
Program Brief

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The TV-6 Case: What Does It Mean? What Should We Do? A Panel Discussion

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At a recent Nixon Center panel discussion, three prominent experts on Russian affairs engaged in a spirited but friendly debate over the significance of the forced closure of Russia's TV-6 network. Speakers included David Hoffman, Foreign Editor of *The Washington Post* and a former Moscow Bureau Chief at the paper; Alexei K. Pushkov, Anchor of the influential news-analysis program *Postscriptum* on Russia's TV-Center network and a member of the Editorial Board of *The National Interest*; and Dimitri K. Simes, President of The Nixon Center. Robert Kaiser, Associate Editor of *The Washington Post* and also a former *Post* Bureau Chief in Moscow, moderated the discussion.

David Hoffman

In Mr. Hoffman's view, the closure of Russia's TV-6 network damages media freedoms that have already eroded under President Putin's leadership. As a result, he said, the development of civil society and democracy in Russia have been weakened and the Russian people have suffered. To illustrate the importance of media freedoms in Russia, Hoffman reminded the

audience of the Russian government's extensive but ultimately failed efforts to conceal the sinking of the missile submarine *Kursk* in August of 2000, apparently due to an accident involving an experimental torpedo. He compared the government's actions to the USSR's attempt to hide the truth about the 1987 explosion of a nuclear reactor at the Chernobyl power station.

Hoffman disputed arguments that the closure of TV-6 and the earlier seizure of NTV were the result of business disputes or an effort to tame Russia's so-called oligarchs. Instead, he suggested, the cases represented highly selective application of justice to silence public criticism of the Kremlin by the two television networks.

When asked whether the United States should give Russia "a pass" on the cases to secure Moscow's support in the war on terrorism, Hoffman agreed that Washington must pursue important American interests vis-à-vis Russia. However, he said, the U.S. should communicate to Russia's leaders that their country will not be able "to sit at the table" if the Russian

government does not observe certain standards of conduct. Hoffman also argued that there was ultimately no “pass” for Russia because in his view, media freedoms and the open flow of information—including in non-state media—are essential to the development of a successful market economy in Russia. Russia will pay a price for restricting its media, he said.

Alexei K. Pushkov

According to Mr. Pushkov, Russians have a variety of perspectives on the TV-6 case. Public opinion polls suggest that the general population is largely uninterested in the matter, he said. To the extent that Russians care about the issue, a majority views it as a political conflict while less than 4% see it as an attack on media freedoms.

In sharp contrast, Pushkov said, the country’s small liberal elite do view the closure of TV-6 as a direct, official attempt to muzzle criticism. Though this perspective is held narrowly within Russia, Pushkov told the audience that it is aired widely in Russia’s media. He also implied that the fact that this view is widely disseminated suggests that Russia’s media are not at all under the total control of Russian state. In fact, he said, reducing Russia’s free media to NTV and TV-6 would be “a big mistake.”

Pushkov argued that most of Russia’s political class view the closure of TV-6 as the logical outcome of a political struggle between President Putin, on one and, and the oligarchs Vladimir Gusinsky (who previously owned NTV) and Boris Berezovsky (who owned TV-6), on the other. From this perspective, he said, the dispute is an outgrowth of a long-term war for control of Russia’s development underway between the state, the oligarchs, political parties, the media, and other political forces. In this context, the battle over TV-6 was an important victory for the state and for President Putin.

Questioned about journalistic ethics in his country, Puskov acknowledged widespread abuses by Russian media companies and

individual journalists. “Television in Russia cannot be better than Russian society,” he said, explaining that Russia as a whole suffers from endemic corruption. He urged outsiders to be patient as Russia will likely experience many reversals during its gradual evolution.

Relatedly, Pushkov said that comments on the TV-6 case by U.S. officials are “not helpful.” After a decade of experience with American advice, he said, most Russians are uninterested in commentary on their domestic affairs from the U.S. government. However, Pushkov continued, Russians do listen to Congressional leaders, business executives, and other prominent individuals, who they believe more truly represent “real” American views.

Dimitri K. Simes

Though Mr. Simes agreed with Hoffman and Pushkov that the closure of TV-6 harmed media freedoms in Russia, he argued that the case should not be viewed outside the political and social context in which it occurred.

According to Simes, Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky established their media empires with money that most Russians believe was essentially stolen from the Russian people. They were permitted to obtain broadcast licenses on very favorable terms and to buy newspapers because they were expected to support the Yeltsin government, he added. Both in fact did so during Russia’s 1996 presidential election, when the media under their control presented biased and distorted information to voters to help the former Russian president and to undermine his opponents, even the democratically-minded Grigory Yavlinsky. At the same time, Simes noted, Berezovsky and Gusinsky used their media holdings ruthlessly to attack their political and business rivals, often using false or unsubstantiated accusations.

When Yeltsin announced that he would not run for reelection, Simes said, Gusinsky abandoned the Yeltsin team to support former Prime

Minister Yevgeny Primakov and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. In contrast, Berezovsky continued to support the former president's inner circle, which advocated the election of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to succeed Yeltsin. Berezovsky soon turned against Putin, Simes argued, when it became clear that he would not be a puppet of the so-called "Kremlin family." This, he concluded, is how the two men's media holdings began their assault on the Putin government.

Simes also argued that the Kremlin's pressure on Gusinsky and Berezovsky could be viewed as part of a broader effort to contain the influence of Russia's oligarchs. Berezovsky in particular had frequently stated publicly that he entered the media business primarily to win political power to impact government policy and to help his other businesses to make money, he explained. Thus, while Simes agreed that the Russian government had been politically selective in targeting Gusinsky and Berezovsky, he suggested that it was only natural for the state to target first those oligarchs who sought political influence to work against the state. Simes implied that oligarchs who abandoned high-profile political activities were less dangerous and accordingly of lower priority.

Asked how the U.S. should respond to the TV-6 case, Simes said that American officials must raise the case with their Russian counterparts. However, he said, Russians are unlikely to be interested in or influenced by American lecturing. U.S. comments would be more effective if written in the spirit of partnership rather than the spirit of propaganda, Simes continued; the message should be simple and matter-of-fact: Americans will not support a constructive, long-term relationship with a Russia that does not appear to share American values. Nevertheless, he said, if the U.S. intends to work with Russia to advance important American interests in the short term, Washington must also be prepared to some extent to accept Russia as it is while drawing appropriate

conclusions about Moscow's limitations as an emerging democracy.

This Program Brief was prepared by Nixon Center Director Paul J. Saunders.

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