stated once and for all that nothing can be printed *without* censorship. So at approximately the same time in our two countries' history there were two documents born, one just having four lines in it, another one four pages, which exists practically until today.

That is why the Law on the Mass Media, which was adopted in Russia in 1991, has for us some sacred meaning and importance, because in fact it cancels once and for all the Law on Censorship of 1804. That is why we, as the professional and the public community, are doing a lot in order to not allow any restrictions on that law.

The helping hand to us is usually offered by new technologies, because the ultrasonic speed at which Internet communication is developing offers great opportunities for the development and the distribution of mass media to the people.

As was rightly stated by Mr. Gusev, there are 70,000 print media outlets in Russia and 1,500 TV companies. Imposing any control or supervision over that—I mean control and supervision in the bad sense of those words—would be impossible due to the fast development of technologies. This is where we lay our hopes.

MIKHAIL GUSMAN: Thank you, Mikhail.

The day after tomorrow I have a lecture at Harvard University, and we will go to Boston all together for this commission. The name of the lecture is "Traditional Russian Media vs. Blogosphere—Parallel or Perpendicular?"

Now I will give a few words in Russian, because when I speak about the oldest agency, TASS, I have to speak in Russian, just to know I will not forget my Russian.

[Translated] I represent here the oldest Russian and one of the oldest global news agencies, ITAR-TASS. We are turning 106 years old. We are the only state agency, and even institution, which independent of what changes there are in the country—wars or anything that was happening—never ceased to exist, even for an hour.

It is clear that today we work in the environment of natural competition. We have representation in 76 countries around the globe. And, of course, today we have to compete quite harshly with such a notion as the Internet, which I hate with all the powers of my soul.

Besides, I believe that [Julian Assange](#) is a big criminal. Had it been within my power, I would have jailed him for a long time. Of course, there are other people to decide on that. But personally I believe that what Assange is doing has nothing to do with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Speaking of the United States, we have very close contacts with our partners here in this country, and we have been in the States for about 80 years. We have a very important office which is located in New York and we have present here today the head of this office, Mr. Kikilo. We also have offices in Washington and Los Angeles. We are planning to expand our presence here in the United States, because due to the size and the greatness of the country, we see that those three offices that we have today are not enough to cover exactly what is going on in the United States.

We did our best today in order to confuse you completely regarding what the contemporary mass media is in Russia.

In fact, I represent a state-owned information agency. But, compared to the Soviet-era TASS, if you look at our news wires and our information, you will see that we do our best in order to show the information in its fullness, without any bias and to the full extent.

While it's not very good sometimes to quote your own boss, I will quote my boss, the director-general of ITAR-TASS, who this year will be celebrating his 70th birthday and 20 years of being at the helm of ITAR-TASS. Mr. Ignatenko words are—and they have become our motto—that "Something which is not covered by ITAR-TASS simply doesn't exist."

Having said this, I would like to stop my modest introduction and presentation and we will open the opportunity for questions and answers.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Edith Everett.

In 1987, I had the pleasure of participating with the Chautauqua Institution at the first public conference, I guess you'd call it, in Yormala [phonetic]. I don't know if that rings a bell. It was a quite extraordinary experience.

I had a conversation with some of the people in the audience. The idea of a free press was an alien thought. In fact, one of them said to me, "Why do I want to know if an airplane goes down? I don't want to be unhappy. Why should I read about those things?" That was then.

What's the situation now? Is there a thirst for knowledge? Do people want to know the truth? What is the current situation in Russia?

But the other question is Mr. Gusev said that 70 percent of the communications outlets would fail if it were not for government support. My question is: Is there no culture of corporate advertising in Russia? That's how we support our public communications.

MIKHAIL GUSMAN [translated]: I will start answering your first question.

I should tell you that the situation with the thirst and need for information is absolutely the opposite to what you heard back in 1987.

At the same time, I am prepared to admit that in the country, in any country, there will be a group of people who wouldn't like to know about some displeasing news.

But, speaking about the situation in contemporary Russia, I should tell you that, being a representative of a news agency, I don't recollect a situation, however sad the information might be, which wasn't covered by the media. The question is who in the media would be first to announce that. But never has there been a case when it was not covered.

My colleague Mikhail Ponomarev represents the TV channel and he is head of the information service of one of the leading Russian TV channels.

I would say that sometimes, and more often, the TV news channels are criticized for providing too much negative information, which makes people sad. I assume that Mikhail would correct me if I am wrong.

MIKHAIL PONOMAREV [translated]: I would agree to what has been said by Mikhail Gusman. In fact, there are no problems with getting access to information and distributing the information about some negative, sad, or extraordinary situations.

But, unfortunately, the modern world is such that the number of emergency situations we have to cover is

so high—be it manmade disasters, military conflicts, or natural disasters—that sometimes we have to limit ourselves in the number of those news items that we cover.

