

Russia: Izvestia changes its design and redefines its “values”

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Last month, Russia’s flagship national daily newspaper, *Izvestia*, announced a change in its format and an increase in its page count. The initial issues published in the new format reveal that not only the newspaper’s external appearance, but also its guiding ideas have been reformulated.

The new design itself does not appear to be an improvement. Far more anonymous than before, it makes *Izvestia* look more like *Kommersant*, which has achieved a distinction of sorts by eschewing any creative approach to the text, i.e., by producing look-alike articles that suggest a factory assembly line or mass-produced hamburgers, a la McDonald’s.

Until its redesign, *Izvestia* avoided the assembly line approach and relied on “traditional” journalism, which presupposes a degree of independence and creativity on the part of the author. Like a number of other organs of the post-Soviet press, such as *Komsomol Pravda* and *Moskovski komsomolets*, *Izvestia* did not change its old name or external appearance. On the contrary, it had viewed these inheritances from the Soviet past, with some justification, as part of the intellectual capital it required to compete on the market.

The Putin government’s official policy of gradual rehabilitation of the Soviet past, especially its Stalinist features, would, one might think, reinforce the orientation of moderate conservatism and dedication to “traditions” proclaimed by *Izvestia*. Why, then, the dramatic changes?

The editorial that appeared on February 20, 2003 provides a clue as to the reasons for the new format. It indicates that the ruling elite, of which the media establishment is an important component, is regrouping its forces and attempting to consolidate itself under conditions of a deep chasm between itself and the masses of average citizens.

Having become the propaganda organ of the new Russian proprietors, the mass media can no longer pretend that they are the “voice of the people”. They are an instrument in the hands of the new owners of the country’s industrial and natural resources, and must serve their masters’ interests in an effective manner.

Proclaiming the need to “fashion a positive image of the country” and work out its “popularly understood, traditional and yet ever-new principles”, *Izvestia* set forth the “key ideas” of the “present and the future” that would guide it. Those ideas were: “Liberty, private property, family, homeland and God”.

Underlining that these are “positive principles” upon which “must be based the whole internal life of Russia,” and noting that they would “serve as the criteria for evaluating all events in our public life”, *Izvestia* advanced the above notions as the fundamentals of state policy of the Putin regime.

It is worthwhile to consider these postulates, especially since this newspaper is the de facto voice of the present Kremlin leadership.

The first thing that strikes one about this list is the absence of the one word that was the mantra of the pro-capitalist layers of society in the first half of the 1990s—the word “democracy”. The struggle of this layer to discredit the heritage of the Russian Revolution and the achievements of

Soviet history was largely founded on counterposing “democracy” to the “totalitarian past”. True, by democracy they meant not the real power of the people, which was truly achieved only by the Russian Soviets of 1905 and 1917, nor the overcoming of social inequality, but only the bourgeois parliamentary rules separating the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. But now, even this restricted and pathetic caricature of democracy has been excised.

What does it mean to acclaim liberty minus democracy? For whom is this liberty, if it is not tied to equal rights for all? The consequences of such an ideological “change in signposts” are extremely significant, and can be correctly understood only within the context of world history.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, in the period of the formation of classical capitalism, progress advanced under the banners of freedom and democracy. At that time the struggle revolved around the destruction of the obsolete feudal barriers and brakes on economic and social life: the array of taxes, custom duties, artificial monopolies and privileges, prerogatives based on estates, the existence of guilds, etc. At the same time, the “third estate” (the bourgeoisie) conducted a struggle against monarchy and absolutism, which crowned all the old filth, advancing the demand for equal constitutional and civil rights for all citizens, without exception.

Liberalism, which could be considered the most general ideological expression of this historical movement, deemed liberty and democracy to be inextricably linked.

At the time, beyond the purely juridical sphere, liberty meant the right to private property and the right to accumulate capital. But these rights had to be guaranteed through equal justice, a democratic constitution and a republic. Thus the liberalism of that time coincided, at least partially, with the vital interests of the whole people, notwithstanding distinctions in origin and property status.

But if we speak of liberty as an absolute concept, without defining it further, then under particular historical conditions this concept may be useful as well for autocratic rulers. After all, what lies at the heart of European absolutism or Russian autocracy? Is it not a fact that the tsar or the king is completely “free” in his actions and desires? This kind of freedom may coincide with the cruellest despotism and with the subjugation of the overwhelming majority of the people.

