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Liberty

THE DREAM OF NAPOLEON:

*The views expressed here are Mr. Goble's own.

A Soviet-era anecdote has resurfaced in recent weeks in Moscow. According to the story, Napoleon returns from the dead and attends a Soviet May Day parade in Red Square. As he watches the heavily armed troops, tanks, and missiles go by, a big smile appears on his face.

A Soviet citizen notes this and says "Emperor, obviously you are thinking that if you had had such weapons, you would have won at Waterloo."

"No," Napoleon replies. "I'm thinking that if I had had a newspaper like your Pravda, no one would ever have known that I lost."

That story has suggested itself because of moves by the Russian government under President Vladimir Putin to gain unchallenged control of the electronic media most Russians now rely on, to reverse one of the greatest gains the Russian people have made since the fall of communism, and to set the stage for a creeping authoritarianism that threatens all the other freedoms which cannot thrive without freedom of the press.

In the year since Vladimir Putin became president of the Russian Federation, hopes both there and in the West that Russia would continue to move in the direction of democracy and free markets have been largely dashed both by what he has done and what those in his country appear increasingly prepared to accept.

Nowhere has that retreat from the progress of the Yeltsin years been greater than in the area of press freedom. President Putin has shown himself unwilling to tolerate any criticism of himself or his government, and he has moved both to intimidate journalists and take control of the most important media outlets. But his ability to do so reflects two other disturbing realities: The Russian media were never as free as many in the West had thought, and the Russian people were not as interested in or supportive of media freedom as many in the West had expected.

When Putin came to power by Yeltsin's sleight of hand at the beginning of 2000, the Russian media were already in difficult straits. Privatization had not lead to media freedom. Instead, in the absence of a population with enough money to purchase newspapers and of an advertising sector capable of supporting media outlets, both electronic and print media had fallen into the hands of the oligarchs, most of whom were former Soviet officials who viewed the press as a weapon in the struggle for power rather than as a means of communicating information to the population at large.

And because the oligarchs had acquired their property largely through illegal collusion with the state and because these properties were typically monopolies or oligopolies both before and after privatization, these "new Russians" as they have come to be called continue to be dependent on the state and therefore can be manipulated by it. Those who try to resist in any way -- Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky are the most obvious -- find themselves subject to the full power of the state and have been pushed out of the media scene.

As a result, the Russian government now controls virtually all the electronic media from which most Russians get their news. This situation was both compounded and made possible by developments in the journalistic community itself. After enjoying unprecedented respect and remuneration during the period of "glasnost" under Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, journalists fell on hard times during the 1990s. Their status tumbled along with their salaries, and by the later part of that decade, they were earning an average of around \$50 a month.

In that situation, they frequently sold their stories to the highest bidder, a situation that has become so nearly universal that an

entire new jargon has emerged in the Russian language to describe it. Because this practice is so widespread, it has further reduced their credibility and the support they had enjoyed from their audiences and readerships earlier. And that in turn has only led ever more of the best and the brightest to look to other careers than journalism, a vicious circle from which Russia shows no signs of escaping anytime soon.

Putin came to power in this context. Unlike Boris Yeltsin who generally backed media freedom despite everything else, Putin, a former KGB lieutenant colonel and communist, had little reason to like the press even if he could still claim that he was interested in market reforms. Within two weeks of taking office as acting president, Putin showed his true media colors, not only appearing to be behind the arrest of RFE/RL correspondent Andrei Babitsky for his reporting in Chechnya but also presiding over a comic opera "transfer" of Babitsky to "Chechen rebels" and telling interviewers that Babitsky and those of his ilk were "more dangerous" than Chechen gunmen.

Some people at the time blamed all this on Putin's newness to office, his supposed inexperience with the media. But the events of the last year have proven them wrong. Putin has taken a series of actions, all of which show him to be an enemy of the free media. Among the most egregious:

Putin and his government have presided over a country that international journalist organizations now say is the third most dangerous place on earth for people in the media. During 2000, several journalists were killed in Russia and their attackers remain at large. Far more were beaten up or threatened by thugs who appear to have close ties to the regime.

Putin and his government have promulgated an information security doctrine that puts the state in charge of all media activities, calls for restrictions on Internet access, and creates a new Kremlin bureaucracy to oversee the right thinking of the population through the press.

Putin and his government have hounded the two most important owners of independent media into exile and potential bankruptcy, forcing both Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky to yield most if not all of their media positions.

