

INITIATIVES OF TV ETHICS CONTROL BY RELIGIONS IN RUSSIA: CHALLENGES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

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Introduction and Historical Background

The diversity of attitudes of Russian society towards television coupled with many plots and subplots emerged in the public arena providing us with an opportunity to consider them as an indicators of the maturity of civil society in Russia. It is also an indicator of the level of influence that religions have in the public sphere and the content of TV programs. I will base my judgment on public declarations by authorities of the idea that Russia strives to build a civil society, rather than examining in details the discussion whether the existence of a civil society in Russia is a fact. The current situation on Russian TV is a permanent source of concern for many people in Russia. Heated public debate about the necessity of social control over Russian TV programs was raised first by religious organizations and then supported by various groups of civil society. The current public debate over the moral control of TV has its roots in *perestroika*, a time when freedom of media was not accompanied by proper understanding of media responsibility in Russia.

In 1999 - this debate almost resulted in a legislative act, a federal law "On a Higher Council for the Defense of Morality in Television and Radio Broadcasting in the Russian Federation." This law proposal passed through the State *Duma* [Parliament] and was approved by the Council of the Federation. But President Boris Yeltsin vetoed the law proposal (Media Law, 1999).

Contemporary "Paradoxes": The Public Trusts TV But Asks for Censorship

On the one hand the situation with the TV seems to be good – *people watch TV and trust it*. Representative survey of the urban population of Russia conducted by the Moscow Center for Mass Communications Studies in December 2008 (2467 respondents were queried in 20 locations) shows that television is the main source of information about current events – it was mentioned by 69.4 % of respondents. And the alienation of TV from the next source in the media hierarchy is very significant – newspapers were trusted by only 26.5 %. The next was the Internet and radio with almost equal number of respondents - 24.5% and 23.4% respectively (Razin, 2009). Russian sociologists note that the leadership of television in the mass media hierarchy has tended to increase.

According to the data of the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) on December, 16 2008, Russian citizens *most of all trust the central TV (70 %)*, of which 44% most often trust it and 26 % of respondents fully trust it. Inhabitants of middle, small towns and villages said that they trust this information source even more often (72-74 %). Distrust of the Central television is expressed by 25 % of Russians, though 17 % mostly do not trust it, while 8 % totally do not trust

it. This estimate is most typical for inhabitants of Moscow and Saint Petersburg (35 %); 2 % do not use this source for getting information. (VCIOM, 2008a)

VCIOM data published in December, 2008, show that 58 % of respondents suppose that *Russian media need state censorship*, of which 26 % of them are sure that this is necessary. One fourth (24 %) object to censorship (and just 8 % of them object strongly). Another fifth – or 18 % of respondents – found it difficult to replying. (VCIOM, 2008)

As I see it, the phenomenon of “trust with demand for censorship” is a good subject for the study for scholars researching TV audiences. However, deeper data analysis is necessary for clarifying the situation whereas the majority of sociological research services and centers publish the results of linear analysis of survey data. Most do not conduct additional analysis taking into consideration social and demographic characteristics of respondents, that are necessary to understand more precisely who demands censorship, and what kind it is..

Public Council for Morality on TV: Development of the Initiative

The idea of establishing the Public Council on Morality on TV was proposed by the Club of Orthodox Journalists in November 2007 and was supported by Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia. "The major part of society, politicians, pedagogues, artists, journalists say that no one is happy with destructive amorality and thoughtless entertainment dominating on TV as it harms everyone," Alexy II noted.

As can be seen from media interest in this topic and from the frequent mentioning of this idea in the media the amount or the “temperature” of journalistic and public attention to this issue did not decline, but remained at a constant level. The results of frequent analysis conducted using full text database of INTEGRUM sources show that press, radio and TV demonstrate stable interest in this subject. Diagram #1 illustrates the dynamics of mentions of the phrase “Public Council for Morality” in the national and regional press, national and regional information agencies, TV and radio broadcasting and online media in period of November 2007 – March 2009.

