

THE CHANGES IN SOVIET TELEVISION IN THE YEARS OF GORBACHEV'S REFORMS

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Summary

This study intends to analyze the political, social and cultural role of Soviet television in the years of Mikhail Gorbachev. The author investigates the new television programs, their contents and the new Soviet legislation around the media in order to obtain information on the socio-political impact that the television medium has played in the historical events that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

This text, which briefly reviews the new television programs that arose after the start of glasnost and generally analyzes the «new way of doing TV» of those years, is intended to be an introduction to the study of late Soviet television. In fact, as demonstrated in the article, television played a leading role in the intricate events that led to the collapse of the Soviet empire, from a cultural, political and legislative point of view.

Keywords: *Glasnost, Soviet television, Vremya, Telemost, Vzglyad, Media Law, January Events.*

1. *Brief history of television in the Soviet Union*

The development of television in the Soviet Union began, as in the United States and Western Europe, in the 1930s. The first regular service began on March 10, 1939. It included just a hundred television stations in the Moscow region and broadcast images of the opening of the 18th CPSU Congress.¹

The importance of television as a tool for broadcasting, indoctrination, and propaganda was immediately understood by the Soviet leadership, so much so that in the first Five-Year Plan in the aftermath of World War II the expansion of the television apparatus was described as a top priority. The Soviet Union consisted of fifteen republics and contained more than a hundred different nationalities within it; television was seen as the means to unite the various nationalities into one united socialist state.

In 1950 there were 10,000 televisions throughout the Soviet Union, but only ten years later there were already nearly five million.² In 1967 color broadcasting began in Moscow and Leningrad, thanks to the use of the SECAM system, jointly developed by French and Soviet technicians.

In the 1940s and 1950s, television programs were broadcast locally, as the available technology did not yet allow for simultaneous broadcasting throughout the vast Union.³

The Brezhnev era is when Soviet television reached its highest rate of growth and development. In 1970, a much more centralized television programming system was established by decree; from this time, every city or regional television studio anywhere in the Union had to submit to direct orders from Moscow. 1973 was the year of the reorganization of the «State Committee of Television and Radio Broadcasting», known by its acronym *Gosteleradio*, the main state body overseeing all television and radio broadcasting in the Soviet Union.⁴

¹ BRIAN MCNAIR, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet media*, London-New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 40.

² ELLEN MICKIEWICZ, *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union (Communication & Society)*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 3.

³ MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law in the Soviet Union*, Digital Commons LMU and LLS, Loyola of Los Angeles Entertainment Law Review, 1991, p. 298.

⁴ *Gosteleradio* had been created as early as 1967 with the function of organizing state propaganda. In 1973 it was reorganized to give absolute importance to the television medium.

The first national television network began operating in 1960 and was called *Pervaya Programma* (literally «First Program», but translatable as «First Channel»). *Pervaya Programma* was the first network to operate throughout the Union and it was forbidden for local television stations to interfere in any way with its programming, which was determined by Moscow.⁵

In 1967 in the Ostankino Television Technical Center, on the outskirts of Moscow, the construction of the famous Ostankino Tower was completed. The 540-meter-high tower is still the center of Russian broadcasting.

The second national television network arrived in 1982 and was named *Vtoraya Programma* («Second Channel»): on this channel, local networks had greater freedom to intervene and include regional programs.⁶ Meanwhile, *Tretya Programma* («Third Channel») and *Chetvertaya Programma* («Fourth Channel») had been launched in Moscow in 1962 and 1967, with the stated aim of being «educational channels» but in fact educating official Communist Party propaganda.⁷

During the Brezhnev years, the function of Soviet TV was purely propagandistic: all content was directly controlled from above, there was little entertainment and much politics glorifying the state and the General Secretary. A popular joke in those years read:

A viewer turns on the TV and finds, on the first channel, Brezhnev giving a long speech. He switches to the second channel: again, Brezhnev still buzzing. On the third channel, a uniformed officer points a gun at the viewer and orders: Comrade, go back to the first channel!⁸

The main Soviet newscast, *Vremya* («Time»), began airing on January 1, 1968, and, except for an interruption between 1991 and 1994, has continued to be broadcast to the present day. Until just before the advent of Gorbachev, rather than a Western-style newscast, *Vremya* was a veritable bulletin of the Soviet government; all news that did not glorify the communist government was omitted and the capitalist West was frequently portrayed negatively.

⁵ MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, p. 300.

⁶ ELLEN MICKIEWICZ, *Split Signals...*, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁸ HEDRICK SMITH, *The New Russians*, New York, Random House, 1990, p. 162.

Vremya lasted approximately thirty minutes and aired on both national channels simultaneously at nine o'clock in the evening, with a repeat the next morning; it was broadcast throughout the Union and for years was the most powerful medium of Soviet propaganda. According to a study by Gosteleradio, in 1985 90% of the Soviet population considered *Vremya* their main source of information.⁹ The structure of the newscast was very strict: it always began with news from within the Union (omitting any negative news such as clashes, famine or natural disasters); then it went on to list the achievements of socialism in industry and agriculture and finally the last part was devoted to international news, sports and weather forecasts.¹⁰

The rise of Gorbachev and his reforms completely revolutionized the way television was done in the Soviet Union. According to many observers, the television itself was the driving force behind glasnost and was a pioneer in breaking many of the taboos that had constrained Soviet media for decades.¹¹

2. *The years of Gorbachev and «Prozhektor Perestroiki»*

As early as December 1985 Gorbachev decided to retire Sergey Lapin, head of Gosteleradio since 1970, and replace him with Aleksandr Aksenov, former Premier of the Belarusian RSS.

