

Dmitry STROVSKY

Russian media at the political crossroads: Why do they not stimulate democracy?

Introduction

Mass media in any society are closely connected with its political reality. It becomes true due to the socially determined activity of the media themselves linked contextually with the political background of society; otherwise they run the risk of never being properly understood by the people. Politics seems to be the algorithm of media comprehension and development following the fact that journalists visualize political facts providing the picture of the day with specific images. Therefore, to a great extent, in order to see how information circulates in the contemporary world it is worth observing the modern political evolution of a country. This information helps to understand main media trends.

The political situation evolving in Russia over the last few decades clearly confirms these observations. Initial democratic priorities laid down in the media content at the dawn of perestroika and glasnost in the late 1980s became a myth having nothing in common with permanent declarations by the Russian political leadership on supporting media freedoms. The last two words have long ago become a pivotal argument in public talks and interviews of the Russian political beau monde. The reality however seems to be different. It makes future development of the Russian media and a standard of public informing as very specific. What basic tendencies are inherent to the contemporary Russian media since Vladimir Putin inherited power from Boris Yeltsin and became the new Russian President in 2000? Why did the last decade turn out to be especially ominous to civic orientations of Russian society? These questions are of importance to understand what political background affects the media here and to what extent it lessens their democratic priorities.

1. Politics and media under Putin and Medvedev: A brief review

Two tenures of the Putin's presidency (2000–2008) were noted by obvious political changes in the political sphere following the entire transformation of the country. According to the Presidential decree signed in 2001 eight Federal *okrugs* were established, and this enabled to centralize the governmental system to being totally dependent on the elaborated political hierarchy. In addition, the electoral system was subjected to numerous and consistent changes. Presently, elections of deputies on each level take place only according to party's lists, and the governors are being scrupulously nominated by the Russian President in person, which also made all organs of power being totally responsible to him and his administration. Most high level positions in Russia have been taken over by the representatives of the "United Russia" Party an establishment of which was initiated by the former President Putin himself, and the Party itself under him has become "the state within the state" accumulating mainly officials but not average people. It is enough to look through CVs of those who are present in the party conferences so that one could understand this situation. Possessing enormous financial resources this political party can easily undermine any opposition in Parliamentary elections, which was true in the 2000s. Among the key factors which predetermined this situation were neither real achievements in the economy and in social life but money and powerful level of propaganda developed by the Kremlin. In these conditions politics seems to have been represented as a great advantage of the Presidential standard of management. Last but not least, a great success in voting was achieved due to obvious sympathies of main television channels and most of the print media which explicitly favored the leading political party "United Russia". Meanwhile, the Central Election Committee preferred to ignore the fact of this unfair political dominance.

The political power's activities in Russia initiated by the Kremlin have defined the trends of the above political development. Putin and his surrounding entourage have managed to strengthen control in different spheres, including media, and simultaneously to seriously diminish the discursive background on the most important issues of the day. Russian society being exhausted of the permanent political and economic turmoil over the Yeltsin's years, had accepted this scenario and easily refused, to a large extent, from spiritual advantages shaped as early as the years of Gorbachev's perestroika. The same happens to every beggar who easily forgets about civic priorities by thinking only about a piece of bread.

During the Putin's two tenures the field of civic activity of the Russian population has been seriously diminished. It is worth remembering that it was the Russian media, which had made an obvious contribution to this process. If under Yeltsin the media were frequently criticizing him and his team, then under Putin the situation became totally different. The initial media eagerness to enlargement

of plurality in the society has dramatically changed to a totally different approach which questions the very background of democratic transformation laid down under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. The Russian media are losing now their previous incentives which seemed to have been durable and indisputable. One of them is the press freedom which seems to be limited nowadays with many obstacles initiated by the existing political powers.

This freedom as it is going to be confirmed below is no longer considered to be a priority for Russian society despite the fact that the government keeps saying it is and assuring people that there is no more important asset than building new democratic principles of the media existence. Under Russian Presidents Putin and then Medvedev the situation with the press freedom is gradually switching back to the old standards setting up tough barriers for the media to interfere in real politics. Despite the fact that in the 2000s Russia is still being labeled by world experts as a state in a transition form¹, the latter seems to be pushing to numerous non-democratic forms of management and to the previous (Soviet) conspiratorial level of informing.

It is worth referring to some very demonstrative facts. In his first Yearly Message to Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (2000) Putin, a newly elected President, stressed that “in shaping a civil society a significant role is played by the mass media”. Besides, Putin also claimed that “journalistic freedom has transformed itself into a tidbit for politicians and financing groups, and has become a convenient instrument of inter-clan fight”, and that this situation has to be stopped². However, defending the media from private intrusions Putin very quickly became enthusiastic to put them under control from the political power and his office in particular.