It is quite explainable that media interest increased when the chairman of the Council of Federation, Sergey Mironov and Patriarch Alexey II of Moscow and All Russia declared the necessity of establishing the Public Council (January, 2008) and during the discussions of proper law proposal at the State *Duma* (December, 2008)

Diagram #1. Level of Attention of Russian Media Regarding the Public Council for Morality



It is curious that television and radio themselves expressed minimum attention and demonstrated less interest to the possible establishment of the Council for Morality on TV (see table 1). This marginally proves their reluctance to accent the attention on the responsibility towards the audience and to acknowledge themselves affected.

Table 1. Diverse Media Attention to the Public Council for Morality

(from the time of plot appearance, November 2007 till February 2009). Database inquiry is "Public Council for Morality" (936 documents).

Type of media	Total number of mentions
Central printed media	102
Central information agencies	139
Regional printed media	122
Regional information agencies	21
Online mass media	518
Tele- and radio broadcasting	34

The following sections present the sides of the current debate on the subject, including supporters and opponents of social control.

Voices “Pro”

One of the brightest leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, (who at the time of the survey was vice-chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, but is currently the head of the Synodal Church and Society Department), believes that “the Council must not forbid anything, but should formulate an opinion, which will be brought to the viewers’ notice.”

Another position belongs to the Orthodox public circles. “The Council will not be involved in any kind of censorship, especially preliminary one. The Moral Council should give its judgment on the TV administration’s actions instead of censoring,” stated Alexander Schipkov, the chairman of the Orthodox journalists club and councilor to the Chairman of the Council of Federation. He also stressed that “Society has lost its control over TV channels, thus norms of public morality were violated and it results in defilement of children.”

Media also have their voice in these debates. President of the Orthodox media-holding “Radonezh” Evgeny Nikiforov, stated that the Council should in no way limit creative freedom and freedom of word, it only intended to oppose ‘freedom in business, freedom of greed’.

Leaders of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and other religious communities and also NGO's have supported the project. At the same time besides general complains about morality on TV any one of the religious organizations has permanent monitoring of TV programs or movies from their teaching view point. Religious leaders and journalists react “ad hoc” to the most controversial cases, pitting their hopes that the new Council will be established.

The head of the Ministry for Culture of the Russian Federation, Alexander Avdeev, described Russian TV products as “low-grade”, “immoral” and “harmful”. Saying this, minister Avdeev at the same time recognized that TV and mass media in general needed additional regulation from the Parliament and government.

The famous Russian TV journalist, Vladimir Pozner, said that during the recent parliamentary and presidential election campaigns, “there were some absolutely banned things: you cannot talk about this, you cannot show this, and you cannot invite that one.” Vladimir Pozner warned about the danger of “black”, “behind the curtain” regulation. Transparency and control by civil society systems seems to him to be more acceptable.

“Establishing a public council to supervise the federal TV channels' performance would be a great thing to do; we have agreed on its composition and range of authority,” Glasnost Defense Foundation president Alexei Simonov said. Alexei Simonov is a well-known fighter for freedom of speech. But he also insists on the extreme necessity of journalists' responsibility for the contents of mass media.

Internet public opinion survey conducted recently by web-portal *Religare.ru* shows, that about 70 % of visitors are in favor of the Council for Morality on TV, 26 % are against it and 3.9 % expressed no opinion. Let us look more attentively to the reasons and arguments of those who are against the Council. (“Religion and Media”, 2009).

Voices “Contra”

A controversial position is demonstrated by those professional, media public circles that show little concern about the spiritual side of a problem. The National Association of TV and Radio Broadcasters President Eduard Sagalayev stressed: “There is too little truth and too much vulgarity on our television.” The information policy that has taken shape in Russia “in fact does not provide for open debate and in fact does not provide for live broadcasts.” “I do not support the establishing of a public council supervising morals either. In addition, the new council will require a lot of

money. We would do better to invest such money in producing of programs for children," Sagalayev said. He does not see the Council as an efficient step in order to reduce vulgarity on Russian television.

