

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## The Press and Perestroika

On 9 October 1990, Vitaly Korotich, the controversial editor of the Soviet magazine *Ogonek*, spoke at the Harriman Institute on the topic of "The Press and *Perestroika*." Korotich related some of his experiences from his vantage point in the Soviet publishing world, noting that his main impression of the changes in the press has been that journalists have started to form, and express, their own opinions.

### Return of the Jedi?

"We know that the socialist experiment has been unsuccessful," claimed Korotich. To describe the twists and turns Soviet society has undergone over the past five years, he drew an analogy to the "Star Wars" films. The past two years of *perestroika*, he said, was the period of "The Empire Strikes Back. Return of the Jedi is quite possible." Nevertheless, the Soviet Union cannot go back to where it was. "The totalitarian system is dying. Its historical moment has passed. It would be like giving power back to the Indians."

The press has been one of the institutions most affected by the changes of the past five years. Nevertheless, all is not what it appears to be on the surface. The Law on Mass Media was promulgated this year, but the experience of *Ogonek* shows that putting the law into practice is not so simple. For one thing, party leaders do not want to give up control over such a lucrative source of revenue. *Ogonek* earns 70 million rubles a year in profits, *Pravda* only 9.5 million rubles. The answer to the problem of party interference is to create a "private economy," i.e., a system of private ownership, "without which it is impossible to be independent."

However, a new problem has arisen: what to do with the newly won independence. The Soviet press has no experience in management, and they do not know what to do with, or how to use, their money. The government still controls printing facilities and the supply of paper. Owing to inflation, the price of paper will double, while the use of printing facilities will be 2.5 times greater this year. The problem of

survival without party subsidies has become a central concern. One promising development has been the possibility of forming joint ventures with foreign partners; *Ogonek*, for instance, recently signed an agreement with *Fortune* magazine to advertise *Fortune's* new Russian-language edition. In addition to the hard currency *Ogonek* will earn from this, a further spinoff will be the staff's exposure to Western-style management and business techniques.

Korotich went on to describe the difficulties related to creating a market economy and a democratic system. Soviet society is "not so stupid," Korotich remarked. With free education, free medicine, and free housing, "sometimes only three or four bottles of vodka a month will keep a person quite happy." Fifteen percent of Soviet society "does not need any changes, because they are happy living on this level and not having to work." Maybe 20% wants to work hard and wants changes. In Korotich's view, however, a dangerous unity now exists in Soviet society, as the party and *nomenklatura* have joined forces with the bottom layers of society, which manifests itself in demonstrations calling for a return to the "old ways" and protesting against a return to the capitalist system.

### Who Profits?

In Korotich's view, the only side that gains from unrest and instability in the Soviet Union is the conservative side. Speaking about the February 1990 disturbances in Baku, Korotich recalled some questions he had posed before the Supreme Soviet related to the events, which were later published in *Ogonek*. "Did the KGB warn the prime minister about the preparations for the pogroms? If the prime minister was warned, what did he do? If the KGB did not warn the prime minister, what was it doing? Were they still looking for jokers?" Korotich fears that in the current situation, powers who stand to gain from the disturbances want to provoke people into going to the streets, and then, "take their guns, go into the streets and announce martial law." Such an outcome, however, could never improve Soviet life. Though



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the army may be able to impose order, it cannot improve the economy or feed the people. Nevertheless, according to Korotich, "a lot of conservatives are praying for these kinds of changes."

Korotich then turned to the difficulties associated with creating a new party in the Soviet Union. He related the experience of organizing a large rally in Moscow with Gavril Popov, the mayor of Moscow, and Gleb Yakunin, the dissident Russian Orthodox priest. Popov observed that they could draw 300,000 people to a rally, but they cannot find fifteen people to work on a daily basis organizing a party, or find a building in which to work. "It is easy to organize a meeting, but practically impossible to organize a party."

Korotich's answer is to divide the property of the CPSU, "the richest party on the globe. It is very easy to leave the Communist Party, but it is necessary to go out with money, with property, and to organize two or three parties on the material base of this one." Unfortunately, there are still many sociocultural stumbling blocks to creating a functioning democracy in the USSR. Korotich related a conversation with the Polish Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, in which the latter noted that the main danger in Russian society was that opposition and enemy are still considered synonyms in the Soviet political vocabulary.

## Looking for Heroes

Vadim Medvedev, the Central Committee secretary in charge of ideological matters, had attacked Korotich's editorship of *Ogonek*, charging that, "Reading your magazine, people have stopped believing in socialism." Korotich replied, "Visiting your supermarkets, people stopped believ-

ing in socialism." The exchange contrasts an essential dichotomy in the views of Soviet officialdom and the Soviet press: the officials believe that press coverage of the negative aspects of Soviet life is in fact destroying Soviet life, while Korotich claims that the press is only a mirror of what Soviet life actually is. Nevertheless, it is essential for the Soviet press to continue its present path. The history of the Soviet press, according to Korotich, is the permanent search for "heroes at home and for enemies and dark characters abroad. We are still looking for heroes in our country, and we are coming to understand that there are less and less of them in this kind of system."

## Moving Towards Humanity

"I think that we are moving towards humanity. Its not such an easy move, but we will be a part of humanity, we must be, and I think its the only way to survive." Korotich estimated that the Soviet Union has a year to a year and a half to institute real changes in its society. If the changes are carried out, "we will survive as a civilized country." Naturally, the big question mark is whether the Soviet Union will even survive as a unified entity. "Nobody even knows what to call the future state. We are not a union, we are not socialist, that's for sure, and I don't know about Soviet or republic either. We are on the border, on the edge, of impossibly dangerous but important changes." In Korotich's view, however, "we can only go through them with your help and your understanding."

— Reported by Gordon N. Bardos

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