

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.

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