The Chairman of the Public Chamber's Media and Freedom of Speech Commission, Pavel Gusev, said that the media law had no clauses pertaining to the activity of publishers and media owners. "Not only authorities but also owners put pressure on the media, and we must do something about that," he said. "I do not believe that any council can change something in our society and the media," said Gusev, who is head of a big media holding company himself. Pavel Gusev is the Editor-in-Chief of the biggest daily newspaper in Moscow, so his position is of more weight in public opinion in comparison to those who are in power.

Even if the council is made up of authoritative and unbiased people, they will be unable to cope with the large amount of television programs in modern Russia, said television journalist and head of the Public Chamber's Nationality Affairs Commission, Nikolai Svanidze. "There is not only a 'technical' reason: if it is impossible to monitor all TV content - there will be selection, and if there is selection - it could be easily used as a tool of pressure," stressed the journalist. Moreover up to this moment it is not known whether this advisory and supervising (in its concept) Council turns into the Ministry of the Truth from G. Orwell's "1984" having punitive rights? Journalists of the elder generation in Russia remember well such type of Soviet institution making merciless and categorical censorship as *Glavlit*.

The main theme of voices "contra" is a "phobia" of the renewal or rebirth of strong ideological controls on media, which has been dominant in the USSR. Those opponents who have invested into "immoral" business on TV very often claim that any attempt at regulation of media is an offensive step against the freedom of speech. They hide their interest and profit behind the slogan of "*Glasnost needs to be defended*." At the same time "Glasnost Defense Foundation" president Alexei Simonov is in favor of new Council for Morality on TV.

The discussion still continues. Russian Federation Council head, Sergey Mironov, confirmed that a public council may soon be established to supervise the content of programs on Russian television. He said he had already submitted an appropriate draft law to the State *Duma* for approval. After the public council initiative was supported by President Dmitry Medvedev at his meeting with *Duma* fraction leaders, it is likely to be approved by parliament without delay. Another step in that direction might be a ban on the show of commercials on public TV channels as it was done in France. The impact of a new Public Council may lead to substantial changes, from the review of policy concepts on federal TV channels to the replacement of their head managers.

Fundamental Challenges

The case for Public Council for Morality could be considered as the diagnostics of the relations between mass media and civil society in Russia. Evolution of civic attention toward Russian TV means that its accents are moving from the opportunity of participation in agenda setting processes or at least influencing this agenda setting and the media contents to the necessity of control. Systematic neglect of citizens as active subjects of information process, the imitation of their participation in TV activity (maximally as a crowd scene at talk-shows), arrogant reluctance to work with the audience have led to the situation that the most active citizens and public institutions expressed the will to control thing when they cannot participate in them. And if some time ago there was no threat for the monopoly and TV channels' owners and producers nowadays the idea of new institution that could obtain not only moral but real power attract the support and voices of highly influential politicians who would like to participate in media management.

Within the frames of the public debates regarding the Public Council for Morality idea, the major part of objections refer to the practical aspects of such a Council while the main obstacles significantly complicating the essence and sense of future activity of the Council are not articulated yet. And surely the presence of obstacles in a society such as Russia the principles of establishing such a council are in themselves problematic.

There is a set of problems that seem significant in the analysis of the possibility of realization of the "Public Council for Morality on TV" project.

The first significant problem is the absence of value consensus in Russian society.

In a multi-normative society in which different values and normative models caused by poly-confessional and poly-ethnic social structure coexist and which would be affected by other factors of diversity, the activity of any council for morality would be successful only if there would be a critical level of agreement of what is "good" and what is "bad."

Moreover reaching a "zone of agreement," a minimum of "axiological unity" seems to be increasingly remote at the present time. According to my observations during the last decades centrifugal forces damaging to values and normative space of social life are more evident than centripetal forces gathering and uniting society, leading it to agreement on the question of values. Here we do not mean vertically forced indoctrination, the attempts of normative uniting of values made "from above." These attempts – if we look at possible consequences – are seemingly the catalysts of "centrifugal forces".

