

Television as an Element in the Democratization of a Society in Transition - Uzbekistan: Experience, Problems and Perspectives

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Introduction

A transitional period for television in the former Soviet Union began long before the country collapsed. During Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika the content of television programming began quietly changing from an aggressively ideological standpoint towards viewpoint pluralism. The collapse of the USSR accelerated the process of transition, opening opportunities for the newly independent republics' television systems and allowing them to choose their own development paths. Thus, the transition period for contemporary Uzbek television started from that point.

This paper will explore the role of television in a changing society, how it affects social life, its role in the rebirth of national traditions and folk culture and as a reflection of state policy concerning ethnic issues, and its link to the processes of globalization in Uzbek society.

In 1991, after Uzbekistan declared independence, it chose a democratic way of governance and development. Changes related to the transition from a socialist system to a Western-style democracy have been reflected in television. These changes also concern issues such as relations between the state and television as a form of mass communications. These relations are very important in defining the role and place of television in a transitional society. Many problems related to relations between the state and television were common in all countries undergoing transition. Slavko Splichal, who wrote about television in post-socialist countries in his book "Media Beyond Socialism," says that changes in

media policy remain a “highly politicized question.”¹ He says that “the new governments do not hesitate to use regulations and strategies of the old authoritarian regimes to retain control of national broadcasting – either a direct control through appointments of boards, directors, and editors or a more indirect control through budgets and other economic instruments (e.g., state advertising).”²

Indeed, problems related to state and TV relations are complex and take time to be solved in a way favorable to media freedom. Solutions require a certain experience. Uzbekistan is a country that has never had a democratic tradition generally and particularly, e.g., in broadcasting. But no one of these arguments can diminish the contemporary role of the television in a new and changing society.

TV in a changing society

In the 1980s Uzbek society faced tough discussions over the influence of phones in people’s lives. One could hardly imagine that after ten to fifteen years television would change society even more radically. During those transition years many people were worried that concerns such as humanitarianism, taking care of the elderly and so forth were in decline because of the wide expansion of telephone communications. People assumed that telephone communications made them closer to each other by helping them solve many problems as well as saving time. But many young people stopped visiting their parents and other close relatives. Instead of visiting they phoned. It was perceived by many as a degradation and devaluation of long-term and well-established traditions tied to showing respect to older people, traditions that have always been considered to be of great value. The nascent attitudes among youth in the society were conceived by many people to be an abnormal aftermath of technology.

¹ Slavko Splichal. 1994. Media Beyond Socialism. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. P. 33.

² Ibid. P. 46

If once the “phone problem” evoked such tough public discourses, the impact of television on society—which exceeds the telephone’s impact by many times—never was a topic for disputations. The main reason was that people did not perceive how television was changing their lives because it was a gradual and long-lasting process that affected social changes step by step. This impact became stronger during the post-Soviet transition period, which is still going on.

After Uzbekistan gained its independence television became the strongest and the most powerful medium in the country. It has been used as an effective tool of propaganda as well, which will be discussed later. So, sole leadership of television among the other media outlets is determined by the three major factors.

First, during the Soviet period the Central Television, Gosteleradio, located in Moscow, had the pivotal role in programming, and covering main events in the country. The TV stations in the republics, including the TV and Radio Committee of Uzbekistan mainly played the role of mediators between local governments and the people. They mostly provided the republic’s government and Communist Party policies and translated the Central Television programs. All programs were required to be reconciled with the Central Television’s message and adapted to the Soviet ideology. Thus, television became the main propaganda machine of the Soviet system. These functions were not abandoned after independence. However, it is fair to say that the TV and Radio Company of Uzbekistan (Uzteleradio), a successor of former TV and Radio Committee of Uzbekistan, inherited the strong and modern technical base and highly qualified staff.

Second, increasing prices for newspapers during the 1990s has caused their circulations to drop. Dissemination of foreign newspapers, especially, those from Russia were restricted. This gave television another opportunity to become more influential. Television began filling a gap in the newspapers' market, and it did so successfully. During the 1990's almost all of the newspapers in Uzbekistan shifted from dailies to irregular (once every two or three days) or weekly publishing. Only three official newspapers, one in the Uzbek language and two in Russian, are published five times per week. Eventually, the unpopularity of the national newspapers enabled television to gain wide popularity in the country.

Third, in the mid-1990's a new national ideology of Uzbekistan began going into the conflict with the ideology disseminating through the Russian television's programs. This problem from one side and financial disputes over using an Uzteleradio channel for the Russian television between the TV and Radio Company and Russian ORT TV (formerly the Central TV) from other side ultimately led to restrictions of the latter's programs in Uzbekistan. As a result, the national television of Uzbekistan became the main source of information in the country. To illustrate, the percentage of households with television sets grew from 73 percent in 1990 to 92.5 percent in 2001.³

After a decade of Uzbek independence it is worthwhile to evaluate the television industry. Despite the monopoly of the TV and Radio Company of Uzbekistan in the nationwide broadcasting market, almost all regional, local and private TV stations emerged during the first five years of independence. Only regional television STV in city of Samarqand and local "Orbita" TV in Angren district of Tashkent region were established in May 1991, just a few months before the country declared independence.

