

Political Control of Television In Yeltsin's Russia

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Since 1987, this author has been working as a television host and producer for Russian national television, which broadcasts to the Baltic states and to all the countries of the former Soviet Union. My colleagues and I have started a private television production company which makes eight hours of prime time shows for national television every week. Our company is the largest private production company in the Commonwealth of Independent States. As I produce political programs which have often been banned by the government, here I seek to explain to you how Russia's authorities strive to manage and control television.

The Soviet Union exercised almost total control over television. Nevertheless, in the early 1980s, the Youth Programs Desk of the national television bureau launched some programs that were radically different from the rest. These were "Youth and the World" and "The 12th Floor," which were given a little more than the usual latitude. In 1987, a weekly evening program called "Vzglyad" (Outlook) made its appearance, and I was lucky to begin there as a host. "Vzglyad" was the first program to escape Communist Party control. That is why our lives were rich with complications.

How does one struggle against totalitarian control? We started with music—Soviet rock, which had been banned for decades. "Vzglyad" broadcast live, and we were on twice a day. We went on the air first at 2 p.m. for the Far East, and then again in the evening for the European part of the USSR. The afternoon and the evening broadcasts were often slightly different. We changed music, and, later on, some of the stories. After watching the first broadcast Friday afternoons in Moscow, the chiefs of the central Party apparatus would calm down and leave for their dachas. The evening version would be a bit different, but on Saturdays the Party bosses would be back in their black limousines to give us a scolding and a brain-washing. So as not to starve due of the endless penalties we incurred, we took to selecting a new "guilty" person every week to take the blow for all of us.

The operations of the censorship mechanism which was directed against us cannot be logically explained. One day a song by the famous Russian pop

Alexander Lyubimov is the principal anchor in the Vid Television Company. He was also the anchor in the outspoken glasnost-era program "Vzglyad," as well as a former people's deputy of Russia. He was banned for six months from the air in the aftermath of the October 1993 uprising for alleged disloyalty to the Yeltsin administration.

star Alla Pugacheva was cut, because on that day Boris Yeltsin was fired from the Politburo and the refrain implored "Beat your people to bully the strangers." An interview with a barmaid from a fishing trawler who spoke of the burdens of her life was censored, apparently because Raisa Gorbachev was visiting the historic cruiser Aurora in Leningrad.

All the top political leaders came to the TV center at Ostankino to try to bring us under control—by both persuasion and menace. Many of them, however, took part in our "Vzglyad" program and it was always somewhat comical. The only man who refused to participate was Mikhail Gorbachev. He once said he would come to "Vzglyad" ("outlook") when we change our own *outlook*. However, returning to post-putsch Moscow in August 1991 after he had been confined at Foros, Gorbachev actually changed his mind and said so on our program.

In February 1988, we were dismissed from "Vzglyad," and the program was entrusted to our more reliable, older colleagues. Fortunately, we were not exiled to Siberia for reeducation. But we were already out looking for new jobs, when to our surprise, we were called back three months later. Something apparently had happened in the reformers' secret struggle within the Party which played in our favor.

Since then, the program continued to have difficulties, but at least we were not fired anymore. As time went on, we felt strength and support and turned from music to politics. Our program was the first to show the great dissident Andrei Sakharov. We investigated corruption of top-level officials, we broadcast the bloody army massacres in Tbilisi in 1989, and, of course, Gorbachev's main rival at that time—Boris Yeltsin, who was in official disgrace. In our programs, we appealed for Lenin to be buried. All those achievements came with menaces, threatening phone calls, KGB provocations, Central Committee arm-twisting, low salaries, and frequent attempts to close down the program. But the officials succeeded only in December 1990. At that time a Red storm was rising: Gennady Yanayev (the future coup plotter) became vice president, Eduard Shevardnadze resigned as foreign minister, and the army prepared to send paratroopers to the Baltic countries. And we were banned. It was quite understandable. Even if the population was losing interest in politics, we were still being watched by an enormous audience of 150 million people.

