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## Businessmen and Freedom of the Press

By Konstantin Sonin

While Boris Berezovsky's political successes may now all be in the past, he now is managing to stand alone, without much in the way of supporters, as the principle ideologue opposing President Vladimir Putin's administration. The reactions of both the Russian and foreign public to the recent events in London demonstrate that even those who see the Kremlin's hand in Alexander Litvinenko's death are not particularly inclined toward feeling any sympathy for Berezovsky as the Kremlin's opponent. If the role he began to play at the end of the 1990s in helping destroy Russia's burgeoning democracy movement didn't last long enough to see the job finished, there is still little doubt about how important a part he played. He can nevertheless take credit as a true advocate of democracy due to his involvement in one important event this year: the sale of the Kommersant newspaper.

He cannot, of course, take all of the credit for the sale itself. Berezovsky's merit lies in providing an answer to the question: "Can a newspaper be owned by an oligarch -- a big businessman and political player -- and still function as an independent source of valuable information?" The answer to this question has to be yes.

Over the six years that the oligarch owned the publication, Kommersant remained a leader in the Russian press by virtue of its independence and the competence of its staff. This is especially remarkable given that all of this was set against the background of Berezovsky's titanic political struggles and tumultuous economic activity. Events on a smaller scale in the lives of other newspaper owners have led to the ruin of their publications. The list includes the newspapers Segodnya, which effectively collapsed in 1996, but officially went under only five years later, Russky Telegraf and many others. In another example, Izvestia suffered a very public fate worse than death as a result of its owners' vulnerability to changing political life.

Skeptics claim that Kommersant was able to maintain its independence only because it was in Berezovsky's political interests to see that it did. Independence is often economically advantageous as well, especially within a narrowing field of competing newspapers.

But let us suppose that the skeptics are right: Independence was politically expedient for Berezovsky inasmuch as it created problems for his opponents. And freedom of the press consists in this: A country's press is free not when its publications express all points of view, but when their owners have different and sometimes opposing interests. In this sense, the press was freer five years ago, when various oligarchs used the publications they owned to pour vitriol on one another. In a similar way, a number of weak streetlights placed along a highway will allow drivers to see much more than would just one powerful beam.

The simple reasoning is that competition, even to the point of animosity, turns information into a weapon and gives citizens and readers access to a broader array of facts and range of opinions. This demonstrates that there is only one real threat to freedom of the press -- the monopolization of the market for information by the state. So, if Yelena Baturina were not Mayor Yury Luzhkov's wife, pressure on Forbes Russia from whatever side about text accompanying her picture on the magazine's cover would not be an example of the struggle for freedom of the press. And it follows that if Alisher Usmanov was acting as a big businessman when he bought Kommersant, then the Jan. 1 closing of its opinion and commentary page, the departure of the writers from that section, along with the despondency on the part of the newspaper's investigative journalists would not be bad signs, but simply the usual ups and downs of business.

It would be an entirely different matter if Usmanov had been acting as the head of a state corporation.

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