³ See Kobil Ulugov, "Determination of socio-economical changes," *Hayot va Iqtisod* (Life and Economy) 12, no. 2 (May-June, 2001): p. 18.

Today nearly 50 television stations, including 35 private, are operating in the provinces,⁴ which has enabled the formation of the broadcasting market in the country.

This market is a totally new sphere of the television business in Uzbekistan (and other countries in the Central Asia). There have been successes and failures, disputes and abuses assigned TV channels, professionalism versus non-professionalism, and so forth. But the main issue is that the region ultimately got its own market, which is gradually developing. We cannot unambiguously say that a particular country in the region is leading in this area. If we juxtapose the condition of the television broadcasting markets in the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan may seem a little more advanced.⁵ American researcher Jeff Brown has noted that by July 1992, ten TV channels were operating in Kazakhstan, including four commercial channels. At the same time he acknowledged that “the government, however, continues to control most broadcasting facilities.”⁶

Government control is not only Kazakhstan’s media problem. The TV and Radio Company of Uzbekistan also is under strict government control. The reason is simple: It is subsidized by the government. Certainly, this subsidy was understandable in the first years after independence. As mentioned above, television was a propaganda tool, and after independence it could only operate with state support. At that time the broadcast market was in its early stage of emergence, and Uzteleradio could not operate in the market without state subsidies. An undeveloped market made it financially dependant on the government. Of course, state support is diminishing every year in proportion to the

⁴ See “Country profile: Uzbekistan,” BBC World/News on-line: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1238242.stm

⁵ Jeff Brown, “Mass Media in Transition in Central Asia,” *Gazette* 54 (1995): p. 257.

⁶ *Ibid.*

growth of revenues from the advertising; however, the dream of financial independence seems a long way off for the largest television station in the country.

While the TV and Radio Company was adapting to the new market, TV stations in the provinces began serious competition with one another. Because these TV stations emerged alongside the broadcast market, they were more flexible and better able to respond to the new market. In the mid-1990's there were even cases of mergers on the regional level. For example, two competing TV stations in the city of Samarqand merged in 1992 to establish the largest non-governmental TV station in Uzbekistan, Samarqand TV (STV). At the time it was unique in the Central Asia. Today it is a popular, professionally run television station with many viewers. According to its former president, Ferdous Abdukhalikov, the company originates almost 70 percent of STV's programming.⁷

TV and reanimation of the folk culture

Coverage of cultural issues is one of the less politicized aspects of television. In this realm television has had a number of successful initiatives and television stations have promoted many positive changes in society. Hence, television played a great role in the reanimation of the national holidays, customs, games, handicrafts, and so on.

During the Soviet regime much of folk culture was prohibited or restricted. It was believed that folk culture was related to religion and/or was a bourgeois or feudal artifact. As a consequence of these kinds of intolerant Communist rules many customs were not allowed to be practiced. Some of these customs have been forgotten; others have disappeared. As an example of the cynical attitude of the

⁷ "Conference materials on "Mass media in the turning point of the XX century" (Tashkent: Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the International In-Service Training Centre for Journalists, 1999), p 27.

former Communist leaders toward folk culture, the largest and most popular national holiday, Navruz, which has for more than a thousand years celebrated as a spring equinox, was rated as a religious tradition. Even though Navruz (“New Day”) has nothing to do with religion, it was banned as a “malicious” holiday in the early 1980’s. The national game “Koopkary” (the horseback rally of men with a headless goat, the analog of now-famous Afghan game “Buzkashi”) and other customs faced also the same fate. During the transition period television played a really pivotal role in bringing the folk traditions and customs to the people.

An interesting phenomenon is that regional and local television stations paid more attention to these issues than the national television did. The Uzteleradio mostly focused its attention on the questions of Navruz at the beginning of 1990s while regional and local TVs took care about not only Navruz, but also other folk customs and traditions. Coverage of the previously restricted or forgotten folk culture and customs was a crucial element in obtaining wide popularity for the regional and local TV stations. This kind of exercise of the television stations in provinces was an instant and timely reaction to the reality of a changing society. In particular, the success of STV in Samarqand, ATV in Andijan, Muloqot TV in Fergana, and NTV in Namangan is linked to this activity. Because of their popularity, transmission of programs from STV and ATV stretches even beyond their home regions.

