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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

From Defiant to Dull in a Decade

By The Moscow Times

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Vladimir Lenin once said film is the most important art form for the state.

About 80 years later, Vladimir Putin adapted Leninism to the 21st century, focusing on television instead of film. In April 2001, one year after Putin was elected president, NTV became Target No. 1.

Ten years have passed since NTV — once the country's most audacious, creative and successful television station — was taken over by state-controlled Gazprom-Media. It was a heavy-handed Kremlin operation, a Bolshevik-like state seizure of private property that had little to do with the debt of Media-MOST, NTV's parent company, and everything to do with instituting censorship on national television and strengthening Putin's vertical power structure.

"The attack [on NTV] was an attack on the most powerful lever of democracy — independent television," satirist Viktor Shenderovich, one of the shining stars of the old NTV, said on April 14 on Ekho Moskvy radio.

“After NTV was destroyed, private property rights, independent judiciary, free elections and the right to assembly were also destroyed,” he said.

Indeed, the government seizure of NTV was followed several years later by the seizure of Yukos.

A strong link can be drawn between the lack of private national television in Russia today and the country’s increasing corruption, lawlessness and declining infrastructure.

Just as the State Duma is no longer a place for discussion, the same is true for state-controlled television. Turn on NTV today, and all that you are likely to see are films, sitcoms and serials — the proverbial “bread and circuses” for the masses. NTV has nothing like Shenderovich’s “Kukly,” known for its sharp parody of Kremlin leaders; Svetlana Sorokina’s “Glas Naroda” talk show; or Yevgeny Kiselyov’s “Itogi” program, known for its sharp commentary.

Although many questioned the objectivity of the old NTV, it at least offered an alternative viewpoint not seen today. Perhaps Leonid Parfyonov, an outstanding journalist fired from NTV in 2004, said it best in late November when he accepted the Vladislav Listyev Prize for journalism. “National television information services have become part of the government. … This isn’t information anymore; this is PR or anti-PR by the authorities.”

This explains why today’s television news is disturbingly deja vu for those who remember the drab, propagandistic Soviet news, which also had a conspicuously servile tone and showed more protocol reports than real news. It also explains, for example, why recent terrorist attacks in Moscow and even former President Boris Yeltsin’s death were first reported several hours after they occurred; it takes that long to get final approval from the powers that be on how “best” to present breaking news.

After the change in management, several NTV journalists joined government-controlled television, while others are working at the smaller Ren-TV. Some of the more outspoken Kremlin critics, however, have had difficulty finding a place on the Russian airwaves. For example, Kiselyov is in “exile” in Ukraine, where he has a television show similar to “Itogi.” Sorokina and Shenderovich have moved to Gazprom-Media-controlled Ekho Moskvy, an indication that at least some freedom of speech is still allowed.

Nonetheless, all three journalists are purportedly on an unofficial “blacklist” for NTV and the two other state-controlled television stations, Channel One and Rossia-1 — as are leading liberal journalists such as Yulia Latynina, opposition leaders Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, Garry Kasparov, rock singer Yury Shevchuk and many others who appeared regularly on the old NTV.

By sidelining some of Russia’s most talented and creative journalists and politicians, Putin and his advisers have shown that they are not only excellent students of Leninism but also Stalinism: No private television, no problem.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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