

Comparative Analysis of the Pre- and Post-soviet Caucasian Press at the Example of Georgian Newspapers: “Sakartvelo” (Georgia) (1918) and “Kviris Palitra” (2022)

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Abstract

In the present reality, the stability of the Caucasus region is essential for the correct and democratic development of the post-Soviet area countries. The press reflects the reality of what is happening, therefore, studying its quality and content always gives an opportunity to draw the adequate conclusion.

Goal of the research is to determine to what extent the Caucasian (in particular, Georgian) press missed the path of its natural development due to appearing in the Soviet reality. What was the pre-Soviet and post-Soviet Georgian press like?

The research was conducted on the basis of a comparative analysis of the content of the National Democratic Party newspaper “Sakartvelo” (Georgia) (1918) and the modern free public-political newspaper “Kviris Palitra” (2022).

Before the forced unification of the Transcaucasian region into the Soviet Union, the local press was developing democratically. There were party newspapers, government and opposition publications. In modern reality, in the post-Soviet space, in the conditions of freedom of the press, newspapers show the tendency of total tabloidization. Irrelevant, unverified and biased information is often published.

As a result of the research, it was determined that the pre-Soviet press was of high quality and developed democratically, and the Soviet experience had such a negative impact that in the post-Soviet reality, the Transcaucasian press did not have three decades to return to its natural development path.

Keywords: pre and post-soviet press, Newspaper “Sakartvelo”, Newspaper “Kviris Palitra”, Caucasus Region

1. Introduction

The level of development of each region and nation is reflected in mass media. Observing the events covered in the press is the best way to determine what achievements and challenges are present in this or that direction. Presenting the peculiarities of the pre- and post-Soviet Caucasian press - a comparative analysis of the most prominent newspapers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries will give us opportunity to see the real picture. The research shows what and how the Soviet Union changed in the regular development of the region and, accordingly, how all this was reflected on the press and society.

Transcaucasia has always been one of the most interesting geopolitical locations. It is located at the junction of Europe and Asia, bordering Russia. It was this circumstance that brought 3 countries in the region: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan under the influence of the Russian Empire and after under the influence of the Soviet Union. The artificially created “unity” of the Soviet Republics obeyed the Center. Media outlets everywhere operated according to the principles of Communist media theory everywhere. Therefore, for 70 years, not only in the Caucasus, but in the entire Soviet Union, real journalism did not exist. In the post-Soviet area, the democratic society is being gradually formed during the last decades, which also is a great challenge for the media.

Formation of the democratic society seemed to be inevitable at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. All the three countries of the Transcaucasia intended to legalize forever their independence from Russia. All the conditions were created for the aforementioned. February 10, 1918, the Transcaucasian Commissariat convened the Seim, a representative body of power in the Transcaucasian countries. The Seim proclaimed the independence of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic. This event preceded the declaration of independence by the countries of Transcaucasia. Those processes were covered by the then print media, which tried to pave the way for the new government with constructive criticism and reasoned analysis; but the development of a democratic society was hampered

by a new situation. Sovietization erased the traces of pluralism and democratic thinking and confronted the media with a communist reality.

Although in modern reality the Caucasus Region has gained independence, still the degree of real freedom is different in the case of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia tries to maintain its influence on the post-Soviet space as much as possible and does not refrain from use of forceful methods for the cause. 20% of Georgia's territory is still occupied by Russia.

Based on comparative analysis, the research presents the peculiarities of pre- and post-Soviet print media. It shows what and to what extent the 70 years of Communist rule has changed in the natural development of independent media; what was the pre-Soviet Caucasian press and what is it like today.

Georgia has always had a distinguished position due to its advanced role in Transcaucasia. It is no coincidence that the Transcaucasian Seim also functioned in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. Georgia declared its independence on May 26, 1918. After Sovietization, it was part of the Soviet Union for 70 years. In modern reality, Georgia is a free democratic country, which declared its independence again on April 9, 1991.

Several political parties functioned in Georgia before Sovietization. The pluralistic environment that existed at the first stage of the formation of the democratic society provided the basis for the proper development of the country. During this period, important forces were active on the political arena: social-democratic, social-federalist, national-democratic and socialist-revolutionary parties.

