

# **Mass Media as a Resource of Mobilization in Ethnic Conflicts in Modern Russia**

Andrey P. GLUKHOV  
Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences,  
Tomsk State Pedagogical University

## **Abstract**

The paper provides a brief historical overview of mass media technologies from the perspective of information war. Author uses the constructivist approach as a framework to examine ethnic and nationalist conflicts and argues that ethnic conflicts often initiate within the information space. He then turns to the situation in modern Russia and shows the use of mass media of communication for the purposes of conflict mobilization.

## **1 Introduction**

Recently, conflict studies have been challenged by the changes in basic configurations of global threats, the way, in which war is fought, and, of no small importance, by the type of legitimization of war used by terrorists-fanatics as well as by the opposite side, i.e. the Anti-terrorist coalition. Therefore, there is a need to revise the conventional theoretical approaches and to provide a new conceptualization of basic notions used in peace and conflict studies.

As concern the studies of global issues, in the epoch of globalization and planet's transformation into a "big village" steeped in communication streams, it seems promising to examine the situations of conflict in terms of interdisciplinary theory of communication that fits well with the structural-functionalist approach. We consider the constructivist approach a common paradigm, because according to constructivists, social actors and social institutions construct the images of acceptable peace and of real or perceived threats within the communicative space. Consequently, the image of peace without war or the image of enemy that represents real or perceived threat serve as an intellectual construct crafted in public conscience by various social actors and institutions and projected in operationally near future.

From the communicative approach's perspective, war is considered the final act and an imminent sequel of the cease of the process of communication, fracture of

communicative links and loss of the public communicative space. As a result, there is a shift of the emphasis in conflict's interpretation. From then on, the priority is assigned to the examination of the mechanisms of gradual alienation with regard to the parties of the communicative process. In addition, in order to achieve the internal cohesion, elite constructs the image of enemy and creates the illusion of the existence of an external threat. Hence, from the perspective of communicative paradigm, the mobilization of the public opinion and the strengthening of civil associations for the elimination of "enemy" stereotype and building up the communication "bridges" between the warring parties rise to the top of the agenda, above all in the information space.

Following the communicative approach, it is clear that there are various competing projects of conflict resolutions or conflict making in public discursive space. A number of social groups, civil movements and social institutions bring forward their assertions or demands concerned with the country's inclusion in the processes of conflict resolution / conflict acceleration. Such social institutions as the state, army, system of education and economics, or the church have their own peace/conflict projects. They present these projects to the society within the space of competitive mass communication. However, costs and profits of war and peace may have different weight for one or another of the above-mentioned social institutions. For example, within the context of modern global economics, any international conflict may bring about a serious crisis and result in the higher prices for energy resources. But, say, for military circles, the idea of Empire's restoration, achievement of (the perception) of national greatness or punishment for wrong doings in the past may overpass the common sense despite of the warning that the human cost of a military solution to the conflict can be too high.

As for the space of mass communication, social actors attempt to convince the society that peace/conflict project is a profitable affair and it is necessary to attain a satisfactory peace. The struggle of pressure groups for the domination of a particular peace/conflict project is taking place within a number of thematic fields of mass consciousness. These fields include the attitude towards history of one's own ethnic group and history of the rivals, interpretation of the state policy aimed at enclosure/globalization, interpretation of foreign policy, etc. The formation of a value

system in the area of interpersonal situational communication with people from other ethnic/national groups is of a significant importance as well.

The application of the concept of “public arenas” introduced by Stephen Hilgartner and Charles Bosk allows us to spotlight the processes of the formation of peace/conflict set-ups in public discourse. From this perspective, the projects of satisfactory peace can be considered the ones that are brought forward by social movements competing for a scarce resource of public attention within the framework of communicative space, which has limited carrying capacity. Dramatization and opposition, appeals to peace and novelty, knowledge of cultural preferences and political leanings of the audience are among the major success strategies. The cultural gatekeepers personified by governmental newsmakers, leading journalists, and political leaders define the agenda and provoke contact/conflict mobilization.

The social-psychological theories of social identification are regarded an important research resource as well. That is because these theories clearly demonstrate how social actors and institutions use symbols and strategies of involvement in order to achieve the mobilization of individuals. Above all, we are referring here to the issues of solidarity or conflict with one or another identifiable group based on ethnic, civil social, religious or civilizational properties.