The modern world offers great variety and variability of ethical norms and ideas about what is moral and what is not linked to the most important world view categories of a person – the attitude toward death, the idea of family, the understanding of social justice, etc. Conditions of relativist occasional ethics in pluralism destroyed the fragile social unity in Soviet Union quite rapidly (if we assume that such unity existed in reality).

In conditions of growing variability the elaboration of joint and united idea of *good* and *evil* becomes more and more problematic. For instance, a TV program where polygamy is represented in a positive way could be acceptable for Muslims but would provoke protests by Orthodox believers. The publication supporting the family status of homosexual couples becomes the reason for indignation for followers of traditional religions but fits well enough within the frame of liberal world views of modern youth. Public discussion about euthanasia has already divided several European countries. The list of examples could be continued. It is hard to imagine them as subjects of discussion at the meeting of the Public Council for Morality on TV and it is even more difficult to think about possibility to arrive at one, united, judgment of its members. It is a more realistic possibility in mono-confessional, mono-ethnic and theocratic countries.

That is why it is not surprising that two "test" sessions of the Council took place in atmosphere of discussions in which the opinions of participants have been divided. This is quite natural in above described context.

"What criteria will the members of the Public Council use in order to define what is moral and what is not?" was a question raised by N. Gevorkyan, a journalist of "Gazeta." Whether Saveliy Yamshikov uses the same criteria as Vitaliy Tretiakov, and whether Mikhail Leontiev uses the same as Pavel Lungin does? I'd like to understand – whether the words and actions of boys and maids from "Dom-2" project are more immoral than jokes which are offered to TV viewers for many hours per month trying to change them into brainless cretins? Do they consider such a "humor" immoral? Do they consider bloody and morbid nightmare and horror translated by NTV channel more moral than the "Dom-2" project"? (Gevorkian, 2008).

The problem of the fundamental possibility of consensus on values is very rarely mentioned in Russian mass media. To our mind this is the main obstacle to analyzing this initiative. It is the main but not the unique barrier.

The second significant problem for the Public Council for Morality on TV is the absence of a system of moral monitoring in mass media and public sphere from value defined, axiologically homogeneous social institutions and groups.

We are convinced that the highest level for aggregate judgment in the moral sphere is not the society of the entire country, but a *morally united monolithic homogeneous community* whose members have a consensus about *good* and *bad*. The uniting factor of such community is exactly common morals. That is why they could be named “crystallization centers” of the society if we use ethical indication, they could be also named the “magnets” or “leading lights.” Religious organizations and other institutions with an explicitly expressed moral “credo” should be put in this group.

They should be the main participants of social dialogue in the moral sphere accumulating and articulating value judgments rooted in fundamental normative models (such as of Torah, the Bible, Qur’an, the Book of Mormon, the oath of Hippocrates, etc) used in different situation of modern practice and activity. Total weight of these voices in polyphonic choir would be admittedly louder than voices of particular followers of some exotic ethical system.

Political parties and trade unions, clubs and other organizations where the uniting factor towards ethical issues is external (fight for power, assertion of professional interest, getting income, love for football or sauna, etc.) are not and fundamentally cannot be morally homogeneous social institutions. Maximally it is possible to discover their conventional professional ethics. The idea of *good* and *evil* apart from official activity is removed from the discussion to the private autonomous sphere of members’ life.

The problem is that there is no system of “moral monitoring” of events and phenomena of social life in media and public sphere made by acting and value defined communities. The light of “moral leading lights” is not seen, they are poorly visible, poorly evident on the horizon of public consciousness. In this context moral navigation of citizens is hardly realizable. Being confused in conditions of value diversity, quite often Russians are not able to make sensible choices; they are liable to normative pressure of different forces.

