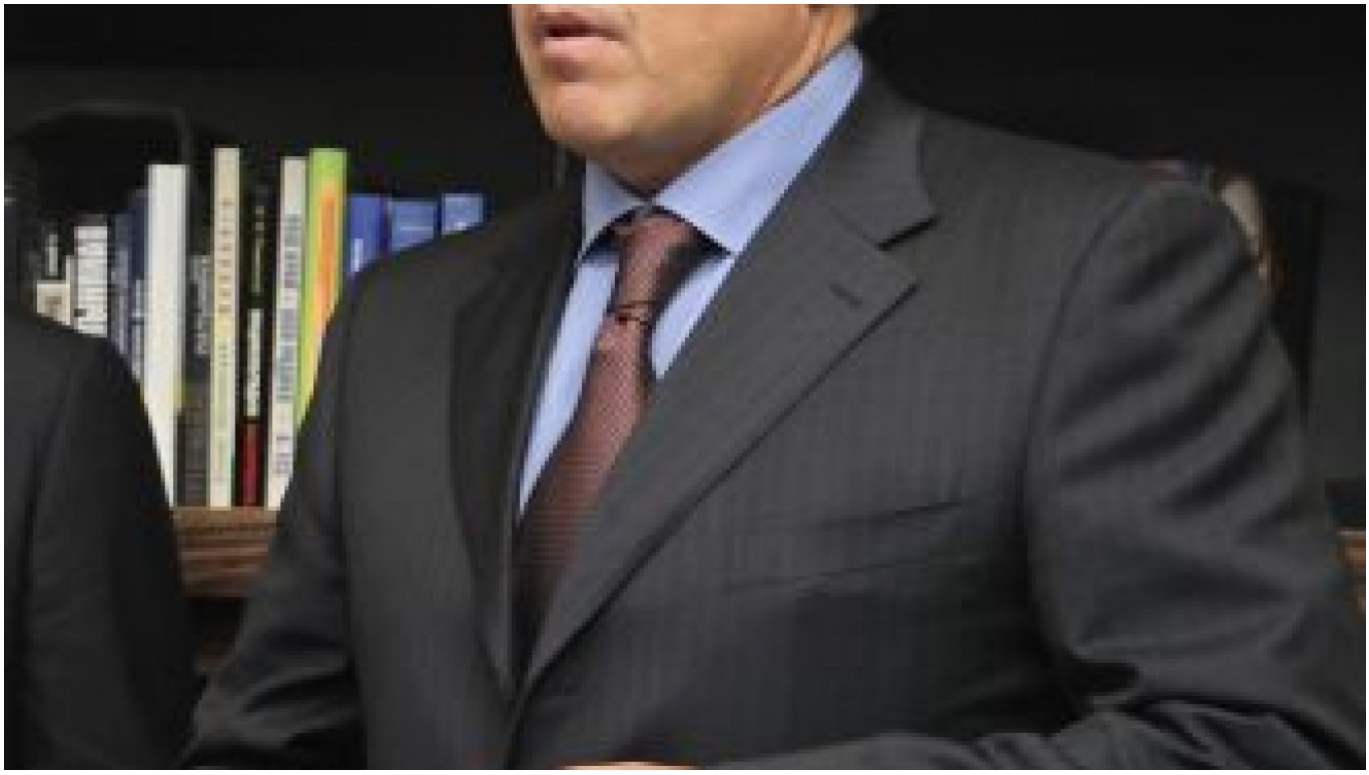
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Media Thaw's Staying Power Hotly Debated

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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RBK TV's Alexander Lyubimov **Igor Tabakov**

National television viewers have been exposed to some disquieting coverage recently.

On numerous occasions over the past three months, they have seen leaders of the "nonsystemic" opposition addressing anti-government rallies and appearing on talk shows.

In the past, the likes of Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov and Sergei Udaltsov were thought to be on a blacklist of individuals practically banned from appearing on state-controlled TV, which has displayed lavish coverage on Prime Minister Vladimir Putin or President Dmitry Medvedev — or both.

But since mass protests broke out after December's State Duma elections, the channels have surprised people by covering the rallies, sometimes with uncharacteristic fairness.