Yet, during the following years President Putin and his cabinet have successfully put in practice a full-scale program of developing the media to political servicing and governmental regulation. As early as 1999, as Prime-Minister, Putin established a Russian Information Center headed by a professional image-maker Mikhail Margelov to handle news-releases about the anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya. It was made in order to feedback a public support for the ongoing military campaign. However all the information distributed by the Center was obviously one sided. The main obligation for Margelov and his subordinates was to issue, according to Belin, “timely releases with a coherent message as well as gruesome videos of Chechen captors torturing and killing Russian sol-

¹ See: R. Sakwa, *Putin: New Choice*, London and New York 2004; A. Heusala, *The Transition of Local Administration Culture in Russia*, Helsinki 2005; A. Vernikov, *Russia's Banking Sector Transition. Where to?*, “BOFIT Discussion Papers”, Institute for Economics in Transition, 2007, No 5; M. Myant, J. Drahokoupil, *Transition Economies: Political Economy in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*, Hoboken, New Jersey 2010.

² “Vestnik Moscovskogo Universiteta” [“Bulletin of Moscow Univ.”] 2001, Ser. 10: Zhurnalistsika, No 1, p. 47.

diers during the first war, from 1994 to 1996” Yet the Center permanently followed the line of secrecy and ignored different information applying to atrocities committed by the Russian army. Official spokesmen also regularly instructed journalists about the language to be used and downplayed Russian military losses. They also denied news about civilian casualties³.

The Information Center was fulfilling PR work instead of providing non-partisan facts about the conflict. In terms of the then military conflict it was almost impossible for journalists to get objective information about what was going on in Chechnya. To some extent, the Center’s activity was similar to that initiated by APN (Novosti Press Agency), which was created in 1961 to supply the world with information about the Soviet Union and to fulfill the role of an “unofficial” press agency without direct governmental connections⁴. It is taken for granted that the APN work as well as later activity of its analogue, Russian Information Center, was fully controlled by the authorities following an extremely positive content telling about advantages of the Soviet system in different spheres of life.

Having taken the presidency, Putin also immediately stepped forward with the Information Security Doctrine which was approved by Russian Security Council in June 2000 and signed by Putin himself three months later⁵. Even a streamlined observation of the document leaves no doubts about its legal basis as somewhat repressive towards the media. According to Andrei Richter, despite many issues being raised in the Doctrine – from the development of national telecommunication market to questions of intellectual property – its pivotal goal was to establish a legal governmental control over the flow of information⁶. It is easily being confirmed through the linguistic structure of the Doctrine’s text using such phrases as “maintaining accord in society” and ensuring “political, economic and social stability” and inadmissibility for an individual to have an access to information “against the interests of society”. The Doctrine also pointed out the destabilizing potential of “irresponsible” news reporting and discouraged the media from circulating “false information”. In order to confirm this in practice Putin signed a law enabling the Media Ministry of the Russian Federation to control the allocation of federal subsidies to local print media⁷. This made possible to hold newspapers on a small leash in far-reaching perspective. In addition,

³ L. Belin, *Politics and Mass Media Under Putin*, pp. 133–152, [in:] C. Ross (ed.), *Russian Politics Under Putin*, Manchester – New York 2004, p. 134.

⁴ J. Turpin, *Reinventing the Soviet Self: Media and Social change in the Former Soviet Union*, Westport 1995, p. 20.

⁵ Link to the doctrine on: <http://www.agentura.ru/library/doctrina>.

⁶ A. Richter, *Media Regulation: Foundation Laid for Free Speech*, pp. 115–154, [in:] K. Nordenstreng, E. Vartanova and J. Zassoursky (eds.), *Russian Media Challenge*, Helsinki 2002, p. 124–125.

⁷ L. Belin, op. cit., p. 137.

Russian President obliged his envoys in *okrugs* to control media activity in terms of holding regular sessions on information issues.

In his public speeches Putin insisted many times on building a single information space which would unite the country. The same idea was diligently repeated by the then Media Minister Mikhail Lesin at the Press Day congratulation ceremony in January 2004. Construing the perspective for journalists in Russia he stressed that the importance of their work is determined not only by their ability to communicate objective information as such. “We are building a single information space and are uniting the country”, Lesin added⁸. It is still not very clear what legislative priorities and real contours were predetermined for this space since practice seems to have been much more uncertain than the document itself. Yet, the perspectives for the doctrine were roughly defined: to secure information coming out from editorial staff and to guarantee that the state interests were not going to be trespassed or openly criticized.

Following this, the 2000s were labeled as more tightening of the media freedom which overwhelmingly contrasted to the Gorbachev’s and the early Yeltsin years. Although Putin never openly proclaimed attacks against the press freedom, he has been constantly supervising media contents. It was if not him but his entourage which became to control strictly the content of the leading information programme “Vremya” (“Time”) appearing in the prime time on the *First Channel*. Under Putin all television debates on the most important political and social issues to TV channels which were actively broadcast under Yeltsin, have left in a non-existence. Since the mid 2000s it became impossible to imagine that during transfers on federal TV channels random phone calls from viewers could be distributed. All plots are coordinated and mounted in advance to relieve the politicians from any random accidents. During the Medvedev’s Presidential tenure no changes occurred in this regard. The leading TV channels as a whole remained a stronghold of official propaganda without any tendency to bring in them an element of discursiveness. True, President Medvedev is the active supporter of Internet. He conducts his own blog and communicates with other Internet users. He also admits his readiness to answer questions of people. However Medvedev’s adherence to modern technological means of distribution and information delivery doesn’t change existing tendencies in the field of mass-media. As before, politically oriented mass-media are strictly being regulated “from above”.

