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Russia's Independent Media Is Under Attack Again as Apathy Reigns

Many find it hard to care that the authorities are strangling Vedomosti.

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Vedomosti, one of Russia's leading business newspapers changed ownership recently. **Sergei Fadeichev / TASS**

In case you haven't seen enough bad news lately, here's another story about how the authorities are strangling freedom of speech in Russia.

Vedomosti, one of Russia's leading business newspapers — for which I have written a regular column for the last eight years — changed ownership recently and brought in a new chief editor, Andrei Shmarov, in late March.

Even though the sale of the paper has not been finalized, Shmarov has wasted no time in making significant changes. He banned any reference to surveys by the Levada Center,

Russia's last remaining independent polling agency and cancelled a regular column for what he deemed "undesirable" content. Shmarov also tried to subvert the meaning of the site's heading and forbade any criticism of President Vladimir Putin's efforts to "zero out" his terms in office and remain in office for life.

As a result, the Vedomosti editorial staff is waging war against Shmarov. In early April, five of the paper's deputy editors wrote an open letter to the new owner recommending that one of the current staffers become chief editor. They received no answer. Later, Vedomosti journalists published a column on the newspaper's site warning that the quality of the publication was bound to suffer under the current circumstances. There was initially no reaction to this either, but then Shmarov posted a response on state-controlled RIA Novosti saying that such a column was itself evidence that "freedom of expression existed" in Russia.

The culmination came when Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov commented in his trademark Byzantine style: "Indeed, there are rules of law that do not allow censorship. That is the law of the land. We are unacquainted with and cannot know the inner workings of the Vedomosti newspaper's editorial office. We hope that the situation will be resolved. Our desire is that the Vedomosti newspaper maintains its same high level of professional activity." When asked whether the Kremlin believes that censorship is unacceptable, Peskov replied: "Definitely."

No one can say with certainty whether Peskov knew about the situation at Vedomosti or whether Shmarov did not, as he claims, receive instructions from above to silence criticism of Putin's maneuvering.

In all likelihood, Peskov did know and Shmarov was doing the bidding of his Kremlin handlers. However, this is all just part of modern Russian political etiquette. Peskov pretends he knows nothing and claims the laws are equitable and properly enforced. The media reports his words without commentary, nobody really believes them, and this so-called "news" is, as a result, essentially worthless.

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The besieged Vedomosti staff published Peskov's comments with the headline "Censorship is unacceptable," hoping it would somehow ward off evil. It won't, of course.

For several reasons, however, this story had only a passing effect on Russia's media and political communities.

The first is just bad timing. People are more concerned right now with the coronavirus pandemic, the unofficial quarantine blanketing the country, and with how to feed themselves and their families.

Second, a kind of emotional numbness has set in. The first time the authorities silenced an independent media outlet, it caused an immediate outcry. But then it happened again. And again. And again. I don't even know anymore how many times censorship has squelched free speech in this country.

I don't blame the newspaper journalists concerned — whom I consider my brothers and

sisters. What's more, I cannot even empathize with their plight properly because everyone is sitting at home in self-isolation, scared, tired, and convinced from past experience that justice is only a dream in Russia. Now, when we write of the bitterness and frustration of this situation, we do so automatically and without passion. The average liberal Russian journalist or activist posts and re-posts his grievances on social networks in a show of solidarity that has become almost as routine and meaningless as brushing one's teeth in the morning.

Does this mean that Vedomosti is doomed? No.

Perhaps some other Byzantine intrigue will grip the Kremlin and the new owners will remove the newspaper's current editor-in-chief. For now, however, that remains only a vague and uncertain possibility. The situation, as it currently stands, is terrible: the authorities are strangling Vedomosti slowly as we watch, and not only are we powerless to stop it, but we have lost the inner spark necessary to be properly horrified by what we are witnessing. And that, perhaps, is the greatest loss of all.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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