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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Parfyonov Raps State of TV

By Victor Davidoff

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Today few people recall that perestroika and the grand events that followed began with one little word: glasnost. The word, which later entered many other languages, sounded modest in the context of 1985, when Gorbachev first proclaimed it as policy. It didn't yet mean freedom of press — in the Soviet Union at the time there was no independent mass media — but simply meant a relaxation of censorship.

Now, 25 years after glasnost, the Russian mediascape is eerily similar to its Soviet predecessor. The vast majority of the media covering political events are either directly owned by the state or indirectly owned through corporations with partial state ownership. Independent media outlets exist in singles: There is one television station (RenTV), one radio station (Ekho Moskvy) and one magazine (The New Times). There is only diversity in the media with the smallest audience: newspapers.

Commentators say the lack of press freedoms is both a symptom of the crisis in governance and a reason for it. And so, although there are myriad opinions about how to end the crisis, today, like 25 years ago, everyone agrees that the changes must begin with less censorship.

Perhaps this is why the ceremony to award the first Vladislav Listyev prize to television journalist Leonid Parfyonov was such a grand event.

The event wasn't newsworthy because of the award, it was because of Parfyonov's acceptance speech. He was visibly nervous and read from a paper he held with shaking hands, which is strange for a man who makes his living speaking before the camera.

Parfyonov overcame his nerves to diagnose with cold medical precision the malaise of the national TV channels: "National television information services have become part of the government. Journalistic topics, like all life, have been irrevocably divided into those that can be shown on TV and those that cannot. ... The positive ratings of the president and prime minister are at about 75 percent. On national television you don't hear a single critical, skeptical or ironic word about them. About a quarter of the spectrum of public opinion is not given. It's as if the authorities were someone who recently died — and you never speak ill of the dead.

"Our television is getting better at getting people excited, distracting them, entertaining them and making them laugh, but you certainly can't call this a civil, sociopolitical institution."

The media community almost unanimously supported Parfyonov's whistle-blowing. Journalist Ksenia Larina, known on Livejournal as Xlarina, wrote on her blog: "Parfyonov dared to touch the holiest of holies — he broke the agreement and rules of the game. And for that reason I consider Leonid Parfyonov a real hero."

In a blog on the Russian GQ site, support for Parfyonov was expressed by television journalist Yevgeny Kiselyov, who had to immigrate to Ukraine after his programs were canceled on Russian TV. Kiselyov wrote that the speech and the circumstances around it were "signs of some permissible changes" and hoped that Russian television might "go through another perestroika."

Others agreed with Kiselyov. "Parfyonov's speech fits in well with other recent events," blogger Matique wrote. "I'd like to believe that times are changing. Now it's the time for talk, but it will be followed by a time for action. We're waiting for change."

Perhaps the optimists are right, but for now Russian television is continuing to operate by its old methods: In Channel One's piece on the award ceremony, Parfyonov's speech wasn't broadcast. Only a few words that had nothing to do with his main point were aired.

The event wasn't covered at all by the channel that was supposedly created to inform foreigners about events in Russia: the English-language Russia Today. This strange hybrid of Soviet agitprop and the National Enquirer may have been too busy covering the story of its reporter and crew in Columbus, Georgia, who were arrested during a demonstration at Fort Benning.

They were fined for partaking in an illegal protest and disobeying the orders of law enforcement officers. RT has been milking this "attack on freedom of the press in the U.S." for all it's worth.

It turns out that there are two types of Russian journalists: independent journalists

supporting glasnost in Russia and Kremlin-financed journalists supporting glasnost in the United States.

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