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Izvestia Offers Snapshot of Russian Zhizn

By Alexei Pankin

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Ever since 2005, when I was the editor of the opinion page at Izvestia, one minor detail has stuck in my memory. The editor-in-chief read a stack of major newspapers every morning before our daily staff meetings, but the publication that was on the top of the heap was the tabloid Zhizn. He was always fond of chiding journalists when Zhizn beat them to sensational stories.

In an ironic twist, Zhizn founder Aram Gabrelyanov has now been appointed the publisher of Izvestia. His first managerial decision was to fire 80 percent of the journalists. He also announced that, having achieved amazing success with Zhizn, he would try to make Izvestia a rival to the Kommersant and Vedomosti newspapers.

Izvestia is currently owned by National Media Group, which also owns Channel 5, Ren-TV, a blocking stake in Channel One and is known to have close ties to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. By all indications, National Media Group is expected to turn Izvestia into an election

resource for United Russia and possibly for the presidential election in March.

There is at least one good aspect of the change in management at Izvestia: It shows that the newspaper business is still considered attractive for investment.

Gabrelyanov also said he would like to emulate The Wall Street Journal, an interesting choice not only because it is a high-quality newspaper, but because it is a conservative alternative to the liberal New York Times and Washington Post. This balance is what is missing on Russia's media market. Vedomosti and Kommersant, the country's two best dailies, have a liberal bent, while educated, successful conservatives, who make up a significant portion of the middle class, do not have a serious daily newspaper that reflects their views. If Gabrelyanov manages to turn Izvestia into a high-quality conservative daily, he will earn praise and gratitude for filling a much-needed gap and for introducing greater pluralism.

There is an additional controversial aspect to this story. The laid-off Izvestia journalists protested when they learned that they would not get severance pay. In the end, however, they managed to secure two months of severance pay. They considered that a big victory, although the law stipulates they should receive from four to five months of severance pay.

The Izvestia layoffs are an accurate snapshot of Russian autocracy as a whole. Democracy has failed in Russia less because of the vicious authoritarian tendencies of its rulers, and more because people are unable to unwilling to defend their own interests.

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