Abstract: Recent years have witnessed rising concern about the future of democracy, and the decline of public service broadcasting (PSB) has been named among the challenges. In a global move to neoliberalism, the territory belonging to public service broadcasting is shrinking with less government investment.

Drawing on the Western and Russian research data about the transformation of PSB, this paper will revisit the key points of contention in the discussion of the role of PSB in a democracy, namely, whether PSB remains an instrument of political socialization of citizens within the public sphere, and whether it can be replaced in this role by any alternative media or the Internet. The paper will challenge the libertarian critique of PSB as a medium of political socialization from the Right, which asserts that proliferation of information channels eliminated the need for PSB, and that an individual needs to be left on her own to “freely” process the abundant information. It will also revisit the critique of PSB as a medium of political socialization from the Left, which points out that being in control of PSB, the bourgeois state cannot with necessity ensure that it truly serves the public interest, and moreover, PSB may potentially be a hegemonic tool for ideological control by the state. Bringing in the experience of the Russian TV system, that shows institutional and historical differences from any of the English-speaking systems, this paper will add a new dimension to the study of media as an instrument of political socialization and its implications for democracy. The first part of the paper will review the experiences of PSB in different countries and discuss the factors influencing the ability of PSB to be an element of the public sphere and thus an instrument of political socialization. The second part will address the controversial role of the state in regulating PSB in Russia, when the civil society and the public sphere are underdeveloped and authoritarian tendencies threaten to return. The third part
of the paper will argue that new media, community media, Internet discussion groups and other forums may not replace PSB but can meaningfully complement its functions.

Keywords: Television, democracy, public sphere.

Introduction

The place of the mass media in political socialization [of the youth and people in general] is arguably under-researched and under-estimated (Buckingham, 1999; Hepburn, 1998; Calavita, 2004). The functionalist perspective on political socialization seems to dominate in the field (Calavita, 2004; Hepburn, 1998), and implies direct top-down influence of agents of socialization (i.e. elders of the society) on the youth, who are seen as more or less passive recipients of influences and effects that aim to instill in them proper values and norms. ‘Mass media are usually identified as secondary agents in political socialization, a categorization that hints at the relative lack of attention given to mass media’s long-term political-developmental significance – even in a so-called information age’ (Calavita, 2004: 129). Moreover, as Calavita (2004) argues, there is a noticeable lack of research on the processes of individual political development through which people forge their political values and beliefs. Research literature simultaneously reports the increasing television viewership of entertainment, features and sports among young people of practically all social backgrounds (Hepburn, 1998), and laments the declining interest of young people in the news media (Buckingham, 1999). As Buckingham (1999: 172) suggests, a critical explanation of young people’s increasing disinterest in politics is that they are actively excluded from politics and from the political discourse – and the media are one of the major gatekeepers. Young people thus may become disinterested in political news in the media as a rational reaction to realization of their own powerlessness and of the fact that the media make no effort to address their concerns (Buckingham, 1999).

According to Buckingham (1999: 175), research into television as an element of political socialization needs to focus on ‘how [television] enables viewers to construct and define their relationship with the public sphere’, and in order to do it may effectively draw on cultural studies and
constructivist perspective. Following Gerbner (1984), Buckingham (1999) points out that television news does not succeed in ‘fulfilling its historic mission of producing an informed citizenry’ but instead creates a substitute for active citizenship and illusions of being informed through reinforcing the status quo of the viewers’ role and place in the social world. Focusing on how the personal meanings of the news are constructed and negotiated by individuals, Buckingham (1999) emphasizes the difficulty of finding and evaluating the evidence of critical viewing. On one hand, the members of the audience may express critical views about the content of the programs they have watched only as a socially desirable response in the context of an interview situation. On the other hand, even when the viewers are critical of the media content or as Buckingham (1999: 181) says ‘mobilize critical discourses’ it does not mean that they are not influenced by the media. Say Calavita (2004) and Buckingham (1999) that ways in which viewers interpret and make personal sense of the television texts are constrained and regulated by institutions, cultural norms, and frames of reference specific to their generation, social stratum, ethnic group, and society. Thus the viewers cannot make any sense of the media text they please, in any way they please, but only in ways that are feasible under the current historic, institutional, economic, cultural, and political conditions. Although multiple interpretations may be possible, ‘[media] texts do not mean anything that readers want them to mean; and all readings [of the media texts] are not equally valid…Against the surfeit of postmodern enthusiasm, there is a need to insist on relatively traditional questions about who has the right to speak, whose voices are heard and who has control over the means of production [of the media texts]’ (Buckingham, 1999: 181-182).

Joining this effort, this paper considers the role of television in the process of political socialization by analyzing the systems of control, production, and distribution of media texts. As I stated elsewhere (Rozanova, 2006) television is among other things a medium of [political] communication. While critiquing critical media theory for its emphasis on the media as a conductor of ideology and values and culture from the ruling elite to the masses, even the representatives of the active audience approach in television studies (Ang, 1996; Fiske, 1987) still recognized the difference
between the viewers’ semiotic power to interpret media texts and the social power to create and disseminate them (Rozanova, 2006: 187). The question about the role of television in political socialization is thus not only about the process and the various implications of consumption of the media texts by the viewers (Loveless, 2004), but also about the production of media texts (and intents and reasons underlying it). Thus while studying audience/citizens’ reception of television messages is important, in order to understand the role of television as a medium of political socialization, it is also essential to consider who, how, and with what intent produces television texts (Rozanova, 2006; Spigel, 2001; Buckingham, 1999; Browne, 1994).

