

## **Worldwide Threats to Media Freedom**

*Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission*

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Co-Chairman McGovern, Co-Chairman Wolf, esteemed Members of the Commission. I want to thank you for holding this important and timely hearing, and for the opportunity to present my views on the situation concerning media freedom in Russia.

Lech Wałęsa once observed that the attitude of authoritarian regimes toward independent media fits the formula: “Break the thermometer, and you won’t have fever”. For Vladimir Putin, breaking the thermometer was an early priority. On the fourth day after his inauguration in May 2000, masked gunmen from the Federal Security Service and the Prosecutor-General’s Office stormed the headquarters of Media Most, at that time Russia’s largest privately owned news media group. Its flagship was NTV, a national television channel that provided uncensored news to millions of Russian viewers. Known for its hard-hitting live political talk shows and satirical programs, NTV had fiercely criticized the Kremlin over its wars in Chechnya and government corruption. President Yeltsin used to say that when he didn’t like something on NTV, he switched off his television set. President Putin had a different approach. He decided to “switch off” NTV.

The Kremlin’s war on NTV lasted almost a year. The channel’s founder, Vladimir Gusinsky, was briefly put in prison; a part of NTV’s shares were frozen by a court order; its minority shareholder, the state-run energy giant Gazprom, moved to replace its management. Around 3 a.m. on April 14, 2001, Gazprom-installed security guards seized NTV’s offices at the Moscow Ostankino television center, taking control of the channel. Attempts by former NTV journalists to continue their work elsewhere were thwarted with remarkable efficiency. In January 2002, the Russian authorities cut off the transmission of TV6, once again using a minority shareholder as proxy. In June 2003, TVS, Russia’s last nationwide independent television station, was switched off the air by the order of then-Press Minister Mikhail Lesin. The official reason offered by the minister was “the interests of viewers”<sup>1</sup>.

For the past nine years, Russia’s national television has been a discussion-free zone. With the rarest exceptions, no opposition leaders are allowed on the air. No alternative viewpoints are offered. No criticism of the regime is permitted. During the 2007 parliamentary election campaign, the Moscow-based Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations conducted a seven-week study of the news coverage on Channel One, the principal state television station. The study found that 87 percent of coverage was

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<sup>1</sup> Минпечати заменило ТВС на «Спорт» «в интересах зрителей» (NEWSRU.com, 22.06.2003)  
Press Ministry Replaces TVS with “Sport” “in the interests of viewers” (NEWSRU.com, 06/22/2003)  
<http://www.newsru.com/russia/22jun2003/sport.html>

devoted to President Putin, his administration, his government agencies, and his United Russia party<sup>2</sup>. The two democratic opposition parties, the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko, received 1.6 percent of airtime between them<sup>3</sup>. For years, Russian television channels have had to deal with the so-called “stop-lists”: the informal lists of politicians who cannot be shown on the air. Last year, Vladimir Pozner, the leading talk show host on Channel One, publicly admitted that “there are people whom I cannot invite on my program... because these people cannot appear on federal television”<sup>4</sup>. Among them he named opposition leaders Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov<sup>5</sup>.

Russia’s print media scene is markedly more pluralistic than television. There are several publications, such as *The New Times* magazine and *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper, that continue to adhere to the best standards of independent and professional journalism. To put things in perspective, however, the total circulation of independent news publications, both national and regional, is estimated at 700,000 copies – in a country of 140 million people<sup>6</sup>.