Coverage of cultural issues was one of the few sides of the social life in which regional and local television could really compete with the mighty TV and Radio Company of Uzbekistan, which is geographically remote and isolated from the cultures and problems in the regions. There is no doubt that the success in cultural coverage and some other aspects of social life helped regional and local TV stations gain audience share in their nascent media markets.

TV and minorities

Uzbekistan is a multicultural country. About 100 ethnic groups live in the republic. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the new government identified ethnic issues as an important area of policy. Thus, coverage of the lives of ethnic minorities was instituted by the TV and Radio Company of Uzbekistan, which created an International channel on national television. Ethnic Russians, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs, Uygurs, Koreans, Ukrainians and other nationalities were given time quotas on television for programs in their native languages. But Russian programs were not just restricted to this quota. Many Russian-language programs appeared on all channels (there are four channels under the Uzteleradio). Additionally, programs from Moscow ORT television and the “Vesti” news program from the Russian government’s television also are regularly broadcast.

Regional and local television plays a role in ethnic issues, too. Among them we may note STV of Samarqand, which gives these kinds of issues plenty of attention. STV programs are prepared in three languages: Uzbek, Russian and Tajik. Hence, the lives of the Tajik and Russian populations—as well as Uzbeks—are covered by this station. There are also some stations in the country where Uzbek is not the predominant language. For example, more than 60 percent of programs from the “Orbita” TV station in the Angren district of the Tashkent region are in Russian language; more than half of programs of the local television in the district of Tomdi, which is in Navai region, are in Kazakh.⁸ However, despite the many regional and local television programs in the languages of minorities, ethnic issues are a priority of the TV and Radio Company of Uzbekistan.

⁸ Barot Aslanov, “Local television: covering social issues,” *Hurriyat* (“Freedom”) (April 18, 2001): A1.

Regulation of ethnic issues through the mass media, especially television, helped the country reduce ethnic tensions and keep the peace. During 1989 in the Tashkent and Fergana regions (a part of the Fergana Valley that stretches through the territory of three neighboring countries – Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) fighting between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks led to bloodshed. In 1990 in Osh province (also a part of Fergana Valley) of Kyrgyzstan a brutal bloody clash between Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs took place. Those days, television demonstrated its ability to help in solving inter-ethnic conflicts and other social problems.

During those periods of conflict, television broadcast many programs devoted to the friendship and fraternity between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks and Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs. When Meskhetian Turks (originally from the Caucasus, they were deported by Soviet leader Stalin in 1944 and resettled in Uzbekistan) came to Uzbekistan Uzbeks shared everything with them and together they built the economy of the region after World War II. That's why their relationship had no long history during which serious disputes over various issues might develop. There were many inter-marriages between the two groups after Meskhetian Turks arrived in Uzbekistan. So, for example, a small dispute in a bazaar between a few Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks over the price of strawberries, which was the beginning of the inter-ethnic clash, did not have deep historical roots. It was simply an explosion of emotions provoked by the social tensions and desperation evoked by the deepening crisis in the Soviet regime before its collapse. That kind of scenario of Uzbek-Meskhetian Turk clashes could have been between Uzbeks and any of the other ethnic groups in the country. But television was able to explain the substance of the problem and call on the public to be patient and not give in provocations and emotions. Television organized joint concerts and shows of Uzbek and Meskhetian Turk artists in the places where conflicts occurred. It worked. The conflicts ceased and have not recurred.

This experience helped television to assist in solving inter-ethnic disputes between Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks during the Osh tragedy a year later. Uzbek television showed the villages in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan, where Uzbeks and Kyrgyz people lived peacefully beside each another. Scenes of inter-marriage wedding ceremonies between the representatives of these two nationalities were shown. Meanwhile, across the border in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbek-Kyrgyz tensions were high. Television programs showed old people, Uzbek students of the Kyrgyz universities, Kyrgyz students of the Uzbek universities, and just ordinary citizens belonging to various ethnic groups calling for the fighting in Osh to stop. As television programs of Uzteleradio were available in Osh, they succeeded in helping to stop the violence. Of course, the television broadcasts during the Tashkent, Fergana and Osh events may look like propaganda, but it is hard to criticize it when it was so helpful in the cause of achieving peace.

Ethnic issues are delicate questions not only for the mass media in the Central Asia. Since the end of the Soviet Union, Russian media also have shown considerable interest in ethnic issues. But there were many controversies because the Russian media, especially television, were not always telling people the truth. For example, covering the Tajik civil war and the unstable postwar years, the Russian media, particularly television, tried to emphasize the nationality of casualties in the news, pointing out Tajiks and Uzbeks. For example, a rebellion led by a colonel of Tajikistan's military forces, Makhmud Khudayberdiyev, who was ethnically Uzbek, was described in the Russian media as a dispute between Tajiks and Uzbeks. But those allegations were groundless. They were nothing more than exhortation of two titular nationalities of the region for a conflict. In another case, while covering social life and living conditions in the Central Asian republics, particularly Uzbekistan, Russian television always

drew viewers' attention to the issue how Russians and Russian-speaking population were "suffering" in this land and how they were leaving these countries. This kind of approach in covering social issues in Central Asia provoked an increase in the flow of the Russian-speaking population from the region.