With the implementation of glasnost, within a few months, Soviet television became unrecognizable; tight top-down control was dispensed with and a wealth of new television programs were born, embodying what was undoubtedly the most radical part of liberalization. The new programs were numerous, but the most important and revolutionary was probably *Prozhektor perestroiki* («Прожектор перестройки», translatable as *Spotlight on Perestroika*).¹²

⁹ ELLEN MICKIEWICZ, *Split Signals...*, p. 32.

¹⁰ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin*, London, Routledge, 2017, p. 132.

¹¹ MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, p. 294.

¹² To directly view the television material to write this article, the Gosteleradio archive was used (I refer to the official YouTube Channel of the Gosteleradio Archive: «Советское телевидение. ГОСТЕЛЕРАДИОФОНД», <https://www.youtube.com/c/gtrftv/featured>). The Archive is completely free and open access; it contains nearly twenty thousand videos of countless Soviet television programs, including precisely *Prozhektor perestroiki*. The channel has more than three million subscribers and more than one billion views; it is an invaluable source for anyone who wants to study the history of Soviet television.

Prozhektor perestroiki was launched on August 3, 1987, and was intended to air immediately after *Vremya*, as an afterword that would add ten to fifteen minutes to the news program. As the name suggests, the purpose of the program was to investigate how the implementation of reforms was progressing, often going into the streets to interview ordinary citizens for real and honest opinions. The program immediately became very popular, as for the first time Soviet citizens felt they were at the center of something, for the first time their opinions were not only heard by someone, but even discussed on television.

The daily *Izvestia* wrote: «It is hard to recall another Central Television program that arouses such great interest», as Aleksandr Krutov, the historic presenter of *Prozhektor perestroiki*, recalled in the magazine *Russkii Dom* («Russian Home») of which he is still editor-in-chief.¹³

The program was conceived by Leonid Kravchenko, deputy chairman of Gosteleradio from 1985 to 1988 and then chairman from 1990 to 1991) and the Alexander Yakovlev, a close collaborator of Gorbachev who was called the «architect of perestroika».¹⁴ In his autobiography¹⁵ Kravchenko recounts a number of episodes in which *Prozhektor perestroiki* succeeded in solving important problems for citizens literally in a matter of hours; problems that in the Soviet Union of previous years would probably have lasted weeks or months.

For example once, Kravchenko recalls, trucks delivering fruits and vegetables blocked traffic near Ostankino, demanding a meeting with Russian television executives. Kravchenko went in person to talk to the truckers and discovered that some vegetable warehouses had been demanding bribes for about a week and were not allowing drivers to unload tons of produce. The truckers asked Kravchenko to organize an episode of *Prozhektor perestroiki* right then and there to bring this issue to the attention of the public. Kravchenko agreed, but while he was arranging it, he received a phone call from Viktor Grishin, an important member of the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee and historic First Secretary of the Moscow City Committee. Grishin had already heard the news and wanted to prevent the issue from being aired in prime time on one of the most watched programs in the

¹³ ALEKSANDR KRUTOV, *O žizni, o sebe* («On Life, On Myself»), *Russkii Dom*, <http://www.russdom.ru/node/27>.

¹⁴ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 117.

¹⁵ LEONID KRAVCHENKO, *Kak ya byl televizionnym kamikadze*, «Как я был телевизионным камикадзе», Moscow, AiF Print, 2005. The book is published only in Russian.

country. «Comrade Kravchenko», Grishin said sternly over the phone, «I have ordered that all these trucks be unloaded immediately at the nearest vegetable stores. In two hours the problem will be solved. The blackmailing bureaucrats will be punished severely. But please, let us dispense with *Prozhektor perestroiki*». The program still aired showing the truck drivers, but it was also shown how Grishin quickly solved the problem.

This is only one of a great many examples that could be given to demonstrate the importance of a television program such as *Prozhektor perestroiki*, which was created to analyze change and became its driving force and stimulus.

Another issue that was investigated by the show was the widespread scarcity of newspapers in the Soviet Union.¹⁶ As reforms and unprecedented freedom of speech were consolidated, demand for newspapers and magazines increased exponentially, far outstripping a supply caught unprepared. Many citizens accused the authority of artificially creating this shortage of newspapers, in order to limit the circulation of the excessively radical new publications; *Prozhektor perestroiki* thus decided to investigate the matter.

A reporter from the tv program went to a Moscow newsstand at six in the morning; there was already a long line of people waiting to buy a copy of a newspaper. The vendor stated to the broadcast microphones that usually by eight o'clock in the morning he had already sold all the newspapers. After showing the problem, following the usual procedure of investigation, *Prozhektor perestroiki* journalists would go and ask for explanations from those in charge, pointing out the issue. In this case they went to the chairman of the Goskomizdat¹⁷ Mikhail Fedorovich Nenashev. From the interview with Nenashev it turned out that the real problem behind the lack of newspapers was the technological backwardness of the printing industry. «We have about 79,000 printing presses, 46 percent of which are fifteen years old», Nenashev told the microphones of *Prozhektor perestroiki*, «the technology installed fifteen or twenty years ago is obsolete and requires complete replacement. But the saddest thing of all is that nowhere in this country do we produce this equipment».¹⁸

¹⁶ *Prozhektor perestroiki*, March 1, 1988.

¹⁷ Государственный комитет Совета министров СССР по делам издательств, полиграфии и книжной торговли (State Committee of the USSR Council of Ministers for Publishing, Printing and Book Trade).

¹⁸ BRIAN MCNAIR, *Glasnost...*, p. 49.

The fact that a television program could freely investigate the problems of ordinary citizens and go to the officials dealing with them and hold them to account, urging speedy and functional solutions, was already something revolutionary in the Soviet Union.

3. *Case study: the Chernobyl disaster (analysis of the spreading of the news)*

Glasnost, little more than a month after its launch, was tremendously tested and suffered an immediate setback.

