TITLE: Parties and the Press in Today's Russia: Part II - Party Newspapers

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PARTIES AND THE PRESS IN TODAY'S RUSSIA:

PART II - PARTY NEWSPAPERS

Executive Summary

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A survey of three newspapers published in Russia under the auspices of major political parties in the democratic camp - Al’ternativa, the organ of the Social Democratic Party of Russia; Gospodin Narod, that of the Republican Party of Russia; and Demokraticheskaya gazeta, published by the Democratic Party of Russia - reveals a considerable variety in the party press. This variety includes a party newspaper whose orientation is situated along the lines of partiinost' ("party-mindedness") familiar to the Bolshevik tradition (represented, here, by Demokraticheskaya gazeta); another, the antithesis of partiinost', which is effectively indistinguishable from an erudite journal devoted to public affairs (Gospodin Narod); and a third which features the views of party leaders along with criticisms of same, a form of counter-partiinost' (Al’ternativa).

The sources of this variety are traced to three general factors: first, the degree of attention displayed by party elites toward their respective party newspapers; second, the character of these party elites themselves; and, third, the particular ways in which the editorial boards of party newspapers have defined their objectives and their respective audiences. The dissimilarity evinced by these party newspapers itself represents a window on the character and orientation of their party sponsors, providing for the analyst a deeper level
of information about parties than can be derived simply by reading their formal platforms or position papers. Indeed, the character of the parties under consideration seems to be a direct reflection of the social groups represented in their respective elites, and this character is, in turn, directly reflected in the newspapers which they publish.
This report concerns those newspapers published by three of the largest parties in Russia’s so-called "democratic" camp; Al’ternativa, the organ of Social Democratic Party of Russia (SDPR); Gospodin Narod, published by the Republican Party of Russia (RPR); and Demokraticheskaya gazeta, put out by the Democratic Party of Russia (DPR). As party newspapers, each shares with the others certain qualities and orientations - a more or less consistent editorial perspective grounded in the ideology of the political party sponsoring the newspaper; a sensitivity to the respective audience, both party members and potential recruits; and, of course, the use of items that highlight party activities. At the same time, however, considerable differences are apparent in the style and content of each of these newspapers. At one end, Gospodin Narod features erudite commentary on general social, political and economic trends while, on the other, Demokraticheskaya gazeta’s columns are far more prosaic, largely confining themselves to news about the work of DPR organizations at national or regional levels or essays expounding on political topics of import to the party’s leadership. Al’ternativa can be situated somewhere between these poles.

An analogy can be drawn in this respect between these party newspapers and those profiled in the first part of this report ("The Russian Free Press in the Transition to a Post-
Given Russia’s very short experience with a free press and multi-party democracy, the issue of culture, or the lack of it, bulks very large for those involved with newspapers. Accordingly, journalists do not tend to understand their roles as ready-made or something simply to be learned. These roles, along with a "cultured" reading public, are in the process of development. Accordingly, quite different conceptions are available at the moment on the issue of how these roles should be structured and how the journalist might contribute to the growth of a "cultured" public.

More specifically, the business orientation that had been noted in the case of Delovoi mir would find an analogue in the generally "flat" content provided in the pages of Demokraticheskaya gazeta; the more learned, analytical pieces encountered in Panorama would, for the party press, correspond to much of the copy available in Gospodin Narod; and Nezavisimaya gazeta’s penchant for lacing its reporting with subtle doses of irony would appear to have a counterpart in Al’ternativa’s focus on news items from various, usually critical, perspectives.