The pre-Soviet Georgian press was mainly represented by the publications of various political associations, such as: the newspaper of the National Democratic Party "Sakartvelo", the newspaper of the Social Democratic Party "Ertoba" (Unity), the Socialist-Federalist "Glekhi" (Peasant), "Mitsa" (Land), "Sakhalkho Sakme", "kviris palitra" (People's Affairs), etc.

2. Literature Review

There is mainly literature on political parties and historical topics in relation to the research topic. As for the research of the press itself, the identification of its qualitative characteristics is usually covered by a relatively fewer sources; just parts of some textbooks, specially intended for journalism students, where the work of the authors working in this or that publication is described only superficially or the monograph written by this or that individual researcher, on any newspaper or magazine. For example: "History of Georgian Journalism: 20s of the 20th century", Shota Gagoshidze, Tbilisi, Tbl. University Publishing House, 2004; (Gagoshidze, 2004) "Diaries of 20th century Georgian public figures", Tbilisi, Intellecti, 2012; (Giorgi Dekanozishvili, Iason Iortqifanidze, Davit Qartsivadze, CHanturia Akaki, 2012) The work published on the basis of the thesis submitted for the PhD academic degree - Rusudan Vashakidze, "The Idea of Georgian Independence in the Georgian Press of 1917-1918" ("Sakartvelo", "People's Affairs", "Alioni", "Ertoba"), Tbilisi University Publishing House, 2009). (Vashakidze, 2009)

The scientific novelty of the presented article is conditioned right by the fact that there is very scarce scientific literature on the topic.

The period and topics selected for research in framework of this article are related to the monograph Newspaper "Sakartvelo" (1918-1919) published by me in 2020, in which the thematic priorities of the mentioned publication are presented, the work of publicists is evaluated and the qualitative characteristics of the newspaper are studied. The work was created based on the research of the issues of the mentioned newspaper in 1918-1919, as the given period coincides with the most insignificant event in the history of Georgia, the declaration of independence.

The monograph outlines the position of "Sakartvelo" publicists in relation to the most acute problems. Focus is on the fact that in parallel with the criticism, the authors always offered their own version of different solutions to the Government. The monograph can be used as an auxiliary textbook by journalism students and those interested in the history of journalism. (Bukia, 2020)

Teimuraz Khoridze's book Conversations about Journalism tells about Georgian journalism in the post-Soviet period. The book is mainly based on personal experience gained as a result of the author's practical activities and focuses on reality in Georgian electronic and print media period after 1990s. (Koridze, 2010)

The researches of the political situation and political party life in Georgia at the beginning of the 20th century mainly focus on the following circumstance - due to the anarchy reigning in Russia, Transcaucasia had the desire to escape from the slavery of the Russian Empire. First, the establishment of the Transcaucasian Seim, and then the declaration of independence by the Transcaucasian countries made them to face serious challenges.

The variety of political parties in Georgia, pluralism and the diversity of opinions related to the issues of the organization of the country, created healthy environment for the formation of a democratic society. Each political union was backed by its own media periodical. Consequently, all these conflicting opinions appeared in the press in the form of polemics. It can be claimed that the political party press in Georgia at the beginning of the 20th century was quite highly developed.

The Social-Democrats - Mensheviks came to power in the Republic of Georgia. Although a non-national party had to do the national work - the formation of an independent country - they still managed this challenge. It was the twentieth century, and particularly the brief independence of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (DRG) under a social democratic government that intensified the notion of Georgia as a part of Europe.“ (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2014)

When analyzing Remembering Georgia’s First Republic by Stephen Jones, the following conclusion can be made - **Despite the fact that the party that did not have national basis had to do national work, the Government was motivated by the desire to form a successful Republic. Working for the development of self-government and democracy, multi-partyism, made the press pluralistic and therefore - interesting.** The roots of Georgian social democracy were in Europe. The leaders of the Georgian social democratic movement imbibed ideas of equality, self-determination, democracy and civil rights from Georgia’s Europeanized intelligentsia, who were educated in Russia and Europe, and were known locally as the *Tergdaleulni* – those who have drank from the river Tergi (*Terek*), leading them to St. Petersburg and sometimes further, to Europe.“ (Jones, 2018)

Stephen F. Jones’s book *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883–1917*, was mainly dedicated to presenting the Georgia’s governing party’s worldview at the beginning of the 20th century; the author again emphasizes that the non-national party was leading the process of conducting of national affairs. “The Georgian intelligentsia’s acceptance of imperial state borders did not imply indifference to national rights, The Georgian Social Democrats, like their nineteenth-century intellectual predecessors, were “nationalists too...” (Jones S. F., 2005)

As it can be seen, literature mainly helps us to present a general picture, but, does not allow to specifically understand the processes taking place in the press and the hampering of development of the free media of the independent republics by the Soviet and their so called reanimation and development after gaining freedom.