Contrasting the experiences of a post-communist Russia with the key media research findings pertaining to the Western democracies, this paper explores how the challenges to the public media affect who has the right to speak, whose voices are heard, and who has control over production and distribution of television programs. It examines the relationship between public television and the political regime in order to point out the conditions that may foster and inhibit the diversity of voices that have access to the media to express their position, and media independence and freedom. It argues that although the ability of television to be public, that is to serve as a medium of mass communication that facilitates the mechanisms of expressing the political will of the people is more compromised in Russia in comparison to any Western society, the challenges to the ‘publicness’ of television witnessed in the Russian context share the similar logic described by both the Western media theorists and by Eastern European media scholars based on analysis of media and politics of their countries.

**PSB and democracy - precarious and vulnerable linkages?**

There are many definitions of democracy, but in simplest terms it is a mechanism of expressing the will of the people (Benhabib, 1996; Young, 2000; Krasin, 2002). According to Kellner (2005), a democratic social order requires a separation of powers, so that no single institution or social force dominates the society and polity; a vigorous public debate of key issues of importance; and an informed electorate, able to make intelligent decisions and participate in politics. It is therefore
essential that the media are not a tool of any economic or political force and can criticize the
government and powerful institutions, while promoting active discussion on issues of common
concern, thus providing citizens with the necessary information and ideas to meaningfully take part in
public affairs.

‘In today’s world, democracy remains precarious and vulnerable’ (Dahlgren, 1995: p.1). Among the more obvious external factors contributing to that is the increasing power of corporations
and a transforming international system where the status of the nation-state is increasingly problematic.
However internal challenges emerge from the very process of democratic governance. Due to the
rapidly growing complexity and sophistication of the society the amount of time, effort and knowledge
required for informed political participation is getting beyond the grasp of average voters. As a
consequence most citizens lack ‘civic competence’ (Dahl, 1991, 2000) needed to make political
decisions, and withdraw from the political process, leaving its management to the ‘political class’
(Hobsbawm, 1994). Such depolitization includes both the affluent minority with ample private
resources to pursue and satisfy their interests, and the majority who become increasingly cynical and
disillusioned and pull out from participating in a political game they view as futile (Farnen, 2003: 7;
Dahlgren, 1995: 1).

In opposition to commodification of democracy as ‘offering consumer choice in the rotation of
elites’ (Dahlgren, 1995: 3), Habermas’ thesis about the public sphere linked the understanding of
democracy as a system expressing the will of the people with the concept of ‘public’, and placed the
problematic of the mass media central to this approach. Anchored in the critical theory of the media
(Adorno, 1944/2001; Horkheimer, 1975), Habermas’ notion of the public sphere as a communicational
condition of democracy inspired much critical media research, but remained heavily contested. Liberal
discourses on media and democracy do not explicitly use the category ‘public sphere’, but they
nonetheless underscore the citizens’ need for useful and relevant journalism, access to reliable
information from a variety of perspectives, and a diversity of opinions on current affairs, to arrive at
their own views on important issues and thus prepare themselves for meaningful political participation. As Dahlgren (1995) pointed out, Habermas’ public sphere is not totally remote from the notion of the marketplace of ideas that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes inserted into the debates about the freedom of speech in Anglo-American liberal tradition over 80 years ago. Public sphere was also challenged from the neo-Marxist and feminist perspectives, which argue that ‘Habermas’ public sphere was overwhelmingly male, bourgeois, and white and thus highly exclusionary, and therefore, hardly democratic or very public’ (Mosco, 1996: 168). However, this space as both the social sites where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated, and the individual and collective consciousness constituted through this process, points to the communicational requirement of a viable participatory democracy (Habermas, 1989; Garnham, 1990). ‘This space, and the conditions for communication within it, is essential for democracy. And even though the reality may contrast with the normative depictions of democracy and the public sphere, even though these ideals may be anemic does not prove that they are irrelevant’ (Dahlgren, 1995: 9).

The practical embodiment of the public sphere especially in Britain was associated with public service broadcasting (Garnham, 1990; Leys, 2001). According to McChesney (1999: 226) ‘public service broadcasting is a system that is nonprofit and noncommercial, supported by public funds, ultimately accountable in some legally defined way to the citizenry, and aimed at providing a service to the entire population – one which does not apply commercial principles as the primary means to determine its programming.’ The understanding of what public service broadcasting is varies a lot between countries¹, but at its foundation is always the notion of state support for what is considered as the basic preconditions of effective social, cultural and political participation in a democratic society.

Rejecting the claims that at bottom TV is a commodity like many others, Leys (2001: 108) analyzes the conception of the public service broadcasting in Western Europe, when television was believed too important to be left to the broadcasters, and simultaneously too important to democracy to be entrusted to whoever happened to hold state power. Out of that tension arose the idea of
broadcasting serving neither private interests nor the government of the day but the democratic process itself, by providing citizens with the adequate balance of information, entertainment, education and debate that they need for effective participation in political life. Drawing on Sen’s notion of capabilities, Garnham (1999) points out that PSB increases both the range of real communication options made available to the audience (not mere choices between products and services with minimal real differences), and the ability of viewers to engage with these options (Garnham, 1999: p.121). Thus in Garnham’s view PSB is indispensable as it offers programs that maximize the capability set of broadcasting users but which cannot be evaluated only in terms of what people actually buy or what they actually enjoy.

