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Concatenated JPRS Reports, 1991

Document 15 of 17

Page 1

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How We Were Independent: From One Newspaper's
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Tatyana Fast: `` How We Were Independent: From One
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FULL TEXT OF ARTICLE:

1. [Article by LITERATURNAYA GAZETA staff correspondent Tatyana Fast: `` How We Were Independent: From One Newspaper's Experience``]
2. [Text] Riga-The end of party power over the press has created illusions: of the freedom of the press among the public, and of the press' independence among journalists. Riding the wave of glasnost, the papers-both newly established and those which had ceased to be some organizations' organs-one after another were proclaiming themselves independent. Few journalists in these years have been able to resist the temptation to take an opportunity to publish their own independent newspaper. We, several Riga journalists, were not able to resist the temptation, either. Disagreements between the people in the Baltic republics were on the rise, and so was the conflict between the central and local press. Against this background, the absence of an all-Baltic regional newspaper seemed an omission. Thus, our NEZAVISIMAYA BALTIYSKAYA GAZETA was born. A sponsor was available, too-the Baltia Association of Independent Entrepreneurs-who was willing to support the newspaper financially. The association incorporated several cooperative firms and banks, counted business volume in millions, and had hard currency accounts.
3. The desire of the new class to support the newspaper and, in case of success, have a nice calling card in the West and in the East seemed understandable. The emerging business needed information and communication channels. Therefore, we were not surprised by the proposal: ``Make a good newspaper. Money is no object.`` An agreement of noninterference in editorial creative life sealed our aim at independence.

UNCLASSIFIED

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40

UNCLASSIFIED

Concatenated JPRS Reports, 1991

Document 15 of 17

Page 2

4. Still, what is it—an independent newspaper? Not state-owned? Not party-affiliated? We felt proud that none of us belonged to any party or was part of any warring fronts. But can one make a newspaper on this? Then what is it made of? Of looking at the same event from different points of view? Of praising something at some point, and then criticizing it at another? Or perhaps, one should do without any opinions and build a newspaper on facts alone—let the reader figure out what is what? Recipes were offered and rejected, while the publication started.

5. Our very first issue was not to the liking of the functionaries in the new government—we had written about their predilection for ostentatious receptions. The second issue brought us a threat of a lawsuit from the CPL [Communist Party of Latvia] Central Committee. After we criticized Rubiks, former first secretary of the CPL Central Committee, the newspaper of the republic communists SOVETSKAYA LATVIA warned: "Beware the independents!" The reader was sending puzzled letters: Who are you with? Define your stand! The issue of independent press was also an issue for the reader who was used to the fact that a newspaper defends either the right or the left. Our reader has a long-standing conception that a newspaper must support some clearly defined positions.

6. We did not agree with this. We published letters from readers, explained, and quoted our opponents in the belief that this was also a sign of independence. Groping blindly in the situation of acute political confrontation of parties and movements, we were attempting to create the concept of an independent newspaper. We were rejoicing every time we were mentioned on Svoboda and BBC and in democratic Moscow newspapers.

7. Of course, we were not alone even on the Baltic press market. ATMODA, born under the NFL [National Front of Latvia] wing, was criticizing the NFL leaders. Lithuanian ATGIMINAS slipped out from under the Sajudis guardianship. Lithuanian RESPUBLIKA was bravely battling old and new authorities. The times were demanding publications of a new type, serving the truth rather than group interests. In this sense, we were trying to be independent.

8. Can one, though, remain independent towards good and evil? Towards official corruption? Towards OMON [Special Missions Militia Detachments] excesses? Towards the CPSU and KGB provocations?

9. We were writing about tanks crushing the democratic movement in Vilnius and Riga. About Baltic communist parties that were fooling the workers and were using automatic rifles to fight their own people. Evicted out of the House of the Press by OMON, we put together a homemade January issue almost manually and were giving it

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Concatenated JPRS Reports, 1991

Document 15 of 17

Page 3

away free at the barricades. It was then that we were suddenly jerked back by the sponsors: "Do not get into politics!" A little later, we heard something even more harsh: "Change your position!"

10. We replied: You are independent entrepreneurs; we are an independent publication. The agreement between us provided for each of us to maintain our sovereignty. When we brought this up, we got a sobering reminder: Those who pay are the ones who can afford to have an opinion. A little later, an article written by our partners appeared in the local press under the tale-telling title: "A Sponsor's Wish Is the Law." We were pointedly being shown our place.

11. We were being summoned to conferences and... taught how to write. Just like it had been done in the old times at party meetings. Even the terminology turned out to be similar: "You are not holding the line," "You are helping their hand...". We suddenly remembered the party censors, who usually did their job quietly, one can even say, in a delicate manner. If they removed materials from the issue, they tried, as a rule, to find a good reason: The censors cared about their reputation. The new masters were acting openly and unceremoniously. Their reputation was protected by money-in millions. Actually, not just money. When we, having gotten tired of squabbling, declared that we want to break the relationship and claimed our legal rights to the newspaper, the editorial offices were visited by... four Schwarzeneggers. Flexing their biceps and other muscles, the Schwarzeneggers explained that it was in our interests not to start a fight for the newspaper. The text ran more or less this way: "Remember! The newspaper has been and will be ours. We can prove it to you by any means at our disposal."

