

# Russia's Diversity of Opinion

The usual U.S. depiction of Russian media is that all you get is Kremlin propaganda, but prime-time talk shows actually offer wider diversity of opinion and more substantive debates than what appears on American TV, says Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

I remember with a shudder an exchange I had with Elmar Brok on March 5, 2015, on *The Network*, a debate program of Euronews. Brok, a German and chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, comes from Angela Merkel's CDU party and within the Parliament is in the European People's Party bloc, on the center right, the bloc which really calls the shots in the Parliament.

Brok is big, brash and doesn't hesitate to throw his weight around, especially when talking with someone outside the Establishment whom he has no reason to fear. We were discussing the shooting of Boris Nemtsov, which occurred just days before. Brok insisted the murder was the responsibility of Vladimir Putin, not that Putin had pulled the trigger but he had created the atmosphere where such things could happen, etc., etc.

One way or another the talk shifted to the allegedly autocratic nature of the Putin "regime," with its crackdown on freedoms and, in particular, its ever tightening control of media. At that point, I objected that the Russia media were very diverse editorially, with many different points of view expressed freely.

Brok shot back that this was patently untrue, and he did not hesitate to cross all red lines and indulge in libel on air by asking how much the Kremlin paid me to say that. Apart from the obvious, that an authoritarian like MEP Brok would not know freedom of speech if he tripped on it, I think back to that exchange every week whenever I turn on Russian state television and watch one or another of the main political talk shows.

These shows are very popular with Russians and draw in audiences numbering tens of millions. The longest running is by veteran presenter Vladimir Soloviev. A competing show in this format on Pervy Kanal, the country's flagship television station, is *Special Correspondent* hosted by a journalist 20 years Soloviev's junior, Yevgeni Popov.

Now that I have just made my first appearance on Popov's program (on May 11), I can state with full confidence that my impressions as a viewer are borne out by what I experienced as a participant: respect for diversity of opinion in a

marketplace of ideas.

My landing on the program was the result of one of those chance encounters that have a core of pre-determination in them. I happened to be in the European Parliament auditorium in Brussels on April 26 – awaiting the screening of Andrei Nekrasov's film on Bill Browder and the manufactured myth of Sergei Magnitsky's murder – when Yevgeni and his Russian cameraman looked around the nearly empty room to find someone to comment on the film's last-minute cancellation. They settled on me, I delivered the needed sound bite and we made contact.

My later article on the Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra concert in Palmyra, Syria, on May 5 was published at Consortiumnews, Russia Insider and other portals that Yevgeni's staff monitor. So, when they had a talk show devoted to terrorism, the Islamic State and Western press reaction to the Mariinsky concert, I was identified as a welcome new face and got an email inviting me to their Moscow studio to join the "regulars" on *Special Correspondent*.

### **Talk Show Regulars**

The regulars on these talk shows are a mix of Russians and foreigners, pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin voices. There inevitably is at least one American who can be counted on to purvey the Washington Narrative. A reliable regular in this category has been Michael Bohm, who was for a long time the op-ed manager at *The Moscow Times* and now is said to be teaching journalism in Moscow. On May 11, Bohm's place was kept warm by another upstanding neocon, the bureau chief of *The New York Post*.

Then there is an Israeli regular who delivers the Netanyahu perspective on events. And you can be sure to see a Pole or Ukrainian who will spice up any discussion about the Maidan protests and the current regime in Kiev.

From among Russians, the talk show hosts bring in one or more representatives of opposition parties. On May 11, it happened to be a personality from the Yabloko Party (Liberals). But at other times there will be the leader of the Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov, the founder of the right nationalist LDPR, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, or the leader of the social democratic party, Just Russia, Sergei Mironov. They all get their time on air in these shows.

For the pro-Kremlin position on May 11, we had a member of the Russian federal Security Council, a professor of television journalism from Moscow State University, a very loyal Vesti journalist and someone from a Moscow think tank.

There are those who will object that the anti-Kremlin foreigners who are invited time and again to speak out in the Russian political talk shows are selected precisely because they are so outrageous and/or appear so dim-witted that they

serve the purposes of the official party line. There is some truth to this, although to rise to the level of self-caricature of Michael Bohm still takes extraordinary linguistic skills, which no doubt escapes the attention of Russian viewers.

But the Russian opposition leaders who are invited on air are a totally different story. They are shrewd observers of the Russian political system with deep resources of insider experience and analytical skills. With the Russian opposition voices, other factors are operative.

