



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Statement at the Permanent Council
(Review of Current Issues)

Vienna, 7 September 2000

Madame Chairperson, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to draw your attention today to current media developments in Russia. First of all I would like to extend my condolences to the Russian people regarding the death of 118 sailors on the Kursk nuclear submarine last month.

The Kursk tragedy and the fire at the Ostankino TV tower in Moscow that blanked millions of television sets showed once again how important media is in the life of people. After the fire, in trying to fill the information vacuum, daily newspapers were selling out by early morning and the three leading Russian news providers on the Internet crashed because of an influx of users.

The death of so many marine soldiers has opened a very serious and challenging debate on the role of the media in OSCE's largest participating State. During the month of August Russian media, in an invigorated and combative mood, tried to provide the people with information on this tragedy in real time.

For example, NTV, the leading non-government national television channel, on the one hand was accused by some independent experts of "waging a campaign against the president," on the other it had been praised for regaining "its combative voice."

The coverage of the Kursk tragedy prompted Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Deputy Speaker of the Russian Duma, to ask Putin to withdraw NTV's licence. According to Zhirinovsky, NTV programmes "were hazardous to the health of the population because of their anti-Russian character."

NTV, like any other media outlet, can and should provide a forum so that different views, especially at a time of national crisis, are aired for the benefit of the public. Many of the views may be critical of the government and here media play a corrective role by bringing to the public's attention cases of government mismanagement and even corruption. Providing such a forum is not a reason to revoke a station's licence.

According to an opinion poll conducted by the All-Russian Centre for Public Opinion Research, 53 percent of the population thinks the media "played a positive role" during the Kursk crisis. The Centre's Director, a respected Russian pollster Yuri Levada believes that "the atmosphere the media created forced the government to invite foreign help [to recover the bodies]. That surely wouldn't have happened without them."

How will this new situation, the combative spirit among many journalists, the atmosphere of openness in the country, already deeply routed, affect the future relationship between the media and the government of Russia is the topic of this statement. Most of the information evaluated is from Russian sources and experts that my Office interviewed.

However, if the current volatile situation develops in a negative direction with pressure being applied on non-government media - the OSCE Permanent Council should be informed. This negative scenario is still possible. This is how I understand the early-warning function of my mandate.

Boris Berezovsky, a leading Russian media owner, wrote a letter to Putin on 4 September informing the President that he was transferring his shares in the main TV channel ORT to "journalists." According to Berezovsky, he made this decision after an "ultimatum" was issued by the President's administration that he had two weeks to transfer all his ORT shares to the government.

"By issuing this ultimatum, you have basically asked society a question: does non-government media have a right to function in Russia. If I agree to this ultimatum there will be no television information, it would be replaced by television propaganda controlled by your advisers," wrote in his letter Berezovsky. Names of potential beneficiaries - future owners of ORT stock - are being reported in the Russian media.

At the Istanbul Summit the participating States reaffirmed "the importance of independent media and free flow of information as well as the public's access to information. We commit ourselves to take all necessary steps to ensure the basic conditions for free and independent media."

It is the freedom of journalistic media that the OSCE, a declared community of democracies, is there to protect.