SOCHI
INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM
A COMBAT SPORT

OCTOBER 2013

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS
FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

AN INVESTIGATION BY JOHANN BIHR

SOCHI

Population (2013): 368 011
Mayor: Anatoly Pakhomov (since 2009)
Region: Krasnodar (Kuban)
Administrative centre: Krasnodar
Governor: Alexander Tkachev (since 2000)

INTRODUCTION

This report is the product of a Reporters Without Borders fact-finding visit to Sochi, Krasnodar and Moscow from 12 to 18 September 2013. RWB met journalists and bloggers of all political tendencies, local government officials, representatives of journalists' organizations, and civil society activists.

SOCHI - HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY AS NATIONAL SHOWCASE

Located in southern Russia, on the Black Sea, Sochi is not like other cities. Regarded as Russia's "unofficial summer capital" because so many officials have vacation homes there, it was a logical choice to host the Winter Olympics. Its inhabitants like to call it "the country's third city" and point out that, until 1958, it was a "republican city" with its own government, independent of the regional authorities, a status reserved for cities such as Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. Its development as the country's leading beach resort was largely due to Stalin, who had a dacha near the city. Sochi's privileged relationship with the Moscow elite was reinforced by the Soviet Union's breakup, which left neighbouring Crimea – a leading resort destination for the nomenklatura – as part of Ukraine, with the result that Sochi gradually replaced Crimea as the Russian riviera. Under Vladimir Putin, who also has a dacha in the area, there have been massive investments in Sochi.

This privileged status has helped Sochi to gain a degree of independence from the surrounding Krasnodar region, also known as Kuban. "Sochi is a more liberal city compared with agricultural Kuban," Galina Tashmatova, editor of the independent *Novaya Gazeta Kubani* newspaper, said. The city's distinguishing features have encouraged innovation. The flood of summer visitors favoured the emergence of capitalism in embryonic form in the Soviet era, when many residents rented their homes to tourists. "Even before perestroika, we were the first in the entire country to put ads on the front page," said Sergey Belov, editor of the now closed newspaper *Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa*. Nowadays, most local newspapers are free and depend largely on advertising. The opposition weekly *Mestnaya* includes a CD-ROM with each issue containing additional videos and interviews about local news developments. Even the city's information department boasts of its modern and "progressive" practices.

Sochi's distinguishing features have also won it Moscow's special attention. Raised by the Winter Olympics to the status of Russia's official showcase, Sochi now has the entire world's spotlights turned on it. A real estate price boom has encouraged many Muscovites to invest in what has become one of the country's most profitable regions. A succession of mayors have all been parachuted in from outside. National figures such as liberal opposition member Boris Nemtsov have run for the post. And Putin has invested political capital in the success of the games, the most expensive in Olympic history, hence his

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Leaders of the main communist bloc countries meeting in Sochi in June 1973 at Leonid Brezhnev's invitation

frequent visits and a close supervision of the local situation by the Kremlin. "It's Vladimir Putin's city, he comes here at least once a month," *Mestnaya* editor Oleg Rubejanski said. "He regards it as his region and the local authorities are very scared of what he thinks."

Right now, in October 2013, Sochi is still a gigantic construction site. Despite their Olympic pride, many inhabitants are very frustrated. The organization of the games, the land expropriations and the environmental dangers are the subject of less debate now than a year ago. The decisions were taken long ago and the work is on the final straight. The resentment and concern is now focused on the massive traffic jams, the frequent cuts in water and electricity supply, and the skyrocketing prices. Everyone cites the faulty logistics and corruption, which increase costs and lead to work having to be repeatedly redone. "What use is being made of the enormous sums being spent here?" environmental activist Vladimir Kimayev asked. "And all the infrastructure that has been built, how will it be maintained?" In many ways, and despite everything that makes it different, Sochi continues to be the "mirror of Russia" and its difficulties, to use Kimayev's phrase. And that applies to the media too, even if, in this respect, Sochi supplies some oxygen to a tightly controlled region.

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1 LOCAL MEDIA'S "CONDITIONAL INDEPENDENCE"

Although Sochi has many different regional and municipal media, most of the people Reporters Without Borders met described the level of media pluralism as limited. Many newspapers are basically the mouthpieces of their owners, whether individuals or authorities. The editorial line of some privately-owned newspapers sometimes wavers in line with political circumstances, intimidation or power struggles. Short-lived newspapers appear in the run-up to elections. Nonetheless, some leeway is tolerated and independent journalism exists.

