

## The Role of the Media in Russia's Inter-ethnic Relations: An Interview with *Chelyabinsk Worker* Editor Boris Kurshin

By Galima Galiullina, Chelyabinsk

### Abstract

The newspaper *Chelyabinsk Worker* has published for more than a century in Chelyabinsk Oblast, where representatives of more than 140 nationalities live. In the Southern Urals, there have been no terrorist acts or nationalist outbursts even though, as with the rest of the country, local residents have experienced the difficulties of the economic crisis and the shock of the tragic events in Moscow, the Caucasus, and other regions. In the following interview, Editor-in-Chief Boris Kurshin explains the role of his newspaper in the stormy world of such sensational events.

### Investigating the Causes of Violence

**Q:** Is there a connection between the nationalist demonstration on Manezh Square in December 2011 and the terrorist attack on Domodedovo Airport in January 2011 and how will these events affect the future of the country? How do you evaluate the behavior of the media in covering these events?

**A:** The events at Manezh Square and Domodedovo are definitely connected: they are a reaction to the actions of Moscow in the Caucasus. Thanks to my many years as an editor, I thoroughly track the reaction of the media, particularly the print press. I did not notice any gross mistakes in the coverage of these events (with the exception, probably, of the nationalist press). The style and tone of most publications was within the limits of tolerance. The events in Manezh Square were covered with sympathy for the people who suffered from the actions of the nationalists.

Some media went further. *Chelyabinsk Worker*, for example, carried out an investigation. We decided to make clear the connection between the events in Moscow and what happened in the city of Miass in the Urals. We were particularly interested in understanding how typical the use of specially-prepared groups of young people is in attacking ordinary people.

Last summer at the Tornado Rock Festival in Miass hundreds of people suffered at the hands of a group of young people who appeared out of nowhere. They were armed with truncheons, striped to the waist and had shaved heads. They beat many members of the public quickly and cruelly.

With the aid of readers and bloggers we sought to figure out why this had happened and who stood behind this battle. We published the results of our investigation in several issues of the newspaper. The first explanation was that this attack was the work of skinheads. This explanation drew a strong reaction around the world. But the investigation showed that the skinheads were not involved.

A second explanation lays the blame on an Armenian kebab seller. Initially, the authorities described the

mass beating as an ordinary riot and insensitively cited the nationality of the kebab stand owner. They simply blamed him because of his nationality. The readers of our site questioned whether his ethnicity was really the main cause of the conflict.

Ultimately, the newspaper identified the organizer of the battle. The key player was the leadership of the entertainment complex where the concert took place. This complex is associated with a sports hall where a group of bodybuilders trained. They were ordered to attack the rock festivals fans after these fans had quarreled with one of the workers at the complex. Now his bosses are hiding him abroad, apparently in Cyprus.

### Tolerance and the Media

**Q:** What are the main reasons for the collapse of tolerance in Russia? Why is xenophobia growing in a country where once there was a "fraternal family of peoples"? Is the mass media at least partly to blame for this?

**A:** Why has the "friendship" become aggravated between the fraternal peoples? In the USSR the differences between ethnic groups were artificially papered over. This false unity of various cultures and traditions gave rise to internal tensions. When the force clamping this "family" together weakened, the family fell apart. We have to learn how to value the uniqueness of every people. We need to see the particular charm of each people. Our strength is in diversity; it is important to understand that. ...

I do not think that the media play a special role in whipping up xenophobia. Journalists are typically intelligent and delicate people. However, to some degree, there is an insufficient culture of tolerance. There are newspapers which profess xenophobia, whose staffs include "excessively Russia people." But their share is insignificant. There is only one such newspaper in our region—in the city of Zlatoust.

Probably, the media bear some responsibility for the way that they covered the events in the Caucasus. The

journalists covering the war divided Russian citizens into “us” and “them.” In fact, we were all in this war. Since we did not trust the central media to cover these events, we sent our own correspondents to Chechnya. People increasingly understand—the war in the Caucasus is a tragedy for Russia. Recently I learned that General Rokhlin once refused a Hero’s Star award, saying that there are no heroes in a civil war.

**Q:** How much tolerance is there among Urals residents—this is after all a multi-cultural society? Is it sufficient to preserve peace between ethnic groups?

**A:** Tolerance is natural for Ural residents. The entire history of the region is the history of joint life among numerous ethnic groups. Together they built factories, defeated fascism, survived bitter cold winters, and experienced reforms. There are no serious ethnic conflicts here. Occasionally, they find signs of Wahhabi extremism here, but it is most likely a result of efforts by the special services to justify themselves and their salaries. Maybe the reason is that in the Southern Urals there are no serious financial interests, no sharp battles to control money flows during which the various sides seek support among national clans by manipulating nationalist feelings. Here most people are dealing with the toils of daily life. The big money is in Moscow and St. Petersburg and that is where the battles are.

Are there skinheads in our region? Probably there are, this contagion exists everywhere. But we have not seen any serious disturbances or nationalists calling for blood as happened on Manezh Square.

### The Role of Ethics Codes

**Q:** How active today are journalist ethics codes in conditions of global competition for audience share? Do they cause any problems?

**A:** Competition for readers has a negative impact on ethics. I’ve noticed how a good journalist will set up a blog and immediately turn into the kind of cheeky scribbler who allows himself all kinds of unimaginable things. He is trying to distinguish himself from millions of similar people in an ocean of information.

At *Chelyabinsk Worker* journalists observe ethical standards. And in many other traditional media, ethical standards are alive. This distinguishes us from the Internet, it is our competitive advantage, guaranteeing the trust of the reader. We do not have the right to violate it, otherwise we will lose our readership.

*About the Author:*

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*Chelyabinsk Worker* is 103 years old. Our journalists feel the strength of these years and the authority of those who worked in the paper before us. We understand how many journalists from the paper were shot in the 1930s or were sent to the camps. The reputation of the newspaper and its history is the base of moral and ethical norms for each of us.

I remember one particularly vivid story from the history of the newspaper. In the 1930s, one of our journalists joined a group of miners to visit the hero of labor Alexei Stakhanov. Finding the journalist to be young, smart, and good company, Stakhanov invited him home. Afterwards, the journalist described this party and his open conversations with Stakhanov. Soon he was arrested and disappeared forever. It turned out that a neighbor needed his room in their communal apartment and she told the authorities about his “unsuitable” conversations. Such stories are unforgettable.

**Q:** When you must choose between being competitive and morality, which wins?

**A:** Some American mass media researchers think that in contemporary conditions transparency should replace objectivity. You can move away from objectivity, but your readers should know where and how this happened. In the US, this topic came up because of the expansion of the digital media. There is 74 percent Internet penetration in America. In Russia it is only 32 percent. If the Russian media follow this US trend, no one would notice because 93 percent of the Russian media is controlled by the state (according to Russian human rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin). What kind of objectivity can we speak about in these conditions?

This problem does not affect *Chelyabinsk Worker*. Objectivity is our trump. We are independent of state structures and live exclusively on money we earn. Therefore we can conduct an independent editorial policy.

**Q:** What are your information policy principles in a multicultural and multi-confessional society?

**A:** Our main principle is to find living examples of tolerance in the South Urals and in the world and to tell our readers about them. Recently, for example, we devoted an entire page to a class for Roma in one of the oblast’s raions. In multicultural Europe, some countries expel their Roma, we work to educate them. Education for Roma is an inspiring example of a multi-cultural society.