

What's next for The Moscow Times?

By Wendy Sloane

The publication is in exile, and its founder has died. Will it lose its relevance?

In one of the early issues of *Moscow Magazine*, a ground-breaking joint venture between Dutch publisher VNU and the Soviet Union of Journalists and the forerunner to *The Moscow Times*, a photo caption misidentified outspoken Russian politician Galina Starovoitova (later assassinated) as the wife of Boris Yeltsin. It was 1990 and, despite the pervasive odour of *glasnost*, the venture's Soviet editor panicked. A scandal like this could have escalated into a major diplomatic scandal, sparking tit-for-tat expulsions – or worse.

But Derk Sauer - Dutch co-editor and an ex-Maoist fresh from editing *Nieuwe Revu*, a sensationalist Amsterdam-based weekly known for its cocktail of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll - devised a cunning plan. He ordered 30,000 tiny, printed stickers, which were flown in overnight from the Netherlands at absurd expense, and quietly set about fixing the blunder. In truth, I did the fixing – with help. As the magazine's associate editor, I spent three days crammed into a windowless storage room with two Soviet drivers and a chain-smoking British proofreader, manually covering each caption in a hush-hush operation before the issue hit the streets.

Did anyone notice the original mistake? Not that I know of. Crisis averted.

The move was classic Derk: bold, scrappy, impulsive, and a little chaotic – and set the tone for everything that followed. He launched his 33-year Russian adventure at full tilt: no knowledge of the language, no roadmap, just nerve, hustle, a bundle of idealism - and a wallet wide open when it counted. By the time Putin's crackdown forced him into exile in 2022, Derk spoke the lingo with a strong Dutch accent and iffy grammar - but had become one of the most influential figures in Russian independent media, having built his extraordinary empire from scratch.

Tragically, Derk passed away in July at age 72 following a freak sailboat accident off the coast of Corfu. He was celebrating his 40th wedding anniversary with his wife, journalist Ellen Verbeek - founding editor of Russian *Cosmopolitan* and *Yoga Journal* – and fell down the galley stairs. The accident left him paralysed, and he died from his injuries five weeks later in at a family home in the Netherlands. Derk, a daily yoga practitioner and longtime vegetarian (in Russia!), left behind his wife and three sons, including Pjotr, now a Russia affairs reporter for *The Guardian*.

He also left behind *The Moscow Times*, which was launched just three months after the Soviet collapse in March 1992. It became Russia's first independent English-language

newspaper - a vital window into post-Soviet Russia for the outside world, and a launchpad for generations of journalists, both Russian and international, including several Pulitzer Prize winners. Remarkably, it still endures - though now in exile. Driven out by the Kremlin's relentless crackdown on independent media, it operates today from Amsterdam, along with TV *Dozhd'* (Rain), the independent news channel Derk also helped to relocate. The Moscow office is shuttered, the newsroom dispersed, and Derk lives on as a black-and-white photograph on the wall. Yet *The Moscow Times* continues to publish from a distance, its focus unchanged. And yes - with apologies to Celine Dion - it *will* go on.

Operating in the shadows

Will Derk's death affect *The Moscow Times'* future - or its direction? "The short answer is no, in terms of our mission and our purpose," said editor-in-chief Samantha Berkhead, a 33-year-old journalist from Rochester, New York. She relocated to the Dutch capital from Moscow after a brief period in Istanbul followed by a nine-month stint at *The Moscow Times'* temporary offices in Yerevan.

Now operating from a discreet location on the city outskirts - its address is kept top secret due to security risks, after journalists covertly filmed the building and aired the footage on Russia 24 - the publication runs on a lean editorial team of around 15 reporters and photographers. Together, they produce a wide range of content for both the Russian and English-language editions, including reporting from across Russia and its regions. "We're working to keep journalism alive and to maintain the flow of information from Russia to the rest of the world, even as the country becomes increasingly closed off," Berkhead told me. "Those goals do not change with Derk no longer with us."

The Moscow Times already underwent a major shift in 2017 when it went fully digital. Today, only a handful of its journalists remain inside Russia - reporting anonymously and underground. Safety concerns have forced them to write without bylines after the paper was designated a "foreign agent" (twice) and an "undesirable organisation" (just once) by the Kremlin, making it illegal for anyone to work with them, or even be interviewed by them.

This shift to exile journalism is something no one at the publication welcomes. "The sooner they're back in Russia, the better," said Pjotr, Derk's middle son and *The Guardian* reporter. "*The Moscow Times* always prided itself on having more reporters on the ground than any other English-language outlet in Russia. That's what made them special - and that's what makes exile so difficult."