The regional state-owned TV stations *TV9* and *GTRK*, and the local privately-owned station *Maks TV* dominate the broadcast media landscape. They produce their own programmes and rebroadcast some of the programmes of Moscow-based stations that are partners. *TV9* is the new name of *NTK* (New Television of Kuban), a privately-owned station that the regional government bought shortly after Alexander Tkachev became governor in 2000. According to the Glasnost Defence Foundation, the owner relinquished the station in return for a few million roubles and a job in the regional government's press department. *Maks TV* belongs to Maks Media Group, a company launched 15 years ago by businessman Mikhail Mikshis, which also owns the radio station *Maks FM* and a news website, Maks-portal.ru. The group is continuing to develop, recently merging its various newsrooms into one and planning to launch a 24-hour TV news channel on 1 November.

The leading regional newspapers include *Kubanskye Novosti* and *Kuban Segodnya*, which are co-owned by the regional government, and the privately-owned *Volnaya Kuban* and *Yug Times*. The regional editions of leading national newspapers are also fairly popular. They include *Moskovsky Komsomolets na Kubani*, *Argumenty i Fakty Kuban*, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda Kuban*. *Novaya Gazeta Kubani*, a partner of the Moscow-based *Novaya Gazeta*, has a more limited print run. At the municipal level, the main newspapers are the privately-owned weeklies *Nash Dom Sochi* and *Narodnaya Gazeta Sochi*, the city government's mouthpiece *Novosti Sochi*, and the opposition *Mestnaya*.

CLOSURE OF CHERNOMORSKAYA ZDRAVNITSA, A "TERRIBLE BLOW" FOR INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

Many national media have permanent Krasnodar or Sochi correspondents. They are not subject to the same constraints as journalists working for the local media and it is sometimes easier for them to tackle sensitive stories. "It is easier to talk to national and international media than to local newspapers," the environmental activist Vladimir Kimayev said.

Finally, in addition to the websites operated by these media and such news sites as *Kavkazsky Uzel*, the blogosphere has developed rapidly in Sochi. Besides Vesti-sochi.ru, Privetsochi.ru and BlogSochi.ru are fairly popular and have given the news domain a shot in the arm. Launched by Alexander Valov, a young entrepreneur from the Baikal region who moved to Sochi six years ago, BlogSochi.ru hosts and produces articles that are often quite critical of local figures. He says he has been the target of many lawsuits.

The environmental activist Vladimir Kimayev puts it succinctly: "*Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa* was a unique newspaper. Its articles were totally objective, covering the positive and negative aspects of local life. It was a source of pressure on the authorities and its closure was a terrible blow."

His opinion is widely shared. After 95 years of existence, the city's oldest newspaper published its last issue on 1 May 2012. Led by editor and co-owner Sergey Belov, it had established an editorial policy that aspired to "constructive opposition."

"*Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa* was entirely independent and we were financially autonomous," Belov said. "Sochi's mayors all paid a great deal of attention to what we wrote. We were very well informed and we were among the few to denounce the law-breaking that accompanied the real estate boom – building in earthquake areas, flood areas and protected areas." The newspaper was prepared to publish articles provided by the municipal and regional press departments, but unlike many newspapers, it labelled then as 'Press Department'.

Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa's material survival was based both on its Soviet past and innovative management. A member of international media associations such as the International Press Institute and the World Association of Newspapers, Belov could talk forever about the technological lead long maintained by his newspaper. For years, *Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa*'s regional importance protected it from city hall pressure. "Even before perestroika, we received three times more readers' letters than the main regional newspaper, Sovietskaya Kuban. The mayor could not do anything he wanted. We played a cat and mouse game."

But unfair competition and lawsuits finally got the better of *Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa*. As a result of court rulings, the newspaper's premises, warehouses and press were seized. The journalist Svetlana Kravchenko (see Part III) said: "*Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa*'s closure was deliberately orchestrated."

Stone commemorating the 80th anniversary of the creation of *Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa,* now serving as its gravestone.

1. EXTREME ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY

Free newspapers have left their mark on Sochi's local media landscape. No fewer than 100,000 copies of *Narodnaya Gazeta - Sochi*, which is edited by municipal councillor Tatyana Chernovalova, are put in the letter-boxes of homes in Sochi and surrounding areas. It is the same with *Nash Dom Sochi*, a privately-owned weekly, which reserves 70 per cent of its page space for ads. *Novosti Sochi*, the city hall's official newspaper, and the opposition newspaper *Mestnaya* use the same model. There are also many purely commercial publications.