Of course, not all of the Russian media materials might be accused on bias and partiality. Some were objective, fair and balanced publications and broadcasts. Nevertheless, the tone and content of the coverage of ethnic issues and criticism in the Russian media was not always given a hearty welcome in Uzbekistan. In the aftermath of events such as those just described, many Russian newspapers lost circulation or ceased publication, and the dissemination of many television programs in Uzbekistan ended. At the same time as the public was not able to get Russian newspapers and television programs, control over the Uzbek television became tighter in order to prevent disruptive materials on ethnic issues.

No doubt the media restrictions cannot be squared with the concepts of the freedom of speech and democracy. Nevertheless, we cannot diminish the great role television played despite the regulations in helping to maintain tolerance and peace during the harsh periods of the transition. Although the choice between the freedom of the press and the interests of social security tilted toward the latter, television is continuing to play its own role as a democratic institution.

TV and Globalization

TV and Globalization: Is there a link between them? To call television a chief conduit for the globalization processes in the new democracies in Central Asia would not be precisely correct. But if we take into account a contemporary locus of television in countries of the region, one may assume

that this medium is one of the most successful tools of penetration of the global culture in a society, particularly in Uzbek society, where the internet has not yet become an integral part of the social life. Thus, television may play a pivotal role in issues surrounding globalization.

Development of digital technologies, widening access to the global information sources, and growth in the use of English and other world-wide spoken languages in the country all potentially accelerate the opening of doors to the global culture. With regard to the processes of globalization, television has sharply changed since 1990. Today Uzbek viewers can watch programs not only from national, regional, and local television, but also receive information directly from international sources via satellite.

Satellite television access is available in Tashkent, the capital, and it is regulated by the Uzbek-American joint venture Kamalak TV. Also five or six Russian TV channels are available on cable television in the capital, depending on the area of transmission or the provider. But, as mentioned above, the International channel on Uzbek TV translates programs of many foreign TV companies. Russian ORT TV and VGTRK (Russian state TV) programs, Turkish television's programs in their original language, BBC programs sometimes in English, but mostly with Russian or Uzbek translation, Deutsche Welle (a German Satellite TV), and Indian TV Doordarshan's programs in translation can all be seen. CNN and BBC news materials are widely used in the first channel's "Akhborot" ("News") program in Uzbek and Russian languages and "Davr" ("Time") news service on the Youth channel (the second channel). In 2001 an entertainment program called "CNN Show" was launched on the International channel. It is based on material from CNN international.

Paradoxically, despite fewer original programs compared with other channels the international channel of TV and Radio Company is still popular in the country. Young people especially prefer this channel, which could be explained by its relative lack of politicization.

The regional TV stations also may make programs on international topics. But because of time and financial limitations they limit themselves mostly with international news rewritten from the National TV - Uzteleradio. Only Samarqand TV, which has two channels, has regular foreign programming on cultural topics.

Watching contemporary television in Uzbekistan some ten years ago, one could hardly imagine that it would make the world seem so small and introduce the cultures of the countries from the former “enemy camp.” Indeed, the world and attitudes in it have changed a lot since then. As American professor Monroe Price acknowledged: “We are now in a world characterized by the diminished power of the state, where the boundaries of a previous era, such as the Mexican-American border, the Berlin Wall, and the Great Wall of China are no longer ‘defendable.’ ”⁹

Conclusion

Today Uzbek mass media are passing through an uneasy stage of development. Media, including television, facing economic difficulties and lack of freedom of expression. Despite this the television industry in the last decade has made a certain step forward; an advertising market has emerged, and journalists have learned to work in new circumstances, where competition is a new phenomenon.

Regional and local TV stations found their own audience and a place in the broadcast market. The

⁹ Materials of the international conference on “National Boundaries, Global Communications” at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, May 9, 1997.

number of newspapers has tripled since 1990. All of these facts demonstrate progress in the sphere of mass media overall.

However, these changes in the mass media system brought with them a problem related to the correlation of quantity and quality. Uzbekistan has enough media outlets to assure diversity. Now it is time to convert quantity into quality. Unfortunately, this process is slow and in some places even at a standstill. The problem cannot be solved effectively unless foreign investments flow to the media industry. Such investments also enable media to be financially independent from the government. Hence, a restrictive Uzbekistani legislature on media ownership should be revised according to international standards and democratic traditions. Once these problems are solved a free media will be feasible.