Short profiles of our three party newspapers are provided, below. It remains, here, only to emphasize what is all-but-obvious - namely, the differences obtaining among these newspapers in many respects are reflections of the specific social groups within, and the collective ethoses associated with, their respective party sponsors.¹ From this perspective, reading the party press provides information not only on what parties stand for or what they might be doing. We learn something as well about "who" the parties are.
Profiles of Three Party Newspapers

1. Al’ternativa. The SDPR began publication of Al’ternativa, its national monthly newspaper, in July 1990. It has since been regularly appearing in eight-page editions with no advertising in print runs of 50,000-60,000. Production of the paper has been entrusted to a professional journalist and founding member of the SDPR, Vladimir Nyrko, who relies for episodic assistance on other SDPR members with backgrounds in journalism. No one on the staff receives a salary. Production itself takes place on a personal computer with Nyrko doing the requisite paste-up before copy is sent to a typographical unit at Moscow State University for cut-rate printing on newsprint purchased at discount from a sympathetic cooperative. Much to Nyrko’s dismay, Al’ternativa has received “not a kopeck from the party” and sales of the papers - distributed to some 40 cities through the kiosks of Soyuzpechat’ (now Rospechat’) and Mosinform - finance all production costs (with deficits made up for by out-of-pocket contributions from the newspaper staff).

Perhaps understandably, Al’ternativa’s Editor-in-Chief is quite critical of the disinterest displayed by the SDPR’s leadership toward its official organ. He has remarked that:

We put out this newspaper in a closet - 10 quadratic meters! - without even a toilet. I have requested from party members with influence - people like [Pavel] Kudyukin [Deputy Minister for Labor and Social Problems] and [Oleg] Rumyantsev [Executive Secretary of the Supreme Soviet’s Constitutional Commission] - that they use their influence to get us some decent premises.
But they do nothing. In all a very strange relationship exists between our paper and our party. Nyrko cites this lack of support as the principal reason for the high level of turnover among those working for Al’ternativa. "Other offers come in", he says, "and they [the staff] go. I was just offered the editorship at Demokraticheskaya gazeta which I refused; but that may have been a mistake because I have two children [to support]."

In addition to the lack of material support coming from the party sponsors, those working at Al’ternativa complain about an insensitivity on the part of SDPR leaders with respect to how the newspaper might be used to build the party. In Nyrko’s words:

Our party has a lot of theoreticians but very few organizers. We have not done well in reaching people. Take the party’s program. The Kadets have a six-page program, people can read it and understand it. Our program is over 60 pages long. This is not a program but a dissertation. Nobody will read this. Maybe someone at Harvard or Oxford would find this interesting, but your man-on-the-street here in Russia won’t bother to read it. So what good is such a program?

It is the same with articles submitted to Al’ternativa by leaders of the party. From the perspective of journalism, these texts are usually not very good. They are not very informative and they are certainly not very interesting.
The editorial perspective adopted at Al'ternativa has attempted to compensate for the stiffness attributed to the SDPR's leadership by consciously seeking ways to make the newspaper more attractive. As Nyrko remarked:

We see the newspaper not only as a forum for the leaders and the publication of official documents, but for those opposed to the leaders, indeed, those opposed to the newspaper itself. Otherwise, the newspaper would be boring and no one would read it. We don't want a dry party newspaper but one that is of interest to everyone. So we include extra-political materials too. This helps to improve the newspaper's function from the perspective of recruiting new members. Who wants to join a boring party?

The newspaper's potential as a recruitment mechanism was underscored not a few times by Nyrko during the interview. On each occasion, he criticized the SDPR's leadership for their lack of appreciation of this potential. He has been promoting the idea of distributing the newspaper - perhaps free of charge - in factories, but has only once succeeded in organizing such an operation (at the Likhachev Automotive Works in Moscow), primarily because the SDPR has not committed resources to this effort. When asked in this context of recruitment and Al'ternativa's corresponding propaganda function how the concept "objectivity" applies to the production of a party newspaper, Nyrko replied:

"Objectivity"? I don't like the idea. I prefer commentary from a clearly defined point of view. In fact, commentary that includes various points of view is better still.
Given the difficulties associated with the production of Al'ternativa, the Editor-in-Chief has remarked on two possible scenarios for the future. The first would be simply to shut down operations. The increasing costs of production, the lack of party support, the absence of salaries and attendant loss of staff to other newspapers would all point in that direction. The other possibility would resemble a social democratic alternative for Al'ternativa whereby the newspaper would incorporate as a commercial venture under the ownership of its workers.

