



## UNCENSORED DEBATE AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE SOVIET MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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### ABSTRACT:

This article is about the development of Soviet media since 1985 and the increase of uncensored shows. Also, information about Vlasov and his political position, Gorbachev's speeches, significant press coverage is analyzed. In addition, the results of press freedom such as "Lastochka", "Vzglyad" will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Vzglyad, Lastochka, Media, Vlasov, VOA, Pravda, Copy, live broadcast, self-censored.

### Introduction

One of the most significant media events occurred in May 1989 when Vlasov and Gorbachev met. Vlasov was a former Olympic weightlifter whose achievements with the barrels had wowed Soviet sports fans.<sup>1</sup> Vlasov was elected to the newly formed Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union in 1989. He recently criticized Soviet sports policy and Gorbachev, recognizing his criticism, wanted to talk about it. The live broadcast of Vlasov's speech that evening was watched by millions of *Vzglyad* viewers. After a few days, *Vremya* news self-censored this speech, and invited Vlasov to *Vzglyad*, where he chastised his fellow Deputies for the corruption of Soviet athletic sports.<sup>2</sup> Gorbachev signed an order responding to Vlasov's criticism, and the progress on the reform of Soviet sports was reported in every newspaper.<sup>3</sup> People were anxious for the outcome of this reform as Congress launched an investigation into the Sports Committee. Even after Vlasov's statements, Western Media, including the VOA, aired several more shows rebroadcasting Vlasov's statements and footage

<sup>1</sup> P.Andersona. О власовской репутации (About Vlasov reputation). Pravda 1987 July 07. P, 6

<sup>2</sup> Yuri Vlasov chat with Gorbachev at Congress before speech: interview with Andrei Karaulovin *Vokrug Kremlya* (Around the Kremlin) (Moscow: Novosti, 1990), p.282. Vlasov speech to Congress: BBC Summary of World Broadcasts. SU/0477, pp C/16-19.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Dallin, "Causes of the Collapse of the USSR," *Post-Soviet Affairs*. October-December 1992: 279-302, Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*. Oxford, 1996



from the original show.<sup>4</sup> After all, the debate between Vlasov and Gorbachev began after Vlasov's statements in *Vzglyad*. Soviet media censored Vlasov's radical statements, but they were still published in newspapers and broadcasted in Western media. The Pravda, Izvestia, Ogonyok, and Argument i fakti, for example wrote down his speech verbatim while many critical articles started to appear days after his TV-appearance. The fact that these mostly concerned the KGB was particularly noteworthy.<sup>5</sup> Vlasov did not attack the KGB directly, but rather all "KGB criminals" as he described their illegal operations and corruption schemes in great detail. Following these accusations, the VOA broadcasted it daily in a variety of languages, attracting ever increasing public interest.<sup>6</sup>

A couple of these later, on the evening of May 31st, Vlasov's accusations were widely discussed in *Vzglyad*.<sup>7</sup> At bus stations, taxi stations, movie theatres, and other public areas, people discussed the KGB and Vlasov's political position.<sup>8</sup> Because of his status as a champion, Vlasov was well-known, and he could give numerous interviews in the daily media without risking repercussions from the KGB. As this new political wind blew through Congress, some Deputies followed in his footsteps, although others did not.<sup>9</sup> Because Vlasov's accusations identified the KGB's unique corrupt mechanisms, Gorbachev permitted his statements "under *Glasnost*".<sup>10</sup> Vlasov had at first only wanted to criticize the sports committee, but, after Gorbachev's encouragement, expanded his criticism to include the entire political system of the USSR.<sup>11</sup> His ten-minute speech, live broadcasted, changed people's minds and deeply weakened the KGB's control over the media. The BBC, VOA, and other Western media watched and waited to

<sup>4</sup> Anniversary of the "Vzglyad" program that changed the country: 30 facts about the legendary program. Komsomolskaya Pravda. 2011.

<sup>5</sup> John Miller, Mikhail Gorbachev and the End of Soviet Power. 1993

<sup>6</sup> The History Of The Soviet Bloc 1945–1991 A CHRONOLOGY. Part 5 1988–1991 Edited by Csaba BÉKÉS Research Chair, Center of Social Sciences, Institute for Political Science, Hungarian Academy of Sciences; Budapest 2017

<sup>7</sup> Yuri Vlasov chat with Gorbachev at Congress before speech: interview with Andrei Karaulov in *Vokrug Kremlya* (Around the Kremlin) (Moscow: Novosti, 1990), p.282. Vlasov speech to Congress: BBC Summary of World Broadcasts. SU/0477, pp C/16-19.