Public service broadcasting started to come under scrutiny in the 1980s when the whole raison d’être of state intervention into the mass media was radically challenged. Governments around the world privatized what were for decades their national public monopolies - postal services, transportation, telecommunications, and broadcasting, in the name of opening up the services to competition\(^2\). Many different factors accounted for this dramatic shift in policy. Firstly, the view on the State and its role in the society and the economy has undergone substantive changes. These changes have theoretical roots in neo-liberal philosophy and the ideas of economists like Ronald Coase (1937, 1959, 1960), who argued that once the system of private property rights in resources is established, private enterprises and the competitive system will manage themselves and only need the government to maintain a legal system defining property rights and resolving disputes (Rozanova, 2006). In a climate of growing corporate power and inability of economic regimes with a strong emphasis on the role of the state be it Keynesianism or state socialism, to effectively address the challenges of the globalizing marketplace, public sector including PSB came under attack and deregulation became the new keyword in theory and in practice.

Technological development has eroded the main reason that justified government intervention - airwave scarcity (Wedell, 1995; McQuail, 1997)\(^3\). Since the Internet undergoes little intervention, and
forecasts estimate that increasingly in future years there will be the integration of computers into the television, it is claimed that continuation of special funding privileges to PSB can no longer be justified. Moreover, since the new broadcasting technology (satellite) does not respect national boundaries, national legislation cannot properly be applied to global media operators.

Simultaneously, the process of integration and the development of competitive markets have impacted PSBs particularly in the European Union. Commercial channels increasingly question the legitimacy of State funding of PSBs, claiming they distort the market. This criticism is compounded when the public broadcasters in question have commercialized their output, started to carry advertisements, and their programming policy has become as commercially driven as that of the private television channels with which they compete for prime-time viewership. Curien (2000a), Dagnaud (2000) and a number of other European media scholars point out inequality of different organizational types of broadcasters on the media market and demonstrate that PSB, despite having gradually commercialized their activity, still have access to cheap state credits and a number of other privileges, such as lower prices for services they purchase, that other types of broadcasters do not enjoy.

To summarize, the main criticisms of PSB from the right have been that technologically there are no more reasons to justify the existence of PSB (Wedell, 1995; Hamilton, 1996); the organizational form and management of PSB is inefficient (Greff, 1999); and the existence of special conditions for the operation of PSB distort the market (Vedel, 1997; Curien, 2000b). But an important critique of public service broadcasting was also coming from the left. Across Western Europe and North America, these institutions were accused of paternalism and elitism in their program output, of ignoring the growing pluralistic and multicultural character of their own societies, and of being generally stagnant and in need of creative renewal. Raboy (1999; 2002) adds another dimension to this critique by pointing out that PSB as an embodiment of public sphere has no international equivalent, and stressing
the difficulty for the national institutions to manage public broadcasting in the name of public good at
the trans-national level.

The most significant criticism of PSB from the left concerns the role of the state. According to
Mosco (1996) the model of public service broadcasting in advanced capitalism is essentially imperfect,
because there is a fundamental problem facing government. The state has to promote the interests of
capital even though it reputedly is an independent arbiter of the wider social or public interest. Bennett
(1998) comes to similar conclusions analyzing public television as both an institution of culture and a
political institution and reviewing the Gramscian critique of the civil society as a spin-off of the bour geois state. Being in control of PSB, the bourgeois state cannot with necessity ensure that it truly
serves the public interest. Moreover, PSB may potentially be a hegemonic tool for ideological control
by the state, as Burghelman (1986) wrote drawing on the perspectives of critical theorists of 1960s and
70s. As Dahlgren remarks,

A society where democratic tendencies are weak and the social structure is highly
inegalitarian is not going to give rise to healthy institutional structures for the public sphere,
[including TV broadcasting]… For instance, the state, together with vested interests, can
pursue media policies, which hinder the flow of relevant information and constrict the range
of opinion. Alternatively, such mechanisms [as ‘news plants’, misinformation, and
trivialization] may operate through the public sphere to hinder democratic development.

How do the above-described factors abuse the ‘publicness’ of television and reduce the role of
public television from an instrument of democracy to an instrument of the state in the context of a post-
communist society where democracy is at best only emerging? To address this question, I proceed to
examine the realities of the Russian media.
Public media and democracy – Russian scenarios

According to Jakubowicz (2004), the change in the media systems in all post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is part of a larger process of systemic social transformation, connected to changes of a society’s economic system, political regime, social consciousness, political culture, and the public view of the media. Splichal (2001) points out three ideal-typical patterns of media systems transformation in CEE countries: idealistic, imitative/mimetic, and atavistic. Idealistic pattern envisages creating a media system subordinate to the societal control on the basis of values of justice, equity and solidarity by transforming state into social broadcasting. Yet creating such a media system is impossible in any CEE country because their societies lack the necessary social, political and cultural conditions to sustain the truly social media. Thus a realistic goal is to mimic the West by creating a set of institutions and legal frameworks that redesign media system to ‘internationalize’ it, develop guarantees for freedom of speech, and create media markets (Jakubowicz, 2004). It was expected that over time these legal frameworks introduced from above, in combination with the changing political culture, continuing economic development, and democratisation of the political life will foster a socially responsible system of balanced commercial and public broadcasting.

