
THE PREDICTABLE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDEPENDENT STATION NTV

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The taking control of the independent TV station NTV in Moscow is only one indication of the centralisation of power by the state, in a context of general indifference towards politics.

A new editor-in-chief of *NTV*, the TV company that became a symbol of Russia's hounding of freedom of speech during recent weeks, was appointed on April 25 after a long 'bulldogs' under-carpet fight'. More precisely, Tatyana Mitkova, a newly-appointed *NTV* editor-in-chief and formerly its announcer, has become the chief of 'the fourth key's *NTV*' because most of her former colleagues have quit *NTV* and are now engaged in establishing a new *NTV*, that of 'the sixth key'. Meanwhile, the scandal that shook Russia is not of today's origin and could have been foreseen. The *NTV* case lasted for several weeks and came to a climax two days before Easter. *NTV* was finally 'mopped up' by a kind of counter terrorist operation: under the pretence of a bomb in the studio, the former guards were replaced by new ones who did not allow the old company workers to do their jobs and only new workers were let in. During previous weeks, a legal battle had waged and the public was rather tired of the same 'victory day'; step by step it had disappeared from front news pages and moved to tail ends of TV news.

ILLEGAL MOVE

In order to get rid of this tiresome TV company, the State chose the simplest way. Gazprom, Russia's raw materials production giant involving state interest, held 49.5% of *NTV* shares. *NTV* was in arrears to Gazprom and had failed to pay back the loans. So, the 'operators' believed that eliminating *NTV* by financial ways would be the smoothest manner and legally convincing. The 'war' became even more dynamic following the reports about *NTV* owner Vladimir Gusinsky's negotiations with the American media tycoon, Ted Turner, to whom he was going to sell his interests so that the new holder would cover the company's debts. Gusinsky, who at that moment was in Spain, was accused of fraud, and a part of his *NTV* shares were confiscated. It was announced that, on those grounds, they had no voting rights eligibility. Thus, the interests held by Gazprom increased to over 50%, i.e. became controlling. Generally speaking this scheme is absolutely invalid in legal terms: the confiscated shares do not disappear, but are just no longer subject to sale and purchase; the confiscation could not affect the total volume of shares. However, the number of persons willing to neglect those 'details' was sufficient. So, it was just a matter of technology to organise a meeting of the new owners, to find strike-breakers among the journalists and, ultimately, to hold 'the key'.

NO REAL FINANCIAL MOTIVES

NTV people took up the gauntlet and became involved in the struggle. As could be expected, this struggle waged within the means available. The channel's news broadcasts contained almost nothing but wrathful philippics against the power and Gazprom. In those broadcasts, *NTV* appeared as the last bulwark of democracy and freedom of speech and the deserters almost as traitors of Christ. Those people who were engaged to deal with *NTV*, i.e. new 'managers' Alfred Kokh and Boris Jordan, were exposed to mockery and public dishonour, the more so as it was quite easy. Both Kokh and Jordan were

figurants in the first, scandalous stage of Russia's privatisation undertakings in the early and mid-90s; people, to put it mildly, with a dubious public image that could hardly be spoiled even by public dishonour! The defence they built up was very well constructed. In interviews which they gave several times a day, Kokh and Jordan reiterated that the *NTV* case had nothing to do with politics; Media-Most's insolvency was the only issue that mattered. Such a defence could not be effective despite being well-constructed. It was clear to absolutely everyone in Russia that there was no reason for Gazprom to obtain the TV company without its leading journalists, i.e. factually 'the *NTV* key.' Rem Vyakhirev, Gazprom head, made it clear publicly that this was really so. Gazprom's financial motivation became even less plausible when Gazprom thwarted profitable negotiations with Ted Turner. Indeed, no proof was necessary to clearly understand that the *NTV* struggle had nothing to do with business. By that time, *NTV* probably remained the sole nation-wide truly independent TV company. During the last one and a half years or so, it began to increasingly lose its TV company nature and turned into a sort of 'political opposition', aptly remarked Vitaly Tretyakov, editor-in-chief of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. However, such a thing cannot exist in the new post-Yeltsin Russia.

LOGICAL CONSEQUENCE OF PUTIN'S POLITICY

The events that the journalists, fighting for independence, presented as unprecedented are, as a matter of fact, quite within the logic of Russia's political processes following President Putin's accession to power. The new President's policy can really be referred to as 'centralizing' or 'concentrating.' Centralizing power is, without doubt, becoming the main purpose of its existence. Properly speaking, the power began to build up a so-called 'managed democracy' in all directions immediately after Putin's accession to presidency. It began with the 'taming' of regional heads, sometimes using similar clumsy methods. For instance, the same formal juridical methods were used in the flagrant removal of Governor Ruts koy of the Kursk Oblast from the election race: it was, at that time, that the court and the prosecutor's office began to function as bludgeons against objectionable persons. It is this specific feature of the current stage of State enforcement that has manifested itself in the *NTV* story.