Firstly, their criticism of the Kremlin these days is almost exclusively on domestic policy; like the population in general, the opposition leaders who appear on state television have rallied around the flag in the face of economic warfare and information warfare deemed to be initiated by the West. Secondly, they are nearly all representatives of parties with seats in the Duma. The so-called "non-systemic" opposition figures, who could not pass the five-percent barrier of electoral support to enter the legislature, receive no or very limited airtime on the talk shows.

From the standpoint of the authorities, these sometimes odious personalities will not be allowed to disseminate seditious views on state television. For instance, Mikhail Kasyanov, head of the Parnas party or movement where he shared power with Boris Nemtsov, has spent too much time paying court to the anti-Russian bloc of Guy Verhostadt in the European Parliament or visiting the Arizona home of Sen. John McCain in support of anti-Russian sanctions. Alexei Navalny effectively called for violent overthrow of the regime when he fired up the crowds on Bolotnaya Square on Dec. 5, 2011. It is hard to imagine any country where the authorities would hand them the microphone, least of all on prime time.

### **Into the Arena**

The Russians are great fans of boxing or wrestling matches without rules, where almost anything goes. And the talk shows are often a free-for-all, especially if there is no particularly important politician among the panelists. In this spirit, each of us received a round of applause from the live audience as we entered the studio, like so many Roman gladiators on their way into the Coliseum.

But the presenter does keep order, and not just to ensure the breaks for advertising are respected. In this way, I was assured before we went on air that I did not have to shout down the regulars to be heard, as they often do among themselves, but would be given the mike when I indicated I wanted to jump in.

I jumped in three times during the program, at greatest length when the discussion finally turned on what I had researched and wanted to share: my take on the Western media coverage of the Mariinsky's concert in Palmyra.

Yevgeni Popov knew very well that what I was about to say was 180 degrees at variance with what he had said about this coverage in a broadcast several days earlier. His position was that the world at large viewed the Russian cultural mission to Palmyra with great sympathy. My position was and still is that the immediate PR return from Russia bringing 100 foreign journalists to the concert was very meager and largely negative.

To this I added that it is much too early to draw conclusions because Western media were similarly negative initially following Valery Gergiev's concert in South Ossetia in August 2008 at the conclusion of the Russian-Georgian war, but that within six months the views changed in the West completely in Gergiev's favor.

Popov let me have my say to the end, holding the others back. There was no question for me that his objective was to challenge his audience, not to coddle them. How nice it would be if U.S. prime-time television allowed similar rough-and-tumble – yet substantive – debates on foreign policy towards Russia and the rest of the world.

**Gilbert Doctorow is the European Coordinator of The American Committee for East West Accord Ltd. His most recent book, *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015. © Gilbert Doctorow, 2016**

---

## Refugees from 'Endless' War

Policymakers in Official Washington talk piously about waging "humanitarian" wars, but the real-life consequences of these interventions play out in squalid refugee camps far from U.S. shores, as Ann Wright witnessed.

By Ann Wright

"If you don't like refugees coming to your country, stop voting for politicians who love to bomb the shit out of them." Our delegation from CODEPINK: Women for Peace saw this written on a tent at the Idomeni refugee camp in on the Greek-Macedonian border.

As we well know, neither the Greek nor Macedonian governments have bombed people, but they are having to deal with the huge numbers of refugees caused by

the decisions of government far away. However, in a U.S. presidential election year, it is a message that American voters should heed.

The Obama administration, which inherited the chaos from the 2003 Iraq war from the Bush administration but which has been bombing ISIS in urban areas in Iraq and Syria, has resettled only 1,736 Syrian refugees over the last seven months – despite President Obama’s pledge to resettle at least 10,000 Syrians by September 2016.

In contrast, Canada has resettled more than 26,000 Syrian refugees since late 2015, while Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have together taken in millions of Syrian refugees since the conflict began five years ago.

In early May, we had flown from Athens to Thessaloniki, Greece’s second largest city, and then had driven one hour north to the Greek border with Macedonia. The name of the tiny hamlet of Idomeni has become synonymous with the largest refugee camp in Greece.

As we arrived, a tremendous thunder, lightning and hailstorm hit the area ripping down tents, making mud pools and deluging tents and the clothing and bedding inside. We saw the worst conditions (except cold and snow) that the 13,000 refugees must endure in five camps within four miles of the Macedonian border.

All five are “informal, unofficial” camps and refugees can come and go at will. They have refused any attempt to put them into the formal “detention” camps that place them in isolated areas and restrict their movement within Greece.

As a result, the services provided are not particularly well organized although all have limited porta-potties, showers and faucets for washing clothes. All have basic food provided primarily by volunteers, non-governmental organizations and the Greek military (in only one camp).

The first camp one comes upon on Highway 75 heading north from Thessaloniki is at the gasoline station and rest stop called EK0. Over 2,000 persons are camping in the large parking lot, grocery store and car wash.