An imitative pattern of media system transformation was characteristic of CEE countries classified by the World Bank (2002) as ‘competitive democracies’ that had a comparatively high level of political participation, civil liberties, and economic reforms (for example, Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic). Yet even in those countries introducing a balanced socially responsible media system and particularly PSB faced enormous challenges due to politicization of society, inadequate political and civic culture, lack of managerial and professional competence, and low commitment to media impartiality and public interest (Jakubowicz, 2004). As Zandberg (2003) stated, in Poland for example, economic and consumer culture developed faster than civic and political culture, and people were more active in the roles of consumers than in civic and citizenship roles.
In ‘concentrated’ political regimes such as Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Croatia (World Bank, 2002), political power consolidated in the executive branch of the government or was captured by oligarchs and insiders, civil society was almost non-existent, and reforms failed to sustain an efficiently functioning economy. The transformation of the media system in these countries followed an atavistic pattern. While the new political elites overtly declared commitment to independent and socially responsible media, in reality they expected the journalists to be ‘cooperative, guided by a sense of responsibility for the process of transformation and assisting the government as the leader of the process, rather than exercising an impartial and critical watchdog role’ (Jakubowicz, 2004: 58).

The creation of a balanced media system that would serve as a vehicle of democratisation of the country was the officially stated priority of the Russian agenda of reforms, but the actual situation in the Russian media during all the years of transformation has remained highly controversial, relentlessly reflecting all political, economic, and social problems that the country has faced. According to experts, three phases may be distinguished in the history of the Russian television system. The first phase, until 1986 and perestroika, was totalitarian (Chumikov et al., 2002, Zassoursky, 2004). The second, the beginning of the 1990s, was the phase of unlimited freedom (Chumikov et al., 2002). The third and current phase that started in 2000 with the presidency of Vladimir Putin is the period of managed democracy (Lipman & McFaul, 2001) or ‘democracy on the leash’ (Chumikov et al., 2002).

The Soviet television system that comprised four Central Programs (corresponding to four terrestrial broadcasting channels) was vertically integrated and centrally managed by the State Committee of Radio and TV Broadcasting of the Council of Ministers of the USSR (Rozanova, 2006). The programming material was produced and transmitted by TV Centers (52 of which were located in Russia and 78 in other Soviet republics). Television was under rigid ideological, administrative, financial and political control of the state (Dewhirst, 2001; Simon, 2004; Zassoursky, 2004). On the upside of it TV had high priority in the state budget that resulted in high professional qualification of
journalists and high level of trust of the society. However, state support was a means of manipulation, and the state TV was neither public nor democratic (Rozanova, 2000).

Television, alongside other media, was a mouthpiece of the state personified by the communist party (Dewhirst, 2001; Simon, 2004; Lipman & McFaul, 2001) and a channel through which the party provided information to the masses (Rozanova, 2006). Dissent and opposition were eliminated from the public scene not only by overt suppression, but through self-censorship of journalists who came to understand the parameters of their actions within the dominant ideological system (Simon, 2004).

The introduction of perestroika and glasnost by Gorbachev in 1986 allowed the media greater editorial license to investigate the controversial pages of the Soviet history and to discuss the ongoing reforms (Simon, 2004). The new independent newspapers such as Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Kuranty, and Kommersant that appeared in the late 1980s (Lipman & McFaul, 2001) reflected a plurality of perspectives that emerged in the opening society, while still enjoying the economic benefits of financing from the state budget.

The phase of unlimited freedom (Chumikov et al., 2002) that began after the collapse of the USSR was marked by privatization of television. It was facilitated by the senior state officials who sympathized with the interests of the emerging TV business sector and desired to reduce the state financing of television (Rozanova, 2006). The first commercial (i.e. relying on advertising revenue, not state funding) TV company in Russia was the channel ‘2X2’, founded by the State Committee of Radio and TV Broadcasting in 1990. In 1992 two main state-owned television channels – ORT (Channel 1) and RTR (Channel 2) were allowed to engage into commercial activity. In 1994 the President’s Decree transformed ORT into an Open joint stock Company. 51% of its shares belonged to the state, and 49% of shares were sold to a group of banks and commercial structures associated with Boris Berezovsky, allegedly through inside deals arranged by the Kremlin (Simon, 2004). TV-6 (originally called the Moscow Independent Broadcasting Corporation) was founded in 1993 by the Moscow city Administration and a group of associated with it entrepreneurs. NTV, the largest private
TV company in Russia and the flagship of Media-Most, the empire of another Russian oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky, was created in 1993 by the President’s Decree. The money paid by Gusinsky for the control package of NTV shares allegedly resulted from his political connections as the chief banker of the Moscow city government. Originally NTV shared the frequency of Channel 4 with Kultura, a state-owned channel that broadcasted cultural and educational programs. Coincidentally NTV obtained the license to exclusively use Channel 4 following the 1996 presidential elections, in which the channel vigorously supported Yeltsin (Lipman & McFoul, 2001: 118).

Throughout the 1990s the functioning of television was influenced by multiple, often conflicting in their goals, groups of interest. All the political actors (including the oligarchs and political elites whom they supported, the State Duma, the Federal Assembly, the Government, the President, and his Administration) considered television a very powerful weapon in their fighting for power and struggled to increase their influence on television while preventing their opponents from doing the same. A media insider I interviewed in 1999 suggested that the most dramatic political struggle concerned the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting. Passed in 1991, the Law on Mass Media outlined the Russian television system only in general terms. The specifics of regulation were to be detailed in the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting. However, all the conflicting political actors resisted the development of this law in fear that the adoption of clear legislative norms may give more authority over television and consequently a strategic political advantage to their competitors. The lack of clear norms and sanctions in the regulatory documents concerning television was also convenient when ‘[after 1996 Presidential elections] the media became more and more tools of their owners in the pursuit of their owner’s narrow interests. Having played a pivotal role in Yeltsin’s re-election, the oligarchs no longer had a common cause and began to engage in battles over the division of remaining profitable sections of Russia’s state-owned media…An increasingly common feature of the media in the late Yeltsin period was the use of so-called ‘compromat’ or ‘compromising material’ with which to smear politicians and other public figures’ (Simon, 2004: 178).
Yet throughout the 1990s the state continued to own all the capacities for production and distribution of television programs at both federal and regional level, including the offices where TV stations were located, and all equipment and facilities for generating, recording and transmitting television signals. Despite the ongoing struggles between various political actors that Mickiewicz (2001) called the ‘pluralism of power’, the executive branch of the state (in contrast to legislative or judiciary branches) retained (and gradually increased) significant influence over television. The state continued to fully own RTR, reorganized into a state unitary enterprise in 1993, as well as 51% of ORT shares (Rozanova, 2000). The President had ultimate control over these channels’ programming policy by virtue of appointing their top executives, including the Chairperson of the ORT Shareholders’ Council.