The privately owned media outlets in Russia are by no means immune to political pressure. Just two weeks ago, Dmitri Solopov, the editor-in-chief of Kommersant FM, a talk radio station, resigned from his post, citing, among other reasons, his unwillingness to “compromise” with his conscience<sup>7</sup>. He confirmed that the owner, Alisher Usmanov, was unhappy with the station’s independent editorial policy<sup>8</sup>. In the last few weeks, I have had the opportunity to personally witness the extent of the Russian government’s influence over the media. On July 12, I was stopped at the gates of the Russian embassy in Washington and told that Ambassador Sergei Kislyak had ordered to annul my media credentials. The official explanation was that I am “no longer a journalist”<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Деятельность СМИ по информированию избирателей (Национальный центр мониторинга демократических процедур. Бюллетень № 5, 03.2008)  
The Media’s Activities in Informing Voters (National Center for the Monitoring of Democratic Procedures. Bulletin # 5, 03/2008)

<http://www.vibory.ru/Regs/GD/part-6-4.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Владимир Познер в «Разговоре без правил» (О2ТВ, 24.01.2011)  
Vladimir Pozner in “Talk without Rules” (O2TV, 01/24/2011)

<http://o2tv.ru/Владимир-Познер-в-Разговоре-Без-Правил>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> «Журналистика приобрела женское лицо и ушла в гламур» («Новые Известия», 04.06.2007)  
“Journalism has Acquired a Female Face and Descended into Glamour” (*Novye Izvestia*, 06/04/2007)

<http://www.newizv.ru/politics/2007-06-04/70352-zhurnalistika-priobrela-zhenskoe-lico-i-ushla-v-glamur.html>

<sup>7</sup> Дмитрий Солопов: Усманов действительно считал, что мы критикуем власть за его деньги (Телеканал «Дождь», 17.07.2012)

Dmitri Solopov: “Usmanov Really Thought that we are Criticizing the Authorities on his Money” (Dozhd TV, 07/17/2012)

[http://tvrain.ru/articles/dmitrij\\_solopov\\_usmanov\\_dejstvitelno\\_schital\\_chno\\_my\\_kritikuem\\_vlast\\_za\\_ego\\_dengi-328179/](http://tvrain.ru/articles/dmitrij_solopov_usmanov_dejstvitelno_schital_chno_my_kritikuem_vlast_za_ego_dengi-328179/)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Евгений Хоришко: «Господин Кара-Мурза не аккредитован при посольстве» (Slon.ru, 13.07.2012)

Yevgeny Khorishko: “Mr. Kara-Murza is not Credentialed with the Embassy” (Slon.ru, 07/13/2012)

[http://slon.ru/russia/kara\\_murza\\_mladshiy\\_govorit\\_chno\\_uvolen\\_iz\\_za\\_spisoka\\_magnitskogo-811013.xhtml](http://slon.ru/russia/kara_murza_mladshiy_govorit_chno_uvolen_iz_za_spisoka_magnitskogo-811013.xhtml)

The puzzling detail was that the ambassador's order came *before* it was publically announced that I am being dismissed from RTVi, a private television network, effective September 1. Former Russian Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov has learnt that the directive to place me on a blacklist came from Alexei Gromov, President Putin's first deputy chief of staff<sup>10</sup>. Two separate sources have confirmed the same to me. The blacklist extends not only to RTVi, but to other Russian media outlets, thus making me unemployable. This is, in effect, a *Berufsverbot* – a ban on profession.

According to the same sources, the reason for my blacklisting was the fact that I, along with other representatives of Russia's civil society, political opposition, and independent media, have been a vocal supporter of the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, a U.S. Congressional initiative which proposes to sanction corrupt Russian officials and human rights violators by denying them U.S. visas and freezing their U.S. assets. It is, in my view, a pro-Russian bill which provides a much-needed measure of accountability for those who continue to violate the rights and freedoms of Russian citizens. The Kremlin's reaction to this legislation shows that it hits them precisely where it hurts. I want to take this opportunity to thank Co-Chairmen McGovern and Wolf for their leadership on this issue. I hope the Magnitsky Act is signed into law before the end of this year.

If that is possible, the political environment in Russia is getting worse. In recent weeks, the State Duma rubberstamped a series of repressive measures aimed at the already besieged civil society. Among these measures are a 150-fold increase in fines for "violations" at public rallies; the reinstatement of "defamation" into the criminal code; and the requirement that Russian NGOs which receive funding from abroad be tagged as "foreign agents".

