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The Return of Glasnost

By Alexei Pankin

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When President Dmitry Medvedev spoke recently in his video blog about the country's political stagnation, it appeared that glasnost had returned to Russia. Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev used the word "stagnation" to criticize his predecessor, Leonid Brezhnev, and now that Medvedev is using the same word. It means that another period of glasnost must be near.

Under the original glasnost, editors published apolitical works by Russian emigre writers and then proceeded to brand Gorbachev as a criminal. The accusations were largely without basis, but the writers faced no danger of being punished.

The most striking event that suggests we are experiencing a new glasnost was the harsh criticism that television journalist Leonid Parfyonov leveled at the state of modern Russian television during his acceptance speech in early December for the first Vladislav Listyev prize, established by Channel One. Although the station did not run coverage of the speech on the air, it was shown in full on the Internet — a classic glasnost-style act of insubordination and "subversion" aimed at exposing the Kremlin's autocratic control of television news.

Glasnost is great for journalists. Throughout 2010 — a year that marked the 25th anniversary of Gorbachev's reforms — the media has been waxing nostalgic about the mid- and late 1980s, a period when, as one of my colleagues wrote, "open debate raged in the press and in public about the nature of state and society in the Soviet Union."

Many recall how during those times the newspapers Komsomolskaya Pravda and Argumenty i Fakty were listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for their multimillion circulations and how people waited in line for an hour before newsstands opened to get a copy of Moskovskiye Novosti and Ogonyok.

But is glasnost a good thing for social development? The February 1987 issue of Novy Mir magazine ran an article titled "Crafty Figures" by Novosibirsk economist Grigory Khanin and Moscow journalist Vasily Selyunin proving that the gross domestic product of the Soviet Union did not grow 90 times in size from 1928 to 1987 as official statistics claimed, but by a mere 6.9 times. That was shocking news at the time.

Khanin has not stopped shocking readers. He recently reported that Russia's gross domestic product in 2007 was only 85 percent of the GDP of the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union in 1987. Using the same comparison, Russia's productivity in 2007 was only 70 percent of what it was in 1987.

In the late 1990s, Moskovskiye Novosti editor Yegor Yakovlev once said, "We fought for a market economy without having the slightest idea of what it was or how it might affect us." The general population had tremendous faith in the country's journalists. That can be a recipe for disaster.

And herein lies the fundamental difference between Gorbachev's glasnost and its current version. Today, the public puts very little faith in the media. In fact, when Medvedev recently proposed giving journalists special legal protections in response to the savage beating of Kommersant journalist Oleg Kashin, 75 percent of the people were opposed to it.

This new glasnost creates a unique opportunity to achieve harmony and balance. Journalists can write and broadcast anything they want without inflicting any harm whatsoever on society for the simple reason that nobody believes or trusts them anyway. In this way, the wolves will remain well-fed without sacrificing a single sheep.

Alexei Pankin is editor of WAN-IFRA-GIPP Magazine for publishing business professionalfor publishing business professionals.

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