PUTIN'S POPULARITY STILL HIGH

Judge Nikolayev of Saratov city rashly declared the *NTV* shareholders meeting that had factually changed the company management as illegal but, next morning, he recalled his judgement. One can only guess about the events which took place that night to make the judge change his mind within 24 hours. As long ago as the stage of combating regional leaders, the struggle began against the so-called 'oligarchs'. The new President found Berezovsky-type 'pocket businessmen', former President Yeltsin 'court' retainers, no longer suitable. So, some of them had to take back seats and others, like Berezovsky, had to leave the country. The party system centralisation seemed to be the next stage in this manageability struggle. The merger of "Edinstvo", an amorphous and insufficiently structured party of nomenclature that had been created to control the parliament and, "Otechestvo", another nomenclature party created to control the Moscow Mayor, are presumably intended to be the 'first birds' in this process. This way, two goals would be achieved: taming Moscow Mayor Luzhkov, the strongest of the governors, as the anti-governors struggle goes on and creating 'the governing party', a sort of conglomerate of go-getters ready to transform State Duma into a stamp to censor presidential initiatives. This system provides a place for opposition as well, both right and left. Communists would customarily be the opposition's left, and the right wing would belong to the Union of Right Forces which recently intensified its activities. Neither of these two parties can sufficiently influence actual policy, but they can conveniently be used as channels for draining the energy of the opposition part of the society. As this well-tailored system of total centralisation is bolstered by the world's high oil prices and,

accordingly, by a rather bearable social situation in the country, Putin's popularity remains steadily high, which fact gives him a chance to keep on advancing on all fronts.

THE STATE'S LATENT AUTHORITARIANISM BECOMES LATENT

This picture, that is quite traditional for nations in transition, yet not merry, incorporates the *NTV* liquidation case as a natural event. Changes in Russia's information market are associated with political changes. Before Putin's presidency, there was an illusion of possible political alternatives, at least at the level of individuals or groups of influence. Therefore, different subjects in the political process needed media holdings. Every large corporation and every serious banking and industrial group had its own media: it was the Gusinsky group which really serviced Primakov and Luzhkov, and the Berezovsky group which virtually brought Putin into presidency. Each of the owners used to invest a lot of money in their media, using them to promote their candidates. Now the political system is changing and media empires are becoming an anachronism. The Russian State's latent authoritarian nature is becoming obvious. The mass influence media merely stop being necessary. They have no real chance and, therefore, fade out. During the Yeltsin era, the media doubtlessly had more freedom. However, that freedom was guaranteed by the President's personal qualities rather than by real media functioning conditions; for some reason, he treated journalists and freedom of press with piety. However, it should be noted that the true opposition, e.g. communists, had no serious access to the 'influence groups'.

NO NATION-WIDE INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Now, the era of freedom is ending. This does not mean that no opposition parties nor newspapers will exist anymore. They can exist until they do not really endanger the power. Few people read newspapers in Russia; the newspapers are expensive. Russian people watch TV, mainly nation-wide channels. Political parties chiefly have adherents in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The classical 'one-and-half-party' system has at last been established in Duma. The society itself has stopped wanting freedom; it wants tranquillity and confidence. The social polls' results were striking, e.g. on the Chechen war coverage (that was *NTV*'s main course). According to the poll data, most of Russia's residents understand that the state channels lie, but still they prefer watching them rather than *NTV*. It means that people do not want to know the truth. Instead they want comfort in their souls. Under the conditions whereby the need for authentic information became a minority need, *NTV* was sooner or later to die. Another matter is that Russia's Draconian laws (and conceptions) are frequently mitigated by the executors' laxity. The *NTV* neutralising operation was striking in terms of its unconsidered and technologically inefficient nature. The powers did not expect that the *NTV* people would begin striking and arranging rallies, that many of the journalists would refuse working for Gazprom's *NTV*, that, after all, Berezovsky would invite *NTV* to his *TV6* channel. Indeed, *NTV* will no longer be like it used to be: it had a truly, highly professional team and the journalists will have to pay for their ultimate transformation into rally leaders. Over slightly more than a year of their fight for independence, the journalists have turned news into news interpreting; in defending themselves they became polemicists. It is impossible to overcome this legacy after such a history, especially in a new place with incomplete staff. However, some independent media still remain in Russia, including TV media. Indeed, they are not nation-wide; their territorial coverage is much less and the quality is lower, but they remain. Also, 'the *NTV* generation' remains, which means there is a chance of the process to proceed in a different way. Building civil society is a long and boring process resembling pendulum swinging. So it can swing backwards.