2. Gospodin Narod. The RPR launched its own newspaper Gospodin Narod, shortly after the party was officially founded in November 1990. Initially published as a monthly, since mid-1991 Gospodin Narod has been appearing twice per month in editions of sixteen pages with press runs of about 100,000 copies. The newspaper accepts effectively no advertisements and receives no financial assistance from its party sponsor. It is, instead, financed out of sales and from contributions made by Monitoring, a public opinion research firm that is directed by Gospodin Narod’s Editor-in-Chief, Igor Yakovenko.

Gospodin Narod is produced by Yakovenko and two associates - Vladimir Tsybul’skii, Executive Secretary, and Irina Afanas’eva, Technical Editor - all of whom draw a small, unfixed salary from the RPR. Only Tsybul’ski: has had prior experience as a journalist. Volunteers also contribute from time to time to the production of the newspaper.

Unlike Al’ternativa, the editorial orientation at Gospodin Narod tends toward the production of a newspaper whose audience is both limited and intellectually oriented. As Yakovenko has put it:
The concept of our newspaper is related to the party’s self-image as "respectable". Ours is rather a "professor’s newspaper". We aim at educated people. Like our party, we are not populist in orientation. We are self-consciously a party and a paper of educated people.

This editorial orientation is clearly represented on the pages of Gospodin Narod. Indeed, should the reader not know of the association between the RPR and the newspaper itself, it is unlikely that he would be aware of the fact that he was reading anything other than a journal of public affairs and commentary. Most issues of Gospodin Narod include in-depth analyses of public opinion on current topics that have been conducted by Monitoring. Extended articles on contemporary or historical questions are also featured. The absence of a single (not to mention defined) political perspective is quite apparent. In part, this follows from an editorial policy of opening the pages of Gospodin Narod to alternative views, even to those thought by the editors to be fundamentally mistaken, with no editorial replies or disclaimers appended. Additionally, it follows from the way in which the editorial board regards their role in constructing a newspaper congruent with the political Weltanschauung of the RPR. In Yakovenko’s words:

We live in unusual times and our approach must follow from that fact.

Neither a traditional nor a straight-forward analysis is required today. We need to see the non-obvious, to distinguish between appearances - which can be very deceptive - and reality. Our analyses, therefore, are sometimes paradoxical.
The single dissatisfaction with Gospodin Narod expressed by Yakovenko was the lack of resources available to the newspaper and, most importantly in his view, the present impossibility of improving it by conducting investigative reporting. "Without investigative reporting", he remarked,

we are not really a newspaper. We rely on information from other sources and then we comment on it. Of course, our survey analyses of public opinion contribute something, but it is not enough. Unfortunately, we are too much like typical Soviet journalists who sit at home writing commentaries after sipping cognac and watching the news on television.

3. Demokraticheskaya gazeta. Initially founded by the DPR under the name, Demokraticheskaya Rossiya as a monthly in July 1990, Demokraticheskaya gazeta began appearing in autumn of 1990 in eight-page editions with press runs of 70,000. During the first part of 1991, the newspaper went over to regular weekly production. The present writer, although promised interviews (with considerable enthusiasm) at Demokraticheskaya gazeta's editorial board on a few occasions, failed to receive a concrete invitation to that end. Consequently, the following is based solely on observations derived from reading the newspaper and on comments on it made by the editors of the other newspapers included in this report.

In a material sense, Demokraticheskaya gazeta is clearly the best endowed of the newspapers considered here. It maintains a salaried staff of nine members who occupy a rather spacious office near the center of Moscow. The newspaper uses more photos than do the others in our sample and the printing is more sophisticated as well. Sales, advertising
(about one page per issue) and party contributions finance the publication which, again unlike the others in the sample, has its own bank account.