Many academics analyzing the state of the Russian media before Putin, treated it much more optimistically. For example, Bazyler from Harvard Russian Research Center wrote in the mid-1990s that the Russian media showed their energy and eagerness to fulfill their duties even in periods of crisis and “despite

⁸ G. Simons, *The Cost of Freedom: Economic Viability and Editorial Freedom in the Russian Mass Media*, pp. 166–185, [in:] K. Elo and K. Ruutu (eds.), *Russia and the CIS – Janus-Faced Democracies*, Alexanteri Papers, Helsinki 2005, p. 170.

government harassment, they will not kowtow to the government”⁹. Since the 2000s those pretty positive conclusions seem to have lost their significance and been replaced with more pessimistic evaluations. According to some academics, most Russian media have not only approached the government, but easily have put themselves under the power control which recreates certain analogies between the Soviet past and the present political situation¹⁰. The time of brevity for most media seems to have gone, and they have lost their even conditionally independent position in evaluation of political facts which is visualized more obviously below.

Patronized by the power, the media turned out to be stately oriented and much less critical towards problematic realities of life. It concerns a number of so-called positive materials which has been hugely increased over the last decade compared to the Yeltsin’s years. This situation does remind the relationship between the power and the media being brought into existence under the Soviets. The “administrative resource” is being actively used to bridle the media making them fully obedient to orders from the authorities. The practice of the “telephone right” which got blossomed in the Soviet period and got slightly deafened in the 1990s, started flourishing again. Officials, especially in the province, are very eager to give rigid instructions for editors of local media about what is worthy of informing and what is not. Holding seminars with journalists of print media the author personally heard these admittances many times. It goes without saying that this situation actively undermines independence of the press.

In terms of confirming the above idea, it is worth calling pivotal tendencies occurring within this landscape and defining the standard of journalistic informing. This, in turn, has resulted in an overwhelming “cuddling” between the media and politics. These tendencies have also put on the agenda the provocative question to what extent the Russian media seem to be independent from current politics evolved in the country and how it affects the present political situation in Russia affects the media content.

2. Less tycoons, less pluralism

The first tendency to be mentioned can be called as an ongoing concentration of media capital to please the interests of the state power.

The process of media concentration became evident as early as in the first half of the 1990s when the media started concentrating as a property of individuals and industrial conglomerates. Media groups headed by Berezovsky, Gusin-

⁹ M. Bazylar, *Book Review*, p. 491, “Slavic Review” 1994, Vol. 54: 2, p. 490–491.

¹⁰ J. Ekecrantz, *Introduction: Post-Communism and Global Culture*, pp. 1–30, [in:] J. Ekecrantz & K. Oloffson (eds.), *Russian Reports: Studies in Post-Communist Transformation of Media and Journalism*, Huddinge 2000, p. 26.

sky, Potanin and some other proprietors had got an intensive development. In the meantime, despite a similar process of accumulating capital they were actively competing with each other by suggesting different interpretations. If the *Second Channel (RTR)* was a rigid adherent of the Kremlin, then the TV-channel *NTV* time by time took a different position about ongoing events. This confirms swaying loyalties of the media belonging to different Russian tycoons.

Under Putin, the situation has radically changed. All television channels began to interpret politics from the same viewpoint. Already during Putin's first tenure (2000–2004) the power significantly narrowed the freedom of expression due to its active involvement into the media business. The most painful this situation occurred for the *Media Most* group which, in fact, ceased its existence. Under different prepositions including untimely payment of debts, its channel *NTV* moved to the property of the state owned company Gazprom. Correspondingly, *NTV's* information content entirely changed, too and became supportive of the state power.

During the second Presidential tenure (2004–2008) Putin's administration vigorously initiated the sale of the last mass media keeping an independent position from the power. The newspaper *Novie Izvestia* being the last of the Magicians in the field of the economically independent press and suffered the same fate as those before it. After the move of one more newspaper, *Kommersant*, owned by the late entrepreneur Badri Patakartsishvili into the property of Gazprom, the media market freed itself from the people knowing on which side their bread is buttered and also from "fugitive oligarchs"¹¹.

Under President Medvedev the existing situation remained firm. Almost all media capital now is owned by the people being close to the Kremlin. Among them is Vladimir Potanin running the Publishing House "Profmedia" with the newspapers *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Sovetskiy sport* along with 6 radio stations and TV channel 2x2. Another tycoon Alisher Usmanov owns the Publishing House "Kommersant" with the newspaper *Kommersant* and some influential magazines such as *Den'gi* and *Vlast*. In turn, Vladimir Evtushenkov is a proprietor of the newspapers *Vechernyaya Moskva* and *Kultura* as well as St. Petersburg's *Smena*. Media holding Gazprom regulates the policy of such magazines as *Itogi* and *Karavan istorii* along with TV channels *NTV*, *TNT* and *Prometei AST*. It does not mean that Russian tycoons control every single word in the field of politics but they jealously safeguard priorities of the current powers. Recently Usmanov has vigorously fired Maxim Kovalsky, the editor-in-staff of the magazine *Kommersant-Vlast*, a very good magazine, for putting in one of its issues of a snapshot of an election bulletin crossed with rude words applied personally to Russian Prime-Minister Putin¹². It is obvious that Usmanov has been

¹¹ A. Kolesnichenko, *Prikormlennaya svoboda slova [The lured freedom of the word]*, "Argumenty i Fakti" ["Arguments and Facts", Moscow newspaper] 2008, No 36, p. 4.