The number of sources named in the literature review is not enough, it is scarce, but it should be noted that there are no other materials on this topic. The issue has not been studied and the article aims to fill this gap. This fact also determines scientific innovation.

3. Methods

Qualitative research, content analysis and interpretive research methods are used in the article. All the preserved issues of the Newspaper “Sakartvelo” from 1918 and the Newspaper “Kviris Palitra” from 2022, have been studied and analyzed. The analysis of the given empirical data clearly shows how the Soviet Union hampered the natural development of independent mass media, what was the pre-Soviet Caucasian press like (on the example of Georgia) and what is the situation in terms of today's reality.

4. Discussion

4.1 1918 Newspaper “Sakartvelo” (Georgia)

In 1915, in Tbilisi, was founded the daily newspaper “Sakartvelo” (Georgia), which during 1920-1921, was being published under the names –“Akhali Sakartvelo” (New Georgia) and “Iveria”. The newspaper was characterized with its national-patriotic orientation and was the publication of the National Democratic Party.

The Editorial Board expressed the concept of the Newspaper “Sakartvelo” as follows: it was a "political, economic and literary" institution. The “Georgians” described the direction and purpose of the newspaper as follows: “Sakartvelo” is of national-democratic orientation. Special attention is paid to the economic, commercial, industrial and agricultural successes of our country, as well as the dissemination of professional and technical knowledge. Well-known publicists and writers cooperate closely with the newspaper.”

1918 newspaper “Sakartvelo” offered its readers the following rubrics: "War", "About the Truce", "Bolshevik Dictatorship", "Chronicle", "Press", "Correspondence", "Theatre and Art", printing relevant materials in the form of informational notes.

In the newspaper rubrics were often repeated in several issues. For example: "Anarchy in the Caucasus", "Press Madness", "Armenian Press", "Georgian Press", "Feuilleton", etc. The publication was very popular.

Spyridon Kedia was the head of Newspaper “Sakartvelo” and of the National Democratic Party. Poet and playwright Sandro Shanshiashvili (1888-1979) was the Editor of “Sakartvelo” in 1915-1916. In 1917, the head of the newspaper was appointed Gr. Veshapeli. Since 1919, writer, translator and critic Geronti Kikodze (1885-1960) was the Editor of “Sakartvelo”. Members of the Editorial Office were: Al. Asatiani, I. Machavariani and L. Kvaratskhelia, Niko Nikoladze, Geronti Kikodze, Giorgi Gvazava, Mich. Javakhishvili, Shalva Dadiani, Vasil Barnov, Ekvtime Takaishvili, Korneli Kekelidze, Ivane Zurabishvili.

1918 was a politically tense year, however “Sakartvelo” wrote with great interest not only about the war and the dictatorship of the Proletariat, but also about culture and arts; The newspaper covered all socially and political essential events. Accordingly, in 1918, the newspaper did not avoid such topics as: the declaration of independence of Georgia (on May 26, 1918); establishment of the first Georgian University, etc.

The publicists of the newspaper were able to maintain the balance by permanent rubrics, which, in fact, precluded the dominance of only one topic in the publication's content.

"Sakartvelo" opposed the political views of the Socialists. According to them, Socialism originated in Europe, and if it was good, it would not have been rejected there. Therefore, Sakartvelo considered the socialization of Russia and of the 98% of our country as an abnormal phenomenon and named it as "Socialist Psychosis".

"Georgians" introduced the society to modern literature and also covered the problems of art. All this was done at a high professional level, with in-depth knowledge of the job.