This helps explain why the classical liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, insofar as it was the bearer of historical progress against the remnants of feudalism, always tied the struggle for freedom with the fight for democracy. This also explains why in Russia, for example, when, following the 1905-1907 revolution, liberalism recognized the danger of a rising by the oppressed masses, it renounced democracy in the name of an abstract “liberty”. In the well-remembered anthology *Vekhi* (Signposts) the leading representatives of the liberal intelligentsia publicly renounced and condemned democracy, supplanting it with the lifeless and paralyzing ideal of “internal spiritual self-improvement”.

Izvestia's list of priorities omits other significant concepts. There is no mention of human rights, of national equality, or, finally, the need for peace in the world, despite the debasement of this phrase through its abuse by numerous demagogues, including the erstwhile Soviet Stalinists. These omissions are not accidental. Every one of these concepts is part and parcel of the fundamental values of democracy, even in its traditional liberal-bourgeois meaning.

Toward the end of *Izvestia's* manifesto there is a reference to some other "significant words", which are solemnly proclaimed the "key concepts of our civic vocabulary"—"patriotism, liberalism, historical memory, democracy, conservatism". But the ordering of these concepts, this eclectic stringing together of elements of distinct and warring principles and currents of social thought, reveals its devalued, false and purely ritualistic character. Democracy is here nothing but an ossified remnant from the worn-out historical "memory" of contemporary liberalism.

On the other hand, *Izvestia* presents us with the "little God" (as Lenin used to refer to the hypocritical and obligatory embrace of the Almighty in the everyday life of the Russian philistine). And this is not an accident, since religion fits in well with the rejection of democratic principles.

As we noted before, *Izvestia* expresses more than its private point of view. It purports to formulate the founding principles of state policy. Everyone knows that the separation of church and state was the basis for the republican, as opposed to the monarchist or authoritarian, form of government. The elementary axioms of democracy imply that all questions concerning God lie within the domain of the individual citizen's private beliefs and conscience. They can in no genuinely democratic sense represent one of the "positive principles forming the basis" of Russia's internal policies.

It is clear which way the wind is blowing: religion is needed by the new Russian ruling elite as a way to anoint its rule, as a tool to keep the masses in ignorance and fear. Unwilling to wait until a majority of the population turns pious and meek (the wait might be too long), those in power try to rape the people spiritually, forcing religion from above, treating membership in one of the leading religious confessions as a condition for achieving a "normal" civic consciousness.

By "little God" they mean primarily the God of Russian Orthodoxy and the Moscow patriarchy. (Putin demonstratively parades his ties to the traditional form of Russian Christianity.) Secondly, we may assume the promotion of those Muslim factions that cooperate with the Kremlin and support it politically, in particular, with respect to its neo-colonial war in Chechnya.

Taken as a whole, this rejection of democracy is not accidental. It flows from the very nature of the new regime, its deep hostility to popular interests. Democratic slogans were hypocritically used when they permitted the future oligarchs to proceed with their conquest of property. As soon as this goal was achieved, democracy became a hindrance.

A historical and conceptual analysis shows that contemporary liberalism does not accept democracy; that of all the existing social movements only the socialists are able to treat democratic rights and freedoms with any seriousness. For socialists, it is not an empty phrase or a pious wish. Socialism can be built only through the creative self-actualization of the masses of the working class, its independent mobilization around its historical mission of wiping out all inequality and oppression. Hence, the development of socialism is internally inseparable from the growth of democracy.

The other thing we should note in *Izvestia's* "change of signposts" is the very fact of the reappearance of the editorial column. The peculiarity of social and political development in Russia over the past 10-15 years consisted in a deep alienation and rejection of the methods of rule and propaganda of the Stalinist bureaucracy. We heard millions of times about the need to break with the "totalitarian past", to "squeeze the slave from

one's pores", etc.

One characteristic feature of this past was the odious editorial in the newspaper *Pravda*, which every Soviet citizen, not just party members, had to accept as the "leading directive" to be obeyed. To disagree with the *Pravda* editorial led not just to public opprobrium, but also to administrative punishment and even worse: forced treatment in an insane asylum, labour camps, emigration, and, in Stalin's days, the threat of extinction.

For this reason, practically all of the leading Russian newspapers abolished editorials in the early 1990s, including the newspaper of Zyuganov's Communist Party, *Sovetskaia Rossiia*. They were replaced by columns "from the editor", which, despite some external similarities, did not carry the same connotation. The new columns expressed the opinions of one person, who might play a leading role in directing the orientation of the publication, but still spoke as a private person, not as the bearer of some official "line" or spokesman for "high authority".