¹² Look at: http://rss.novostimira.com/n_1967961.html.

extremely disturbed by the information that could seriously worsen its reputation in a big-time politics and do damage to its economic interests. It is also clear that this situation became indicative for other media of the country. Editors and journalists hardly begin to push luck for the sake of realization of the journalistic ambitions by knowing that it is unsafe for their professional career.

True, the Russian media market has some exceptions. Thanks to their financial independence the newspapers *Sovershynno secretno* and *Ekonomicheskaya gazeta*, to some extent, seem to be standing distantly from the “general state line”. In addition, some glamour entertaining journals released by foreign investors as Finnish “Sanima WSOY” and German “Hubert Burda Media” seem to be independent from the Russian state’s intrusion. However, a number of media able to promote such politics is very insignificant against a background of many more media favoring the Presidential power. As for broadcasting, the only radio station submitting a variety of opinions is *Echo Moskvi*, which is totally insufficient for shaping pluralistic consciousness of the audience.

Concentration of mass-media in hands of the proprietors defending, in essence, narrow political interests, leads to pluralism restriction at discussion of key questions of day. Besides, in this case narrowing of the most political agenda is inevitable, as it occurs in modern Russia. The current situation inevitably pushes out from the information space discussions about alternative approaches to politics and economics. Although there exists no direct dependence between the level of pluralism and rates of social and economic development of a society, it is worth recognizing that the majority of countries having modern infrastructure protect media pluralism and safeguard rights of journalists to express individual viewpoints on the most pivotal issues. During the last years Russia has managed to inherit neither the first, nor the second. The modernization politics proclaimed by Russian President and its entourage in all spheres of life did not still become a reality. On all basic economic indicators Russia has not come nearer to corresponding indicators of the most developed countries of the world¹³. It could be media pushing alternative ideas ahead but, in fact, they do not seem to be actively involved in these discussions. This seriously undermines democratic orientations of the media as a public institution.

¹³ Ye. Balatsky, *Technologicheskii razriv mezhdu Rossiei i Zapadom: otsenki i prognozi* [Technological breaking-off between Russia and the West: evaluations and forecasts], <http://www.kapital-rus.ru/index.php/articles/article/1019>, 20.11.2008; VEF: *Ekonomika Rossii otstajot ot drugikh stran BRIK* [Russian Economy lags behind the other BRIC countries], <http://top.rbc.ru/economics/06/06/2011/599160.shtml>, 06.06.2011.

3. Non-objectivity as a principal trend of the Russian media

During the media concentration controlled by the Russian political hierarchy there is one more tendency that takes place: political partisanship of media information which is leading to the loss of its objectivity.

In current terms under which a number of proprietors have been lessening, the media themselves, as has been said, become highly affiliated with the power interests. Consequently, a lack of pluralism has been felt over the last years more acutely. This resulted in decreasing the discursive field and taking the audience away from elaboration of its views. It became particularly true during the media involvement in serious political conflicts. The unified position showed up by the power and media proprietors have led to narrowly expressed interests displayed by editorial staffs. This situation has taken place as early as the 1990s when the media was covering the first and second Chechen campaigns. Instead of a deep observation of these conflicts, all the media openly took the governmental position. In the Putin years this situation was redoubled, which was clearly discovered on the example of media coverage of two incidents: the Kursk submarine in 2000 and the hostage drama in Moscow's Dubrovka theatre during the musical "Nord-Ost" in 2002.

While the Kursk submarine sank, Russian journalists except those working for RTR TV-channel were cut off from any information about the accident. Oleg Dobrodeev, formerly of the opposition channel NTV and later employed by RTR as the manager of news production, came to be placed in personal charge of editing all material on the Kursk, and proved to be very adept at this new task. Information being received consisted of occasional briefings, which were contradictory and not very detailed. The Russian navy press center was lying and creating false hopes that nothing horrible had happened onboard the Kursk. It even assured that most of the team were still alive and claimed that the navy headquarters and the submarine were in permanent touch. It became clear very quickly that official information is very far from being objective. In order to collect data following a burning desire of the society to know truth, some editorial staff resorted to illegal activities. A nation-wide *Komsomolskaya Pravda* had published the names of the submarine crew only after bribing a naval officer with 18 000 roubles (US\$ 650) for the list¹⁴.