We then went underground and started producing videotapes. These programs were broadcast through small cable networks and national networks in the Baltics, where we were considered national heroes because our cameraman was wounded during the bloody events in Riga. The Riga program was broadcast illegally through the Leningrad channel, which covers two-thirds of all Russian territory. After the putsch of 1991, we returned and aired different putsch stories practically every day. We managed to show the famous tape which Gorbachev recorded during his confinement at Foros, and even infiltrated the foreign intelligence service of the KGB.

The failed coup of August 1991 was a major turning point. Before then, it was quite clear what to do: struggle for freedom of speech to protect

democracy. That struggle had ended with Boris Yeltsin's triumph, and many journalists found themselves in a sort of vacuum. Yeltsin's brothers-in-arms quickly acquired a taste for power. They set up a mighty bureaucracy with scant understanding of democracy. To my mind, the Yeltsin people who came to power in 1991 had no idea what kind of society they wanted to build, what kind of democracy to promote or what human rights to protect. That explains why Russian reforms are in a deadlock and why the present government is often more authoritarian than Gorbachev in its attempts to bring the mass media under political control.

How can one speak of freedom and democracy in Russia? The chief editor of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Vitaly Tretyakov, will not let me lie. When the chief editors of influential newspapers did not come to the Moscow reception for Richard Nixon, Vitaly represented the Russian democrats proudly and alone. I think that the world must ask: Is Yeltsin eager to build a democratic society or merely a democracy within his own brand of authoritarianism?

In this connection I regret that many influential politicians in the United States are ready to back Yeltsin whatever he does, without realizing that

many supporters of democracy and social progress abandoned him long ago. Such attitudes are unfortunate because they make Russians doubt the sincerity of the United States and they pave the way for nationalism in Russia. In December 1991, one of our TV hosts showed a watch that Yeltsin had presented to him for defending the White House in August 1991. The host said on the air that the watch no longer seemed to keep time.

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Since then our relations with the governing elite have worsened a great deal. I do not regret it, for today's Russian authorities are not prepared for a civilized dialogue with the media. They do not need political allies. But they do want to be served, or better still, waited upon. There are plenty of vile examples of subservient behavior by TV hosts, but I do not wish to speak ill of my colleagues. The authorities reject all those who criticize them, even if the criticism is delivered in the mildest terms. Unable to live and work peaceably after the putsch of 1991, the authorities created new enemies: the member countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Russian Supreme Soviet.

I was a member of the Supreme Soviet and experienced first hand the ignorance, the lack of foresight, and the utter irresponsibility of many of its members. But I must insist that it is President Yeltsin, the loyalists from the government and the tame journalists who made an “enemy” of the Parliament. You cannot expect a three-month-old child to speak reasonably. But if you want to bring up a good son, you have to communicate with him. A climate of confrontation has developed in society because of the actions

of the president and the Parliament. In our programs we tried to find the points of reconciliation but this did not seem to suit the nation's leaders. First our air time was cut. Then we, as a private company, were slapped with new charges for services.

During this period, we produced three weekly political programs: "Man of the Week," "Politburo," and "Red Square." Yeltsin named as head of the First Channel a Communist Party functionary who knew about television as much as a horse knows about music. Both of the national channels carried out a policy aimed at cutting off the Parliament and the opposition from television. In all the programs, bar none, information from Parliament was distorted while information about the government was embroidered. What irritated the broad audience was that boring government meetings were broadcast during prime time, instead of shows and movies.

Since the summer of 1992, the intransigent opposition has regularly been attacking the TV center at Ostankino. The municipal authorities and the law-enforcement organs always let the conflict grow and then repress it in the most brutal way. The Parliament also required the establishment of oversight councils at television headquarters, which would make sure that different political forces could have access to television. Their views though, were presented in an implacable, attacking sort of way and were ignored by the executive branch. Finally, the Parliament decided to set up its own television station. It bought TV equipment and started producing a daily program called "Parliament Hour," starring the most radical opposition. Parliament's TV program became the official organ of Yeltsin's opposition. The rest of the television was ruled by his supporters.