The newspaper mainly focused on the separatism of the Ossetians, the danger of losing Saingilo, the daily life problems of the capital, the need to better organize the railway, the need to delegate functions to the provinces and to introduce nationhood. To put it better, the newspaper presented all the essential and actual topics with reasoned arguments in order for the electorate to have their own position on the processes underway in the country. Although the newspaper was a periodical of a particular political party, its analytical content appears to have been unbiased. Publicists' reasoning was always based on factual material and logical arguments.

When discussing the foreign policy issues, the newspaper considered alliance with Germany as the most optimal decision to be made for that time. They believed, while there was anarchy in Russia, Georgia should be smart enough to connect with the leading state of Europe, Germany. This step, in their opinion, would make it possible to escape Russia's orbit.

Analysis of all issues of the newspaper published in 1918 showed that the publicists of "Sakartvelo" demonstrated professional mastery in polemics, followed the principles of credibility and objectivity and substantiated their reasoning with the statements by prominent people. In order to emphasize the correctness of their viewpoints, convincing arguments were given, which ensured the achievement of the necessary effect. The opponent of "Sakartvelo" newspaper mainly was the Social-Democratic "Ertoba" (Unity). Sakartvelo actively used the rubric "Press" for polemics with Ertoba, however, polemical letters were also published outside the mentioned rubric.

Based on the strategy of the newspaper, an author first offered the readers the position of the opponents as it was and then delivered a decisive attack with argumentative reasoning. Sakartvelo often published counter-accusations too.

By 1918, chaos and anarchy were raging in Russia. For Newspaper "Sakartvelo", the restoration of Russia was acceptable not as an empire or a federation, but as an ordinary country. "Georgians" considered that declaration of Georgia's independence was a legitimate happening. In the matter of its preservation, they hoped for the Tribunal, as our country was given a chance to present itself to the world at the given peace conference.

Publicists of "Sakartvelo" newspaper spoke out with serious, motivated criticism. Their negative attitude was supported by reasoned arguments, which should have been interesting and trustful for readers. At the same time, in case of interest, government representatives, could get many important recommendations from the materials of the publication. The research revealed that critical views in the 20th century Caucasian press were much more correctly formulated than today and did not resemble swearing and cursing. Unfortunately, modern press does not maintain such balance nowadays.

Thus, the research showed that Newspaper "Sakartvelo" dealt with all the relevant and important problems. It can be safely claimed that this newspaper could be used by the government as an advisor. The Social-Democratic government, which was inexperienced in national affairs, would have avoided many mistakes, if the recommendations from the publications were considered. However, historical fate could not save Georgia from the Soviet Union. The research has confirmed that Newspaper "Sakartvelo" published at the beginning of the 20th century was diverse and interesting.

4.2 Newspaper "Kviris Palitra" (2022)

Social-political newspaper "Kviris Palitra" has been a Monday weekly since 1995. The newspaper is mainly 44-48 pages and is targeted at an audience of 30 years and older. "Kviris Palitra" has its own distribution network and is circulated throughout the country. Therefore, its content is available to everyone. Since 2005, the newspaper has a website www.kvirispalitra.ge

2022 "Kviris Palitra" used the following slogans to position itself - "Discover every week", "What's happening - find out elsewhere... why it's happening - read here!" Despite such loud statements, the content study showed that almost no analytical materials are being published, except of the opinions of politically motivated respondents and experts, which are offered a lot, in the form of interviews.

The newspaper has the following permanent rubrics: "Topic of the week", "From week to week", "In the wake of the pandemic", "Point of view", "In the political labyrinth", "Economy", "Roots", "Georgians", "Georgians abroad", "On the military topic", Announcements, etc.

In "Kviris Palitra" changing rubrics alternate with each other depending on the topicality of an issue: "Victims of the Occupation", "Dariali Sketches", "Georgian-Japanese Friendship", "Exclusive", "Law", "Wealth Formula", "Beyond the Enguri", "Artist", "Big Politics" etc.

The principle of distribution of topics in the rubrics in some cases seems illogical. For example, the rubric "Georgians" presents interviews with emigrants. While the same topic is continued in the rubric "Georgians Abroad". It is ineffective to separate two different rubrics for thematically identical content. Columns: "Georgians Abroad" and "Point of View" stop on the front pages of the newspaper and are continued again towards the last pages. This decision makes it difficult for readers to choose which material to read. As an example of the illogical decision of the editors to organize the content, we can cite the rubric "Law" presented in the issue N4(1435) of January 24-30, the two materials printed in which are both about politics. Thus, the publications in the rubric are thematically inappropriate.