We should note that this method did not become an insuperable barrier. Having by and large come over to the side of the new regime, the Russian mass media brainwashed public opinion, promising democratic miracles and capitalist manna from heaven.

Nevertheless, for a while the new informal rules of behaviour were observed. Now, side by side with the official rehabilitation of the Stalinist heritage, many of its propaganda tricks have begun to re-emerge. In a general sense the existence of editorials is normal in a newspaper. However, the return of the editorial column to *Izvestia* must be viewed in the context of the newspaper's quasi-official position. It is a characteristic reflection of the change in relations between society and the new elite. The ruling elite no longer prefers to listen, or at least appear to listen, to public opinion. It has no desire to tolerate it, and speak out "as part of a discussion", but instead seeks to impose its own requirements upon it.

It is useful to briefly recall the history of *Izvestia*.

The newspaper appeared in early 1917 as the organ of the Petersburg Soviet, then dominated by the Social Revolutionary and Menshevik parties, i.e., as the organ of petty-bourgeois democracy. *Izvestia* was initially hostile to the October Revolution, but continued to publish as the central organ of the Soviet government, as distinct from *Pravda*, the organ of the Communist Party. After the Stalinist bureaucracy consolidated its regime during the 1920s and 1930s, *Izvestia* was transformed into one of the two main newspapers of the Soviet propaganda machine.

Specializing primarily on problems of international affairs, *Izvestia* could pretend to greater "liberalism" than the stubbornly frozen-in-time *Pravda*. This was especially true in the early 1960s, when Khrushchev's son-in-law A. Adzhubey headed the newspaper. It was at that time that the newspaper attracted a number of gifted journalists who gave *Izvestia* its relatively independent authority.

Despite these specifics, the general character of the leading organs of the Soviet press was dull and false. The old Soviet joke—"Pravda (Truth) has no news, and *Izvestia* (News) has no truth"—was quite on the mark.

The years of perestroika witnessed the transformation of *Izvestia* into the leading ideologue of capitalist reforms. The editorial board headed by the chief editor, I. Golembiovsky, put a great deal of effort into securing Yeltsin's victories in 1991 and the fall of 1993.

But fate proved unkind to this editorial team. By the middle of the decade the oligarchs, by means of "loan auctions", were taking over the choicest pieces of industry, natural resources, infrastructure, transport and means of communications. The mass media could not remain apart from this fire sale.

At about the same time, while V. Gusinsky was constructing his media empire and B. Berezovsky was assembling his own conglomerate out of the main national TV network ORT, a consortium of two of the leading industrial and financial groups, those of V. Potanin and V. Alekperov, leveraged their own financial and legislative resources into a semi-

criminal takeover of *Izvestia*.

The old team of *Izvestia* writers was ruthlessly ejected from the newspaper. Political considerations played a large part in this management decision. The group of old-style writers around Golembiovsky naively continued to promote a middle class vision of society and supported the small businesses, farmers, and so on. The tone of the newspaper was hostile to the new commercial conglomerates and tried to promote the interests of the “millions of proprietors”.

The real developments in the economy followed a different path and, after some difficulties, concentrated oligarchic capital firmly suppressed this circle of “freethinkers” and squashed the attempts of this group of journalists to protect their turf.

Since then *Izvestia* succeeded in transforming itself into one of the most influential voices of the new Russian elite, promoting Putin and fully supporting the main political orientation of his regime. Authoritarianism, barely concealed under the fig leaf of “democracy”, became its watchword.

This process has now entered a qualitatively new stage. Just like Putin’s government, *Izvestia* takes its main cue from the American right-wingers who stand behind the Bush administration and the Republican Party. These layers of the American ruling elite, among whom are significant numbers of fascistic elements, are indifferent to any democratic values. Their ideals consist of property, God, the police apparatus for repression within the country, and the military machine for repression abroad.

What we are observing now is a real change of ideological signposts and a new “International” of open reactionaries. Democratic rights and freedoms are the first and main barrier to their predatory goals. Everything is to be sacrificed on the bloody altar of that sort of “liberty” that anoints the unlimited right to loot and subjugate the weak and accumulate ever more capital and riches.

The confluence of the changes in *Izvestia* and the international wave of popular antiwar protests is not accidental. Although mass protests did not directly extend into the still politically disoriented and morally devastated Russia, they will inevitably exert a strong anti-capitalist influence on popular attitudes. The elite is afraid of this. Hence it seeks to regroup its forces to counter any democratic rising from the “lower depths”.



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