A similar situation of hiding information from journalists occurred during the Dubrovka theatre siege, which was taken by the Chechens for three October days in 2002. True, this time the crisis, which was more accessible for the media, and all Moscow TV channels were running live reports from the place that

¹⁴ Keesing's Record of World Events, August 2000. Russia, <http://keesings.gypi.net>, 26.05.2004. Look also: G. Simons, *Russian Crisis Management Communication and Media management Under Putin*, Paper given at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, July 2004, Lund, Sweden.

made the media image different to the case of Kursk incident. However, at the same time there has been much evidence that the powers were still very active in controlling the journalistic standards. During the second day of the siege, the government established a system of rules for journalists since all the information was being supplied from the crisis center organized by the powers. Media managers were called to provide recommendations what accentuation has to be made in reportages. Some deputies of the State Duma even called for a ban regarding this information, but the motion failed to get enough support in the Duma's Lower Chamber. In the meantime, Media Ministry was actively rebuking *Ekho Moskvy* radio, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* and some others for "improper commenting" on the Dubrovka case¹⁵.

There is nothing wrong about the limitation of information imposed by governments during crisis situations. Meanwhile, it mostly concerns military situations when the appearance of journalists in the front line of the conflict may cause the problems for themselves and the authorities. Those taking place with Kursk submarine and in Dubrovka had nothing similar to it. Safety of journalists was not at all an issue for the authorities. The latter were much more worried about keeping their likely non-professional management undisputed. Instead of open observations of their own politics during both crises the Russian power seems to see more reasonable for constant calls to newsmen not to pump up the problems. As early as November 2002 Presidential Aide Sergei Yastrzhembsky insisted on following an unwritten code of conduct for reporting in crisis situations¹⁶. This code of behavior declared by Yastrzhembsky, hasn't been introduced in practice of mass-media. However, aspiration of presidential administration to carry out additional control over behavior of journalists, has confirmed presence of authoritative tendencies in Russian politics.

The impact of the powers has become just one side of pressure on journalists in the 2000s. Another one is the odious position of newsmen themselves. Some of them have immediately realized that the best way to achievement of own well-being is keeping their promises to be obedient to the powers and trying not to violate the "unwritten" rules. For example, Oleg Dobrodeev, appointed by Putin as a new head of *RTR* (Channel 2) immediately proved to be loyal to presidency. It was proved through numerous reportages about the tragedy of the Kursk submarine and the second Chechen war. Dobrodeev also ensured at the very beginning that he would took responsibility for editing all the stuff which proved to be "politically incorrect" for Putin and his government¹⁷.

The media have also cut off the audience from any information during the hostage seizure by terrorists at the school in Beslan in September 2004. The

¹⁵ G. Simons, op. cit., p. 11–12.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 19.

¹⁷ L. Belin, *Political Bias and Self-Censorship in the Russian Media*, pp. 323–342, [in:] A. Brown (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, London – New York 2001, p. 338.

power, in fact, was unable to take lessons from the previous tragedies. Russian society again was unaware of a number of sacrifices and of political and military errors made by those who have been instructed to develop an operation for rescuing the hostages. The hostages of the situation became not only the relatives of those killed being unable to find out truth from officials but all Russians removed from comprehensive information.

A lack of objective information in the 2000s showed itself not only in the tense political moments but on a daily basis. It became possible due to media remoteness from the people and the eagerness of the former to limit the press from any critical judgments on modern Russian politics. If the Yeltsin's period the media initiated acute debates on the most pivotal issues, then in the 2000s they became much less frequent. There is more often a different kind of broadcasting: the viewers seem to be present at studios but their mission turns out to be sticking to passive involvement in the debates, without an opportunity to actively participate in them. This is decreasing the significance of the media as a public institution leveling them to one-sided sources of information transmission. A similar position of all national TV-channels is currently seen in news plots. Viewpoints of legislative and executive powers on the main political issues are submitted as the only correct account. Representatives of different political parties and social organizations getting a word on the air very rarely undertake criticism the decisions adopted by the power. This creates a simplified picture of everyday life removed from conflicts and contradictions.

Suggesting the problems of the Kremlin life, Russian journalists presently step forward mostly as information providers of power holders but not of actual problems. This coverage of reality does not facilitate to shaping civic consciousness and strengthening of public trust to the media. It can be easily seen on almost all federal TV-channels strictly controlling their informational content favoring exiting political priorities of the Presidential office. Of about 20 plots shown in an average TV news release three quarters of them necessarily look positive about the current political course in the country. Simultaneously, any criticism towards the Presidential power in Russia is rigidly dosed out. The high-level political persons are never exposed to criticism which starts reminding the time of "the developed socialism". Simultaneously, speeches of the President and the Prime Minister of Russia are very often being reproduced in detail irrespectively of the content they discuss. Television as the most powerful source of information tends to create the images of Medvedev and Putin, the current political leaders of Russia, as being most sophisticated and informed about every single detail of their branch of national household. The reality seems to be totally different. These plots are often treated in public consciousness as fakes because many decisions taken by the leaders subsequently turn out to be unfulfilled.