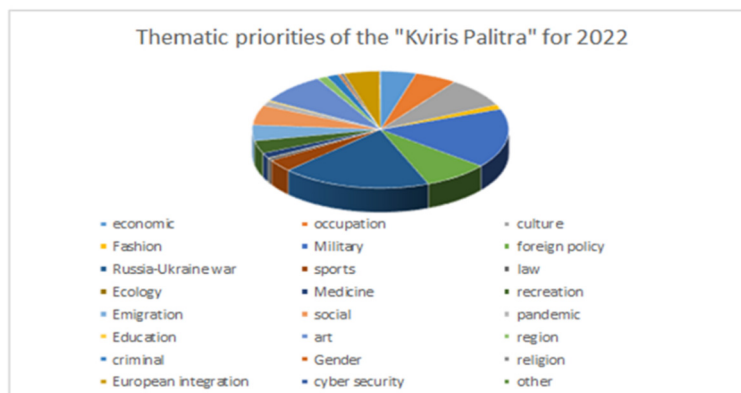
A social-political newspaper, which claims to be the best publication in the country, obviously should cover all the important issues. However, analysis of "Kviris Palitra" showed that sport is not separated a specific rubric. In general, the newspaper does not pay any attention to the achievements and problems in this field. Several interviews with this or that athlete indirectly cover this topic, which ultimately will not satisfy readers interested in sports at all.

"Kviris Palitra" newspaper does not focus on culture sphere problems and challenges, nor does it have a dedicated rubric for the cause. This deficiency is partly corrected by "Point of View" rubric, in which they write about socially important topics in interviews with representatives of the cultural sphere. Also, they have the "Artist" rubric, telling about work of one particular person. This content does not fully reflect the real picture; there is no attempt to identify and analyze the problems, which in no way can be counted as a positive addition to the reputation of the discussed publication.

If we do not pay attention to the rubrics offered by the Editors of "Kviris Palitra" and group its content thematically, according to content peculiarities, the interests of the creative group of the newspaper can be better identified and specific conclusions can be made. In 2022, 1383 extensive materials were printed in "Kviris Palitra" newspaper. The thematic priorities of Editorial Board clearly lean towards politics - 21.4% (296 materials). Most of these publications are related to the Russian-Ukrainian war (162 materials). However, it is noteworthy that from July 10, 2022, the topic of Ukraine moved to the background and writing about the prospects of Georgia's European integration became a priority for the newspaper's authors. As result of the content analysis of the materials, we have concluded that the Editorial Board interest was distributed as follows:

The observation and analysis of thematic priorities revealed the fact that "Kviris Palitra" is politicized and in this respect only covers ongoing events, but showing less interest to such important areas as: education, culture, sports, etc.

The absolute majority of the materials printed in "Kviris Palitra" are interviews; which allows us to think that the authors prefer to completely transfer the burden of proving to respondents. As they are the main source, journalists do not have to verify anything. Such a decision, of course, harms the quality of the newspaper, because content that is homogeneous in terms of genre is boring to understand and does not give the impression of a professional journalistic text. At the same



time, the use of an interview as a form of representation is an indicator that journalists do not have the potential to write analytical materials, which, we of course, can evaluate negatively.

Only reasoning by respondents, no matter how logical it is, still gives the impression of disbalance, because they are, in many cases, politically motivated individuals and are driven by the desire to guide public opinion according to their own viewpoints. Reader believes, and should believe, a neutral author, a professional journalist who does not represent any party. Considering the circumstances revealed during the research, we can conclude that the mentioned newspaper is unbalanced and there is no attempt by the authors to verify the information provided by their sources, which excludes the possibility of disinformation prevention.

Only 181 materials in "Kviris Palitra" of 2022 are not interviews, although this indicator is only at the expense of Rusa Machaidze's recent blog and the rubric of military expert Irakli Aladashvili. An expert in military affairs professionally analyzes the problems of this field and looks for cause-and-effect relationships between events, but this is done only within the framework of one rubric and the author is not a journalist by profession. The aforementioned emphasizes the following circumstance: the field competences of "Kviris Palitra" authors does not give the opportunity to qualitatively

cover the problems of various fields and for journalists to be able to do analytical reasoning independently without authoritative figures. The circumstance mentioned in relation to the country's leading publication does not speak in favor of the development of the free press in the region.