Yet, in spite of all this, I remain optimistic about my country's future. Television may still be censored, but it no longer matters as much. In April of this year – for the first time ever – Yandex.ru, a private Internet search engine, registered a larger audience than any of the national television channels<sup>11</sup>. According to TNS Russia research group, the gap between the total daily television audience and the number of daily Internet users has narrowed to just 900,000 (31.4 million and 30.5 million, respectively)<sup>12</sup>. It will not be long before the Internet replaces television as the principal source of information for Russian citizens. Overall, 47 percent of Russians are now online; in Moscow and St. Petersburg this figure is around 70 percent<sup>13</sup>. Thanks to the Internet and social media – and despite the silence on national TV – the news of mass fraud in last December's

<sup>10</sup> Борис Немцов: «В. Кара-Мурза-младший. Запрет на профессию» («Эхо Москвы», 13.07.2012)  
Boris Nemtsov: "V. Kara-Murza, Jr. A Ban on Profession" (Ekho Moskvu, 07/13/2012)

[http://echo.msk.ru/blog/nemtsov\\_boris/908852-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/nemtsov_boris/908852-echo/)

<sup>11</sup> Internet Shows Signs of Challenging TV for Attention (*The Moscow Times*, 05/27/ 2012)

<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/internet-shows-signs-of-challenging-tv-for-attention/459337.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Развитие интернета в регионах России (Информационный бюллетень Яндекс.ру, 03.2012)  
The Development of the Internet in Russia's Regions (Yandex.ru Information Bulletin, 03/2012)

[http://company.yandex.ru/researches/reports/internet\\_regions\\_2012.xml](http://company.yandex.ru/researches/reports/internet_regions_2012.xml)

parliamentary elections quickly spread around the country, leading to Russia's largest pro-democracy demonstrations in two decades, as tens of thousands of people came out on the streets of Moscow and other cities to demand political reforms. According to a recent survey by the Levada Center polling agency, 38 percent of the Russian population supports the pro-democracy protesters<sup>14</sup>. Young, middle-class, educated Russians are no longer willing to tolerate Mr. Putin's authoritarianism. They are tired of the lies in the official media. They are tired of being politically voiceless. They do not want to be told who will rule over them for the next six or twelve years. They want to be *citizens* in their own country. And this, in my view, is the best guarantee that, despite Mr. Putin's efforts, Russia will one day return on the path of a modern, open, democratic society.

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<sup>14</sup> Социолог Лев Гудков - об угасании протестного движения в России и перспективах его роста (Радио «Свобода», 03.05.2012)

Pollster Lev Gudkov – On the Decline of the Protest Movement in Russia, and the Prospects for its Growth (Radio Liberty, 05/03/2012)

<http://www.svobodanews.ru/content/article/24568870.html?s=1>

**Vladimir V. Kara-Murza** served as the Washington bureau chief of RTVi (Russian Television International) from 2004 to 2012. He was previously a correspondent for *Novye Izvestia* and *Kommersant* newspapers, and editor-in-chief of the *Russian Investment Review*. He has published op-eds in the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and writes a weekly blog, *Spotlight on Russia*, for *World Affairs*. In 2005, he produced *They Chose Freedom*, a television documentary on dissent in the Soviet Union. Kara-Murza is a member of the federal council of the Republican Party of Russia–People’s Freedom Party, and of *Solidarnost* (“Solidarity”), Russia’s democratic opposition movement which was instrumental in organizing mass protests after the flawed 2011 parliamentary elections. He was a candidate for the Russian parliament in 2003, representing the *Union of Right Forces* and *Yabloko* parties, and has served as campaign chairman for presidential candidate Vladimir Bukovsky (2007–08) and advisor to Duma opposition leader Boris Nemtsov (2000–03). Kara-Murza is the author of *Reform or Revolution: The Quest for Responsible Government in the First Russian State Duma* (Moscow 2011), and a contributor to *Russia’s Choices. The Duma Elections and After* (London 2003) and *Russian Liberalism: Ideas and People* (Moscow 2007). Vladimir Kara-Murza holds an M.A. degree in history from Cambridge University, England.