Even the voice of the most powerful of sources and opportunities and theoretically the most united community in modern Russia – the Russian Orthodox Church – is not heard regularly and systematically. The Church gives estimations in an *ad hoc* manner – when some scandalous and extremely immoral thing happens. As it was, for instance, with the “The Last Temptation of Christ” film release, with the concert of pop-singer Madonna crucifying herself on a cross, etc.

In ordinary life there is no regular production and distribution of morally evaluated judgments of TV production and wider enunciation of diverse socially significant problems and situations made by the Russian Orthodox Church. Moreover, as a press officer of the Russian Orthodox Church, priest Vladimir Vigilyanskiy, said that the Moscow Patriarchate did not plan to establish the structures for regular moral evaluation of cinema and TV production like ones created by the Roman Catholic Church. (Orthodox Council, 2008). Meanwhile at the Catholic Bishops Conference in the USA and in some Catholic countries there are special institutions constantly monitoring cultural life (primarily monitoring the film and television industry) and publishing lists of the main events and news of this or that sphere with reviews every week. From time to time Muslim leaders also publish the texts of normative and value contents – *fatwa* – actualizing dogma

in the social sphere. The aim of such an activity on the field of TV consumption is to support believers in making decision of what is worth seeing and what is not. These cases might also be found in other religions.

It is important that even within the same institution evaluation should come from moral authority of society but not from impersonal subjects representing institution in general otherwise the risk of harsh judgments of people's behavior and conscience would take places. Moral authorities should give guidelines but not rule the people.

The third significant problem for the Public Council for Morality on TV activity is the absence of a well-articulated dialogue of value systems.

If the moral monitoring of current events and facts does have a place, if "leading light" works properly it would be possible to speak about an articulated dialogue of value systems within the framework of constructing a normative model. In particular communication about moral norms and their implementation for codifying facts and events in society is a fundamental and necessary condition for formation of a balanced broadcasting policy.

Naturally this communication of value systems in the public sphere might be problematic, difficult and even conflictual but it would contribute to agenda setting and to elaboration of mediating mechanisms in the sphere of moral values. Moral dialogue in society is seen more naturally as polyphony of voices of mutually respecting axiological homogeneous social institutions than as a dissonant choir of voices of members from the Public Council who may be respected in society but are personalities singing in different keys.

Trying to explain the difficulties with establishing the Public Council idea publicist Vladimir Mozhegov stresses that idea that "moral councils" would be reasonable as "attempt to find the common denominator between fighting social camps." But, as he opines, "conservative consciousness a priori supposes that it knows the absolute truth. This causes an unconcealed party spirit, corporative feeling and containment of all actions". Vladimir Mozhegov reminds us of the phrase which Metropolitan Pitirim (Nechaev) of Volokolamsk liked to repeat: "Morality which needs to be defended is not worthy of being defended." (Mozhegov, 2008).

Sooner or later *the problem of subjectivity* appears. Citizens are necessary for civil control of TV programs. Inert consumers satisfied with poor media contents of low quality are not enough. Probably it would be possible to find 25 citizens for the membership in the Council for Morality. But they hardly could influence the TV production and contents without wider social support, without a solid basis of civil society.

Vitaliy Tretiakov, a Russian journalist, quite often discusses civil society topics in the Russian public sphere. In December 2008 he expressed the belief that at present there were just two powers that could be the base and support for promotion of the Public Council idea in Russia – they were Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. "If these two persons give a signal that this law project should be approved by the State *Duma* and the president is ready to sign it, that will be the way," said Tretiakov (Tretiakov, 2008). It is gratifying that he discovered two persons seriously influencing the formation of civil society in Russia. But what about the rest of the population? This question still remains rhetorical.

Besides the "immaturity" of Russian society which is diagnosed by many experts, in this article I would like to pay attention to the points which are not theoretically articulated up to this moment during the public debates regarding the future of Public Council for Morality on TV due to diverse reasons. Meanwhile I am convinced it will face these above mentioned obstacles. The case of the Public Council shows that the position of a unique "moral tuning fork" in a poly-

normative society is vulnerable and hard to implement.

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