Demokraticheskaya gazeta perhaps comes closest to matching one’s conception of a party newspaper in present day Russia. It features much more news about the party, and more articles by party leaders, than do Al’ternativa and Gospodin Narod. In general, items are short and visuals are used to some effect. The DPR - which prides itself on being a "serious" political party - has clearly gone to some lengths to produce a newspaper that reflects that image. In certain respects, those at our other two newspapers would envy Demokraticheskaya gazeta - Nyrko, for its no-nonsense style that would make the newspaper available to an audience of non-theoreticians; Yakovenko, for the fact that Demokraticheskaya gazeta covers stories on its own and, at least to a certain degree, engages in investigative journalism. And, of course, both would envy the newspaper’s base of resources.

On the other hand, however, neither Nyrko nor Yakovenko hold a high opinion of Demokraticheskaya gazeta overall, and their disposition on this score tells us something about parties and the party press in today’s Russia. Rather like the charge of "Bolshevism" regularly levelled at the DPR by competitors in the "democratic" camp - and, of course, what others regard as "Bolshevism" (party discipline, hierarchical structure and so forth) the DPR leaders take as signs of "serious" party activity - Yakovenko regards the partiinost' of Demokraticheskaya gazeta as equivalent to that of (the old) Pravda. Similarly, Nyrko, while admiring the practical sense of the DPR in exploiting the possibilities of its newspaper for
building a party organization, is repelled by the monotony of perspective into which this has been translated.

Conclusion

From this short survey of party newspapers in contemporary Russia, the overriding conclusion that seems to emerge involves a tension between adjective and noun. To what extent can a publication functioning as a party organ be considered a newspaper? To what extent can such a publication appearing as a newspaper play a role as a party organ? Within this tension we can discern something about the parties that sponsor the newspapers in our sample. The SDPR, which developed out of intellectual circles and eschews the idea of becoming a mass party7, has taken small interest in using its official organ for purposes of recruitment and party building. Indeed, the leadership seems to be so heavily involved with such matters as drafting legislation (including the draft Constitution produced by the Supreme Soviet) and position papers that it tends to neglect the party’s newspaper altogether. Those working at Al’ternativa lament this lack of attention, on the one hand, but employ it on the other as a sort of editorial freedom to turn out a newspaper to their liking. Similarly, in the case of the RPR, intellectuals dominate the ranks of the party’s leadership and activists, yielding an erudite newspaper that features controversy and an analytic thrust more given to exploring problems than to finding solutions. Finally, as in the preceding instances, the character of the DPR seems to be clearly displayed in its newspaper. DPR leaders have been quick to criticize intellectuals active in Russian politics as useless for purposes other than speechmaking.8 For them the task of creating a "serious" political party has been at the top of the agenda - and "serious" would seem in their view to connote the direct transfer of
information rather than inquiry, discussion or reflection. Their newspaper, *Demokratcheskaya gazeta* has apparently been molded in this image.
NOTES


2. The SDPR has also published at least two regional newspapers, Epokha (previously titled Esdek) in Leningrad (circulation 8,000), and Respublika in Kareliya (circulation 3,000). At the time of writing, it is unclear as to whether the rising costs of paper and printing will permit these regional organs to continue publication.

3. All statements attributed to Vladimir Nyrko were recorded during an interview which I conducted with him in Moscow on 17 Nov. 1991.

4. In late November 1991, the RPR also began publications of Respublikanets, a monthly shorter in length than Gospodin and devoted to party information.

5. Igor Yakovenko was interviewed on 19 Nov. 1991. All statements attributed to him were recorded during that interview.

6. With its third number (Sept. 1990), the DPR declared that Demokraticheskaya Rossiya had ceased to be its newspaper and belonged instead to "the union of democratic force". Soon, this newspaper had become the official organ of the movement, Democratic Russia.


8. I have heard comments to this effect from DPR officers on more than one occasion. For a statement to this effect from party leader, Nikolai Travkin, see the interview that he has given