This happened, for instance, a few years ago to four national projects which had been put forward to realization by Presidential administration. They con-

cerned public health service, education, housing construction and agriculture. Mass media informed on grandiose plans of transformation of these branches. However from the very beginning it was not clear how much money is going to be accumulated for fulfilling these projects and who bears personal responsibility for them. After a couple of years media attention to these projects has almost gone, because it was obvious that the Kremlin was unable to carry out its plans. The big words, pronounced publicly, have been safely forgotten. It is also possible to remember one more situation connected with reorganization of the Russian police. In 2011 President Medvedev repeatedly passed an opinion that the proclaimed measures were well-planned. Simultaneously, most Russian media remained non-critical to his words. They were incapable to estimate objectively a current situation and treated power statements mainly as the blessing for a society.

Such unconceivable position of mass media, conciliatory with politics of the ruling power, can not cause approval by most Russians. As numerous opinion polls show, public trust to journalism in Russia continues to decrease due to non-objectivity of the latter¹⁸.

4. Media technologies vs. journalism

In the contemporary conditions a third tendency encompasses the entire information space: vigorous intrusion of image-making and PR technologies into the media content which undermine media creativity and, consequently, journalistic frameworks.

Using these technologies became possible following the political dependence of many media on the ruling power. In addition, a lack of ethics within the relationship between the media and private capital, and frequent ignoring of Russian media legislation that prohibits an intrusion by the media founders into editorial politics certainly strengthen the development of these technologies. In fact, the media in all levels seem to be the source of partisan information. “Ordered” media materials are being circulated everywhere. Outwardly they appear

¹⁸ *Otnoshenie k SMI u rossiyan stanovitsya vsjo bole negativnim* [The relation of Russians to mass-media becomes more and more negative], <http://gtmarket.ru/news/media-advertising-marketing/2007/10/18/1401>, 18.10.2007.

Vsemirnyy opros ob otnoshenii ljudei k SMI i svobode pokazal, chto Rossiya blizhe vsego k Iranu [The world poll about the relation of people to mass-media and freedom has shown that Russia is the closest to Iran], 03.06.2008, <http://www.gipp.ru/viewer.php?id=23002>; *Rossijane ne doveryajut informatsii po povodu krizisa* [Russians don't trust the information concerning crisis], http://www.acg.ru/russian/rossijane_ne_doverjajut_informacii_smi_po_povodu_krizisa, 14.01.2009.

Bol'shinstvo rossiyan smotrit teledebati radi razlecheniya [The majority of Russians looks television debates for the sake of entertainment], <http://www.lenizdat.ru/a0/ru/pm1/c-1100605-0.html>, 10.11.2011.

as pure journalistic work but in fact have nothing common with it. Reality turns out to be thoroughly misconstrued.

It becomes an even more significant fact during election campaigns when the audience seems to be affected by an unstoppable alleluia favoring some candidates and the ethically unrestrained critique towards the opposition. The current Russian media still seem to be a source of discrimination and deceit for achieving extremely narrow political purposes. At present the situation provides the audience with manipulative methods, and most media themselves shape irrational observations of politics affecting the entire situation in the country. It is worth saying that on most pivotal political issues the leading figures of current Russian politics such as President Medvedev and Prime-Minister Putin remain outside serious media criticism although corruption and low living standards remain the most visible problems in everyday life of Russians.

Simultaneously, prevalent evaluative and populist linguistics in image texts is leading to the loss of traditional ethics and nihilism, and following it, to destabilization of social relations. The political elite in Russia seems to believe in such influence on public opinion. However, supporting the “war of compromises” it destroys the perception of Russians that the media can be an objective source of information which does not facilitates to steady the legitimacy of the elite¹⁹.

The above picture could be easily noticed during the election campaign to the State Duma taking place in December of 2007. Sympathies of all television channels and most of the print media explicitly favored the leading party “United Russia” which received disproportionate coverage in the media, between it and competing political parties. This situation was taken for granted by the power and media proprietors: both sides were deriving political profit from it. The media stopped transferring trustworthy information and lost real contacts with the public which was feeling superfluous during such media development. There is no media self-regulation creating the norms of professionalism, remarks J. Zassoursky, professor of Moscow State University, and the professional conscience of journalists did not rise to the level of the most common and most important human values²⁰.

A similar situation occurred prior to the last elections to the State Duma in December of 2011. A basic information trend was concentrated around “Edinaya Rossiya” (“United Russia”), existing as the main political party, and only to some extent touched its formal political rivals such as “Spravedlivaya Rossiya” (“Fair Russia”), the Communist Party and Liberal Democrats headed by V. Zhirinovskiy. As for “Patrioti Rossii” (“The patriots of Russia”) and “Pravoye

¹⁹ A. Shvidunova, *SMI kak sub'ekt politicheskogo protsessa i instrument politicheskikh tekhnologii* [Mass media as a subject of the political process and the instrument of political technologies], http://www.pressclub.host.ru/techn_13htm.

²⁰ J. Zassoursky, *Iskyusheniye svobodoi. Rossiiskaya zhurnalistika: 1990–2004*, p. 30 [Seduction by freedom. Russian journalism: 1990–2004], Moscow 2004.

delo” (“A just cause”) which have also been formally registered for the elections, they received a very random coverage on Russian television as the most powerful source of information. The Russian population was unable to form a certain opinion about their activities which was later resulted in minimal voting for them. In addition, any critics towards the ruling party coming from opposition forces was silenced by main Russian media, only except for the most liberal “Ekho Moskvi” (“The echo of Moscow”).