Despite these constraints, Pjotr says the newsroom continues to impress. "If you look at the volume and quality of the stories they produce in both English and Russian, they're doing a very good job," he said. "They have news, opinion, analysis, features. The website is always fresh and the newsfeed is constant. They try to produce several strong features and good opinion pieces every week. For many, it's still a go-to source."

He added, "Surviving is, in itself, a statement to Moscow - to the Kremlin - that you cannot get rid of them. Expanding is another issue. Right now, it's about survival."

Even in exile, *The Moscow Times* continues to grow – and its credibility remains strong. BBC Moscow correspondent Steve Rosenberg recently told me: “I read it from time to time and it's very good, it's a very good site. But in terms of the impact of not only of *The Moscow Times* but other western outlets, it's very difficult for me to say.”

The numbers speak for themselves. In 2023, site traffic nearly doubled - from 4.87 million users in 2022 to 8.69 million, with page views soaring to 162 million. In Russia's hostile media landscape, encrypted messaging apps have become vital lifelines. Telegram, now *The Moscow Times*' primary distribution channel, saw subscribers surge from just over 31,000 in late 2022 to nearly 115,000 in August 2025, despite Putin's ongoing efforts to block it. On TikTok, the Russian-language service reached 117,000 subscribers this year, while the English-language edition amassed almost 800,000 followers on Facebook.

“The *Moscow Times* has never been an opposition publication,” publisher Alexander Gubsky wrote, commenting on the magazine's direction not long after it relocated from Moscow. “It has focused instead on quality, truthful journalism. But as Putin's regime became more repressive, more articles critical of the Kremlin naturally appeared. That's why we became an enemy of the state.” The Kremlin's decision to label *The Moscow Times* an “undesirable organisation” in 2024 has had serious consequences, Gubsky added. “We need to be even more careful and creative so that we don't risk the criminal prosecution of our journalists and our newsmakers who are still operating from inside Russia.”

Despite the mounting pressure, the legacy Derk built continues to resonate – felt not only with those who worked alongside him, but by many who value independent journalism. Pyotr Kozlov, now a Bloomberg reporter in London, previously worked with Derk in Amsterdam as a political correspondent for the Russian-language editions. What stood out most, Pyotr said, was Derk's hands-on style, as he was never afraid to roll up his sleeves. “Despite his status, Derk personally took part in the newsroom's work. He came into the office at least once a week, often more,” he said. “He was a passionate journalist and a true media manager who loved *The Moscow Times*. He read everything we published.”

Irreverent beginnings

Derk's success didn't happen overnight. It all started in 1989 in a cramped office at the *Dom Zhurnalista* (House of Journalists), where *Moscow Magazine* was born. Irreverent, glossy, and unlike anything else on Russian newsstands at the time, the magazine launched just as the country was beginning to open up. It quickly gained traction.

The operation ran on minimal resources: outdated equipment, a multinational staff with work visas and passable Russian, and unpalatable food from the in-house canteen. When the country's first McDonald's opened in 1990, we upgraded to take-away *gamburgeri*. Our driver, Semyon, made the run to the franchise on Pushkin Square several times a week, waiting heroically in long queues, no matter the weather. He spoke no English and became a fixture at the office – memorably showing up to the magazine's launch party proudly wearing a handmade nametag that read “SEMEN”.

Lindy Sinclair, an Australian copyeditor who later became the magazine's food writer, recalled the chaos of the early days. "We were just the gateway drug to the heavy stuff, to serious Russian journalism. Derk was cutting his teeth on us," she said in an interview from the French countryside, where she now runs a farming blog. She remembers everyone sharing one power point for five computers. "And when he started talking about launching a newspaper we laughed and said, 'We don't even have enough chairs!'"

Moscow Magazine attracted attention both locally and abroad. For a gal like me from Salt Lake City, working on the magazine brought a kind of fame I never imagined – despite nearly getting fired after a few months for not being jolly enough (Derk dubbed me the "anti-American": funny on paper but not fun in person). I learned to relax, and before long, the two of us were profiled in *New York Magazine* and I appeared on Kremlin pundit Vladimir Posner's TV show to debate US and Russian lifestyles. Along the way, I judged a national identical twins' competition, interviewed Politburo members, toured with nationalist Vladimir Zhirnovsky on his campaign trail, and watched my gossip column make it all the way to US gameshow *Jeopardy!* ("What is *Around the Square* for \$400, Alex?").