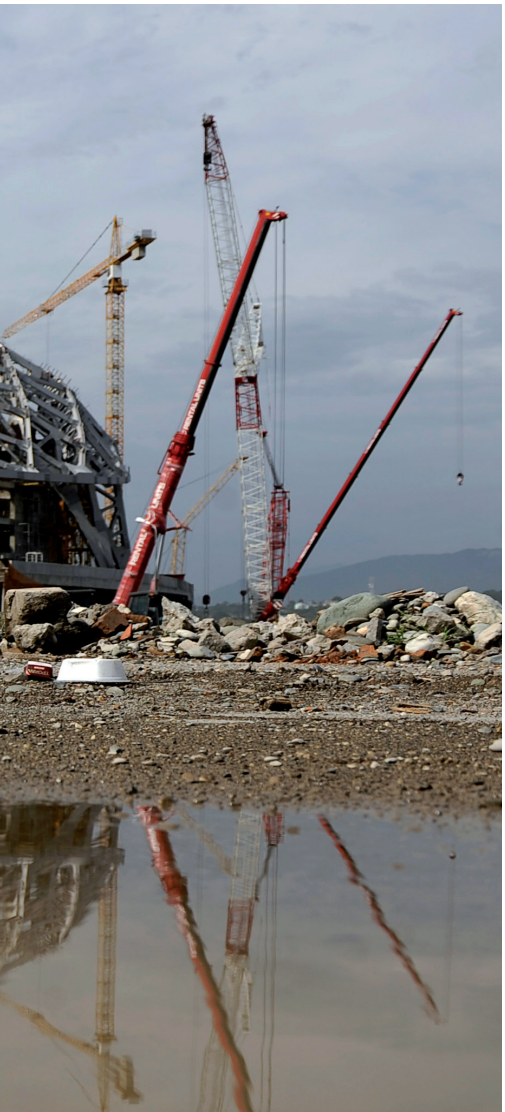
Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa was the first newspaper to publish a free supplement, *Kurortnaya Nedelya*, to attract advertising and keep itself afloat. The city's oldest newspaper, founded in 1917, it adopted an innovative strategy in a search for real financial and editorial autonomy. But it was forced to close in 2012 as a result of the emergence of new publications that were solely interested in advertising, publications that were more attractive to advertisers than a newspaper like *Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa*, which wanted to be able to criticize the local authorities. *Sochi*, a weekly that had a reputation for its bold treatment of sensitive subjects in the early 2000s, also stopped publishing a few years ago.

2. STATE FUNDING, TOOL OF DEPENDENCY

As in the rest of the country, most of the local media have "information supply agreements" with the municipal and regional authorities. The system is openly designed to provide the local media with financial support. Under these agreements, the media receive generous subsidies and tax advantages in return for publishing a quota of reports supplied by the municipal and regional press departments. These reports are not just official announcements. They are often full-blown advertorials singing the praises of the authorities that are usually published among other reports without being labelled as advertorials. In some cases, the media may also agree to give a certain space or air-time to government representatives.

Media must request these subsidies under a competitive application process that is repeated at regular intervals. The amount of money involved is often enormous for media that have been brought to their knees financially by the loss of revenue from advertisers who have abandoned them for publications dedicated solely to advertising. In a 2003 report on the Krasnodar region, the Glasnost Defence Foundation described the system as playing the key role in the ability of the local authorities to pressure the media.

"The application process is conducted according to the Federation of Russia's laws," said Mikael Nersesian of the Sochi municipal information department. "Each media with which we reach an agreement benefits from it. We offer them what they need and we adapt to the different formats (…) We only spend 20 per cent of our work time on preparing content to offer to the media. The remaining 80 per cent of our time is spent on responding to their requests. Similarly, I would say that about 20 per cent of the content of these media comes from the government, as against 80 per cent that is self-produced."



Many of the journalists Reporters Without Borders spoke to nonetheless said the press departments were extremely demanding about the way their content was presented. The "information supply agreements" are a Trojan horse that gives the authorities a right of extensive editorial supervision over part of the published content – with a temptation to intervene in other content – and over the finances of the media concerned.

Vyacheslav Smeyukha, the editor of the regional daily *Kubanskye Novosti* and a representative of the Krasnodar Union of Journalists, said it was possible to discuss the administration's directives. "Being linked to the administration by one of these accords does not mean that criticism is impossible, and one can always denounce the accord," he said. "It

is true that some officials think they can take advantage of the accords to tell us what we must write. I have received a few phone calls of this kind. But you just have to be firm and put them in their place." But in a highly competitive climate in a local market, a trial of strength with the local authorities is difficult when so much is at stake economically. It can only be attempted by the few media with a solid financial base.

The biweekly *Novaya Gazeta Kubani* is one of the few newspapers not to enter into such an agreement. "I am not at all bothered by the fact that *Novaya Gazeta Kubani*'s journalists are almost never invited to official press briefings and press conferences," editor Galina Tashmatova said. "On the contrary, I am even glad that our time isn't being wasted by a daily dose of propaganda. This does not in any way prevent us from getting the information we need from the administration. We send precise requests to which the administration replies within the seven-day deadline set by the law. This is much more effective."