On the night of April 26, 1986, not even two months after the end of the XXVIIth Congress of the CPSU in which Gorbachev had officially initiated reforms, the fourth reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in RSS Ukraine, about 100km north of Kiev, failed causing the largest accident in the history of civilian nuclear power. What caused the disaster was a fatal interaction between a series of human errors and distractions and outdated technology dating back to the postwar period.¹⁹

Faced with this first and sudden test, the young glasnost gave way to the old culture of secrecy. The Politburo met in an extraordinary session. Yakovlev, who advocated fully informing the public, stated later that general bewilderment reigned in the meeting and «no one knew what to do».²⁰ Some information soon leaked out from the Western media. Sweden was the first to raise the alarm, reporting an abnormal radiation spike; the news spread throughout Western Europe but, in the absence of an official statement from the Soviet government, no one knew what had really happened.

For two days no Soviet media said anything about it, until the April 28 evening edition of *Vremya* announced, as the seventh news item and using just five sentences: «An accident has occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. One of the nuclear reactors has been damaged. Measures are being taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Help is being brought to the victims. A government commission has been established».²¹ Few words, no pictures, little importance: that was how Soviet television announced the disaster.²²

¹⁹ ANDREA GRAZIOSI, *L'Urss dal trionfo al degrado. Storia dell'Unione Sovietica, 1945-1991*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011, p. 528 and HANS MODROW, *La perestrojka e la fine della DDR*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2019, p. 44.

²⁰ ANDREA GRAZIOSI, *L'Urss dal trionfo al degrado...*, p. 528.

²¹ *Vremya*, April 28, 1986.

²² ELLEN MICKIEWICZ, *Split Signals...*, p. 61.

Although made in such a frugal manner, the announcement of the Chernobyl accident was nonetheless a novelty for a journalism accustomed to completely omitting any negative news, and those five sentences delivered with indifference represented an initial breach in Soviet public information.²³ It was not until May 14, eighteen days after the disaster, that Gorbachev spoke to the nation, although much of the speech consisted of accusing the United States and the West of exaggerating the gravity of the situation in their media for anti-Soviet propaganda purposes.²⁴

To compare how the news was treated in the early days in the Soviet Union and in the West, it's useful and interesting to compare the Soviet news program *Vremya* with the Italian *TGI*²⁵ and the American *ABC News*.²⁶

It has been said how *Vremya* announced the news of the accident on the evening of April 28: in an atonal, anonymous voice, with a note of indifference and that superficial swiftness with which news of little consequence is usually reported. Instead, the Italian newscast opened with the following words: «The aftermath of the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union almost totally focuses the world's attention». It seems impossible that they were referring to the same event described so unimportantly by the Soviet news program. «It is a situation that is in many ways out of control», the Italian journalist continues, «especially because of this extreme scarcity of information provided by the Soviet authorities, with an attitude described as irresponsible by several countries». So, in Italy as in other countries aligned with the Atlantic bloc, the news was given marking the seriousness of the incident and blaming the Soviet government for the lack of comprehensive coverage of the news.

The American *ABC News* on April 28 opened with the following sentence: «A nuclear accident has occurred in the Soviet Union, and the Soviets have admitted that it happened». The Americans with this ironic-tinged opener wanted to announce that there were two important pieces of news: it was not only the accident itself that was news, but also the fact that the

²³ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 118.

²⁴ The *Vremya* episode can be viewed in Russian and in its entirety in the *GOSTELERADIOFOND* archive at the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Fe6f5poNOQ>. Instead, to see a cut and dubbed version in English, which aired on the U.S. *NBC News*, can be viewed at the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0k3wnXBE5S0>.

²⁵ 1986 *TGI* episode about Chernobyl <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLL8ZpeGV5s>.

²⁶ *ABC News*, April 28, 1986 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmeeEpWxfRY>.

Soviets had mentioned it on *Vremya*. Subsequently, a translation of the Soviet version of events was reported by the presenter, and then insinuated that the Soviets had been so «quick» to report the news only because the exponential increase in radiation had been immediately recorded by some Scandinavian countries.

After showing some pictures, the American news program, in the full spirit of Cold War competition, proceeded to point out the difference between American and Soviet nuclear technology:

Most large Soviet plants are different in design from U.S. reactors. The main difference is that most Soviet nuclear plants do not have containment buildings (the thick concrete dome structure that Americans are used to seeing built around reactors). When the worst U.S. nuclear accident occurred at Three Mile Island, most of the radiation was retained within the containment building, unlike this Soviet accident where radiation was measured from six hundred to a thousand miles away.²⁷

At the conclusion of the report, it was remarked once again that if the Soviets themselves had spoken about it, it meant that the accident had been definitely serious: «Sources in Washington speculate that the accident at Chernobyl must have been very serious, otherwise the Soviets would never have acknowledged it».

ABC News also reported on Gorbachev's May 14 speech.²⁸ Again, the news report opened with a provocative sentence: «It took a full eighteen days for Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to make a public statement on the Chernobyl nuclear disaster», and again a few seconds later, «It undoubtedly took a long time for Mr. Gorbachev to speak publicly about it». Later the U.S. news program reported about two minutes of Gorbachev's speech, dubbed into English by the commentator, and then concluded the report with yet another sentence with ironic-provocative overtones: «It was a speech designed to calm Soviet fears and end Western doubts about this country's [the Soviet Union's] ability to cope with a national disaster, but since the Kremlin leadership has taken more than two weeks to deal with the problem, it may be a long time before these two goals can be achieved».²⁹

²⁷ See note 36, minutes 2:32 - 3:00.

²⁸ *ABC News*, May 14, 1986, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0k3wnXBE5S0>.

²⁹ See note 28, minutes 2:51 - 3:07.

