THE STANCE OF RUSSIAN MASS MEDIA ON THE UKRAINIAN ORANGE REVOLUTION

Introduction

At the end of 2004, Ukraine came to the center of the world’s attention. A series of political protests flared up throughout the country in response to an attempt by the ruling elite to rig presidential elections and to their alleged abuse of power. Eventually, the charismatic opposition leader Victor Yushchenko1 with the support of his ally Yulia Tymoshenko won the run-off and became the third legitimate President of independent Ukraine. The events that led Yushchenko to his victory became known as the peaceful Orange Revolution. Yushchenko’s supporters chose orange ribbons as a sign of their affiliation with the political block Yushchenko–Tymoshenko, often referred to as the Orange Coalition.

Russian political circles largely condemned the Orange Revolution. Russian leaders openly supported Victor Yanukovich, the Ukrainian Prime Minister at the time and an anticipated successor of the ruling President Leonid Kuchma. The Russian President Vladimir Putin was quick to congratulate Yanukovich on his victory despite claims made by international observers that the results were rigged. The Russian mass media was reluctant to acknowledge that the Orange Revolution defended the right of the majority of voters who were deprived of their choice being recognized. Russian public discourse focused on the “embarrassing” actions of supporters of the Orange Revolution and placed in the background or concealed positive aspects of the movement.

Russian media still has a significant influence on the shaping of the Ukrainian political and social landscape. On the one hand, a large proportion of the Ukrainian population uses the Russian language for day-to-day communication and is, therefore, highly susceptible to opinions presented in its first language. On the other hand, Russians and those from the brother nations2 of the former USSR often access information about former Soviet

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1. I use Russian versions of names for transliteration.

2. The term brothers – Slavic brothers is widely used in the Russian mass media. The following publications can be considered: “Pochemu raspalsia Sovetskii Soiuz?” [“Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?”], Argumenty i fakty, no. 49 (2001); “Voprosy s gazovym dush-kom” [“Questions with Gas Tinge”], ibid., no. 51 (2005); “Brat’ia po razumu: Saakashvili poteshil Yushchenko” [“Spiritual Brotherhood: Saakashvili Amused Yushchenko”], ibid.,
Republics from Russian sources because products of Russian mass media are in broad circulation. As a consequence, the attitude of Russian mass media toward events in Ukraine has influenced the perceptions of an audience that was not able to access alternative sources of information. At the same time, many Ukrainians who participated in Presidential elections and saw Russian reports on the situation in their country felt betrayed and expressed resentment.

Zaimites’ soboi! Ob’iasnite, rossiiane, zachen vy lezete so svoim ustavom v ukrajinskij monastyr’. Ia uzh ne govoriu pro potoki propagandy, livsheisia s vashix gosudarstvenyx kanalov. Takoe oshchushchenie, chto v Rossii drugix problem ne ostalos’.

[Mind your own business! You Russians, explain why do you poke your nose in Ukrainian people’s business? [lit. monastery – L.A.] I do not mention the streams of propaganda that have been poured through your national channels. You try to make the impression that in Russia, problems do not exist.]³

The above statement prompted an investigation of the “streams of propaganda” in Russian mass media. However, the collection of evidence on the propaganda campaign has been anything but simple. Russian public discourse does not adhere to the practice of black and white labeling that was a widespread technique used by the Soviet press.⁴ In the past, if Soviet newspapers were assigned to destroy a reputation they would use dysphemisms (verbal resources we have for being offensive⁵) such as vonyuchaia padal’ (stinking carrion/animal corpses), beshenye sobaki (mad dogs), razdavit’ poganyu gadinu (to squash repulsive reptiles/vermin), rasstreliat’ kak poganyh psov (to shoot like vile/filthy dogs).⁶ Hudson observes that the Russians “introduced a new, crude and repulsive ideological vocabulary with which to abuse their enemies.”⁷ A step away from the highest

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⁵ K. Burridge, Blooming English (Sydney: ABC, 2002), p. 221.
⁶ From a collection of expressions by Vyshinsky (a prosecutor on the trial of Rykov, Bukharin and their associates). Cited from the Internet newspaper Eto interesno at: www.etointeresno.com (Febr. 20, 2003).