<sup>8</sup> Anniversary of the "Vzglyad" program that changed the country: 30 facts about the legendary program. Komsomolskaya Pravda. 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Wim P. van Meurs. The Bessarabian question in Communist historiography. Nationalist and communist political and History-Writing. East European Monographs Distributed by Columbia University Press, New York 1994

<sup>10</sup> Alan Cassels. Ideology and international relations in the modern world. Total war and propaganda 206. First published 1996 by Routledge 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

<sup>11</sup> Evgeniya Konovalova The Effects of Western Broadcasting on the Soviet People in Glasnost and Perestroika Period: The Case of RadioFree Europe/Radio Liberty M. A. Dissertation Prague 2012



see how Vlasov would finish his conclusion. Vlasov's political status also improved as a result all this attention. Even before he had been regarded as a working-class hero. Now, people started to view him as a fighter against corruption.<sup>12</sup> The KGB was unable to stop him. Vlasov had said in his speeches that any unresolved criticism and pressure on him should be blamed on the KGB and had pointed out that the government's response to his actions would affect the entire USSR's foreign policy. Foreign journalists had been given a certain level of freedom in the USSR thanks to Gorbachev's *Glasnost* program.<sup>13</sup> As a result, Vlasov could challenge corruption in Congress and the KGB was powerless to resist. This would have been impossible but for the important link between foreign policy and national press freedom.

The first demonstrations in front of the Kremlin started after Vlasov's critical speeches. Even though these demonstrations were small, the situation was regarded as extremely dangerous for Communism by the Party. Because the ban on the Voice of America and other Western media was lifted, the government was always in no rush to use force to end such incidents. Rather, the Gorbachev administration started to appease the public by endorsing these critiques.<sup>14</sup> The government boldly asserted that *Glasnost* was the correct way to deal with these protests, which was warmly accepted by Voice of America and other Western media. The proliferation of critical articles further accelerated the process. It is shocking that the Communist Party, which had violently crushed any opposition before 1985 now found itself in apposition where it was cheering on protest.<sup>15</sup> The Party had been completely unaware of these problems for years, ignoring important articles in the international press. In certain ways, this was a result of the fact that the public did not trust the Soviet propaganda machine's claims. A Soviet citizen could not decide about the veracity of the news without relying on information from the West. On the one side, this also became possible due to the public's increasing dislike of the KGB. The Soviet people, who had long believed their false information, now started to look down on them, furthering eroding KGB power.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Anniversary of the "Vzglyad" program that changed the country: 30 facts about the legendary program. Komsomolskaya Pravda. 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold* (Washington, D.C., 2003).

<sup>14</sup> At The New Stage Of Restructuring. Speech by M. S. Gorbachev at a Meeting in the CPSU Central Committee With Executives of the Mass News Media, Ideological Institutions and Creative Unions [on Sept. 23 Trans.] *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, The, No.39, Vol.40, October 26, 1988, page(s):7-9 Publication. Minneapolis, USA. Note: After his speech foreign media entered to the Soviets countries.

<sup>15</sup> At The New Stage Of Restructuring. Speech by M. S. Gorbachev at a Meeting in the CPSU Central Committee With Executives of the Mass News Media, Ideological Institutions and Creative Unions [on Sept. 23 Trans.] *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, The, No.39, Vol.40, October 26, 1988, page(s):7-9

<sup>16</sup> A.Lopuxin. В секрете - по всему миру [In Secret - All Over the World], *Pravda*. 1989 January 8, p.5.



What distinguish VOA in affecting USSR from other western media or other institution devises was the size of its audience and its use of multiple languages in broadcasting. As a result, it had more influence than other Western organizations and programs. This becomes clear when looking at Soviet governmental sources. The fact that the VOA had been supported by Congress from the start is also a hint, just like the dramatic shift in US policy after the Soviet Union attempted to disable the VOA.<sup>17</sup> The KGB was furthermore notas hostile to the VOA as to other Western organizations or media at first. The USSR has been steadily strengthening its ideological defenses against VOA propaganda while also carrying out real activities against the VOA, which is another sign of its importance.

Following these incidents, Pravda articles began to change their tone. The Pravda, in particular, started to publish articles about the importance of "protecting the communist idea."<sup>18</sup> Various ideas appeared in these articles on how the U.S and Western media were destroying communist ideals and how this needed to be discussed. However, as a result of conflicting information freely transmitted via radio and television, articles like these were losing ground. Yulesnichenko, a political analyst for the Pravda, wrote about these *Strasti po ideologii* (Passions over Ideology).<sup>19</sup> He carefully analyzed the immense impact of the entire Western and American media on the USSR, even daring to suggest that Gorbachev's strategy would have disastrous consequences. That is, the Voice of America served to train the enemy inside through its broadcasts, reducing the influence of communist ideas throughout the Union. As a result, all members of the media, he argued, had to emphasize the importance of intellectual unity in *Glasnost*.<sup>20</sup>

Yulesnichenko's analysis was difficult for anyone to accept because everyone's attention was focused on resolving weekly adjustments and analyses during live shows, which formed a completely different world. In addition, such paper publications were aimed at party officials and largely overlooked by the general public. Also, politicians and diplomats who had returned from the USA or Western Europe to the USSR unknowingly increased the USSR's interest in the West.<sup>21</sup> Yulesnichenko had included concrete examples to support his argument. In his article, he discussed the weakening of the Soviet Union's impact in Eastern Europe, as well as the massive changes in

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Yulisnechenko. Увлечения идеологией (Passions on ideology) ,Pravda. 1990.08.09, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> A.Lopuxin. В секрете - по всему миру [In Secret - All Over the World],Pravda. 1989 January 8,p.5.