From the analysis of how these three news outlets reported information about the nuclear disaster, some conclusions can be drawn. The first is that in 1986 the political climate of the Cold War had far from waned; even in reporting tragic news like this, both superpowers indulged in more or less explicit attacks, accusations, and provocations. The second observation we can make is that, among the three, the most unbiased and balanced news program was undoubtedly the Italian one. *TGI* put the news and its consequences first and never directly attacked the Soviet Union, vaguely stating that the Kremlin's behavior was deemed irresponsible «by various countries».

Finally, it is important to note that despite the slowness and the difficulties, the mere fact that the disaster was reported by *Vremya* and addressed directly by the General Secretary was a huge step forward for Soviet information compared to previous decades. Chernobyl was undoubtedly a watershed for Soviet media.³⁰ Glasnost, a policy of openness and transparency that was being pioneered for the first time in those very months, suddenly found itself at the center of world attention. Chernobyl was the final blow that opened the breach in the Soviet media's wall of silence, media that would become unrecognizable within a few months.

4. *Radical glasnost and new unfiltered TV shows*

As glasnost spread, more and more innovative programs made their appearance on Soviet television. In addition to the already mentioned *Prozhektor perestroiki*, other important programs worth mentioning were *Dvenadsatyi etazh* («Двенадцатый этаж», Twelfth Floor), *Do i posle polunochi* («До и после полуночи», Before and After Midnight), *Pyatoe koleso* («Пятое колесо», literally The Fifth Wheel, but translatable as The Spare Wheel), *600 sekund* («600 секунд», 600 seconds) and the all-important *Vzglyad* («Взгляд», translatable as Look, Vision, Perspective, but also Point of View).

One of the earliest shows, aired as early as 1985, was *Dvenadsatyi etazh*, a program designed for the younger generation and named so precisely because the «General Editorial Office of Youth Programs»³¹ of the Central Television of the Soviet Union was located on the twelfth floor of the Television Center. The purpose of *Dvenadsatyi etazh* was to put

³⁰ ELLEN MICKIEWICZ, *Split Signals...*, p. 64.

³¹ Главная редакция программ для молодежи (Glavnaya redaktsiya programm dlya molodezhi).

the very young in direct contact with senior officials and public figures in Soviet politics. The presenter, Eduard Sagalaev, arranged the youth and the officials in two different rooms, joined by a satellite link. In fact, Sagalaev argued that arranging all the guests in the studio face to face would somehow inhibit the young people who would not feel free to fully express their thoughts; and he was probably right: proceeding in this manner often resulted in heated and intense generational clashes.

On May 23, 1987, *Pravda* wrote: «Central Television's programs for young people have recently gained particular popularity... The programs *Mir i molodezh* and *Dvenadtsati etazh* demonstrate an understanding of the great social challenges facing young people, help form in viewers a sense of responsibility for the Motherland, for its great history and culture». ³²

In March 1987, began the airing of *Do i posle polunochi*, a show created by Vladimir Molchanov that achieved immediate great success. The purpose of this program was the infotainment, a combination of information and entertainment. ³³ The show, in its opening theme song, called itself «informacionno-muzykal'noj», or informational-musical; in fact, Molchanov tried to combine interviews, news and politics with live youth music entertainment, and again, as in Sagalaev's show, the experiment was very successful. ³⁴

The program aired once a month, in the night between Saturday and Sunday, and was the stage for the live performance of many songs previously banned by Soviet censorship. In an interview with *Novaya Gazeta* in 2000, Molchanov explained why *Do i posle polunochi* was so successful:

When we went on the air for the first time on the night of March 7-8, 1987, we were the only ones. There was not a single program on Soviet television, with the exception of *Vremya*, which was broadcast live. And there was not a single program that talked about what we were talking about. Basically, it was easy for us. Since nothing else was being offered to the viewer, the whole country watched us. Then we realized that since we were the only ones, we had a chance to say what we wanted, what had

³² *Pravda*, May 23, 1987.

³³ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 135.

³⁴ To watch episodes of *Do i posle polunochi*, one can consult the aforementioned *GOSTELERADIOFOND* and search (in cyrillic) for «До и после полуночи».

never been said on Soviet television.³⁵

To understand the extraordinary novelty of the topics covered by these new shows, we can take as an example the May 6, 1987 episode of *Do i posle polunochi*. The evening's topics were: the rehabilitation of Igor Severyanin, a futurist poet of the 1920s; an account of the Cannes Film Festival; a music video by the Soviet heavy-metal group Ariya; an interview with Grace Kennan, an American journalist and daughter of the George Kennan who had devised the «policy of containmen» toward the USSR at the dawn of the Cold War; an interview with Archbishop Pitirim about the availability of Bibles in the Union; and a debate with sociologist Igor Bestuzhev-Lada about Russian youth and their uncritical imitation of Western fashion.³⁶ Just two or three years earlier, all these topics would have been huge taboos and would never have been treated with such freedom on public television.

Before talking about *Vzglyad*, which according to some historians was the most-watched television show ever in the Soviet Union,³⁷ I think it appropriate to mention two regional programs, produced by Leningrad television.

Pyatoe koleso was a program created by the intelligentsia for the intelligentsia, conceived and presented by Bella Kurkova; it aired twice a week with very long episodes reaching up to three hours. Launched on April 11, 1988, it did not enjoy immediate popularity, but slowly managed to win an important segment of the audience, an intellectual audience interested in the historical, political, and cultural debates and interviews with writers and thinkers that the program offered.

The title, «The Fifth Wheel», was meant ironically to indicate its own superfluous nature, as the purpose of the program was to tell stories about people and ideals that had been considered superfluous by Soviet ideology;³⁸ not surprisingly, *Pyatoe koleso* was very successful even after the collapse of the Union, continuing to air until 1996.