Becker (2004) was right nevertheless in stating television’s relative autonomy from the state, albeit based not on the commitment to civil liberties and democratic institutions, but on the internal disputes between the elements and actors comprising the state and their inability to effectively develop and implement a media policy. While the relationship between television and the state during the 1990s remained controversial, there was real pluralism of organizational forms, sources of financing and control, and consequently, of viewpoints expressed in the programs (Lipman & McFoul, 2001; Koltsova, 2001; Simon, 2004). On the negative side, television became colonized by various political interest groups and outpoured on the screen a mixture of political compromising material (compromat), commercials, and ‘zakaz’ (indirect commercials) (Koltsova, 2001). But on the positive side, political broadcasting and investigative journalism had a space for development and growth, and represented diverse points of view, particularly within the framework of the non-state commercial channels like NTV. Political and current affairs programs used satire to relentlessly criticize the political establishment, through such acclaimed masterpieces as Kukly (The Puppets), referred to as ‘the mirror of the Russian politics’ (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 1997).
After the coming of Putin to power first as Prime Minister in 1999 and then as President in 2000 the state re-introduced administrative and political pressure on TV channels, but continued to encourage their commercial activities. Unlike Yeltsin who sought the support of media oligarchs to get through the political, economic and fiscal crises, Putin was determined to consolidate the Russian state, strengthen its executive apparatus, and terminate the confrontation between the legislative and the executive branches of power ongoing during the 1990s. While continuing to declare commitment to the free media as a foundation of democracy, Putin asserted that the true social responsibility of the media is to support the government in carrying out the reforms (Coalson, 2000; Albats, 2001). The media that criticized the government and more importantly, supported the political opponents or potential rivals of Putin’s regime became subject of scrutiny by tax police, and either shut down or placed under state control ‘through selective application of tax and criminal law… and the direct pressure of the Ministry of Press’ (Becker, 2004: 151). In 2000 following intense tax investigation and pressures to repay substantive loans Gusinsky signed a contract passing his package of NTV shares to Gazprom-Media, a subsidiary of the state-owned energy giant Gazprom. Following Berezovsky’s escape to the United Kingdom after investigations concerning his business activities started in 2000, the state restituted its full control over ORT. A year after the closure of TV-6 (another channel that Berezovsky owned and continued to manage from abroad) in 2002, the court made another liquidation decision regarding TVS, established by the former NTV staff led by Yevgeny Kiselyov, and funded by a consortium of businessmen, including Unified Energy Systems head Anatoly Chubais and aluminum baron Oleg Deripaska. Insiders and researchers argue that although the official reasons for closure of NTV, TV-6 and TVS were, according to the Duma speaker Gennady Seleznyov, the stations’ severe economic woes, there were undoubtedly political dimensions to these decisions (Becker, 2004). A State Duma Deputy Sergey Mitrokhin said in an interview with RBC that the hastiness, with which the liquidation decision had been made by the court, ‘proved fears that the Russian judicial system became a tool for political persecution.’ (www. Pravda.ru).
The Russian experts I interviewed considered the ability of the state-controlled broadcasting to serve the public interests very problematic. In their opinion, in the absence of genuinely public TV, and under imminent threat of reinstalling of the state-run TV system, corporate media would still serve the public interests better than the state-controlled media. These views are shared by key parliamentarians and journalists (Rozanova, 2001) as well as some media researchers. The most significant among the latter are Kolomiets (2003) and Poluekhtova (2003), who analyze in detail the specificity of commercialization of the Russian TV, and make a conclusion about its positive impact in increasing information pluralism, diversifying programming structure, overcoming Russia’s cultural isolation and fostering the development of regional TV and the growth of available TV channels. Although this argument was debated by Razlogov (1997), Shabdurasulov (1999) and others, who pointed out that commercialization brought forward many negative tendencies, such as the erosion of educational broadcasting and the decrease of the quality standards of programs’ content across all genres, the majority agreed that in comparison with the state-controlled television of Putin’s presidency the television of the 1990s, imperfect and faulty as it was, seemed the least of the two evils. Several Russian scholars, including Zasoursky (2002) and Chumikov et al. (2002), regarded corporatisation of the media (and in particular TV) in Russia as a step towards creating public broadcasting, for two reasons.