Thereby, the objectivity of political information was called into question which had affected the final results of the election campaign. It is questionable, at least, to claim that there exists a universal dependency between information trends and political priorities. The population quite often opposes the “forced” information which takes place in mass media. Yet Russia seems to be an exception. The population here still trusts a printed word, especially in a situation when opposition voices are entirely silenced.

Regarding media as its subordinate, the authorities do not intend to legislatively change the existing Elections Law forbidding journalists to express their judgments about political candidates which are in conflict with the current Media Law defending freedom of the press. In the meantime, a critic of Russian media realities exposed by international community does not seem to be shared by Russian politicians. It is worth referring to the resolution of the IFJ World Journalist Congress taking place in June 2007 that stressed that the media system in Russia, specifically in broadcasting, does not provide adequate pluralism and freedom of speech. The Congress condemned the Russian power for the pitiful state affecting the media and journalists of the country²¹.

It is noteworthy that during the years of his stay in national politics, Dmitry Medvedev repeatedly stressed the importance of strengthening freedom of the media in the country. For example, in the fifth Economic Forum held in Krasnoyarsk in February 2008, he stressed the need “to ensure that people throughout our country the best access to information”. A few months later, at a meeting of the Bureau of the State Council on the development of the information society in Russia, Medvedev underlined that “ultimately, free access of our citizens to information is one of the most significant signs of democratic development”. A year later, in September of 2009, in an interview with American broadcasting company CNN, Medvedev stated that “pressure on the freedom of the press is absolutely an unpromising thing” and that “the press should feel their dignity...”. The most life-asserting argument was expressed by Medvedev in the third annual message to the Federal Assembly in November 2010, he announced that the authorities should not be the owners of newspapers and that “appropriate actions should be taken at the regional and local levels”²². However, these basic re-

²¹ “Zhurnalist [The Journalist]: All Russian Monthly” 2007, No 7, p. 8.

²² All quotations are taken from “Zhurnalist [The Journalist]: All Russian Monthly” 2011, No 11, p. 10–11.

quirements had not been implemented. President Medvedev's speech was left only on paper. In addition, no mechanism has been developed so that the media could be removed from the constant guidance of the Russian authorities.

The monopoly of the ruling regime on informational resources became evident, noted some years ago by a distinguished scholar G. Mel'nik from St. Petersburg. Following it, open searching and unlimited transmission of information, as a natural function of the journalistic profession, appears to be undermined. Sources of state and political information are toughly defended. Narrowing of access to information has cut off publications from being trustworthy²³. The 2000s were numerous confirming the correctness of this statement. If some time ago a deeper understanding of press freedom under democratic change seems to have been true, then the current political conditions are drawing a new media landscape.

5. When information looks alien

The above political and economic conditions of Russian media development have predetermined a deeply changing quality of information which, in turn, can be regarded as the fourth tendency of the media market. Having no opportunity to initiate a thorough discussion of daily problems due to the lack of different opinions being unified, mass media keep paying attention to entertainment information leaving apart a comprehensive analysis of the political and economic backgrounds of the country. Unstoppable entertainment is being created owing to soap operas, a numerous number of which is broadcast by different television companies. Simultaneously, information itself is becoming more scandalous and yellow in nature. The audience permanently seems to be in the know of the private lives of political and cultural stars by scrupulously calculating their salaries, quality of properties, etc. In addition, television actively involves a viewer in the entertainment world by suggesting diverse plots. Such talk-shows on *the First Channel* as "Bolshaya stirka" ("Big washing") and "Pust' govoryat" ("Let them say"), "Davai pozhenimsya" ("Let's get married") as well as the *Second Channel's* (RTR) reality show "Posledniy geroi" ("The last hero") and its more simplified analogies like "Dom-2" ("The House 2") being transmitted by *TNT* until recently and some others recreate the replica of real life but in fact have not much in common with it. Most shows obviously bear the marks of being ordered and leave much to be desired about their thoughtfulness. It is true that modern media in any country are switching to "easier" information. Meanwhile, the Rus-

²³ G. Mel'nik, *Professionalnaya etika zhurnalista: krizisniye faktori* (*Professional ethic of a journalist: crisis factors*), p. 203, [in:] V. Kon'kov (ed.), *Sredstva massovoi informatsii v sovremennom mire* [*Mass media in the modern world*]. The proceedings of the scientific and practical conference, St. Petersburg 2003.

sian media, thanks to other tendencies sorted out above, speculate on it and thereby create a simplistic observation of the world which is unsafe for individual and collective psyches.

TV-shows are destined to draw attention of the mass audience and to provide the latter with the opportunity to rest and to relieve its consciousness from difficulties of contemporary life. This trend seems to be successfully motivated due to permanent conflict situations in lives of the people shown on TV screens. In the meantime, blossoming of these plots in any society starts functioning impetuously when media has a lack of diversified political information. It is obvious that due to a lack of politically diversified information in the contemporary Russia these plots have received a strong media approval. Entertaining plots currently gather large audiences thanks to shaping a simplified picture of the world by discrediting some heroes on account of the others and peep into “key holes”. In these conditions the content structure of information leaves behind real life shaped by human needs of its development. As a result, the Russian media frequently distort the human environment, and this is leading to specific comprehension of the world itself²⁴.