³⁵ *Novaya Gazeta*, March 6, 2000 «Vladimir Molchanov: Diktatura v Rossii vozmozhna vseгда» («Владимир Молчанов: Диктатура в России возможна всегда»), the entire interview can be found at the following link: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2000/03/06/9543-vladimir-molchanov-diktatura-v-rossii-vozmozhna-vsegda>.

³⁶ *Do i posle polunochi*, May 6, 1987.

³⁷ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 136.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

Another fortunate Leningrad television program was *600 sekund*, conceived and presented by Aleksandr Nevzorov. This show was very different from *Pyatoe koleso*; it was fast-paced and humorous and depicted the hidden life of Leningrad without filters. It seemed that *600 sekund* was designed as a parody of *Vremya*, having quick speeches, no protocol, and reporting only bad news. The host, Nevzorov, was also very different from typical Soviet news presenters: he wore a leather jacket and always had a wry, provocative smile plastered on his face. The program lasted, as the title implies, 600 seconds, ten minutes, and behind Nevzorov reporting the news was a television set on which a countdown from 600 to 0 was shown; the program played precisely on Nevzorov's race against time, who had to announce all the news before the 600 seconds expired.

The show soon became very popular, although it received some criticism for showing only negative, often gory news, but Nevzorov defended himself by claiming that he was reporting the unvarnished truth, not making anything up. Nevzorov made this bleak and violent reality his strong point, placing his program in that tradition of «magic realism» that characterized the Petersburg stories of Gogol and Dostoevsky; Nevzorov, in fact, referred to the humble citizens of Leningrad's dark corners in the Dostoevskian terms of «humiliated and insulted».³⁹

However, the most controversial and most famous show, which twisted Soviet citizens' perception of television, was *Vzglyad*.

Vzglyad was probably the television symbol of perestroika, and its impact on the politics and society of the time was incalculable.⁴⁰ The show aired, live, every Friday night starting at 11 p.m., continuing without a lineup and ending freely often well past midnight.

The first episode was broadcast on October 2, 1987⁴¹ and immediately the program described itself as «a weekly informative-musical-entertainment show for young people», later proving to be a huge success even among the less young. The show, which aired until 2001, had numerous hosts, but the first three, the most important and those who went down in history, were Vladislav List'ev, Dmitry Zakharov, and Aleksandr Ly-

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 139.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 136.

⁴¹ The first episode of *Vzglyad* can be viewed in its entirety on *GOSTELERADIOFOND* at the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWPcU0rn4w8>.

ubimov.⁴² The three young presenters deliberately showed themselves as very unprofessional, dressed in Western-style t-shirts and jeans, wanting to mark the difference between them and old-fashioned television programs. Each of the three embodied a different personality: List'ev was the one who was always quiet and relaxed, Zakharov the serious one, and Lyubimov the outgoing and pop music expert.⁴³

The name of the show, *Vzglyad*, can be translated as «point of view», and this was precisely to signify, in the full spirit of perestroika, that the one brought by the program was only one point of view among many possible ones. *Vzglyad* was thus doing *infotainment* similar to *Do i posle polunochi* although, unlike Molchanov's show, it was less serious and much more mischievous in dealing with amusing scoops that often concerned Party officials or bureaucrats.⁴⁴ The two shows were often compared as the two symbols of perestroika television. Yevgeny Dodolev, one of the other presenters of *Vzglyad*, stated in a 2011 interview:

During the same period Vladimir Molchanov's show *Do i posle polunochi* was broadcast, an order of magnitude higher in terms of quality of content and conduct. It came out once a month, the time of the show (before and after midnight) was not the best... But *Vzglyad* had a one-to-four advantage! [Dodolev refers to the fact that *Do i posle polunochi* aired once a month, while *Vzglyad* once a week] So the show became, as they say now, a cult...⁴⁵

Vzglyad brought prime-time content that was often shocking to audiences; for example, it was the first program to talk about Soviet prisoners in Afghanistan, and it caused great scandal the April 21, 1989, episode in which Mark Zakharov, director of the Lenkom Theater in Moscow, argued on air that Lenin's body should be removed from the mausoleum and buried normally. Although Zakharov was not directly criticizing Lenin, this proposal was felt to be an affront and Gosteleradio director Aleksandr

⁴² Two other prominent *Vzglyad* hosts worth mentioning were Vladimir Mukusev and Aleksandr Politkovsky, husband of the famous journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was killed in 2006 .

⁴³ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 137.

⁴⁴ For example, *Vzglyad*'s team once waited at the airport for one of the most self-righteous commentators with anti-capitalist views in the Soviet Union to arrive and they surprised him with a suitcase full of Western products he had purchased during his trip abroad.

⁴⁵ LARISA Štejnman, «Evgenij Dodolev vsponimaet, kak peredacha *Vzglyad* izmenila otechestvennoe televidenie i ego samogo» («Evgenij Dodolev recalls how the *Vzglyad* program changed national television and himself»), *Svobodnaya Pressa*, May 21, 2011 (<https://svpressa.ru/society/article/43592/?f=1>).

Aksenov was forced to resign for allowing such a thing to be said on television.⁴⁶ Mikhail Nenashev, whom we mentioned a few pages ago as head of Goskomizdat, took his place.

The second half of the 1980s represented a golden age for Soviet television, and this was thanks to enterprising young men, such as Sagalaev, Molchanov, Nevzorov, and the entire cast of *Vzglyad*, who, with their innovative ideas, set out to revolutionize the way television was done in the Soviet Union, also thanks to the new freedom of expression. Soviet television was the real unstoppable force behind glasnost, and within months all the taboos that had plastered the Soviet media for decades were broken.