The transformation, dubbed "television thaw" by the national media, seemingly reached

a boiling point earlier this year when President Dmitry Medvedev took questions from journalism students at Moscow State University.

The Jan. 25 evening news broadcasts included an extraordinary exchange in which one student wanted to know whether Medvedev was ready for a revolutionary tribunal.

"Do you understand that you might well be sentenced to death? Are you ready to accept that bravely as Saddam Hussein did?" asked Vladimir Kulikov, who studies television journalism.

Medvedev, unfazed, responded by congratulating Kulikov for "probably asking the boldest question of [his] life."

He added that as president he was obliged "to be ready for everything" but that he was convinced there would be no revolution.

Channel One's 9 p.m. newscast did not show Kulikov's question in full, omitting that he asked Medvedev whether he would "emigrate to a friendly country like North Korea."

But the entire exchange was included in the report on Rossia-1, the other big state TV channel, and the full transcript remains available on the Kremlin's website.

Television is still seen by many Russians as the main source of political information, especially in the regions where Internet penetration remains low.

And the country's three biggest stations — Channel One, Rossia-1 and NTV — were more or less brought under firm Kremlin control during Putin's first presidential term, from 2000-04.

But on the threshold of Putin's return to the Kremlin, people are divided over whether television is about to change again.

Kulikov, for one, is skeptical.

"It is the imitation of a thaw," he said. "They just saw that it is impossible not to talk about us."

Kulikov, 26, said he got along extremely well with the camera crew, which singled him out for a 15-minute interview after his conversation with Medvedev.

"They were really sympathetic and promised to show as much as possible. But in the end, it was two sentences in which I say Medvedev personally made a good impression on me," he recalled.

The interview aired Jan. 29 on Channel One's Sunday weekly news program. Anchor Pyotr Tolstoi introduced it by saying the president had openly answered questions "so nasty that they were unacceptable to put to a head of state anywhere in the world."

But others believe that change is here to stay because once opened, the floodgates will be hard to close again.

"Putin has no alternative but to let it continue," said Alexander Lyubimov, the CEO of the RBK business TV channel and a longtime top state-television executive. "He needs to introduce

political reforms and mechanisms that allow state television to be more liberal."

In an interview given in English, Lyubimov cautioned that the current thaw was initiated from above and that after more than a decade of heavy-handed state control the channels might not live up to new expectations.

"They cannot take part in serious political discussion because they lack the resources," he said of the big national channels, explaining that their creativity and journalistic potential had withered away.

"Their journalists cannot fight for news. They are too tired" he said.

Lyubimov recalled how the Kremlin effectively hijacked Channel One while he was a first deputy for the channel's director, Konstantin Ernst, from 2001 to 2003.

"Suddenly, people in the presidential administration started having opinions," he said. "They took everything into their own hands without any experience or expertise. And it worked."

He added that television executives could not "say no to these people every day."

He also said regional officials across the country are tightly controlling local media through state ownership structures or special contracts with cash-strapped outlets.

"If you want to survive in the regions, you sign an agreement about information cooperation with the governor," he said.

Born in London 1962 as the son of a Soviet intelligence officer and spy novelist, Lyubimov rose to fame in the late 1980s as a co-host of the "Vzglyad" TV show, which was banned in 1991 for being anti-Soviet. Unlike in the perestroika period, it has been easy to break journalists' independence during the past 10 years, he said.

Most television reporters, he said, are worried more about raising families and getting credit for a car or an apartment.

Lyubimov formerly served as a deputy director of the VGTRK media holding, which controls Rossia-1. He resigned last year to join close friend Mikhail Prokhorov in the Right Cause party until it ousted Prokhorov in September.

In November, he was appointed CEO of RBK, which belongs to Prokhorov's media holding.

Lyubimov said the big channels focus too much on entertainment for an aging audience.

"They have no hosts or anchors who are experienced in political journalism. They are all entertainers," he said.

Many prominent TV personalities of the 1990s gradually vanished from the screens.

One of them, Yevgeny Kiselyov, now lives in Kiev where he works for Ukraine's Inter TV and occasionally writes for The Moscow Times.

Kiselyov said the fact that more radical opposition figures and he himself have not been

allowed to appear on Russian TV shows proves that the "blacklist" still exists.