Novaya Gazeta Kubani has to compete with subsidised media and it is by no means available on all newsstands, so its economic situation is precarious. The Moscow-based *Novaya Gazeta* provides much of its content and the support that its reputation represents, but no material assistance. Asked whether it was going to be able to survive, Tashmatova replied: "We ask ourselves that all the time and we produce each issue as if it could be the last one."

Sochi municipal administration building

3. “DIALOGUE” WITH THE AUTHORITIES?

When journalists and local administration officials are asked about their mutual relations, the key word is “dialogue.” But when pressed to elaborate, it is clear that they are using this word in very different senses.

As elsewhere in Russia, the Sochi city hall press department plays a crucial role in relations between the authorities and the media. Its main function is to publicize what the city hall is doing and what it wants to tell the public, in part by means of the “information supply agreements” reached with most media. The press department also actively monitors the local media and reacts to what they say, sometimes by posting comments on the city blogs.

Press department chief Tatiana Pshenisnova and her deputy, Mikael Nersesian

According to its head, Tatiana Pshenisnova, and her deputy, Mikael Nersesian, the press department is above all at the service of journalists, inasmuch as it is the focal point to which they turn when they need official information. “We facilitate journalists’ access to officials, we help them get interviews with the mayor and his deputies […] and we prepare statistics and briefings for them,” Pshenisnova said. “It’s in our interest that they have information. Also, as we are the most open and available representatives of the administration, they often call us for everything and anything, and we sometimes take too much on ourselves.” Pshenisnova regards herself as an intermediary: “The journalists regard us as officials, and officials regard us as journalists.”

Pshenisnova said that, if the press department made so many calls, it was just to be effective and fast. “We try to keep up with the pace of the news. We are proud of not operating like most press services, which – when they spot a mistake or a lie in a media – send an injunction in the mail requiring that it be corrected within 10 days. When this happens, we dialogue with the media concerned and urge it to publish a retraction within three days. We try to avoid court proceedings and the journalists themselves have every interest in our following that policy.”

If there is a taboo recognized by most of the media at the regional level, it is criticizing the governor, Alexander Tkachev. “You can criticize anyone but the situation is different with the governor,” Vyacheslav Smeyukha said. “It’s the same for all the local media in Russia… and I think it is the same everywhere in the world. You really have to have very serious grounds for criticizing the governor.” After all it is the local authorities who issue licences to the local media –¬– and sometimes withdraw them.

Maks Media Group
editor in chief
Natalya Boyko

4. MEDIA OWNERS IMPOSE THEIR MARK

Most of the people Reporters Without Borders talked to recognized that self-censorship continues to be widely practiced by the media. "Our newspaper is free and yet journalists still ask me if they can say this or that or report something in such a way," Vyacheslav Smeyukha said. "I always reply that they should write what they really think. How a story is handled depends a lot on senior editors. Some of them do the right thing."

The freedom with which a publication expresses itself is largely based on the personality of the person running it, his relationship with the administration and leading local businessmen, his view of journalism and his determination to fight for editorial autonomy. This is complicated by the fact that several of the region's newspaper editors are also their owners, with the result that the clear separation that should be made between editorial policies and economic management may be minimal or non-existent.

Natalya Boyko, the editor in chief of the media owned by the Maks Media Group, readily recognized that the group's relative editorial independence was due to the status of its owner, Mikhail Mikshis, a leading local figure with close links to the administration. The group's editorial policies are determined by Mikshis himself, and his stature allows him some leeway.

"*Maks TV* is one of the few TV stations that dare to criticize the authorities," she said. "The mayor often lets us know that he is unhappy after our coverage of this or that event […] Just yesterday, we invited the Geographical Society to take part in our talk-show 'Chasovoy Efir' about building in protected areas. I cannot claim that we can say everything. We understand the environment in which we are operating. What's more, given all the attention that Sochi gets nationally, we don't want to create problems for our city."

Local media owners and editors naturally have many kinds of links with the local authorities. Several are members of the "Citizens Council" of the Olympic Games Organizing Committee. This consultative council is modelled on the various committees of civil society representatives that have been created to advise the Russian president and government. Its members include Vyatheslav Smeyukha, Mikhail Mikshis, Dmitry Mozolyuk (the head of *VGTRK* Sochi) and Margarita Simonian, a Krasnodar native who is editor in chief of *Russia Today*, a state-owned TV station targeting the international community.