5. *Donahue, Pozner and the «Telemost» between the United States and the Soviet Union*

Among the purposes of perestroika was also to permanently avert the risk of nuclear war and somehow end the Cold War;⁴⁷ one of the best ways to implement this purpose was to decrease the distance between the Soviet and American populations.

Thus, a broadcast was devised in which a television studio in the United States and one in the Soviet Union were linked via satellite, each with its own host and its own audience. The Americans called the program *US-Soviet Space Bridge*, while the Soviets called it *Telemost* (literally «Television Bridge»). The purpose of this kind of show was to directly connect American citizens and Soviet citizens in an attempt to humanize what had been considered the enemy for decades.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, p. 305.

⁴⁷ MIKHAIL GORBACHEV, *Perestrojka. Il nuovo pensiero per il nostro paese e per il mondo*, Milano, Mondadori, 1987, p. 342.

⁴⁸ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 119.

The two historic Space Bridges hosts were Phil Donahue for the United States and Vladimir Pozner⁴⁹ for the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ The two became close friends, and in the 1990s they hosted a popular show together in the United States called «Pozner/Donahue».

The first *Telemost* was recorded on December 29, 1985 and aired on February 19, 1986 under the American title of «Citizens Summit I - Leningrad/Seattle» and Russian title of «Telemost Leningrad-Seattle». The total recording was over two hours, but the program aired cut, differently in the two countries. The American version lasted about 45 minutes (one hour including commercials), while the Soviet version consisted of 70 minutes (without interruptions).⁵¹ The two versions were not equal; Soviet TV eliminated many funny parts, giving the program a more serious slant.⁵² For example, a scene was cut in which an American spectator asked how much money Gorbachev made, causing a group laugh in the audience in the Leningrad theater. Another episode cut in the Soviet version was when an American soldier declared his opposition to the Vietnam War and called on the Soviet military to rebel against the war in Afghanistan. In the adaptation aired in the USSR, only the part criticizing the Vietnam War was left in, and the subsequent appeal was cut.⁵³

In the second *Telemost* («Citizens Summit II: Women to Women - Leningrad/Boston» in the American version) both audiences were composed entirely of American and Soviet women. The show was taped on June 29 and aired on July 17, 1986. This episode went down in history for the phrase *V SSSR seksa net* («B CCCP секса нет»), literally: *There is no sex in the Soviet Union*.⁵⁴ An American woman had asked Soviet women: «In our TV commercials, everything revolves around sex. Do you have such TV commercials?». On behalf of the Soviet women, Lyudmila Nikolaevna Ivanova replied: «We don't have sex, and we are totally against it»; the

⁴⁹ Vladimir Pozner was born in Paris in 1934 to a Russian father and a French mother. His parents separated shortly after his birth, and Vladimir grew up with his mother in New York City. He did not move to Moscow until 1952 where he attended university and graduated with a degree in biology. He began his career in the Soviet media in the 1960s and to this day is one of Russia's leading journalists. Thanks to his perfect knowledge of English, he has traveled the world giving lectures with the aim of bringing the Western world and the Russian world closer together, just as he intended to do with Space Bridges with Donahue in the 1980s.

⁵⁰ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 119.

⁵¹ ELLEN MICKIEWICZ, *Split Signals...*, p. 43.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵³ For a detailed analysis of the differences between the American and Soviet versions of the first *Telemost*, see ELLEN MICKIEWICZ, *Split Signals...*, pp. 40-50.

⁵⁴ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 120.

woman meant to say «we don't have sex, we make love», as she stated in a later interview; shortly afterwards another woman in the audience attempted to correct the first and said «we have sex, but we don't have such advertisements», but by then the audience had erupted in collective laughter and the correction was not clearly pronounced into the microphone; thus, the distorted version of *V SSSR seksa net* went down in history.

The phrase *There is no sex in the Soviet Union* became a catchphrase in those years and was often used to refer to the hypocrisy and anti-sexuality of Soviet culture.⁵⁵

The Space-Bridges experience undoubtedly made a great contribution in bringing the populations of the two superpowers closer together, bringing face to face ordinary men and women who turned out to be more alike than they thought. The *Telemost* experience also permanently established Donahue and Pozner in the Olympus of American and Soviet journalistic and television media figures.

6. *Legislative measures of the summer of 1990*

In the summer of 1990, new laws went into effect that went on to institutionalize the major changes that glasnost had brought to the Soviet media world over the past four years.⁵⁶

On July 15, 1990, the «Decree of the President of the USSR on the Democratization and Development of Television and Radio Broadcasting in the Soviet Union» was issued by Gorbachev. The purpose of the Decree was to allow the establishment of a radio and television broadcasting completely independent from the control of the Party.⁵⁷ The Decree consisted of an introduction and five short articles, the first of which consisted only of a preamble to the next four.

Article Two was crucial in that, for the first time in Soviet history, it sanctioned the possibility of establishing private television stations, with extremely simple requirements: all that was needed was for the new tele-

⁵⁵ The first ever Soviet film containing an explicit sex scene was Vasili Pichul's *Little Vera*, released in 1988.

⁵⁶ According to some historians, the institutionalization of glasnost also sanctioned its end. In fact, by 1990 there was no longer talk of glasnost but of now-won freedom of speech and officially independent media. Instead, the term glasnost tended to refer to that gradual path, begun in 1986, that led to the 1990 legislative measures (see DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 152).

⁵⁷ For the full English text of the Decree, see Appendix 1 by MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, pp. 335-337.

vision centers to be registered with the public authority. However, this simple bureaucratic requirement concealed a much more complicated practical one: private funds had to be used to set up and register a private television station, without any kind of public funding, and this was something very few could afford.

Article Three sanctioned that public television should also be organized independently of any political organization: «Monopolization of television space by either party, political current or group is inadmissible». This too was a first since, as we have seen, Soviet television prior to glasnost had always and exclusively played the role of amplifier for Party directives and propaganda.