Save the Children provides rice porridge and oranges daily for children under 11 years of age and estimates there are over 1,000 children. We helped hand out the porridge by going tent by tent and asking how many children of that age group were in the household (tenthold).

Save the Children coordinators told us that they liked having the daily contact with people in their living space rather than having people stand in another

long line. We were greeted with a warm smile and a thank-you by every mother to whom we delivered the porridge.

### **International Efforts**

The Boat Refugee Foundation of the Netherlands has a number of volunteers that help with the porridge delivery, young women and men from the Netherlands, Ireland, Sweden and the UK.

At EKO camp, we met a distinguished man who told us he was a mathematics teacher in a small village outside of Damascus, Syria. He and his 13-year-old daughter made the trip from Syria, through Turkey, by boat to Samos, ferry boat to Piraeus, train from Athens to Thessaloniki and taxi to EKO camp. He had been at the camp for one month and three weeks. He left his wife and 17-year-old daughter behind in Syria

Leaving EKO camp, we stopped at the Park Hotel on the outskirts of the village of Polikastro where the volunteer headquarters is located. Each night at 8 p.m., experienced volunteers provide an orientation for new volunteers and update everyone with the day's happenings.

In the back of the Park Hotel is the kitchen of Hot Food Idomeni, a group of volunteers that cook basic meals of staples such as rice, beans and curry in large vats for 5,000 persons each day. Paul of the United Kingdom heads up the volunteer force of 45 persons.

Two shifts of 15 people prepare the meals and two groups of another 15 load up the food, drive the food to the camps and distribute it. Paul said that they are spending about \$2,000 per day for food and transporting the food for 5,000.

The Greek military feeds one of the other camps and has called on Hot Food Idomeni to help them when their food ran out. Hot Food Idomeni is a remarkable place to work as a volunteer and it's a great organization to send donations as their work is definitely keeping people alive.

After the Park Hotel, we stopped at the 500 person camp called Lidl, named for a nearby merchandise store. Most persons live in white tents provided by the Greek military. The tents are in long military precision lines next to a small runway. The military does not let new volunteers into the camp, only those affiliated with organizations.

Next we visited the Hara camp, named for a gasoline rest stop and nearby hotel. Five hundred persons are camped around the gasoline station area. Norway's Northern Lights Aid group is nominally "in charge" of the camp and provided tents, coordinates clothes distribution and has a sundry item

purchase for refugees.

Charlie and Henry formed Northern Lights after they worked for months on Lesbos and when volunteers were displaced by the detention center staff, they came to the Macedonian border to help with refugees there. Hara, a much smaller camp, has a much different atmosphere because of the attention given by Northern Lights volunteers, including four from Poland and the Czech Republic when we were there. They had much to do with a more positive environment.

### **A Sprawling Camp**

Idomeni is a sprawling camp within 500 meters of the Macedonian border and has around 10,000 persons. One Doctors without Borders (MSF) staff told us that no one knows the exact number as refugees are coming and leaving at will.

The camp has been open as a stop for refugees who were able to cross into Macedonia prior to March 22 and go into Europe. Now those in the camp are stuck. They must remain in the camp until a decision is made on their individual cases. Some have been in the camp for nine weeks.

Greek police have two large buses that block the railroad tracks between the camp and the border. Many of the refugees have placed their tents on the railway line. Others have their tents in the fields which became mud pits with the heavy rain that we witnessed on the day we arrived. Parents were cleaning out the tents of mud and rain that had poured in, hanging up clothes, blankets, and sleeping bags on the fences along the railroad track.

Not everyone is sleeping in small tents. Two large UNHCR temporary tent buildings have approximately 100 bunks in them arranged much like the overcrowded prisons in the U.S. People make privacy areas from the blankets hanging down from the upper bunks.

Four dinner lines began forming in the late afternoon. The four feeding locations had hundreds of people lined up for simple meals of beans and rice, and a couscous type meal.

As with any refugee camp, industrious sellers have begun. Some had small amounts of coffee, powdered milk, crackers, eggs for sale. Those who had purchased food were cooking it over wood fires from trees they were chopping down, not an enduring move to local residents in the area.

Millions of refugees await their fate and future in Greece, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan as the international community slowly decides how to handle the flood of people fleeing chaos in their countries caused by military operations. Millions of others hope that their arrival in Europe will provide them an opportunity for

a life without conflict until they can return home.

**Ann Wright served 29 years in the US Army/Army Reserves and retired as a Colonel. She served as a US diplomat for 16 years in US Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned from the US government in March 2003 in opposition to President Bush's war on Iraq. She is the co-author of "Dissent: Voices of Conscience."**

---