Not content with creating *Novaya Gazeta Kubani* in 2004, Galina Tashmatova has created an association called “Golos Kubani” (Voice of Kuban) to protect and encourage the region’s independent journalists. It has carried out many projects in the region and neighbouring areas to increase the media’s awareness of local government and environmental issues. Taking statements of intention by officials at their word, it has awarded prizes for the best investigative reporting on corruption. To draw attention to the difficulties that journalists encounter in seeking access to state-held information, it awards a spoof prize every year to the region’s most opaque press department. The award is called the “Burned Chicken”. Circumventing official events, independent journalism has invented new forms of solidary and celebration.

Novaya Gazeta Kubani editor in chief Galina Tashmatova

2 HARSHER FORMS OF PRESSURE

Most of Sochi's journalists have rarely received anything other than the previously mentioned soft forms of pressure and encouragement to censor themselves. But that does not mean that they are safe from any form of danger. The name of Sergey Zolovkin, a journalist who worked for *Novaya Gazeta* and then the weekly Sochi, often crops up in conversation. Well known in Sochi for his investigative reporting on illegal construction, judicial corruption and crime, he narrowly escaped a shooting attack on 11 March 2002. The same year, he was the target of high-profile proceedings initiated by a number of judges. After receiving new threats, he fled to Germany.

The offices of *Narodnaya Gazeta - Sochi* were badly damaged by an arson attack on 31 December 2010. Among the possible motives cited by editor Tatyana Chernovalova (who is also a member of the municipal council) were several articles on land and real estate disputes, and corruption. Aside from journalists, many civil society activists, especially environmentalists, have been harassed in recent months. They include Suren Gazaryan, Vladimir Kimayev and Natalya Kalinovskaya . Mikhail Savva, a human rights activist who was arrested on 12 April on a charge of embezzlement, is still in pre-trial detention in Krasnodar.

1. DISTURBING PRECEDENT OF JOURNALIST UNDER HOUSE ARREST

The detention of Nikolai Yarst, an experienced freelance journalist who worked for state-owned TV station *OTR*, is unprecedented in Sochi. Arrested on 23 May on a charge of illegal possession of drugs under article 228 of the criminal code, which carries a possible ten-year jail term, he has been under house arrest for more than four months with no possibility of any contact with colleagues and friends. The investigation has been marked by so many inconsistencies and procedural violations that it is hard to blame them on nothing more than negligence.

On 23 May, Yarst and his cameraman Filipp Vasilenko were heading to an appointment at the Sochi office of the Investigative Committee (Russia's FBI equivalent) in the hope of getting information for a story, when their car was stopped en route by a traffic policeman. Vasilenko told Reporters Without Borders: "We had committed no traffic violation and we were driving slowly because there were traffic jams (…) And contrary to what the police later said, our seat belts were fastened. What's more, it is one of those cars that emits a loud sound if the seat belts are not fastened (…) The police told us there had been a report about our car, that we were supposedly carrying something illegal." After they were stopped, other police officers quickly appeared and one of them claimed to have found an envelope containing drugs on the back seat.

Why did the police offer several different versions of the circumstances Yarst's arrest in succession ?

According to the version later given by the interior ministry, the car was stopped because it had violated the highway code and was then searched because the driver and passenger had behaved "strangely." However, the leading prosecution witness said in a statement that he had told the police that he saw Yarst hide the drugs in his car on the eve of his arrest.

After testing negatively for the presence of drugs in his blood stream, Yarst was charged with illegal possession of drugs. After two days in policy custody and the start of a campaign for his release, he was freed and placed under judicial control. A week later, the police said they had found traces of drugs on the clothes he was wearing at the time of his arrest, although the traces were so slight that nothing remained. A new order was then issued putting him under house arrest and forbidding him to communicate with anyone except his lawyer, the investigating judge, his wife and his co-tenant, Vasilenko. The initial investigation was concluded in record time on 7 June but there were so many inconsistencies that the prosecutor's office ordered an additional investigation that was completed on 23 August. A decision to extend Yarst's house arrest for another month was confirmed on appeal on 27 September. The trial is supposed to start soon.

Why did the police offer several different versions of the circumstances of Yarst's arrest in succession ? Why did the police not search his clothes at the time of arrest, instead of realizing a week later, in the absence of witnesses, that his clothes bore the traces of drugs ? And can these traces be considered evidence inasmuch as they have entirely disappeared ? And finally, if Yarst really was a drug consumer, why would he have been so imprudent as to carry drugs in his car when he was going to a meeting with the police? None of these questions has been answered.