## **2 Competing Peace and Conflict Projects and Ethnicity in Modern Russia**

The use of “public arenas” model for the examination of peace/conflict projects in modern Russia allows us to identify several competing scenarios in the “public arenas” of politics, mass media, religions, and social movements. According to the liberal scenario, Russia should seek a gradual integration with the European Union based on the acceptance of the priority of human rights and democracy. The implementation of this project implies the maintenance of a satisfactory peace with Muslim countries and countries of the Far East, first of all with China, at the expense of Russia’s identification with the West and its membership in Western organizations, including military ones (EU, NATO). However, lately, the project to position Russia as a European state has rather insignificant support among the majority of the Russian population, not lastly because of the project’s extrusion from the Russian mass media.

The so-called Eurasian project of “balancing” Russia is one of the dominant in today’s Russia. The project calls upon the Russian authorities to take advantage of the existing disagreements between the West, Islamic world, and gaining the geopolitical weight China. This project is put forward by anti-Occidentalistic nationalistic intellectuals and is full of anti-Western rhetoric. The nationalistic intellectuals play kind of a pragmatic game and attempt to take advantage of the existing antilogy between the major geopolitical actors.

Although it is fraught with danger for Russia’s future, the project to restore the Empire on the debris of the Soviet Union is becoming increasingly popular. Drowsily done by the Russian authorities, the re-framing (re-conceptualization) of Russian history is exemplified, in particular, by the symbolic restoration of the Soviet anthem, a more positive interpretation of the role of Stalin, etc. All this is indicative of the fact that the idea of the “Empire’s resurgence” appears quite appealing for many Russians. The authorities in Russia are becoming more and more interested in the use of nationalist ideology as a strategy of involvement and identification. It seems that the governing elite expect to achieve the cohesion by contrasting “natives” to migrants and to trigger the reaction of solidarity amongst the masses: the recent policy of the Russian authorities towards Georgian migrants is a clear confirmation of this presumption<sup>1)</sup>.

It is precisely from this angle that the phenomenon of “ethnic enterprise” has been examined by the western constructivists in the area of ethnic sociology, in particular by Ernest Gellner (1991), Benedict Anderson (2001), and Eric Hobsbawm (1998). Here, an ethnic enterprise is understood as a solidary mobilization of the masses by the elite through the search of an ethnic enemy. From the constructivist perspective, ethnicity is elite’s intellectual construct. This construct is broadcast to potential members of the ethnic group with the use of various means of mass media of communication, system of education, official rhetoric, etc.

Recently, a group of scholars from the Laboratory of the Sociology of Education based at Tomsk State Pedagogical University supported by the Russian RGNF Foundation (project No. 06-03-00386a) conducted a research project on the topic of “General Education as a Ground for Inter-Ethnic Integration”. As concern the examination of means of mass communication and discursive mechanisms, the results of the project confirmed the validity of the chosen approach to view ethnicity as a space

of competitive activities originated in various sources. The ethnic/civil identity, or ethnic communicators, has been broadcast from these sources via mediators, in particular, via teachers as intermediaries of civil identity. This is an obvious attempt to get over the ethno-messages to children in order to influence the identity of the latter.

In addition, Tomsk scholars adapted the model of social space proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. In this model, the social space is considered a set of social fields of the struggle for social resources. Following Bourdieu's approach, scholars were able to identify various symbolic and social resources, tactics and strategies of the struggle for the prescription of ethnic-civil identity in case of children of migrants and refugees. A number of social groups in ethnic meso- and micro environment, namely, family, Diaspora, teachers, migration services, coevals, etc. have been making the full use of the above strategies.

With Russian elite by no means the exception, the elites aspire for the conversion of a primarily social conflict between "the powers that be" and masses into an ethnic conflict. That is because this strategy is sought to result in a higher level of consolidation between "the top notch of society" and "lower" classes within ethnically cohesive social group.

In Russian historiography of the particular area of ethnic studies that deal with the examination of ethnic identity from the perspective of either conscious or coercive choice of the membership in one's group, or "fasten" sociality, the works of the Russian constructivist Valery Tishkov are worth of mentioning here. According to Tishkov (2003), ethnic group is a product of the nation-building process. Ronald Barthes' ideas of functional meaning of ethnic borders and of the role of ethnic markers in ethnic communication and individual perceptions are also relevant to the issue of the formation of ethnic identity as a result of "our vs. alien" conflict.

### **3 Mass Media of Communication and Ethnic Conflicts**

It is difficult to overestimate the role of modern mass media of communication (and of television above all) in the process of ethnic and inter-state conflicts' escalation as well as in the process of the searching for compromise and reaching the consensus. The fact is that modern means of mass communication is the powerful instrument of the

formation of public opinion. Not surprisingly, they are often exploited by political and business elites as a tool of manipulation and inculcation.