The rapid increase of the circulation of the yellow press during the recent years and the popularity of such shows as “Anshlag” (“Full House”) and “Kprivoe Zerkalo” (“Curved Mirror”), many plots of which are distinguished by banality and poor taste seem to be a consequence of the simplified understanding of daily life by the mass audience. Under the current conditions the opportunities for developing the quality press and distributing serious and analytical information turn out to be limited.

It is correct to claim that by now the Russian media have shaped a definite level of mass consciousness being unable to comprehensively evaluate complex occurrences and take argumentative decisions. The main problem affecting the situation is the changing nature of the information process. It becomes managed having little in common with the creative understanding of the environment.

Conclusion

The political power’s activity elaborated during the recent years, have defined the principal trend of the political and spiritual development of Russian society. Under Putin and later Medvedev’s administration, control in different socially-oriented spheres was strengthened, and the standard of discursiveness turned out to be lessened. Russian society accepted this very specific “formula”

²⁴ M. Shkondin, *Transformatsya tipologicheskoi strukturi rossiskikh SMI: sistemniye aspekti* [Transformation of the typological structure of the Russian media: system frameworks], pp. 3–8, “Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta”, Ser. 10: Jurnalistika 2000, No 1.

for successful development by turning down political progress shaped as early as in the periods of Gorbachev's glasnost and of the early Yeltsin's years.

In 2000s the civic activity of the population has gravely decreased. The Russian media contributed heavily to this process. The above-mentioned media tendencies investigated in this paper clearly confirm that the last few years thoroughly undermined the democratic priorities of Russian society and lessened opportunities for free opinion. In this regard, the situation looks unsafe for the media themselves due to the great risk of being bridled at any time. The present Russian political regime seems to be strengthening its influence in public sphere and enjoying its opportunities to control the media content politically and financially. The main trend of the media development in Russia is going on to evolve in a completely different direction compared to the Western standard of informing which makes it more difficult to compare the contemporary frameworks of media activity. True, in his last Yearly Message to Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (2011) president Medvedev declared some organizational innovations which can change the existing situation in politics and mass media. One of the most impressive ideas expressed by him in the last Yearly Message to Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (2011) concerns setting up of public television which has never existed in Russia. "I suggest, Medvedev declared, to solve in the near future a question on creation of public television – probably, on the basis of one of existing federal channels". In this case, he added, none of media owners should have a dominant influence on acceptance of any decisions: neither the state, nor the individual. It is assured that such public television can make our information environment more competitive and, accordingly, more interesting²⁵. In the meantime, it seems doubtful that this idea can become true, at least, quickly. On the one hand, the Russian political hierarchy is very unlikely to be interested in creating a free debatable space able to criticize the powers. On the other hand, the media legislation has never touched this issue, and it makes a final decision as being very uncertain. In addition, it is unclear who can take responsibility for this project.

The observations suggested in this article put on the agenda a very sacramental question of *what the future holds for both Russian democracy and the Russian media*. The current political and media evolution in Russia is remote from the idea of civic development of society because of the non-democratic framework of their existence. At the same time this situation is difficult to overcome quickly due to its deep-rooted origins and strong pressure exposed from the Kremlin. The existing political hierarchy stimulates suppressive orientations in the field of media which are being squeezed financially and morally by the powers. This provides scholars with a good background of the relationship between the authoritarian past and the present which cannot get rid of this legacy.

²⁵ Look at: <http://президент.рф/news/14088>.

In turn, Russian society will suffer spiritually from these obstacles if media do not elaborate sensible ways of changing the situation.

Streszczenie

Rosyjskie media na politycznym rozdrożu: Dlaczego nie stymulują demokracji?

Artykuł skupia się na współczesnej ewolucji rosyjskich mediów i rzuca światło na problem ich służalczości wobec sił politycznych w tym państwie. Ukazuje główne tendencje, które obecnie pojawiają się w krajobrazie rosyjskich mediów, oraz następstwa tej sytuacji. Autor zmierza do wykazania, w jakim zakresie skutki te są niszczyielskie dla kształtowania obywatelskich priorytetów w Rosji, a także dlaczego istnieje niezwykle małe prawdopodobieństwo rozwijania się owych demokratycznych podstaw – ogłoszonych w latach 1980–1990, ale znacznie osłabionych po roku 2000 – w najbliższej przyszłości. Całe tło polityczne we współczesnej Rosji wygląda bardzo przygnębiająco także dla moralności społeczeństwa, oddalonego od codziennego porządku mediów. Tymczasem, obraz ten wydaje się być uniwersalny – przynajmniej częściowo – dla zrozumienia stanu mediów w dowolnym kraju wychodzącym z totalitarnej przeszłości i próbującym ugruntować nowe zasady swojego istnienia.