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Ex-State TV Reporter Zhanna Agalakova: 'We All Bear Some Degree of Responsibility'

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Zhanna Agalakova **Courtesy photo**

Zhanna Agalakova is an ex-reporter and news anchor who gained prominence for her work at Russia's state-controlled Channel One broadcaster, one of the country's leading television networks.

In March 2022, she made international headlines by resigning from her position in protest of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, returning her state awards to the Kremlin and telling Russians “to switch the TV off.”

Since leaving Channel One, Agalakova has become a vocal critic of Russian state media and its role in the war.

The Moscow Times spoke to Agalakova about the ethical dilemmas faced by state TV workers and their responsibility to society.

The Moscow Times: You worked at Channel One for over 20 years. How did your attitude toward your work evolve?

Zhanna Agalakova: It was a cumulative effect — the freedom of a journalist diminished gradually. At first, it was normal work; the 1990s offered a lot of freedom to journalists in Russia. I joined Channel One because it was a major media outlet with massive reach across the country and abroad. A kind of turning point for me was in the mid-2000s when it became clear in our newsroom that Dmitry Medvedev would be the next president [after Vladimir Putin]. It was very evident; we were instructed to show him every day on the air. For me, this was unacceptable because I understood that neither in the informational nor political context did this person, whom we were pushing as the future president, offer anything exceptional.

I realized that I was personally accountable for what I was saying on screen — by then, the viewer's attitude toward TV presenters had shifted. They were no longer just announcers, but journalists with independent thoughts. I knew I was the face of a policy that was being implemented and I didn't want to be part of it. So, I asked to transfer from anchoring to a correspondent role and moved to France. It was a wonderful time. Relations between Russia, Europe and the world were still good. I worked freely without compromising my conscience. I covered what I found important and had many initiatives. However, even this window gradually closed.

Can you describe the propaganda techniques used in state media? How do they work and influence people?

There's a well-known "60/40 principle": initially, you provide 60% truth — core facts — then gradually insert propaganda elements, steering the narrative in the desired direction. It's like the old parable of several blind men who described an elephant based on touching it. Each touched a different part — the trunk, the tail, a leg — and described only what they felt, believing it was the whole truth. That's how propaganda works: certain facts are exaggerated and presented as the sole reality, distorting the broader picture.

There's also the red herring technique — introducing a blatant lie into the media space and spreading it across all platforms. Everyone starts discussing it, regardless of its source. This lie gains traction and eventually gets recycled back into the system as if validated by third parties. A prime example was the claim that Volodymyr Zelensky was an alleged drug addict. Propaganda outlets pushed this narrative, which then circulated widely, creating a feedback loop of false legitimacy.

A watershed moment for me was the infamous story of the "crucified boy," a fabricated claim that Ukrainian forces had crucified a little boy in the Donetsk region [in 2014]. This outright lie first appeared on the channel where I worked.

This brings us to the question of journalistic responsibility...

I feel responsible for the fact that Russians supported the war so massively. We all bear some degree of responsibility. [Regarding the "crucified boy" story], I am not responsible for the fact that this news was aired. I couldn't have influenced its appearance or its dissemination. But I do feel responsible for not reacting the way an honest and responsible journalist should have reacted — to stand up and leave that room.

How hard is it to quit a state-run channel?

These decisions are rarely made with the head, they come from the heart or the stomach. Most people choose based on their stomachs — mortgages, children in music or sports clubs, elderly parents needing medication and so on. I spoke with colleagues before and right after the war — now all connections have ceased. They faced heavy burdens, waiting for pensions or other life changes. We all hoped, and no one believed war was possible.

Do you still watch Channel One, perhaps out of professional curiosity?

I haven't watched it in months, maybe half a year. Maybe I should occasionally. It's necessary to understand what's happening.

Is it possible to reach people who watch state television and show them a fuller picture of Russia?

Right now, it's nearly impossible. All media in Russia is under strict control. Alternative views are suppressed, with severe consequences for those involved — prison, restrictions, the foreign agent label and so on. Independent information can only be spread via outlets based outside Russia, with the help of VPNs. But stories still circulate [inside Russia] via social media, stories about different issues like migrant workers or the struggles of widows [of Russian soldiers]. These accounts resonate with people eventually, especially as the impact of sanctions and the militarization of industry becomes evident. I believe this shift is inevitable.

You also reflected on the role of a journalist in Russia while filming a documentary where you showed your daughter the country...

The film explores my responsibility as a journalist and mother. It's not finished yet, but we've made significant progress. We traveled to over 30 Russian cities. I deliberately chose non-touristy spots to show the unvarnished reality. What struck me was how little had changed during Putin's presidency. Everywhere, people are suffering and in need. One striking story was a wooden house with a massive Russian flag on its facade. Inside, seven or eight families lived in dire conditions, with holes in the floor and no sewage. A resident had hung the flag out of patriotism, and for me, it symbolized our country — no sewage, but plenty of pride. Pride for what?

I'd like to end on a hopeful note. Do you dream of returning to Russia?

After the war began, once my life stabilized, I wrote on a poster: "I will see a free Russia, and I will return to a free Russia." It's the first thing I see when I wake up and the last thing I see before going to sleep. So I hope to go back.

Zhanna Agalakova will speak at Women Against the Kremlin*, a groundbreaking gathering of women leaders standing against war and authoritarianism hosted by The Moscow Times in Amsterdam on Nov. 26.*

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