From the perspective of ratings, of course negative information and emergencies get the utmost attention. If we direct ourselves only by this assumption, then we would be showing different disasters and unpleasant bits of information 24 hours a day.

PAVEL GUSEV: From the news point of view, there is not a single event, not a single bit of news, which would not be covered by the mass media. The question is what are the evaluations and the comments on those events. That is where most of the problems appear. The state-owned news media would give one evaluation or comment on an event, while the privately owned media would give an absolutely different account of the same news event.

Speaking about the support or the financial assistance of the media, of which at the moment 70 percent belong to the state, is a very complex matter indeed. When I was speaking about those newspapers, I was more or less referring to fairly small ones, local and regional newspapers, which have a circulation of about 1,000 to 5,000 copies. They definitely cannot boast of any ads on their pages, and at the moment there can simply be no ads. Such newspapers exist either through the direct financial support of the state or through different grant programs which are distributed among such newspapers.

The problem is that the local authorities give the money to the newspapers directly from their own hands and in return believe that the mass media, the newspapers, have to report to them.

In the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, the Civil Society Chamber, we have suggested a different system. Our proposal is that in the regions throughout Russia there should be foundations, which would be governed by public organizations and would accumulate financial resources and then distribute them among such public media.

Another way is to have the state provide the paper on which the newspapers are printed, as well as to make the distribution of newspapers through the post office network free of charge.

Regardless of which scenario of those two is chosen, the main goal is to move the newspapers out from under the control of and dependence on the local authorities.

QUESTION [translated]: Nargiz Asadova.

As my colleagues introduced me, I seem to be the only representative of the opposition mass media of Russia here.

When speaking about the information that people want, in January when the [terrorist acts happened in the airport in Moscow](#), on our *Echo of Moscow* radio station website we were receiving lots of feedback from the people who were asking not to show and report on the details of what was happening.

They said, "Just provide us with figures of how many people were wounded or killed, to which hospitals were they brought, and tell us about the facts of this terrorist act. But please do not supply us with those atrocities, those terrible details. Do not show us the pictures of disfigured bodies and all those terrible things."

Even some journalists were commenting on the situation and criticizing their colleagues for trying to gain additional publicity by getting some hot information, exclusive photos or video footage, or other horrible images from the scene of the tragedy.

This is a situation which is legitimate for any country. If we recollect the tragic events of 9/11 here in the United States, there were lots of comments from viewers who did not want to see that tragic footage and images of people jumping from the buildings trying to save their lives.

But speaking about the notion and the feeling of the public towards the mass media, comparing the United States and Russia, the difference is fundamental. If here in the U.S., people believe that mass media is a tool of the public to control the state, then back in Russia the people feel that the mass media is a tool of the state to control the public.

For instance, in speaking about TV, some people tend to say when they cover some information, like for instance the [Khodorkovsky case](#), that the information is provided in very condensed and limited amounts and the views of the family of Khodorkovsky and his lawyers are not shown.

If we are speaking about the demonstrations of nationalist forces near the Kremlin, this event did not get TV coverage to the extent which could be expected.

Speaking about the Mass Media Act, indeed the Russian law is very good and is very liberal from the point of view of the mass media. However, in real terms there is so-called self-censorship.

Speaking about the TV, the younger generation, my generation, is watching less and less TV, and getting information from the Internet or other sources.

Speaking about the law, again I have to confirm that it is a very good law. However, in real terms there are cases of self-censorship, because we understand that sometimes there are ways of making a journalist think twice, or sometimes thrice, before he says or writes something.

There have been over 600 cases over the past years when journalists were assaulted.

The recent case of [Oleg Kashin](#), a journalist from *Kommersant*, who was beaten, did not result in any proper investigation, any accusation, or putting the criminals into jail. This case was very demonstrative. When he was assaulted, he was beaten—his legs, his head, and his fingers—which in my opinion was very explicit in saying "Don't go there where you shouldn't go, don't say what you shouldn't say, and don't write with your fingers what you shouldn't be writing." In such a case, and in other cases, this climate of impunity sets a certain atmosphere for journalism.

In ending my comments, I would like to quote one of the public figures of the 18th century of Russia, who said once that Russia is very good at writing laws but not very good at living according to those laws.

MIKHAIL GUSMAN [translated]: Despite my personal attitude towards the Internet as a source of professional information, in Russia we have a very reliable and strong source of information in the media which develops in the Internet, which is Gazeta.ru. I would like to give the floor to Mikhail Kotov to comment on the situation in the Internet.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Perhaps not surprisingly, the questions and answers period to some extent has been superseded by a debate within the delegation, which is fine. It's good to hear this. A quick comment by Mr. Kotov and then perhaps these people have some excellent questions.

MIKHAIL KOTOV [translated]: Speaking about the situation with mass media in Russia, it is unique and may be not quite clear from the U.S. perspective.

On the one hand, we have a strong dependence of the mass media on the state. But on the other hand, we have a very fast and booming mass media sector which is developing through the Internet.