<sup>19</sup> Soviet People in Glasnost and Perestroika Period: The Case of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty M. A. Dissertation Prague2012

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Yulisnechenko. Увлечения идеологией (Passions on ideology) ,Pravda. 1990.08.09, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Soviet People in Glasnost and Perestroika Period: The Case of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty M. A. Dissertation Prague2012



the media and, most importantly, the USSR's rapid disintegration that would follow if these processes persisted. This should have been one of the government's most significant policies, but, at a time when media processes were accelerating and KGB control was under criticism, his analysis was misinterpreted as an effort to defend the KGB. No follow-up articles were therefore published by the Pravda.<sup>22</sup> This, in particular, highlights the US and Western press's influence on the USSR media landscape.<sup>23</sup> According to Yulesnichenko, US media expected that the USSR would fall apart any time soon. His analysis' main point focused on the weakening of KGB control in Eastern and Central Europe and the increasing cultural inclination among the young generation towards the West. He therefore described the USSR's drastic media reforms as "dangerous." But his plea fell on deaf ears.

The Pravda itself also reformed, not only in content but also in style as new formats were adopted as it rid itself of its role as party newspaper. Any of these reforms ran counter to the Communist Party's priorities, but this was not an obstacle. The last two pages of the Pravda, for example, were written as a fully separate newspaper, "Crocodile", by 1991. The newspaper first published an article on crocodiles in 1985 as part of an effort to appeal to the general public. By 1991, under the influence of *Glasnost*, this writing about "crocodiles" instead of politics started to take up half the Pravda. It would appear on one to three pages and might even contain cartoons criticizing the Communist Party's domestic or foreign policy. Also, articles claiming that the USSR was falling behind the US and Western Europe were published in this section.<sup>24</sup> In addition, VOA news was also recorded on this page, along with the frequencies on which the VOA could be listened, since the KGB was trying to suppress people from listening to international radio stations. This meant that information about new waves and shifting ether duration were useful for potential listeners. At this point, another door was opened for American media to intervene in the Soviet Union's political and social life. The "Crocodile" was influenced heavily by American media and started to publish about liberalism and Western philosophy.<sup>25</sup> This was a strategic move to startle the Soviet people and exacerbate the country's problems to increase political instability. Interviews with politicians, different political

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<sup>22</sup> A. Stepanov. A trip from A to Z. — Or from 'unofficial' art to the propagation of anti-Sovietism. Source Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, The, No.19, Vol.38, June 11, 1986, page(s):13-14 Place of Publication Minneapolis, USA

<sup>23</sup> V. Linnik, Good news from Princeton. Source Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, The, No.3, Vol.40, February 17, 1988, page(s):16-17 Place of Publication Minneapolis, USA

<sup>24</sup> A. Stepanov. A trip from A to Z. — Or from 'unofficial' art to the propagation of anti-Sovietism. Source Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, The, No.19, Vol.38, June 11, 1986, page(s):13-14 Place of Publication Minneapolis, USA

<sup>25</sup> Pravda experts, Окна перестройки Сатирики и юмористы на круглом столе в Правде (Perestroika windows Satirists and humorists at the Pravda round table). Pravda 1990 May 4. P, 4. Note: The attitude of the US media toward the progress of media liberalization in the USSR was critically studied by Pravda experts in this analytical article.



forecasts, and caricatures also become key topics in this part of the Pravda. Despite Yulesnichenko's warnings, the "Crocodile" continued to evolve.

The same trend was visible in other areas of life. A radio interview with Yevgeny Dodolyov, one of *Vzglyad's* writers, provides some interesting views on the issue. He was questioned by a journalist who asked whether "Vzglyad [was] a product of Western media?" He did not answer this question, and instead jokingly replied that "Only brave journalists who are unafraid of censorship have been invited. We've also inspired a large number of [these] journalists."<sup>26</sup> According to Dodolyov, some underground networks had started to function freely as a result of the show's success, and others were very active as well.