Article Four provided for a reorganization of Gosteleradio «for the fullest and freest manifestation of the creative potential of its employees and the strengthening of democratic principles». The reorganization envisioned a move to a market system with profit possibilities and self-financing.

Finally, Article Five announced, as part of the conversion of the Soviet war industry to non-military purposes, that the new *Gelikon* and *Energia* satellite systems would be used to increase the number of television and radio channels across the entire Union.

This Presidential Decree was the first step toward the institutionalization of glasnost, but the big leap was made with the «Law on the Press and Other Mass Media»,⁵⁸ passed by the Supreme Soviet on June 12 and officially entered into force on August 2, 1990. Unlike the previous month's Decree, this law was the result of a long political discussion and was more specific in its articles. The Law consisted of thirty-nine articles and can be said to have officially sanctioned the end of censorship in the Soviet Union; its main goal was in fact to abolish *GLAVLIT*, the state body in charge of censorship in the country. I consider it appropriate, because of its revolutionary importance in the history of media and mass information in the Soviet Union, to quote Article One of this Law in full:

⁵⁸ For the full English text of the Act, see Appendix 2 by MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, pp. 338-349.

The press and other mass media are free.

Freedom of speech and freedom of the press, which are guaranteed for citizens by the Constitution of the USSR, consisting of the right to express opinions and beliefs, to seek, select, receive and disseminate information and ideas in any form, including the press and other mass media.

Censorship of mass information is not allowed.

The second article specified that mass media referred not only to the press but also to television and radio. With Article Three, the Law allowed local and regional television stations to broadcast in languages other than Russian, while Article Four, as already stated in the Presidential Decree, stipulated that each medium would have a separate legal identity, with the goal that the media would achieve their own economic self-sufficiency by following market laws.

The fifth article placed limits on the new freedom of expression, averting its abuse; it was forbidden to: publish information containing state secrets, incite violent change in the Soviet state system, propagate racial or religious violence and intolerance, broadcast pornographic material, incite criminal acts, and violate the privacy of individual citizens. In addition, Article Twenty-six allowed citizens to sue media outlets if false news was published about themselves, and the medium in question was obliged to publicly deny what had been previously published. This happened, for example, when Leningrad television accused Egor Ligachev of corruption and was sued by the latter for libel.⁵⁹

Another article that brought about a momentous change was Article Seven, which formalized the end of state, and thus CPSU, control over the media: «Monopolization of any mass media (press, radio, television, or other) is not permitted».

Articles Twenty-nine through Thirty-two went on to create the status of a «journalist», defining their powers, rights, and duties. In fact, until before glasnost, investigative journalism on a Western model did not exist in the Soviet Union, and so-called «journalists» were mere officials charged with reporting on Party directives.

⁵⁹ MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, p. 318.

Regarding foreign media, Article Thirty-three provided that Soviet citizens had the right to access information from foreign sources, including television and radio broadcasts and the press.

The Media Law of 1990 was a true Revolution and was the triumphant end point of the great ride that glasnost managed to take in just four years, starting from an uncertain beginning on the eve of Chernobyl accident and arriving at an institutionalization that included unprecedented liberalization, both in political and economic terms.

Against this backdrop, some television shows decided to turn into independent production companies. Among them was *Telekompanija VID*, also known as *VIDgital* or simply *VID*, founded by Vladislav List'ev and the other cast members of *Vzglyad* on September 30, 1990; the name *VID* is in fact an acronym that stands for *Vzglyad I Drugie* («Vzglyad and Others»). *VID* is still one of the leading television production groups in Russia and makes numerous programs for a variety of channels. Its logo, which consists of a CGI reconstruction of the mask of Chinese Taoist philosopher Guo Xiang, has become very famous.

7. *The authoritarian turn of 1991 and the «January Events» in Lithuania*

The positive situation that had emerged in those years regarding media liberalization took many steps backward in 1991, the *annus horribilis* for Gorbachev and his reforms. While glasnost had successfully brought the Soviet media to an unprecedented level of freedom, the economic reforms of perestroika were not yielding the hoped-for results; indeed, according to some historians, the General Secretary's main mistake was precisely that he focused more on political and democratic reforms than on economic ones, in contrast to what the Chinese Communist leadership was doing at the same time.⁶⁰

Citizens were becoming impoverished, consumer goods continued to be in short supply, increasingly strong centrifugal pushes were moving the republics of the Union towards independence, and support for Gorbachev's policies was diminishing. «The only thing that was accelerated», Hans Modrow argues, «was the instability of the economy and society as

⁶⁰ ENNIO DE SIMONE, *Storia economica. Dalla rivoluzione industriale alla rivoluzione informatica*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2006, p. 309.

a whole. [...] There was a lack of stimulus at the social level, no tangible improvements in incomes and material well-being. Democracy alone was not enough».⁶¹

Gorbachev was in a middle position between Eltsin's radical liberal democrats and Ligachev's conservatives, and he understood that it was necessary to choose sides in order not to be caught between the hammer and the anvil. It was in this context that Mikhail Gorbachev's conservative turn, at the end of 1990, took place. The General Secretary entrusted key government and army posts to conservatives, prompting a quick reaction from Shevardnadze, who resigned as foreign minister on December 20, 1990, claiming that dictatorship was returning to the Soviet Union.⁶²

Gorbachev also aimed to regain total control of the media and personally fired Michail Nenashev as head of Gosteleradio, replacing him with loyalist Leonid Kravchenko, who as soon as he took office, on November 14, 1990, declared in no uncertain terms: «I have come to fulfill the will of the President».⁶³

On December 28, 1990, just five months after the enactment of the Media Law, censorship returned to the Soviet Union: Kravchenko banned the airing of *Vzglyad's* New Year's Eve episode, justifying the ban on the grounds that it was inappropriate to discuss the resignation of former minister Shevardnadze. On January 10, 1991, amid general anger and amazement, an order was then signed to indefinitely suspend the production and broadcasting of the show.⁶⁴ Thus *Vzglyad*, the television symbol of glasnost, had been officially censored by the authority.