Putin and his government have restored Soviet-era symbols and actions, including the creation of a patriotic propaganda campaign system and of a Kremlin-financed propaganda apparatus. He has also overseen the return of the Soviet practice of denying paper to newspapers that print something he doesn't like and of denying electric power to radio and television outlets that carry stories he finds offensive.

Putin and his government have used their powers to reward those owners, editors, and journalists who cooperate and to punish those who don't by giving or denying access not only to cover the Chechen war but also to cover events in Moscow itself.

This list could easily be extended, but the point is clear. Unlike Yeltsin and unlike the leaders of democratic countries, Putin does not want a free press. Instead of viewing it as an integral part of a civil society, Putin sees it as an annoyance, as something to be silenced or bent to his will.

Many of Putin's defenders argue that no leader likes to be criticized. That is certainly true. Indeed, none of us likes criticism. But leaders who believe in democracy accept that criticism is part of the system. More to the point, they understand that in the words of Thomas Jefferson, without a free press, there will not long be a free congress. And that is precisely the point: Putin's attacks on the press both frontal and more underhanded are not an end in themselves. They are part of his attack on Russia's chance to move from an authoritarian past to a democratic future.

Putin has made it clear again and again that he is in favor of reviving the Russian state, of rebuilding what he calls "the vertical power" as part of a process of restoring the majesty of Russia. No one can argue that rebuilding the power of the state is wrong: under Yeltsin, the Russian state had disintegrated to the point that many people were saying that it had become a failed state in many ways like Somalia. More to the point, no one can argue that Russians buffeted by the difficulties of the post-Soviet decade would respond other than positively to such a call.

But -- and here is the problem -- there are many ways to rebuild the state in Russia or anywhere else. Putin has chosen to do it by attacking what is always the foundation of a free society -- the free press -- and he has done it with a remarkable degree of support from Russians as a whole.

According to the results of a poll taken in November 2000, 49 percent of Russians -- nearly one in every two -- believe that the reimposition of censorship would be a good thing for the government to do. Four months later, that number rose to 57 percent. Both statistics are far higher than only a few years ago, and together they constitute a dangerous trend. Moreover, this shift in Russian attitudes has been paralleled by a shift in Western ones, with the latter increasingly believing that if Russia becomes a free market economy all other issues will be taken resolved as well.

There appear to be three reasons for this entirely unexpected development. First, many Russians are simply deferring to Putin and his anti-media campaign. It is easy to go along with the new leader, especially one who has managed to advertise himself as more vigorous and effective than his predecessor. Indeed, many people appear to think that supporting the media is a kind of anti-Kremlin measure that they do not want to be a part of.

Second, the quality of the media has deteriorated both because of underlying market forces and because of the actions of Putin himself. At a time when many Russians are still suffering from the transition from communism, they have not only less money but less reason to look to the media for anything other than entertainment. They are thus less likely than before to want to

defend the media or care about the fate of broadcast or print news. Moreover, the Russian media now enjoys significantly less support from and respect by its Western counterparts, a trend that also appears headed toward becoming a vicious circle as well.

And third, many Russians, accustomed to the cheerleading of the press in Soviet times and appalled by the conditions that the Russian media now report, are less and less concerned that the media tell the truth. A recent poll suggested that many Russians now believe that the government not only has a right but an obligation to distort coverage on certain topics, not just prevent coverage but actively to manage it. In every society, people understand that there are things no government can or should allow to be openly discussed -- such as how to manufacture a nuclear weapon -- but that is something very different than supporting open distortion of coverage of ongoing events.

In this environment, there are nonetheless a few positive developments. Some newspapers, a few radio stations, and an occasional television broadcast do perform according to the highest standards of international journalism. Moreover, an advertising sector is reemerging after the ravages of the economic collapse of August 1998. And some journalists and editors appear to be increasingly concerned about their image and their responsibilities.

But such developments are being overwhelmed by Putin's campaign and especially by the population's apparent indifference. A decade ago, the media could rally people to its side and mobilize people to march in its defense. That achievement helped end communism and start Russia's troubled transition toward democracy. But now the media in Russia do not have that power. Worse, they do not appear likely to regain it anytime soon.

As a result, few listeners and readers are likely to do much to protest if Putin continues his crackdown against the press, something Putin knows well but that many in the West have so far failed to understand. And that makes it incumbent on us in the West to speak out lest the dream of Napoleon once more come true in Russia.