Yarst denies the charges, which he claims were fabricated in response to the story he was working on. At the time of his arrest, he was investigating the case of a seven-year-old girl de who remained in the custody of her mother's partner after the mother's death. A court ordered that the girl, who had inherited land and real estate, be placed in her father's custody but the police and Investigative Committee did not comply, suggesting complicity with the mother's partner. The defence also thinks the fabrication might be linked to an argument Yarst had on 20 April with a person who identified himself as a colonel in the local police and who reportedly threatened him with "reprisals."

One of Yarst's lawyers, Alexander Popkov, said witnesses have been pressured. He also said: "We are now only cooperating in a minimal manner with the investigation because all the evidence we produce is turned against us (…) The legal deadlines are not being respected. The investigation was completed on 23 August but it was not passed to the prosecutor until 2 September. The prosecutor normally has 10 days to decide whether to approve it or demand an additional investigation. But 12 days have gone by and still nothing (…) Everything is being done to complicate the defence's job (…) We repeatedly requested a reenactment of the events but the investigators refused until the prosecutor ordered it. Three reenactments ended up being organized, but in only one of them were photographs taken and placed in the case file."

Also, there were reportedly significant differences between the reenactment of Yarst's arrest and his actual arrest. The defence lawyers are now so suspicious that they even wondered whether the various documents that the prosecution mailed to Yarst were not a trap, because officially he is forbidden to receive any mail.

Popkov said Yarst's morale has been undermined by the absurdity of his situation: "His mental state is not good. He feels abandoned. He has the impression that no one believes him." Vasilenko meanwhile found himself unemployed on 30 June after his two-year-old contract with *TV Tsentr* was not renewed. Popkov thinks that the case, which has received a degree of media attention because it involves a journalist, is indicative of flaws in the judicial system that affect all citizens. Sochi as "mirror of Russia"?

Headquarters of the newspaper *Mestnaya*

2. MESTNAYA – AN OPPOSITION NEWSPAPER'S LEGAL PROBLEMS

Mestnaya is a newspaper that can be very critical of the local authorities. "From the outset, we decided not to cover the positive aspects of local politics because the other media do that already and do it better than we could," owner and publisher Oleg Rubejanski said. "That does not mean that everything is wrong, far from it. But we just decided to talk about the problems that are not mentioned elsewhere – bribes, traffic jams, the water and power cuts, corruption at medical centres and so on (…) We have published more than 45 articles on problems linked to the preparations for the Olympic games, including cases of corruption, environmental problems and exploitation of labour."

The offices of *Mestnaya* were searched on 7 June 2013 as part of investigation into Rubejanski on suspicion of violating copyright. Rubejanski said the investigation was the continuation of a series of police inspections carried out when *Mestnaya* moved to new premises that had previously housed a DVD shop. All of *Mestnaya*'s computers were seized on the grounds that they could contain pirated software. They were returned to the newspaper at the end of July, when the investigation was finally abandoned. But the police had meanwhile been able to access all the details of sources and contacts on the computers in what was a blatant violation of the confidentiality of journalists' sources. In a special issue on 14 June, *Mestnaya* described the police operation as an attempt to intimidate the newspaper.

It was not an isolated incident. *Mestnaya* narrowly avoided closure in February 2013. The communications regulatory agency Roskomnadzor asked a court to close the newspaper on the grounds that it had failed to provide the agency with a copy of its statutes three years before. The court rejected the request.

Mestnaya editor Arkady Lander was attacked inside his home on 26 April 2010 by two intruders who had been seen hanging around the apartment building by neighbours during the preceding days. They beat him about the head with metal bars, with the result that he was hospitalized with a skull fracture, concussion and deep cuts to the head. The fact that nothing was taken from the apartment supports Lander's belief that he was attacked in connection his work.

3. JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS

It is not easy investigating corruption, illegal conflicts of interest and other sensitive matters as *Novaya Gazeta Kubani* does, following the example of its Moscow-based partner. Galina Tashmatova says her newspaper is usually defending itself in five or six lawsuits at any one time. "We work with great care and we weigh every word, thinking of the courts," she said. "In nearly ten years of existence, we have lost only one case, when our reporter interviewed the tax inspection chief, who then denied what he had said. Since then, we always make people read the comments we plan to publish and we ask them to sign a statement that they agree."

Tashmatova added: "In the latest case against us, Krasnodarmejregiongaz, the regional gas monopoly, is suing us for nearly 7 million roubles [160,000 euros] in damages over an article about corruption, although all of our evidence comes from official statements and documents. This is the level of damages that is usually sought from us, with the aim of intimidating our journalists (…) Even if we win these cases, they take up an incredible amount of time and money."