Once, Derk and I hosted Soviet magazine editor Vitaly Ignatenko at what Derk called "by far the most expensive place in Moscow". We hoped to convince him to join our Advisory Board. In a later column for *Het Parool*, the Dutch daily, Derk admitted that shelling out almost \$1,000 of sushi at this upscale Japanese restaurant had pushed the limits of our editorial budget - but Ignatenko had insisted on the venue. In the end he spurned our offer, becoming President Gorbachev's spokesperson instead and later rising to the position of Deputy Prime Minister. Not long after, we saw him on TV with Gorbachev, *in Japan*. We joked that at least now he could eat all the raw fish he wanted - for a lot less money.

The magazine - and Derk's increasing network of connections - were the foundation for what came next. Soon he began inviting his favourite writers - from *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker* and more – to visit Moscow and contribute to his publications. Naturally, they accepted. In 1994, he expanded further by introducing Russian-language editions of several Hearst titles, including *Cosmopolitan*, *Esquire*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Playboy*. These weren't simple translations of Western content; they were tailored for Russian audiences, produced locally, and editorially distinct. At their peak, the publications employed over 1,000 people across the country. During this time, Derk hosted Playboy CEO Christie Hefner at the Moscow office; the Russian-language publisher was delighted when she gifted her a Hermès scarf patterned with mushrooms.

In 1999, Derk co-founded *Vedomosti*, Russia's first Western-style business daily, a joint venture with the *Financial Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. It quickly became a reliable source of financial reporting for Russia's business community. But the media landscape was shifting. In 2005, Derk sold *The Moscow Times* to Finnish media group Sanoma for a cool €142 million but kept busy in Russian media, even becoming publisher of RBC newspaper "during a tumultuous period when it printed a series of explosive investigations," according to the *Guardian*. By 2015, foreign ownership laws forced further divestments. The Hearst titles were either closed or rebranded (Playboy Enterprises extended its rights to its rabbit logo in Russia until 2035, according to Rospatent), and *Vedomosti* changed hands multiple times.

In 2017, Derk reacquired *The Moscow Times*, aiming to reinvent it as a digital-first outlet focused on reaching an international audience. That effort gained urgency following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Independent media faced renewed crackdowns. *The Moscow Times* was forced to relocate abroad, and Derk had to flee his family home in the elite Moscow suburb of Zhukovka literally overnight.

No crack in the Kremlin

Derk was widely respected in journalistic circles. In his obituaries, the *New York Times* eulogised him as an “idealistic Dutch media magnate who epitomized the lucrative but brief muckraking days of a Russian free press”, while the Association of European Journalists hailed him as a “media hero” and *Meduza* called him a “man of revolution.” His crowded funeral at the central Westerkerk in Amsterdam drew dignitaries including Evan Gershkovich, Ruud Gullit, and Russian music journalist Artemy Troitsky, along with Dutch friends and family, Russian aristocrats, former editors of his *Hearst* magazines, and *Moscow Times* staff, past and present. A few people still living inside Russia made the fifteen-hour journey from Moscow to attend, travelling through Istanbul due to international flight restrictions.

Earlier this year, Derk wrote a chapter in a book I co-edited, in which he said that he and many other journalists in Russia had believed that there would be a “crack within the chaotic Kremlin bureaucracy through which we could continue our work”. He admits that he was surprised as anyone else when that crack didn't appear. Covering Russia 2,500 km from Moscow meant “no longer being able to breathe in the atmosphere, travel through Russia, consult sources discreetly, attend press conferences, and talk to everyday people”, he wrote.

In this environment, he wondered whether *The Moscow Times* would fade into irrelevance - but quickly realised that wasn't the case. The fact that Russian authorities are expending enormous resources to build firewalls and ban access to its website is proof that its reporting is relevant now more than ever.

“I believe that the fact that they go to all that trouble to ultimately thwart just a handful of independent Russian journalists says a lot about our effectiveness,” Derk wrote. “Are we changing the course of history by doing this? The honest answer is no. With a few hundred independent journalists in exile, it is impossible to completely change the narrative in Russia and defeat state media. But, still, our efforts are not in vain.”

Ends

Dr Wendy Sloane started her career at Time Magazine in New York. She worked as a journalist in Moscow from 1989 to 1995, writing mainly for Moscow Magazine, the Associated Press, The Daily Telegraph and Christian Science Monitor before becoming a magazine editor and newspaper journalist in the UK. She currently freelances for various publications and is an associate professor and the journalism course leader at London Metropolitan University. Her book, *Kremlin Media Wars: Censorship and Control Since the Invasion of Ukraine*, was published by Routledge in February.