Unfortunately, in the last century, there were many cases of the use of mass media as catalysts of armed conflicts and world wars. In fact, the study of the issues concerned with the impact of mass media on the public as a part of still nascent sociology of mass communication started in the 1920s precisely from the acknowledgment of the nakedness of the individual and general public in front of the loud-hailer of the means of mass communication. According to the Russian sociologist L.N. Fedotova, during the First World War, the propaganda apparatus of belligerent sides took advantage of the whole might of already famous press. As Karl Hovland noted, “newspapers pulled us into war” (Hovland 1954, 162). There is as old as time but still very effective strategy of national and state elites aimed at the conflict mobilization of masses in order to divert the attention of the latter from domestic issues and to achieve the social cohesion by promoting hatreds toward an external enemy. From the time of the WWI, such a fantastically effective tool as mass media has strengthened this strategy. In the 1930s, the propaganda machine of totalitarian states matured the manipulative tactics of blowing the fire of racist and class intolerance, xenophobia and aggression.

What are the communicative technologies of conflict mobilization used by mass media at the level of public opinion of a particular state? Today, it is possible to distinguish several media technologies that mass media employ in an information war. Usually, the information war is an overture for a real violent conflict and a full-scale warfare. One of the technologies is a slow conversion of items on the agenda, which attract public attention. As a result, social issues such as poverty, social justice, accessibility of schooling, etc. are paled into insignificance whereas external threats to the national sovereignty or ethnic well-being are highlighted.

As some scholars argued, the press cannot force people to think in a particular way but can point out to the readers what they should think about (see Nazarov 2003). This kind of approach was successfully used during the First World War in order to “strangle the fire of running high class battles” by fomenting the wave of nationalism and chauvinism in public awareness of countries participated at war. Later on, in Weimar Republic, with the help of the press, the defeat of Germany was named the

major cause of the economic crisis and hardship of common people whereas the energy of social discontent was channeled to support the demands of revenge. More recent example is the US “war with terror” that diverts the public attentions from the failures of Bush’s administration in domestic policy. As concern the phenomenon of ethnic entrepreneurs, many examples of dividends paid as a result of ethnic opposition and negative ethnic identification can be found in works by Gellner and Anderson.

Ethnic or national enclosure is another effective technique to strengthen hatreds and narrow communicative contacts. One’s ethnic group or country is defined as superior in comparison with all other ethnic groups or cultures that are considered inferior and potentially hostile. As a result of the mass suggestion by the media, people get the impression of being surrounded by enemies. In modern history, the ideas of racial superiority or ethnic enclosure by means of non-admission of interracial marriages are most evidently reflected in the Nazi ideology, when these ideas had been successfully spread out to the population through the German press. However, in one way or another, similar ideas can be found in the informational space and politics conducted by all countries of Hitler’s coalition. Even today, the perception of being surrounded by enemies is successfully constructed in the public opinion of countries-derelicts like North Korea or Cuba as a result of the totalitarian control over the mass media.

The stigmatization on the basis of ethnic or class property is also an effective mean to promote the conflict behavior. The building up of ethnic hatreds towards the aliens and the making of scapegoats out of one or another ethnic minority – be that Jews in Hitler’s Germany or “individuals of Caucasian nationality” in modern Russia – is a common method of conflict escalation, which often requires the use of mass media. This labeling inescapably leads to a reciprocal alienation and growing hatreds between dominant ethnic groups and ethnic minorities. Thus, for Arabs, Israeli Jews have been blamed for all the troubles including the economic stagnation. That is because the search for more realistic causes of the failure of the modernization policy in the Middle East is too painful for Arabs’ vanity.

In societies ruled by authoritative or totalitarian regimes with no alternative communication environment, the mass media is not the unbiased and impartial source of information for the society but the tool of agitation and propaganda. The mass media

no more functions as a medium of real communication between various social groups. Instead, the media is used to socially construct a mythological, or “virtual”, reality.

The power of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes rests on the fear of the subjects. Therefore, in order to achieve a certain degree of legitimization, these regimes have to build up the mythology of opposition and conflict. The myth of a “fortress beleaguered by the enemy” is constructed and broadcast to the masses through the dependent means of mass media and include historico-patriotic narratives, identification with the stereotyped positive reference group and a stereotyped image of enemy.