But the point of no return was reached on January 13, 1991, in Vilnius, in the events that are remembered in Lithuania as *Sausio įvykiai* («January Events»). The Lithuanian RSS had declared its independence from the Soviet Union on March 11, 1990, and in the following months ethnic tensions between Lithuanians and Russians living in the country had escalated.

On January 8, 1991, the Lithuanian pro-Soviet *Jedinstvo* («Unity») movement organized a demonstration in front of the Supreme Council of Lithuania and attempted to storm the Parliament building. The next day

⁶¹ HANS MODROW, *La perestrojka...*, p. 175.

⁶² MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, p. 322.

⁶³ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 154.

⁶⁴ MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, p. 323.

several Soviet military units entered Lithuania under the pretext of ensuring constitutional order. A series of actions by Soviet troops and minor clashes with civilians followed over the next few days, but it all culminated at 2 a.m. on January 13 when Soviet special troops stormed the Lithuanian national television center in Vilnius to prevent the broadcasts of a television station increasingly aligned in favor of Lithuanian independence.⁶⁵ This reconfirms the absolute centrality of mass media in the history of the Soviet Union's final years.

An unarmed crowd rushed around the Vilnius TV Tower to prevent it from being taken, but the Soviets began firing into the crowd, resulting in fourteen deaths and more than eight-hundred wounded. Images of the massacre went around the world, but nevertheless Vremya brought his viewers a different version: it was not Soviet troops who opened fire, but citizens outside the TV center on the orders of the president of Lithuania and Sąjūdis, the independence movement.⁶⁶

Aleksandr Nevzorov rushed to Vilnius to film a documentary, overtly pro-Soviet, about the events of those days. The film aired on the first channel of Central Television under the title *Nashi* («Ours»)⁶⁷. The documentary presented the Soviet troops as heroes who had protected the Russian-speaking population and restored order in Lithuania, and it was denied that they were responsible for the fourteen deaths. It came as a shock to many viewers to see Nevzorov openly siding with soldiers who had opened fire on civilians, and the journalist lost much of the popularity he had gained in previous years with his show *600 sekund*.

However, not all Soviet media reported the official Kremlin version. For example, the headline on the front page of *Moskovskiye Novosti* was «Bloody Sunday», and immediately below it was the statement of the newspaper's board of directors titled «The crime of a regime that doesn't want to leave the stage».⁶⁸

On January 16, Gorbachev attempted a desperate move and proposed to the Supreme Soviet to suspend the Media Law that had gone into effect the previous August, but failed. Meanwhile, Gosteleradio banned all news

⁶⁵ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 155.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁶⁷ The documentary can be viewed in its entirety (in Russian) on Nevzorov's official YouTube channel at the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFo-hbTGbPY&t=818s>.

⁶⁸ DAPHNE SKILLEN, *Freedom...*, p. 157.

programs from talking about the events in Vilnius, forcing them to present the official Party version. There were numerous popular protests, extolling Kravchenko's resignation and the airing of *Vzglyad*, which despite the ban continued to occasionally come out in videotapes personally produced by Aleksandr Politkovsky in his apartment.

Tatyana Mitkova, a reporter for TSN, a new television news program, refused to read the official Party version of the clashes in Lithuania. At that point, Gosteleradio Vice Chairman Petr Reshetov threatened: «If you don't read it, we will close TSN»; Mitkova replied: «Then bring in one of your reporters». And so it was done. Reading the news, according to the official Kremlin version, was a government spokesman.⁶⁹

From February 6, 1991, when Gorbachev announced a referendum for March 17 regarding the preservation of the Soviet Union, a huge and unusual one-way television propaganda campaign began in favor of Gorbachev's position, whose speeches were broadcast in their entirety. Thus, by early 1991, after five years of glasnost, Soviet television was back to broadcasting exclusively according to the precise wishes of the Kremlin. Eltsin, for his part, accused Kravchenko of denying him access to numerous television shows during the referendum campaign.⁷⁰

Having failed to suspend the Media Law, on February 8 Gorbachev issued a Presidential Decree that effectively abolished Gosteleradio, transforming it from a government commission to an autonomous state-owned company, which took the name «All-Union State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company»;⁷¹ at the head of the company Gorbachev confirmed Leonid Kravchenko. With this decree Gorbachev secured total control over the state media. In fact, the new organizational structure gave the chairman of the corporation far greater powers than the chairman of Gosteleradio: Kravchenko in his new position was no longer required to consult either the government or the Party and was personally answerable only to the President of the USSR, i.e., Gorbachev. The Decree of February 8, 1991 ended the media autonomy that had been institutionalized the previous summer and officially brought media control back into the hands of the Kremlin.

⁶⁹ The story is recounted in *Moskovskye Novosti* January 20, 1991.

⁷⁰ MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, p. 324.

⁷¹ For the full English text of the Decree, see Appendix 3 by MICHAEL J. BAZYLER and EUGENE SADOVOY, *Television and the Law...*, pp. 350-351.

The economic and political situation in the Soviet Union continued to worsen, and Gorbachev had realized that most of the media, especially the television ones, were openly siding with Eltsin's radical faction and using free speech to discredit the government and perestroika; therefore, the General Secretary opted for a conservative turn and by centralizing media power in his hands attempted to stifle the opposition. But by then glasnost had taken root everywhere and the Soviet population had never been so informed and aware, and thus this move by Gorbachev only further diminished his popularity.⁷²

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 330.