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FROM THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR-GENERAL

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
BROADCASTING HOUSE
LONDON W1A 1AA
TELEPHONE: 01-580 4468
TELEX: 265781 FAX: 01-631 5211

Mr Andrew Turnbull,
Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister,
10 Downing Street,
London,
SW1A 2AA

Prime Minister
I would not
put this very
high on a
list of
priorities.
COO
2/4.

29th March 1989

Dear Andrew,

You kindly suggested we should compose a note on the
difficulties our journalists face in the Soviet Union.
As you will see Glasnost and Perestroika have had a
limited impact so far on the practice of our journalism
there!

Yours sincerely,

John

JOHN BIRT

FOREIGN JOURNALISTS IN THE SOVIET UNION

There seem to be five main areas where life could be made easier for foreign journalists working in the Soviet Union. All involve change of a political or bureaucratic nature.

1. Access to places outside Moscow

At present journalists (and anyone with a resident's visa) must inform the Foreign Ministry, with forty eight hours notice, of their intention to travel more than 40 kilometres outside Moscow. Permission is regularly withheld and many places are closed to foreigners, often "temporarily" so. An additional control on travel is the requirement that air tickets and hotel reservations are obtained from Intourist. Intourist very often decide they must check with the protocol department of the Foreign Office. This takes time, often enough to defeat the purpose of the journey. Last year a number of BBC applications to visit Estonia - usually to cover an anniversary - were unsuccessful for what were said to be practical reasons. The BBC would like to see travel restrictions lifted and the obligation to deal solely with Intourist ended.

2. Access to officials

Journalists in Moscow find their scope is restricted on all sides. The continuing and pervasive bureaucracy makes even routine information difficult or wearying to obtain.

It is virtually impossible to talk to key officials except when they decide to give briefings. These are rare and generally given only by a narrow range of officials. Only the Foreign Office has a genuinely working spokesman. Its press department is under great pressure and its usefulness is limited. The Ministry of Defence now has a public relations department. Its telephone number is unknown; its officials have so far been seen only informally. The Chairman of the Council of Ministers has an official spokesman but he meets the press very rarely. Other Ministries have international departments but no clear system for releasing information. A central lobby system or a more organised briefing system would be helpful.

3. Access to Staff

Journalists should be free to appoint bureau staff. There have been some instances recently of journalists being allowed to hire their own drivers and interpreters. Nevertheless UPRK (the diplomatic services bureau) maintains an official stranglehold over such matters. Its role should be confined to that of a consultant employment office rather than a monopoly supplier.

4. Access to Accommodation

The situation is particularly cumbersome in respect of accommodation. This, of course, is a general problem in Moscow but the 'gate keeping' function of UPRK is in part responsible for the delays that the BBC and others have experienced in securing suitable accommodation. Best of all would be a policy of allowing foreigners to live anywhere in Moscow and to use any of the accommodation finding channels which exist. Failing that, an increase in the efficiency of UPRK would be most welcome.

5. Access to the Soviet Union

The system for issuing journalists with visas to the Soviet Union is too slow and cumbersome in spite of recent improvements. Typically, it takes two weeks to obtain a temporary visa and three months a resident's visa. Temporary visa applicants are required to supply a detailed account of their intentions and also to find an official sponsor for their visit to Moscow. The process could, without difficulty, be streamlined.

The Foreign Office confirms that of the five areas of restriction listed here, only the first - the 40 kilometre limit - applies to Soviet journalists in London. British policy is to reciprocate Soviet policy; if the Soviet Union lifted the restriction, so would Britain.