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# How Journalists Defend Against Lawlessness

By Alexei Pankin

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I received an invitation last week to attend the national Restoring Leadership forum to be held on Tuesday. Speakers at the forum were listed as senior managers from leading private and state corporations, governors, ministers, deputy ministers and presidential advisers. "Unfortunately," I responded, "I will not be able to attend because I will be protesting the closure of the Chertanovsky market that day."

When I stopped by an indoor market near my home last week, I was surprised to find the vendors in shock and tears. I learned that a local official had informed them an hour earlier that the market would be torn down and that vendors had only three days to clear out. One farmer from Ryazan sobbed, "If I can't find a new place to set up shop quickly, I will have to butcher three of my cows." She had been selling homemade dairy products at the market for years. Others echoed her plaint, lamenting that they would have to toss their unsold sausage and other foods in the trash. A woman selling beer on tap wailed, "I'm bankrupt!" She had to return the empty kegs for the hefty deposit and had too little time left to sell

the remaining beer. The vendors were all seized by a sense of desperation and hopelessness.

From home, I called Zhukovskiye Vesti newspaper editor-in-chief Natalya Znamenskaya for advice. Her publication had led a successful protest campaign against the authorities' attempt to cut down part of a forest to make way for real estate development in the Moscow region town of Zhukovsk.

"Our situation was different," Znamenskaya said. "The protest was conducted by young people who grew up on the Internet and who did not accept restrictions or prohibitions in any form. If we, as traditional journalists, had not led the charge, activists would have simply destroyed the construction equipment at the site. But the market vendors sound like they won't stand up for their rights," she explained.

She was right. The vendors were mostly over 45 years of age and law-abiding. Their one wish was that they be given at least 10 days warning instead of three in which to sell their remaining goods.

On Saturday, the marketplace looked like it was either beset by looters or the scene of a charitable giveaway. Everything was sold at ridiculously low prices and the mob of buyers snatched it all up by the armful — either to save money or as an act of solidarity with the merchants whom they had known for years.

But soon, the atmosphere at the market changed. People were saying that they would sell what they could by Monday, their last day, but that they would not throw out whatever remained. They would stand their ground even if the bulldozers came. It seemed that the presence of a Vechernyaya Moskva correspondent at the market had inspired them to stand up to the authorities. People of middle age and older recalled how during Soviet times, the media was the last, best hope for restoring justice. To support the growing spirit of protest, I phoned the editors of the Moy Rayon newspaper network. They told me to keep them updated on the situation and that if the authorities attempted to raze the market on Tuesday, the newspaper would send a correspondent.

That is why I will be standing vigil against bulldozers alongside my neighborhood vendors on Chertanovskaya Ulitsa. After all, journalists should make themselves useful in some way.

*Alexei Pankin is the editor of WAN-IFRA-GIPP Magazine for publishing business professionals.*

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