First, advanced businessmen tend to take hands off micromanagement of the programming policy, allowing the journalists creative freedom, as long as the media retain social prestige and thus continue to attract advertisers and make money. Second, corporate media have to provide a critical and comprehensive analysis of matters directly relevant to public life. Otherwise the public, despising all kinds of propaganda and brainwashing, wouldn’t watch them. Many scholars argued that the corporate TV channel NTV created in 1994 and taken over by the state in 2000, was as close an approximation to the ideal of a PSB channel as Russia has ever known (Koltsova, 2001; Lipman & McFaul, 2001; Becker, 2004).
This viewpoint is at odds with the conventional definition of public television, but consistent with the specific interpretation of the concept of ‘public’ in application to television in the Russian media research. According to Krasin (1999, 2002, 2004), the debate about the crisis of liberal democracy and possible ways of resolving it is ongoing in both Western (Young, 2000; Benhabib, 1996) and Russian (Shevtsova, 2003; Shestopal, 2004) political science. The frequently mentioned argument is that a person has a right for ‘personal privacy’, and one’s ‘private space’ needs to be protected from the intrusion of the media, that prevent people from making their own political choices.

According to Habermas (1996), theoretically the issue of political socialization as an independent and autonomous process of one’s political development and determining one’s political behavior was outlined by Emmanuel Kant as the central problem of democracy. Kant pointed out that the freedom of choice is the freedom to be always able to publicly use one’s reason. And anticipating the challenge of forced, paternalistic political socialization when the authorities claim to know what is best for people and enlighten them against their will, Kant (1998) emphasized that enlightenment can be possible only through the public use of one’s reason. From these premises the media become public and the main constituent of democracy if their activity ensures the freedom of citizens to publicly use their reason. The main precondition for that is the diversity of information, enabling to compare different visions of the events, their evaluations and viewpoints, and on this basis to form one’s own opinion about what is happening.

By becoming corporate and subordinate to the consumers the media may not automatically become public, argues Krasin (2002). Such subordination leads to creation of tabloid press or commercial exploitation (Jakubowicz, 2004). The media become public and independent only through subordination to the citizenry. The key public function they perform is contributing to the development of civic conscience. However, multimedia holdings are playing an increasingly important role in the development of the mass media and the information structures worldwide, and the trend of their development does not lead towards increased subordination to the citizens. Concentration of the media
industry and the purposeful anti-competitive strategy of media holdings mitigate against information pluralism, which is the necessary precondition for citizens’ free choice of information from different sources and its independent assessment within their ‘private space’. What it comes down to is that only certain groups of corporate and state-corporate interests are represented in the media, and the growing number of smaller interest groups are forced out and do not receive adequate coverage in the public sphere. Liberal illusions of Western and Russian scholars about information pluralism as a direct consequence of privatization of the media and their inclusion into the market mechanisms become unsubstantiated (Becker, 2004; Mickiewicz, 2001).

Moreover, the amount of effort, time and expertise required of citizens to obtain and process the information in the multi-media world, even if the trustworthy sources of unbiased information are abundantly available, is often unaffordable and build huge opportunity costs into the functioning of the public sphere and of democracy. That requires revising the model of the relationship between PSB and democracy, placing at its core the concept of deliberation or capability to get informed and to participate in the political process. Analyzing the experience of Russia, as well as the experience of Western democracies, Krasin refers to two ways of activating this capability.

The first way is libertarian, when the formula for freedom is ‘let me figure it out on my own, don’t let the society tell me what to do’ (Hayek, 1978; Nozick, 1974; Friedman, 1962). In reality the society has become so complex and sophisticated that individualistic isolation leads either to absenteeism, to withdrawing from political participation (Farnen, 2003), or to incompetent decisions due to the lack of understanding, knowledge and expertise necessary to make a choice regarding any matter. The second way is deliberative, when a citizen participates in the public reflection that involves articulating and confronting views of various social and political forces, common debate and search for general consensus and agreement (Elster, 1998; Habermas, 1996). The private reason of a person is not isolated from the society, but accumulates the results of public discussions, enabling one to make a truly free and informed choice.
What may ensure the balance between these two ways? Even if the commitment to public and independent media and recognition of subordination to the citizens as a major precondition for its existence takes root at the conceptual level, can any progress be made in this direction at the level of media policy? Sharing the position of Burgelmann (1999), McQuail (1998) and McChesney (2002), Krasin (2002) suggests that informational pluralism cannot be maintained without applying to the broadcasting sphere the non-market regulatory practices. On the normative level the solution may lie in ensuring regulation in the informational sphere on the basis of a broad, public, representative responsibility, according to the principles of a social contract between all the concerned political, social and production parties. This task is enormously difficult, but only thus can the democratic pluralism of information in modern societies be ensured.

The future for public television: in search for alternatives?

The challenges to public service broadcasting associated with the pressures from both the state and the corporate sector are very significant. They are present, albeit in different degrees, both in the established Western democracies and in the context of a neo-authoritarian Russian society. The question is whether there are substantive arguments to support the feasibility of PSB at the conceptual and practical level.

To some scholars the virtue of PSB is self-evident. According to McQuail (1998) the role of the media in a healthy democratic political culture is to define and publicize diverse perspectives on the shared objectives or problems of the society and of the wider international community, provide trustworthy sources of information and ideas and maintain broad opportunities for access to public channels of communication for diverse collective and individual voices. ‘This implies the existence of a public interest in mass media, which is more than the sum of individual ‘user’ demands.’ (McQuail, 1998: 19). It is just as valid in a more competitive, globalised and commercialised age, as it has ever been.
Researchers sharing these views consider re-regulation key to maintaining PSB ‘to counteract the negative aspects of market forces and to optimize the positive role they can play’ (Dahlgren, 1995: 15). Despite all shortcomings the state still remains the most appropriate national instrument for implementation of public policy. But addressing the problems of PBS through legislative mechanisms is extremely difficult. Both the principles of re-regulation and the mechanisms for their implementation remain subject to serious debate. According to Western and Russian lawyers (Hundt, 1996; Efimova & Artishchev, 2001) the main points of contention are whether the rules and standards should be the same for all broadcasters regardless of their organizational form, and if not, on what grounds different rules may be applied to select types of broadcasters. The experience of Russia during the 1990s convincingly demonstrated that the conflicting groups of interest that fiercely fight for power preferred using television as a power resource in the absence of clear rules and clear responsibility, and thus resent reaching a compromise and sabotage the development of broadcasting laws. Although this resentment may be taking more refined forms in other societies, the interested parties like multimedia holdings have considerable financial resources and translate them into political power to lobby against media regulation.