The first episode of VZGLYAD aired on October 10, 1989.<sup>27</sup> The most fascinating aspect for 80s Soviet citizens was that the entire procedure was carried out live, in real time. In other words, the entire event was launched simultaneously by singers, dancers, and journalists. The initial show's content started apolitically, with some dancers in a concert. The dancers did an introductory routine to American rock music, which drew the public's attention. Because everyone in the audience believed that the concert was about music and dance, the switch to a talk show happened quite unexpected. While the dancer continues dancing throughout the 1 hour and 15 show, the show's host started to present this by exhibiting various motions and graphics, and broadcasts from journalists on location. The appeal of the program was enhanced because artists had been invited to the studio to sing songs and play music to fill gaps whenever technological problems or delays occurred during the introductory program. The episode discussed rural life, urban congestion, the quick development of a new type of music ('rock n roll') in Moscow, a discussion of Japanese samurai films, a meeting with USSR Foreign Minister Vladimir Mikhailovich Vinogradov, a certain Soviet film and comments on related US films, and contained a lot of journalistic rhetoric. After the first show, the number of visitors to Rock N Roll clubs across Moscow rose sharply.

Shows like "Lastochka" (Swallow, bird) and "Copy" produced their performances at a breakneck pace.<sup>28</sup> Lastochka originated as a mobile club that began exhibiting American and Western films in the back alleys of the country. But as a result of the growing interest in America, Lastochka's customers increased it had to expand its networks. By 1991, it had opened branches all over the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> In the Pravda, Dodolyov

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<sup>26</sup> John M. Kramer. Political Corruption in the U. S. S. R. The Western Political Quarterly, Jun. 1977, Published by: University of Utah on behalf of the Western Political Science Association

<sup>27</sup> Archie Brown. The Soviet Union: Reform of the System or Systemic Transformation? Cambridge University Press. 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Anniversary of the "Vzglyad" program that changed the country: 30 facts about the legendary program. Komsomolskaya Pravda. 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Anniversary of the "Vzglyad" program that changed the country: 30 facts about the legendary program. Komsomolskaya Pravda. 2011.



started to write publicly about his activities, two noteworthy articles being "Lastochka - a pornography video club" and "Lastochka - the communist revolution", because both activities used to be illegal under communism.<sup>30</sup> However, from 1990 TV in the weekend was dominated by pornography films. He commented that "'Lastochka" posters started to appear freely and near Moscow's main train stations. Tourists from the United States and Western Europe were the primary source of these films on the black market."<sup>31</sup>

The Copy network on the other hand had been activated due to the high demand for Western media goods. The network's primary business was supplying the black market with video tapes and audio cassettes. In effect, they competed with Lastochka for the black market in Western media. By 1991, most people came to own video recorders and many people began to form private clubs to watch western media. This resulted in a rising demand for songs and TV clips from American films.<sup>32</sup>

American media also helped spreading the idea of the "American Dream" through the USSR. For example, one of the weekly reports' headlines was that "Americans don't watch a movie at the cinema, but at home", suggesting that Americans live materially better lives than Soviets.<sup>33</sup> The article sparked a lot of interest. Media had been an essential part of life in the Soviet Union for decades because of all the changes in the political situation. Keeping up with the news regularly had become a priority as well as a daily chore. Furthermore, as technology advanced, the possibilities for private movies or sound clubs had increased. As a result, the VOR (Videotape of Recorder)-market in the USSR was booming and most were imported from Japan and the United States. These were viewed as a perfect example of American culture.<sup>34</sup> The fact that even significant amounts of *government* funds were allocated to the import of VOR attests to this.<sup>35</sup> Along with VOR cassettes, a slew of American media shows began to find their way across the Soviet Union's territory. Internal cable providers started to broadcast such shows as a special service.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Gorbachev's 1987 speech to Komsomol congress: "Molodyozh-Tvorcheskaya Sila Revolyutsionnogo Obnavleniya" (Youth-Creative Force of Revolutionary Renewal), brochure containing text of April 16, 1987, speech (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), pp18-19. Source: Volkogonov Collection, Reel 17, Container 25. On file at the National Security Archive. Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya.

<sup>31</sup> Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, Featured News Stories. Minneapolis, USA. 1985-1991

<sup>32</sup> I. Latishyev. Большой и маленький экраны Японии (Large and small screens of Japan) Pravda May 17, 1990. P, 4

<sup>33</sup> Andrei G. Ritcher. Ideology of perestroika and the Soviet Mass Media. N.17. 2001 year. 225|Ibid. Pp130-140

<sup>34</sup> Robert A. Dahl, "Why All Democratic Countries Have Mixed Economies," in John W. Chapman and Ian Shapiro, eds., Democratic Community. New York, 1993

<sup>35</sup> GosKomStata Sobsheniye. Ускорить здоровую экономику Социально-экономическое развитие СССР в 1989 г. (Speed up healthy economy Social and economic development of the USSR in 1989) Pravda 1990 January 28. Pages 1-2.

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