

Call for Papers

'A Window of opportunities:' Newspaper press during perestroika – analyses and field reports

Workshop – Helsinki, Max Weber Forum, Finland, 26 – 27 February 2026

In the late 1980s, freedom of the press was upheld by reform policy and law in the Soviet Union for the first time since the brief period between the February and October Revolutions of 1917. As Communist Party rule and information monopoly no longer exerted its enormous power over media and society, perestroika developed a life of its own.

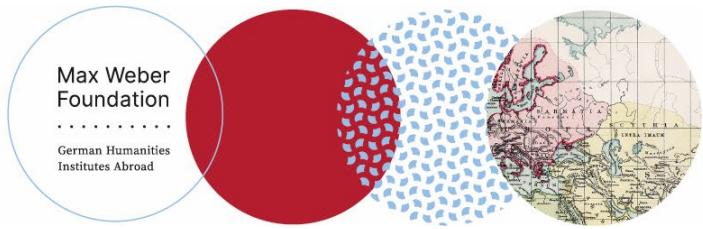
In a new spirit of optimism, the population of the Soviet Union took itself, its history, its present and future to task. Journalists were among the first to test and overcome the limits of what could be said and done; along the way, they also reinvented themselves. Established newspapers and magazines changed their image and content and became more interesting to the readers. New, independent publications could be initiated, especially after the 'Law [of 1990] on the Press and Other Mass Media.'

In March 1991, there were over 8,000 registered newspapers and magazines in various languages, half of which were newly founded. Many newly launched newspapers were probably not even counted. In this arguably decisive period of the late Soviet Union, every newspaper had its own history, circumstances and actors. Together, as media in a highly mediatized society, they surely shaped the era of late reform and early transformation, its images, moods and perceptions.¹ They highlight perestroika as a history of communication in a multi-layered process.

While a body of research literature on the press does exist, there remains room for further exploration. Developments were far from uniform or confined to the two 'capitals'. Besides an evolving political spectrum, journalistic initiatives across the multiethnic Soviet Union remain largely unexplored. There is a great need for individual analytical case studies,

¹ Cp. e.g. Nick Couldry / Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

Eastern Europe



especially at the grassroots level and the multiethnic periphery. Also, many journalists who were active at the time can report first-hand on their experiences.

This workshop aims to investigate the ‘window of opportunities’ for independent newspaper journalism that opened up during perestroika. It seeks to contribute to an exploration of the history of this period with a focus on its beginnings, thus avoiding equating reforms with ‘collapse’ *a priori*, but also paying attention to dynamics that are usually only associated with the later transformation. For journalism in the national republics, the approach of independence in 1991 certainly colours how the perestroika period is viewed. Yet we also encourage analyses of how press practices themselves changed. We would like to invite newspaper analyses as individual case studies covering all areas previously pertaining to the Soviet Union, but especially the – multilingual – peripheries.

We are interested in the following fields of questions:

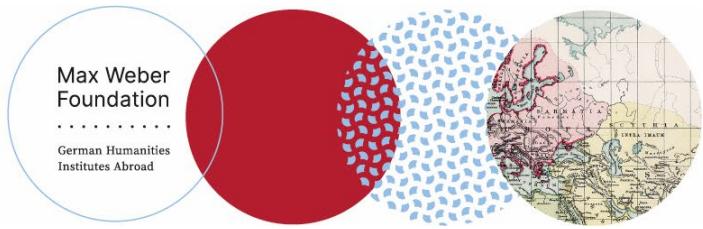
Structures and agency

- Newspapers as ‘contents,’ but also ‘objects,’ according to modern media theory, with technical, economic, infrastructural aspects taken into consideration
- Everyday lives, and risks, of journalists; continuities and change in the editorial offices (including experience reports from the field)
- Newspapers ‘in dialogue’ with their readers: target groups (including previously underprivileged/excluded/stigmatized groups, minorities), networking activities
- Newspapers and local/regional politics
- Press coverage of religion, religious PR and journalism
- International contacts
- Quantities and qualities: newspaper distribution, reception, and impact as ‘shapers of and being shaped by society’

Temporalities

- Future expectations in the turbulent times of the ‘restructuring’
- Media events

Eastern Europe



- Historically inspired tasks and agendas of all kinds in newspapers: the newspaper as 'archive' and medium for restoring knowledge of (one's own hitherto subdued, repressed) culture, but also: the newspaper as medium for extremist positions, delusions of former/future grandeur, etc.

Visual aspects of perestroika newspapers

- Use of 'language without text,' through changes in layout, images, colour, etc.
- Photos and photographers, illustrators: their lives, and risks, working for or in collaboration with newspapers (including field reports)

The workshop is intended to bring together two groups:

- contemporary press practitioners who worked in the Soviet Union at the time, especially members of the local presses
- researchers at all stages of their academic careers from across different disciplines

Both are invited to submit a paper proposal (400 words) and a short CV, including current affiliation and contact details, by **25 October 2025** to [Franziska.Schedewie\(at\)zegk.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:Franziska.Schedewie(at)zegk.uni-heidelberg.de)

Applicants will be informed of the acceptance of their proposal by **15 November 2025**.

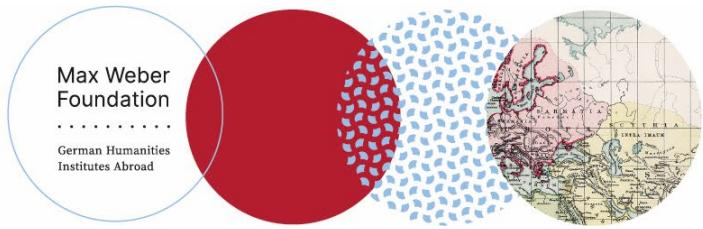
The working language of the workshop will be English. A publication of contributions is planned with a preliminary submission deadline of 31 May 2026.

The organizers will provide accommodation in Helsinki for the duration of the workshop. Travel costs will be reimbursed after the workshop depending on budget availability with early career researchers, participants from post-Soviet states (excluding Russia and Belarus) and scholars in exile taking precedence.

Max Weber Network

Eastern Europe

• • • • • • • •



The workshop will be held in Helsinki and is co-funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and the Max Weber Network Eastern Europe (MWNO). It is co-organized by PD Dr. Franziska Schedewie (University of Heidelberg), Prof. Dr. Bradley Woodworth (University of New Haven/Yale University) and the Max Weber Forum Helsinki (MWF).

Funded by



Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

Funded by

Max Weber Network

Eastern Europe

• • • • • • •



UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386



| University of New Haven