Another question concerns whether regulation should apply to PSBs as organizations or to services they provide. A common assumption in the literature on PSB was that when a PSB organization is weakened by a policy decision, so is the quality of public broadcasting as a service (Wedell, 1995; Humphreys, 1996; Tracey, 2000). Yet according to Clifton (2003) PSBs around the world are different in terms of quality of programming, their relationship to political institutions, funding mechanisms, and independence from the state and the business sector. Not all media organizations formally defined as PSBs provide quality public broadcasting all the time. Many of them, particularly in CEE countries, are ‘empty shells’ (Yakubowicz, 2004). The new regulatory initiatives in the EU situate citizens and services at the center, rather than organizations, by using the term services of general interest (Clifton, 2003). It is assumed that whether a broadcasting company is
public or private is irrelevant, as long as its programs comply with certain criteria developed through democratic legislative procedures. This approach ignores the interrelation between the organizational form and its performance, that has been consistently maintained by organizational and media studies (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2002), and suggests that private TV channels can serve public interest better than heavily commercialized public television.

In a climate of erosion of PSB legitimacy, some voices start speaking about the emergence of new public spaces between the state and private capital, and place in them hopes for renewal or resurrection of PSB. Murdock (2000: 288) questions whether ‘alternative media can be strengthened and linked together to create a genuinely popular public sphere that would break with the populism of the market and the paternalism of the existing public institutions, to develop a new kind of communications system’.

The term alternative or radical media refers to small-scale media of various technical and genre formats that have no allegiance to corporate, religious or government authority (Downing, in Raboy, 2002: 216). Their core is typically a group of media and computer activists, normally associated with particular advocacy projects but not necessarily permanent political groups or parties (Halleck, 2002). Radical media link different forms of communication and expression and include both the technologically-based media and grassroots art activists such as puppeteers, banner designers, T-shirt designers, street theater actors, musicians and so on, who are energetic in preparing for and protesting against certain events (Mohammadi and Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1995).

Kellner (2005) articulates the capacity of alternative media to create a real alternative to the corporate media and regards the Web as a post-modern public sphere, a forum for public discussion of all matters of general relevance in accordance with the democratic principles of freedom of speech, tolerance and transparency. Although more cautious in assigning them the role of saviors of the PSB, Downing emphasizes the impact of these media on social movements, especially the anti-globalists actions of protest around the WTO meetings in Seattle, IMF in Prague, World Bank in Washington and
the Summit of the Americas meeting in Quebec City (Downing, 2003: 216). However, the introduction of any communications technology typically creates high expectations ‘concerning the level of communicative freedom and the possibilities of choice that will be available to the average citizen’ (Burgelman, 1999: 130), and internet may contribute to a change of communication system but not completely substitute it.

There are several important factors why television remains a key forum for social interaction and for political socialization and formation of the civic conscience, and cannot be completely replaced by any other medium, including internet. Access is a widely acknowledged one – not everybody has the means and the ability to go online (Halleck, 2002; Azal & Harwood, 2005), while the overwhelming majority of households own a TV set. But considering alternative media a viable successor of PSB is conceptually dangerous for other important reasons that haven’t been given sufficient attention.

First, the very fact that powerful corporations in the Western societies and governments in ‘concentrated’ (Jakubowicz, 2004) regimes like Russia fiercely fight to control television proves its tremendous and yet unsurpassed power as a means of political communication and political socialization. Unlike television, internet cannot become a background for our daily routines to the same extent as the broadcast media. Websites cannot reach their potential audiences in the same way as television channels, because web browsing is a much more pro-active activity than watching TV. As demonstrated by Azal and Harwood (2005) the majority of social movements’ websites do not show among the top 30 Google keyword search results using the movement’s name, thus accessing these websites without knowing their exact address is difficult even for skilled people.

Secondly, internet is not an area of free and uncensored information. On one hand, website browsing leaves identifiable tracks, exposing users to potential abuse by unscrupulous individuals or groups, or control by state authorities. On the other hand, the economy of scale continues to guide the production of information (Leys, 2001) and most of the key information web sites belong to the major
media companies (such as CBC or BBC). Thirdly, small-scale and community volunteer media lack resources to sustain professional journalistic coverage of current affairs. This raises questions about the quality and validity of information they supply.

Last but not least, the assumption that alternative media may replace public media, and in particular the PSB in its role of political socialization, raises the issue of fragmentation of the public sphere and distortion of its essential qualities. By definition, alternative media serve to articulate the interests and views of select groups. Although they have every right to be expressed and represented, a sum of group interests does not automatically equate to the public interest. Even when individuals can articulate their personal and group interests, public interests are largely opaque to them and may come out and get embodied into social relationships and institutions only through public communication (Krasin & Rozanova, 2004: 277). While the role of the alternative media is important for ensuring democratic pluralism and freedom of speech, they need not be confronted with the traditional media as replacing them in any role – but they may meaningfully complement them.