"They can invite Ryzhkov and Nemtsov, but not [Garry] Kasparov, [Mikhail] Kasyanov or [Boris] Berezovsky," he said.

The notion of a new "glasnost" on national television also does not square with the latest report from European election observers.

The document, published by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe a day after the March 4 presidential election, says the channels gave an unfair advantage to Putin during the campaign, thus helping him to win by a large margin.

Channel One allocated 61 percent of news coverage to Putin, and Rossia-1 devoted 42 percent to him, the observers said, adding that coverage of Putin "was mainly positive, while other candidates were mostly covered in a neutral manner."

As one might expect, state TV executives reject any notion of unfairness.

Dmitry Kiselyov, an anchor at Rossia-1's "Vesti" news program, said the majority of the Putin coverage was devoted to his function as head of government.

"That's life everywhere. He has an advantage. Look at President Sarkozy in France," Kiselyov told election observers from the Council of Europe two days before the election.

He was also adamant that his channel had not changed its policies of covering the opposition.

"We go where the news is and report it. That's all," he said.

Kremlin critics say a crackdown on the media is either ongoing or imminent.

On Thursday, the Federal Mass Media Inspection Service said it had fined the editor of Russian Esquire 40,000 rubles ($1,360) for illegal drug promotion.

Editor Dmitry Golubovsky told Gazeta.ru that the fine was related to an article in the December issue. The article quoted a user from an encrypted website that includes illegal content.

That issue featured opposition leader Alexei Navalny on the cover. The magazine is owned by Sanoma Independent Media, the parent company of The Moscow Times.

The incident was reminiscent of a decision by Russian MTV last month to pull "GosDep," a candid political talk show hosted by Ksenia Sobchak, apparently after she invited Navalny to the show.

In a string of similar cases in February, the editor of the private NTM local TV station in Yaroslavl announced that he would no longer go to work because he was "sick" of continued state interference in the channel's coverage of the mayoral election.

"The diagnosis is simple. I am ashamed," the editor, Anton Golitsyn, wrote on his Facebook page.

Staff at the opposition-minded Novaya Gazeta newspaper were left fearing for their wages after a police raid paralyzed the bank of the paper's co-owner, Alexander Lebedev.

A shakeup at Ekho Moskvy radio resulted in the resignation of station editor Alexei Venediktov from its board.

The country's most prominent critical radio station, Ekho Moskvy is owned by the state-controlled Gazprom-Media holding, and the fact that the shakeup became public a few weeks after Putin complained about coverage fueled speculation that the Kremlin was to blame.

Gazprom-Media's NTV, the country's biggest privately owned TV channel, was hit with resignations of prominent journalists Nikolai Kartozia and Pavel Lobkov in January, prompting speculation that the company's liberal staff was being squeezed out.

The channel also said March 2 that it had postponed a German documentary critical of Putin scheduled to air that night, saying the date was deemed to be too close to the election.

It promised that the documentary "I Putin" would be shown immediately after the vote, but as of Thursday no date had been set.

Inter TV's Kiselyov was pessimistic and predicted that the "period of relative change for the better" would soon be over: "It will not outlive Putin's inauguration for very long," he said.

Putin is scheduled to take over the presidency May 7.

But no media outlets have been seriously affected so far, and Sobchak's show was rescued by Prokhorov, who put it on his Snob.ru website and Lyubimov's RBK TV.

Those facts have led commentators to argue that the media are just another sector that will be subject to new Kremlin infighting.

Meanwhile, outgoing President Medvedev has been actively promoting the idea of public television — free of both state and private owners.

The idea has been endorsed by Putin, and Medvedev is expected to sign a law about it sometime this month.

But experts interviewed for this article were deeply skeptical of the project.

Lyubimov called it a "desperate and stupid reaction to the protests" and predicted that it was bound to fail, either because viewers would not pay the necessary license fees or because the state would nevertheless continue to interfere.

"Not even law-abiding Brits pay for the BBC as they should," he said.

Lyubimov and Kiselyov agreed that for Russia, private TV has the most promising future.

Kiselyov dismissed the most common argument against private television, namely that it would lead to 1990s-style oligarch media wars.

"If we don't take steps forward without looking back to the '90s, we'll achieve nothing," he

said.

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