

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Volume 3, Number 9

The Independent Soviet Press

Author and editor Sergei Grigoryants, displaying the calm conviction which helped him survive years of persecution, challenged the increasingly favorable western perception of the Soviet press. "Generally in the Soviet Union," he said, "we have very good literary journals, but pretty bad socio-political coverage. There's *Ogonek* and *Moscow News*, but they have their shortcomings, too. You can't get hold of *Moscow News* in the Soviet Union. It's practically only for abroad. *Ogonek* concerns itself with the past, not the present... Now that's not enough. People out there want to relate the present to what is to be expected in the future, but no one deals with that."

By Grigoryants' own admission, though, one magazine does deal with it — the periodical *Glasnost*, of which he is the editor. *Glasnost* is an independent magazine, aimed at a broad audience, which covers all contemporary issues facing the Soviet Union. Though it is firmly rooted in the tradition of single-issue underground dissident journals of the 1970s (in which Grigoryants was involved, earning him several years in labor camps), today's flux has created the need for a progressive mainstream tribune. Grigoryants discussed the mission of the nascent independent press and his views of the current Soviet situation in a talk November 20 at the Harriman Institute.

Strictly speaking, *Glasnost* is an illegal publication, since journals in the USSR must be officially registered. Grigoryants applied for permission in a letter to the authorities, explaining his ideas and how he wanted to push the reform atmosphere. He was told that no new journals were needed, since all his articles could be published in already-existing publications. Grigoryants published the first issue anyway, and has continued to do so without registration.

"We aim at a wider audience interested in many things," he explained. "We are pluralist in principles and have no particular ideological outlook." *Glasnost* features articles on politics, the environment, sociology, demography and religion, to name just a few topics. It presses for change and is often critical of the present regime. The articles are written for laypersons, but contributions by specialists ensure a high-level readership. The magazine has published

submissions by Eastern European liberals and now also gets pieces by Westerners. "We don't reprint materials from other publications, but we allow others to use ours," Grigoryants said. "*Ogonek* uses our materials," he added.

Although Grigoryants maintains an adversarial posture toward the official Soviet press, he is willing to cooperate with its journalists. Some of their pieces, deemed too hot to handle by official outlets, are printed in *Glasnost*. Grigoryants told the story of one editor who wrote an article which he was unable to publish in his own journal — "so we published it for him."

Media Entrepreneur

Grigoryants has tried to expand the circulation of *Glasnost* both at home and in the West. In the USSR, 4200 copies of each issue are printed through government publishing houses in Moscow and in the Baltic republics. (Black marketeers reprint the magazine without authorization and sell it at high prices.) Grigoryants has now received permission to establish five or six independent publishing houses, which will print his magazine as well as other information sources. In addition, he hopes to attract printing orders from western companies, "because it is cheaper for them to publish in the USSR."

Glasnost has become a truly international news magazine. A Paris publisher runs off 20,000 copies of each issue in Russian, which are sold mostly to Soviet emigrés. A French-language edition is also put out in Paris, and an English edition is published in New York. Polish, Bulgarian and Spanish editions are planned.

But *Glasnost* is just the flagship of Grigoryants' expanding operations. He also puts out a "Daily *Glasnost* Bulletin," reporting on events that the official press either omits or distorts. His staff produces radio pieces for Radio Liberty, Voice of America and the BBC to broadcast back into the USSR. A video team supplies footage to foreign news services such as CBS, and a team of photographers distributes pictures. Grigoryants has a network of 200 native



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journalists, many of them reporting from areas where foreigners cannot or do not go.

Law on Publishing

Grigoryants was one of the founders of the Union of Independent Journalists, which was created in order to protect and assist such pioneering efforts. It plans to establish a school of journalism. The Union is also coordinating activities with the International Federation of Journalists and is receiving assistance from international organizations. Grigoryants needs all the allies he can make: "From the point of view of the regime, we are radical and anti-Soviet. We have been cursed by the leadership... including Gorbachev. Twice we have been threatened with destruction. But so far we have survived."

Asked about the draft law on publishing, Grigoryants was glum. He noted that this is actually the third draft proposal, commenting, "The first two were just awful. Fortunately, we got them ahead of time." The current draft bill is fifty pages long, "leaving much to be interpreted by the authorities."

The present draft has many flaws. In order to register a publication, an editor must indicate where it will be published and how materials will be supplied. This necessitates showing a signed contract with a printing establishment. Yet printers cannot enter into contracts with publications which are not registered. Such "catch-22" regulations are under attack by deputies to the Supreme Soviet, but Grigoryants said that they matter little because "most laws are not observed anyway." When queried on what is most dangerous for him to print, he muttered, "Like always — the truth."

Gorbachev Unpopular

On the political situation, Grigoryants appeared frustrated by the mismanagement of reform efforts and the regime's conservatism. He called the state of near-disintegration of the consumer supply system "unprecedented." In terms of human rights, he complained that many of his colleagues were still being imprisoned, and that over the last two and a half years, 400 Soviet citizens have been killed during street demonstrations. Grigoryants even believes that there exists the possibility of a "China solution" to the increasing unrest in Soviet society. "The leaders want to preserve but modernize," he said, asserting that the regime still relies on secrecy, political control and force.

Grigoryants saved his sharpest barbs for Mikhail Gorbachev, saying, "Gorbachev is probably the most unpopular leader in Soviet history. Besides the KGB, practically no one is supporting him." In an election, he claimed, Gorbachev would probably lose. Candidates who could defeat him include Boris Yeltsin and Telman Gdlyan. "Most who voted for Yeltsin were voting against Gorbachev."

These assertions were challenged by many in the audience, who suggested that a large segment of Soviet society, opting for "the lesser evil," is throwing its support behind the Soviet President. Grigoryants countered that while Gorbachev's survival hinges upon "fear of the alternatives," this cannot be construed as active support. He claimed that the West is Gorbachev's major power base. Foreign policy is the only area where Gorbachev has scored real successes, and international relations have a great impact on the Soviet domestic scene.

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