The mythological narratives of former greatness and inevitable resurgence, myths of “soil and blood” had been at the core of misanthropic ideologies of the 20th century: Benito Mussolini promised to restore Rome’s former greatness whereas Adolf Hitler predicted the millenary Third Reich. In the Russian version of “soil and blood” ideology, the arguments of Russian exclusiveness and Russia’s specific role in world history were linked to the “Moscow the Third Rome” postulate. With no access to alternative sources of information, in authoritative and totalitarian regimes people have to rely on the versions of ethnic or national history constructed by the media that often strongly differs from the unbiased ones.

The negative image of enemy strengthens the mythology of opposition. Moreover, a stereotype of the enemy may combine subhuman and superhuman properties: the adversary is shown simultaneously as a subhuman, i.e. his extermination is not a crime against humanity, and as someone, who has superhuman cunning and craftiness, i.e. constitutes even a bigger threat. The spread out of this kind of stereotypes is aimed at forcing people to unite with those who reign supreme. As concern the mass culture, sometimes, the image of enemy acquires cliché properties and may turn into a grotesque.

#### **4 Concluding Remarks: Mass Media and Conflicts in Modern Russia**

In Russian TV media space of the new millennium, one can identify a negative tendency to stimulate intolerance and xenophobia rather than appeals to tolerance. Under the influence of the programs broadcast by all-Russian TV channels, the myth of the former greatness and the might of the Soviet Empire is again tends to dominate the Russian public conscience. From here, it is already not too far to the idea of revenge and



the construction of a new empire at the expense of the adjunction of neighboring independent states.

It seems that in the Russian information space the image of a country = “fortress beleaguered by the enemy” has been already formed. According to this image, all the neighboring unfriendly countries, especially, Ukraine, Georgia, Baltic States, etc. constantly seek to offend Russia. In Weimar Republic, the similar “resentful temper” towards countries that won the First World War contributed to the Nazis’ rise to power and became one of the causes that loose the dogs of the Second World War. In many recent cases of the Russian TV mass production, e.g. TV series, it is most often the *siloviki*<sup>2)</sup> who are shown as heroes capable of solving all internal and external problems of Russia. On the Russian TV, one can distinguish a clear stereotypical image of enemy that more and more often corresponds to easily identifiable ethnic profiles. Mysterious Arab terrorists with their foreign patrons-sponsors from the West or “individuals of Caucasian nationality” are blamed for all the troubles and tragedies in contemporary Russia. Illegal immigrants, mostly from Asia, also shown as stereotypical “wreckers”, who obstruct the normal life of “native population”. Thus, the appearance of nationalistic visuals like *Rodina*’s “Let’s clear the city of garbage!”<sup>3)</sup> must not surprise anyone.

Unfortunately, in the Russian media space, there are less and less examples of the pursuit of tolerance or the desire to act as a “public arena” for the discussion of the important social issues, including the issue of illegal immigration, etc. At the same time, Russian journalists have a rich positive experience of breaking the cold war stereotypes and building up the bridges between diverse national audiences. Hopefully, Russia will profit from this experience in the nearest future.

## NOTES

- 1) Following the worsening of the relations between Russia and Georgia in the second part of 2006, the Russian authorities launched an anti-Georgian campaign inside Russia that resulted in the discrimination of ethnic Georgians (*note by eds. for the English version of the joint publication*).
- 2) In today’s Russia, the term *siloviki* (from “power” in Russian) is used to refer to former and present members of security or military services (*note by eds. for the English version of the joint publication*).
- 3) During one of the election campaigns, this TV ad showed people who appear to be of Caucasian ethnic origin eating watermelon and throwing leftovers to the street. In the background, a voice asked, “Have you cleaned up after yourself?” and “Do you even

understand Russian?” followed by *Rodina* party leader Dmitry Rogozin’s appeal: “Let’s clear Moscow of garbage!” Later on, *Rodina* was banned from the participation in the elections (*note by eds. for the English version of the joint publication*).

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, Benedict (2001), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Moscow: Canon-Press-Ts, 2001 (in Russian).
- Gellner, Ernest (1991), *Nations and Nationalism*, Moscow (in Russian).
- Hilgartner, Stephen and Charles L. Bosk (1988), “The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model” in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94 (1), 53-78.
- Hobsbawm, Erick (1998), *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Program, myth and reality*, Sankt-Petersburg (in Russian).
- Hovland, Karl (1954), “Effects of the Mass Media of Communication” in *Handbook of Social Psychology* ed. by G. Lindzey, Vol. II, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.
- Nazarov, M.M. (2002), *Mass communication in contemporary world: Methodology of analysis and research experience*, Moscow: Editorial URSS (in Russian)
- Tishkov, Valery (2003), *Requiem for ethnos. Studies of socio-cultural anthropology*, Moscow (in Russian).