Svetlana Kravchenko is well known in Sochi for her articles critical of the local authorities and her investigative reporting on corruption cases. Formerly employed by *Chernomorskaya Zdravnitsa* and now working for *Kavkazsky Uzel*, a Moscow-based independent news website specializing in the Caucasus, she has often been the target of threats, intimidation and lawsuits. She was, for example, sued in 2006 and 2007 for her coverage of the expropriation and relocation of graves. While trying to interview the representatives of a water supply management company about chronic water shortages in Sochi on 8 December 2011, she was attacked by a security guard after being told to stop filming and leave.

"I had told them I would be coming in connection with my story," she told Reporters Without Borders. "When I refused to stop filming, the security guard hit my video camera and blocked my way, preventing me from leaving. I finally managed to escape but I felt so ill [with hypertension] that I had to go to a hospital emergency department." The security guard filed a complaint accusing her of aggravated assault because, in her efforts to escape, she inflicted a slight scratch on his ear. Absurd as it may sound, she was convicted in December 2012 and sentenced to pay a fine of 10,000 roubles (228 euros).

This conviction was overturned on procedural grounds in March 2013 but the case is being retried and experts are currently examining the medical certificates. "It is an absurd battle but I have to fight it," Kravchenko said. In the meantime, administrative harassment and bullying has compounded the court case. The migration department refused to give her a passport after the initial conviction. It did issue her with a passport after the conviction was overturned, but one valid for only five years, instead of the ten-year one she requested, and she had to pay the passport fee a second time.

3 MEDIAS AND THE OLYMPICS

1. WINTER OLYMPICS – GOOD OR BAD NEWS FOR MEDIA FREEDOM?

What with stories about bribes, anarchic construction, the cementing over of a once very green city, environmental damage and trafficking in zoning permits, it would be hard to say that the local media have said absolutely nothing about the problems linked to the preparations for the Olympic Games. Some have covered these stories at length and others have ignored them. But the former are not the most influential. Some of these stories and issues have entered the public debate but on a much smaller scale and involving a much smaller sector of the public than might have been expected with an event of this importance. "People say only positive things about the games, as if they were talking about a dead person," Svetlana Kravchenko joked. Olympic pride and a desire to promote Sochi to the rest of the country have undoubtedly helped to restrain criticism.

Environmental activist Vladimir Kimayev

National and international attention, on the other hand, has helped to increase the impact of criticism. "Thanks to NGOs and activist groups, especially the environmentalists, there was a lot of criticism of the Olympic Games in the media at first," Galina Tashmatova said. "It has been an example of how media pressure can force the authorities to respect the law. I think this experience has taught them a lot. With the spotlights turned on them, they had to make concessions to opinion and put an end to certain abuses. Construction for the Olympics has been under way for five years and during all this time the authorities have been working under media surveillance. They have begun to work better, in Sochi at least."

The environmentalist Vladimir Kimayev was more cautious. "I don't think the authorities have taken the criticism into account because no significant measure has been taken as a result of criticism." In his view, in addition to applying the law of silence to certain incidents, the main local media have above all failed in their duty to present all sides of every issue and thereby foster a dialogue. "No one tells the public what we think (…) Journalists should referee a dispute but how can they do that if they are involved, if they are taking sides (…) There is no one to appeal to. So dialogue is impossible and only pressure works."

2. ALLOCATION OF ACCREDITATION - PROPAGANDA CONTEST?

Journalists from all over the world will descend en masse on Sochi for the opening of the games. The Olympic Organizing Committee will issue 2,800 accreditations, of which 200 will be reserved for Russian journalists . The visiting journalists will be pampered. The Organizing Committee has announced that they would be housed in specially-built hotels. Each accreditation will include access to a free Wi-Fi network.

But the method of assigning accreditations to Sochi's media has proved controversial. After asking all the media to submit the names of the reporters they wanted to accredit, the Organizing Committee announced that there were so many applicants that a contest would have to be held to choose the lucky ones. During the summer, applicants were asked to submit entries on the subject of "Your sports star." Many people criticized what seemed to be a propaganda contest, a way of choosing journalists who were best at praising rather than criticizing. Levan Broladze, the former head of the local branch of the Union of Journalists, said: "It's a contest on the subject of 'Who will praise me best'."

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Several media refused to participate. Aleksandr Valov, a blogger who edits BlogSochi.ru, even urged local independent news providers to boycott the games. Confusion continued to reign in mid-September, with many media still not knowing whether their reporters had been accredited. "I recently learned that a former journalist who became a power company's press officer was among those who had won the contest," the Maks Media Group's editor in chief, Natalya Boyko said.

But most of the journalists Reporters Without Borders met said obtaining accreditation was not a key issue. For the most part, the Sochi-based media do not have the resources to compete with all the national and international media that will be covering the games. "'What matters for us is not so much the sports events in themselves as the way the population receives the guests and whether the city will pass this test," Levan Broladze said.