Continuing and dwelling on what my colleague Mikhail Ponomarev said, much in the development of the mass media in Russia is dependent on the advancement of new technologies.

The new means of distributing information through the Internet is booming and is developing very aggressively, which leads to a situation when not only the private mass media, who are totally dependent on the extent of information and the volume of information they manage to gather and then sell, but also the state-owned mass media, have to act in order to compete in this situation.

Today it is very easy to turn off the TV and to surf the Web for the whole amount of information or for different views and opinions. That is why even the so-called state mass media have to compete in order to get their audience and provide more information than before in order to have strong positions in the Web and within this situation of the new media.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Other questions?

QUESTION: Robert James. I'm a businessman and also do private work with Human Rights Watch.

In seven or eight trips to Russia since Gorbachev, I found that human rights individuals and organizations have never sounded so downhearted about the situation there.

At the same time, you get the feeling that businessmen or investors also are not feeling very good about investment in Russia. Certainly, the figures show this compared with investing in Brazil, China, or India.

Does the media really address these problems very much?

QUESTION: Many years ago when I was in high school during World War II, I had to read the Soviet Constitution of 1936. As I recall, it was full of wonderful protections for human rights, and I think the press. I'm wondering whether the language in that 1936 Constitution was as protective, more protective, or less protective than the language of your current law protecting freedom of the press.

A subsidiary question is: Are there any restrictions on the publication or distribution in Russia of publications that are owned by foreigners, either in English or in Russian?

MIKHAIL GUSMAN: Mr. Shvydkoy doesn't represent the Russian press.

MIKHAIL SHVYDKOY: On one hand, I am a special envoy of the president, but on the other hand I am president of the Russian Academy of Television. I've worked for television all my life.

Yes, it's an issue. But I am going to answer the first question. I do believe it is a very important question.

The topic that you touched upon was raised about ten days ago in the [Krasnoyarsk Economic Forum](#). The deputy of the head of the Russian government, Mr. [Kudrin](#), presented a very sad situation, where the level of investments into the Russian Federation and the investment climate as such has been decreasing over the past few years. The situation today is worse than what it was in 2008 and 2009. Not only the society, but also the government, is quite worried about the statistics and the situation.

In the past one and a half years, the Russian press has been covering quite a number of very big stories around investments, or individuals related to investments, in Russia. We can recall such stories as [Hermitage Capital](#); now the whole investigation around Khodorkovsky; there is another story around [Magnitsky](#). All of the stories that refer to the issue of investments and security of investments in Russia are quite intensely covered in media outlets in Russia.

Russian journalists and human rights activists have played an enormous role in the story around Magnitsky and his tragic death in the prison. Thanks to human rights activists and journalists during such big, tragic stories as the story with Magnitsky and the journal discussion—it is only because of these activists that these particular cases are under very close supervision of the Russian government and president.

As far as the second question, the Russian Constitution, I believe you refer to the [Russian Constitution adopted in 1936](#), which is Stalin's Constitution. The only general comment I want to make to this question is that the Constitution we have today and the Constitution we had in 1936 are two hugely unrelated things.

AZER MURSALIEV: As a representative of the first independent business newspaper in Russia, *Kommersant*, I would like to also comment on the investment climate and current situation with investments in Russia.

As a business publication, we have been covering this particular story for about six or seven years. During these years, mostly media outlets that are writing on business affairs and news were focused on this topic. In the past few years, we see that the general media outlets that are covering different news are also deeply involved in the investigations and analysis of the investment situation in Russia.

When we are talking about investments in Russia we have to understand a very complex problem around the relationship between business and the state as such, and the very specific and different economic model that has been built around the complexity of this relationship.

As an example, I want to talk a little bit about the story with Magnitsky. A year before it occurred, Mr. [Browder](#) during his speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos mentioned that there is a very good investment climate in Russia and it is the right time to invest. However, it was obvious that there were quite serious issues even back then. But Mr. Browder decided to find his own way to deal with them.

I do believe that currently it is not an issue whether it is the government or it is the press that takes over the situation in terms of assessing or improving the investment climate in Russia. The economic tools and frameworks are going to influence the course of the development, which will lead to creating a more balanced and much more positive investment and economic situation in Russia.

MIKHAIL SHVYDKOY: I just want to make the last comment, going back to the Constitution of 1936. I really want to stress the fact that the Russia we knew back in 1953 or 1985 and the Russia we have today are two very different countries. If we look at the general trends that have been developing in Russia today, Russia is much more inclined to adapt democratic, European in many instances, values and principles in its everyday life.

DAVID SPEEDIE: On that, Chair Mr. Gusman was correct, this could have gone on for eight hours.

What I did not say at the beginning, however, is that the delegation just arrived in New York late yesterday, and are here, I believe, for less than 24 hours. So we're all the more delighted, ladies and gentlemen, that you have chosen the Council to be the forum for this interesting discussion, some very provocative views, and provoking some very good questions.

Please join me in thanking this delegation and wishing them well.

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