Conclusion

Public service broadcasting has been vigorously criticized from both the Right and the Left. Unresolved disputes concern the efficiency of its organizational form and management, the legitimacy for special conditions and rules applicable to it, the role of different agencies, most importantly the state, in its regulation, the quality of its programming, and its ability to address the public interests. Some (McQuail, 1998, Burgelman, 1999; Krasin, 2002) see PSB as the communicational condition of democracy characterized by informed and responsible engagement of citizens in public debates under conditions of separation and balance of powers. Others (Coase, 1959; Vedel, 1997) regard it as a nuisance for the competitive television market that takes advantage of the cheap state credits without any worthy programming return.

Significant differences exist not only between Western democracies and post-communist countries, but among the latter as well (Jakubowicz, 2004) in their experience of, and attitudes to PSB,
depending on the social, political and economic conditions that have been shaping their television history. Naturally, these differences build into theory and policy debates. While PSB was declared among the goals for building the national TV systems in countries like Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic that aspired to join the EU and imitated Western European media regimes (Jakubowicz, 2004), in the UK there were calls to replace the very term (Clifton, 2003). While some suggest introducing re-regulation in the TV sphere to address the current shortcomings of the TV market (Dahlgren, 1995), others point out there are no social or political forces to support this move (Tracey, 1998). While some view small-scale media as the realm of genuine popular freedom of speech, others regard it as privatization of the public sphere. The processes of economic globalization, regional transformation, changes in the regimes of governance and in the balance of global power compound these controversies and make the broadcasting landscape even more ambiguous. While the media markets transcend national borders, many question whether democracy may follow right behind.

My analyses pointed out that challenges to the ‘publicness’ of television that ultimately threatens to reduce its role from a medium of democratic political socialization of informed citizenry to a medium of ideological control by the state or corporate forces, have a universal character and manifest in both the established Western democracies and in the post-communist societies in varying degrees, depending on the specific institutional contexts. My analysis also confirms that Western and Russian communication scholars come to many similar conclusions regarding the sources of these challenges and their effects on the media and democracy. Bringing in the Russian experience into the discussion about public service broadcasting is particularly important because the restriction of media freedom by the state is not unique to Russia but characteristic of all concentrated regimes including such diverse countries as Belarus, Zimbabwe, and Burma (Becker, 2004; Jakubowicz, 2004). The fact that a 2003 Freedom House survey of press freedom ranked only 78 countries ‘free’ and 115 countries (including Russia) ‘partly free’ or ‘not free’ (Becker, 2004: 144) emphasizes the gravity of the question whether public media, and indeed democracy, may be a likely future for the majority of the mankind.
The idea that alternative media may become New Public Media (Kellner, 2005; Murdock, 2000) is disturbing for its complacency with the vision that public institutions, including the media, may survive only on a small-scale basis, using rudimentary resources, while big production resources and large audiences are colonized by media corporations or governments that meet little restraint, particularly in the case of concentrated regimes like Russia, where democracy is on a tight leash. Operating on the local or on the group network level, small-scale media inform people and activate collective debate and decision making, and in this capacity they are essential to democracy. However on the societal level political socialization of the citizens implies their active and informed engagement with the public sphere that requires sustaining a common vocabulary, the common frames of reference to facilitate public discussion and public decision making. ‘Global problems require global solutions’ (Raboy, 1999: 213), and this paper aims to contribute to a broader dialogue among the members of the international scientific community, to address the question: ‘Public television as a medium of political socialization: Quo Vadis?’

Notes

1. In the Western European perspective public service broadcasting has been associated with a certain way of setting up the media system that was regarded as compatible with, and conditional for, democracy. In the United States public service broadcasting was created as a complementary sub-system. Officially established in 1967 as a national broadcasting service, public television’s 125 original stations held in common general commitments to education, community, and, especially for those affiliated with Midwestern universities, the land-grant tradition (Balas, 2003: 11).

2. This description is most accurate of the societies where PSB initially had a monopoly position - that is, in Western Europe. The situation was different in the USA, where PSB was rudimentary and private networks dominated since the start of the TV history, or in the communist world, where the state had a monopoly on television.
3. Wedell and McQuail are supportive of the PSB in principle but believe that its fall is unfortunate but inevitable, hence the factors that they analyze.

4. The World Bank report (2002) outlined two other types of regimes in CEE as of that time: non-competitive that demonstrated restitution of the pre-transitional single party governance (for example, Turkmenistan); and war-torn by conflicts of usually rooted in ethnic and territorial divisions that severely constrain the capacity of the state (for example, Tajikistan). The prospects for public television in these countries are likely worse than in the rest of CEE (Jakubowicz, 2004), but systematic data are not available, not least because of the unwillingness of the respective governments to provide researchers access to information (see for details http://www.eurasianet.org/turkmenistan.project/files2/050503_15thWorldPressFreedomday.rtf).

5. The study was conducted in Russia in 2002 by a team of researchers headed by Alexander Chumikov, by means of telephone interviews. 80 experts in total were interviewed, among them 8 representatives of political authorities regulating the activities of television, 16 businesspersons working in the media sphere, 16 media researchers, 20 staff and journalists working on the central TV channels, and 20 staff and journalists working at the regional TV stations. Permission to use the data from the study for secondary analysis was obtained from Alexander Chumikov. No direct quotes from interviews are provided in compliance with the original provision in the study to keep the experts strictly anonymous.

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