Boyko added: "So far we have no accredited reporter. But we will work with our colleagues from the national media and with the *RIA-Novosti* news agency. We will almost certainly arrange for information to be pooled. In a way, the lack of accreditation will mean that, instead of covering all the sports events on everyone's screens, we will be 'forced' to cover the parallel events, including the more sensitive stories such as how you manage to get around Sochi by car. In the end, they will be more interesting."

3. PUTIN SUSPENDS CONSTITUTION, GAMES UNDER STATE OF EMERGENCY

On 19 August 2013, President Putin signed a decree (Ukaz No. 686) aimed at imposing rigorous controls on the movement of persons and goods in Sochi from 7 January 2014 – a month before the start of the Winter Olympics – until the end of the Paralympics on 21 March. The concern about terrorist threats is unmistakable in the draconian security measures envisaged in the decree. In July 2013, Doku Umarov, an Islamist and self-proclaimed "emir of the Caucasus," had called for "all means permitted by Allah" to be used to prevent the holding of the games, which he described as "satanic dances on the graves of our ancestors ."

The area in which the games will take place will be divided into "prohibited zones" and "controlled zones" in which there will be systematic police checks and searches. Movements through nearby border crossings will be severely limited. A central register will be established of all those with official accreditation, the only ones allowed to move about the entire area.

These draconian provisions will necessarily affect the work of the local media. Levan Broladze told Reporters Without Borders: "There is no letterpress in Sochi capable of producing the volume and quality we need so we are forced to print in Krasnodar. As movements will be restricted, we are in the process of finding a new vehicle and a new driver who lives in Sochi and who will therefore be allowed to enter the city. We may also have problems accessing all the letterboxes we currently cover. But we have absolutely nothing against this. These restrictions are comprehensible. There is an overriding need to ensure the security of the games."

As well as these comprehensible security measures, "any gathering, meeting, demonstration, march or picket" other than events linked to the games is also banned outright by the decree, which does not explain why such fundamental freedoms have to be suspended. Some Russian media have described this provision as disproportionate and have likened the state of exception imposed in Sochi to the "counter-terrorism operations" (KTO) that are regularly carried out in the nearby Caucasian republics. Jurists have pointed out that, under the Russian constitution, fundamental freedoms can be restricted by a law or a state of emergency, but not by presidential decree.

Adopted amid an international outcry about the Russian law banning the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations," the decree clearly aims to prevent any protests. But it also serves as an untimely reminder of something the Kremlin prefers to minimize – the low-intensity civil war in most of the republics of the Russian Caucasus especially Dagestan, just a few hundred kilometres away, where the civilian population, including journalists, continue to pay a high price.

CONCLUSION

COMBAT AND ENDURANCE SPORT

"Two years ago, we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Russian media law [which proclaimed democratic guarantees after the collapse of the Soviet Union]," Galina Tashmatova said. "This event went almost unnoticed both in our region and the rest of the country (…) We are the only ones to blame [for the situation of the local media]. The desire for an easy life and the lack of any display of civic consciousness on the part of journalists are linked, in my view, to the lack of any demand for honest journalism in Russian society at this time."

But it is clear that Tashmatova's demanding definition of her profession exacts a high price that includes no financial security for the newspaper and its employees, families deprived of many possibilities, and a lot of time and resources spent on lawsuits. Independent journalism is an option, but it is a challenging one at the personal level, one that requires more than strict respect for professional ethics. It is a combat and endurance sport that demands exceptional determination and perseverance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reporters Without Borders asks

The federal and local authorities:

• To thoroughly overhaul the system of support for local media, especially the "information supply agreements," so as to limit the local media's dependence on the administration and prevent any editorial interference.

• To treat all news media equally as regards subsidies and access to state-held information.

The judicial institutions:

• To grant Nikolai Yarst a conditional release and ensure that he gets a fair trial.

• To penalize prosecutions of journalists and media that are conducted in an abusive manner with the sole aim of intimidating them and hindering their work.

Journalists and local media owners:

• To ensure that editorial decision-making and business decision-making are kept apart.

• To create organizational structures within each media that ensure that the journalists maintain their editorial independence of the shareholders.

Foreign journalists covering the Winter Olympics in Sochi:

• To do everything possible to meet local journalists and civil society activists and to cover the conditions in which they operate.

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS is an international press freedom organisation. It monitors and reports violations of media freedom throughout the world. Reporters Without Borders analyses the information it obtains and uses press releases, letters, investigative reports and recommendations to alert public opinion to abuses against journalists and violations of free expression, and to put pressure on politicians and government officials.

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