12. On 1 June 1991, we published the last issue of NEZAVISIMAYA BALTIYSKAYA GAZETA. The collective unanimously decided to break the contract relationship with the association.

13. The calamity made us sit down and do our own calculations. Are we really unable to survive without millionaires, we thought. Others somehow manage... If worse comes to worst, we will tighten our belts in the beginning. The results of the calculations left us horrified... The price of independence came to this (the data used is for Latvia). Paper costs 7,000 to 14,000 rubles [R] a ton at the commodity exchange (to produce a weekly, for instance, one needs 22 tons a month). The printing house charges 17 to 25 percent of the print run's list price. The Ministry of Communications-2.5 kopeks per copy for transportation. The Main Administration for the Distribution of Printed Materials of the USSR Ministry of Communications-20 to 25 percent of the list price of the retail part of the print run. The cost of computers: if we want our own, it costs R300,000-400,000; if we lease-R3,000-4,000 for typesetting and layout of one issue. If you

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Concatenated JPRS Reports, 1991

Document 15 of 17

Page 4

want the issue to be on schedule and reach the newsstands on a certain day, add another couple of thousand in cash (for each issue) for bribes. The result: To publish the newspaper in at least 100,000 copies, we need half a million as a minimum. To make the ends meet, we would have to either hike up the price per copy, or to have a million-copy print runs. In the current- quite saturated-newspaper market either option is unrealistic. One can, of course, hope for advertising revenue, but this is also a double-edged sword: Advertisers prefer to pay higher rates but place their ads in newspapers with larger circulation. No matter how we look, it seems that independence is the province of the rich.

14. But how do colleagues from other publications exist? It turned out that since ATGIMINAS had separated from the Sajudis, it became impossible for it to maintain the staff and to pay authors' fees. There are now only three staff members. SOGLASIYE (also formerly a Sajudis newspaper) went bankrupt and closed. We heard of one Moscow weekly that apparently survived thanks only to the editor's former profession in construction business. Another one apparently runs a successful business selling KamAZ trucks. The Riga political newspaper BALTIYSKOYE VREMYA stays afloat by publishing a pornographic supplement YESHCHE; SM-SEGODNYA (previously SOVETSKAYA MOLODEZH) publishes several commercial supplements, each "contributing" something to the kitty. So, if you want to publish a newspaper, it looks like you either have to sell something, or sell yourself.

15. Meanwhile, there were prospective buyers for our newspaper, too. Among those who showed interest were- strange as it may seem-the CPL Central Committee (telephone call): "We hear you have some money problems. How much do you need?"; the military (they offered to share their office space); some people engaged in pump manufacturing and in reselling imported shoes. We got offers-through intermediaries-from cooperatives in the Crimea, one bank in the Transcaucasus, and then simultaneously several firms in Moscow. Some were interested in an opportunity to establish themselves in the Baltic market; others-to invest rubles where tomorrow there may be hard currency; still others-to make politics through someone else's efforts. Almost all promised millions. Alas, nobody was interested in the newspaper as such, let alone an independent one. There was a specific price tag attached to the millions-the right to the newspaper. We did not find common language with any of them.

16. Nevertheless, we survived... After three months of stoppage, desperation, and broken illusions, we took a small loan in the bank and started with commercial supplements. For several months, nobody was paid a salary- all income went to buy paper for the future newspaper. At the same time, we were looking for new authors.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Concatenated JPRS Reports, 1991

Document 15 of 17

Page 5

17. 30 September was the birthday of BALTIYSKAYA GAZETA. In having to obtain a new license, we lost the word "independent," but we did retain this independence in substance. True, this independence does not have much of a material support. In our calculations, the remaining resources will last us until the new year.

18. Actually, many newspapers have found themselves in a shaky situation today. It appears that only those backed up by state structures (soviets, ministries, mayoralities) or financed by big private capital will be able to survive. It is not surprising that in this situation the press is being bought up by mafiosi groups. Some do it to launder the party money or income from shadow economy dealings; others want to gain power by manipulating the public opinion. Some will say: This is what a market economy is; this situation is new for the Soviet press but not for the world press. There is a difference, however. In democratic countries, the state takes upon itself the care of independent press. Any society interested in its development must have an interest in opposition. Independent press is the opposition; its presence is an indicator of the society's health. If this press disappears, so will the health.

19. I do not know whether it was this or some other reason that moved the prime minister of the Latvian Republic Ivar Godmanis to extend a helping hand to the press. Almost all republic newspapers are now included in state orders for paper. The government was able to reach an agreement on deliveries of paper from Russia. So far, until the new year. What will happen after that-nobody knows.

20. ...A few days ago we saw the NEZAVISIMAYA BALTIYSKAYA GAZETA-no longer ours-on Riga newsstands. The new editorial staff does not delve into politics. They write about UFO's, rational nutrition, and sex. The cover shows a temporary address and the editor's name. Alas, this temporary newspaper has more chances to survive than we do. It will be supported even if the reader loses interest in the tabloid mishmash.

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