Thus, the rated newspaper published in the 21st century, which is considered to be the best, can neither satisfy all the interests of the audience nor offer analytical materials to its readers. This circumstance indicates a selective coverage and a certain disability or some kind of self-restraint.

5. Conclusions

Region progress highly depends on the development of the press. Media reflects everything happening around. Every result occur as result of certain reasons. Soviet journalism was nourished by the Communist theory of the press; therefore, everything was controlled by party ideology. Due to that, for comparison, we took the periods when the Trans-Caucasian press (for example, Georgia) was free - before the Soviet Union and after the Soviet Union. A comparative study of the Caucasian press of the 20th and 21st centuries (at the example of Georgia) gave us a clear picture of why the print media is as it is now.

The high level and balance of the pre-Soviet press and the superficiality, chaotic arrangement of content and total tabloidization reigning in the post-Soviet press are apparent. The modern Caucasian press (at the example of Georgia) is either governed by someone's private political interest (by Soviet inertia, when the press had to be nourished by the ideals of the Communist Party), or it is afraid of free analytical reasoning (it is hidden behind opinions of authoritative figures).

There is no official party press (in this case, it would be natural to act according to the worldview of a party), the free press simply pretends to be such and is actually party-affiliated. If the publication is truly free, it is too cautious because of the Soviet experience and is afraid to participate in the process of forming public opinion, so it is based on the interview genre and analysis by experts.

Research has shown that the press in the pre-Soviet era was actually free and of high quality, but in the post-Communist period, despite technical progress, it is not. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Soviet Union slowed it down for 70 years and removed it from the natural development process, which can be compensated for by understanding and realizing the results of media researchers' studies, accumulating experience, observing Western media and working on oneself.

Research results are as follows:

1. Newspaper "Sakartvelo" (1918), which was a periodical publication of the National Democratic Party, covered not only all current topics, but also all the areas that it had already announced in its concept: politics, economy and culture (which means, the publication had a concept and acted according to it);
2. Newspaper "Sakartvelo" (1918) offered the Social-Democratic (Menshevik) government, which was completely unprepared for the freedom of independent Georgia, and the society facing challenges, a critical view of events from the opposition platform, its own solution to the difficult situation, the best analytical articles based on access to cause-effect relationships between events;
3. Newspaper "Sakartvelo" covered all important areas, tried to deeply analyze the problems and to contribute to the Europeanization of the society and the development of the country;
4. Newspaper "Kviris Palitra" is politicized and is illogical in the formation of content; the inconsistency and disorganization of distribution of materials in the rubrics can easily confuse readers;
5. Newspaper "Kviris Palitra" does not cover all areas important to society, although it is required to be done by its concept. The newspaper is positioned on the market as a public-political newspaper, which means it itself violates the promise given to its readers;
6. Journalists of Newspaper "Kviris Palitra" do not write analytical materials, they present all the content in the form of genre interviews and are copying the respondents' discussions on complex topics.

The aforementioned gives opportunity to make the following conclusions:

- Press of the beginning of the 20th century, in the Caucasus region (at the example of Georgia), the was much more progressive, in-depth, democratic, focused on the reader's interests, bold and analytical than it is in the 21st century;
- Pre-Soviet Caucasus media (Georgia as an example) was free when creating analytical content;
- The post-Soviet press tries to just print the statements made by the respondents on important issues; it is restricted and limited. Although the Soviet Union has collapsed long time ago, the mental "handcuffs" are still present;
- The post-Soviet Caucasian media (at the example of Georgia) is trying to show its independence and for better to demonstrating this, it does not refrain from ribaldry, total tabloidization; it even tries to demonstrate its pseudo-freedom by arranging the content chaotically, but it is not yet able to independently, without guidance and help from respondents to take responsibility and to distinguish the essential from the less important.

Thus, the legal legacy of the Soviet Union still remains the serious obstacle; after 70 years of imprisonment, it appears that just a few decades were not enough for the press to understand that freedom is not destruction and chaos, but taking difficult tasks on oneself and the great responsibility.

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