Both sides forgot that it is possible to switch the TV set off. Even though it was broadcast during prime time, both "Parliament Hour" and the Yeltsin programs drew only five to eight percent of the potential audience. Popular political programs were subject to pressure. For example, the team of a weekly program "Itogi" (Summing Up) left the First Channel and broadcasts now on the Fourth, which reaches a considerably smaller audience. During this period, we began to understand that Yeltsin's team, which is composed of loyal but uneducated people, concluded that our programs were supportive of the opposition.

In the last few years crime and corruption have flourished all over the country: ministers and administration officials denounced by the media remain in power, the struggle against corruption becomes a political battle, and Vice President Alexander Rutskoi denounced key figures of the Yeltsin team, while they accused him in return. Society sank into political apathy, and became skeptical about the future. In October 1993, after Parliament was dissolved, the affair came to a head. The opposition built barricades and assaulted the TV center at Ostankino and the mayor's office. Some 150 people were killed.

Deputy Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar called upon unarmed people to rush to the streets to protect the authorities from the militants of the Parliament. Our "Red Square" show was closed even before these events because Vice President Rutskoi and Valery Zorkin, chairman of the

Constitutional Court, had been on as guests. Since October, Ostankino TV headquarters, which is run by the government, prohibited both me and my colleague Alexander Politkovsky, host of "Politburo," from broadcasting. During the night of the bloody events, we urged people to stay at home and go to sleep. The press pounced upon us for immoral and disloyal appeals. It is amazing that going through the city that night, I did not see many of my critics on the battlefield. They must have followed our advice, but wrote differently. Since then, both my colleague and I have had no access to the air.

During the October uprising, the true relations between the authorities and television were revealed. The president's aides cut off the special government telephone lines to all those at television offices which seemed suspect. There were obvious attempts to establish tight control over TV. It is interesting that this control was aimed chiefly at information coming from the regions. Most of them did not support Yeltsin, nor the compromise proposals advanced by the centrists Arkady Volsky, Grigory Yavlinsky, and Valery Zorkin.

After the putsch, the president's supporters established political control over the television which has lasted through the December 12 elections. The campaign of the electoral bloc Russia's Choice—strong Yeltsin supporters—operated free of charge for the most part and with discounts the rest of the time. The oversight organs—a kind of arbitration court in information—was also composed of devoted Yeltsinites. This political management of television reached a high point on the night after the elections with live broadcasting from the Kremlin. Sensing their political defeat, Yeltsin loyalists Vladimir Shumeiko and Mikhail Poltoranin cut off the information coming from the computer center of the Electoral Commission and later stopped broadcasting altogether.

After that came a shock for the Yeltsin team: although they had total control over television, although they bullied public opinion with slogans such as "If not us, then the Communists," they collected only seven percent of the votes. At the same time, extreme nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy made an enormous breakthrough using that same television. I think that now the authorities are beginning to be afraid of television. And everything has come back to the starting point. A former member of the Communist Party Politburo, the reformer Alexander N. Yakovlev, who helped initiate "Vzglyad," was appointed chief of television headquarters to reconcile the implacables. We at Vid Television Company hope to begin broadcasting again in May. Perhaps the government will not ban us anymore, transforming us into martyrs and national heroes. We are tired of that kind of popularity.

In conclusion, I would like to say that the strength of a journalist is not in his freedom, but in the responsibility for his free choices. In times of hard political struggle, it is not easy to overcome the temptation of taking someone's side. But everyone must bear responsibility for the choice which is made. We have not chosen anyone and will not choose anyone. We support the freedom of informing people and the freedom of interpreting

events in conformity with common sense.

A new Russia is emerging: there are new regional leaders and a new young political elite in the metropolis. This new generation of politicians understand better than their predecessors that political control is a vestige of the past. Freedom of the press must not depend on political necessity which is, as William Pitt once said, “a pretext of tyrants and a religion of slaves.”