Sergei M.Eorisov
Institute of African Studies. USSR Academy of sciences
SOVIET AND SOUTH AFRICA'S VIEW OF EACH OTHER:
A ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA
A paper presented at the meeting in Leverkusen (FRG)
October 24-27, 1988
The views expressed
are those of the author

7,, v
The right of every citizen to full and authentic information on any subject (unless it is a state or military secret) and to open and free discussion of any major issue is a fundamental element of the system of democratic rights and freedoms.

Openness for public control and criticism is an indispensable condition of the effective functioning of the bodies of state power. At the same time, the fulfilment by these bodies of their functions as representatives of the people, working on behalf of the people and in the interest of the people, is possible only, to use Lenin’s words. if the mass of the people exercise their right to know about everything, to judge about everything and to do everything’consciously.

By contrast, the infringement of the right to information and concealment or distortion of information make it impossible for the state to express the interests of the people, creating, on the one hand, hossibilities for manipulating public opinion and, on the other, making it impossible for the public to control the activities of state bodies and thus increasing the risk of taking wrong and sometimes fatal decisions.

At the same time, non-democratic regimes’find an ignorant, ill-informed or disinformed society easier to govern and in this case the mass media tend to become a means of propaganda, which an American handbook on journalism defines as a biased selection of unbiased information.

The word "propaganda" in Russian does not have the negative connotation it has in English, although the Greater Soviet Encyclopaedia in its 1976 edition points to a possibility of a similar situation: "Propaganda is the dissemination of views. ideas and theories with the purpose of moulding in the masses an outlook and concepts reflecting the interests of the subject of propaganda (a social group in whose intefests propaganda is conducted) and encouraging the masses into a corresponding kind of action" (v. 21, p. 95).

A key element in this definition is "the interests of a social group, on behalf of which propaganda is conducted."

With regard to South Africa, Dr. Paul Vorster, a former RAU lecturer, wrote that "political, financial and ideological expediency have replaced objective journalism. It must be questioned, if newspapers are not so tied up financially, organisationally and ideologically, that political, financial and ideological expediency have replaced the search for truth."

Says Dr. Vorster, "The public’s right to know is so fundamental that newspapers should not allow themselves to 7 provide selective and biased news and views. Neither, for that ’ matter, should governments be allowed to do 30’ (Citizen, Aug. 27, 1988).

In July of this year the 19th national conference of the Soviet Communist Party adopted a special resolution saying that glasnost (openness) in Soviet society, including foreign policy and international affairs, was a major condition that there will be no turning back from the policy of perestroika,

or restructuring.

"In the international arena, glasnost, revealing the positions of governments and peoples, helps the cause of peace and co-operation, promotes the idea of creating a nuclear-weapon-free and non-violent world and facilitates the moulding of up-to-date, civilised relations betweeh nations," the resolution reads. "As a means of putting into practice the principles of an open foreign policy, it helps involve in international contacts public organisations, work collectives, the mass of working people, scientists and cultural workers, promotes public diplomacy and facilitates the solution of international problems at inter-state level and along inter-governmental channels."

The policy of perestroika has made people take a critical look at the mass media, especially those covering international affairs, and it appears that old ways and stereotype mentality are more difficult to overcome in journalism dealing with international affairs than in the coverage of home news. The traditional practice of writing and editing articles so that they resembled diplomatic notes created the impression in the Soviet Union and abroad that Soviet journalists and newspapers merely repeated or explained the official point of view.

As a result, pluralism of opinion encouraged by the policy of glasnost sometimes creates confusion, as was the case with the statements made by Soviet scholars G. Starushenko and V. Goncharov on the prospects for political development in South Africa, which were taken out of context,

or B. Asoyan’s article about President Botha’s reforms, which were interpreted by some as an indication of a "change in the Kremlin policy."

Indeed, the desire to understand all the diversity and contradictions of the outside world, including the events in Southern Africa. can embarass those who got used to dealing with carefully vetted information and conventional cliches, where personalities and developments were but mere symbols to endorse a pre-set analysis and a corresponding political line.

Although Southern Africa does not top the Soviet foreign policy priorities. it receives a rather considerable coverage in the Soviet mass media. Between January and mideOctober this year the national Soviet newspapers and magazines carried some 400 articles and news items, or 10 per week, dealing with South Africa and her problems.

Unfortunately, most of them were based on second-hand or belated information, since in covering the developments in South Africa the Soviet media have to rely mainly on reports provided by Western news agencies or on the South African publications. Only recently a correspondent of the Soviet government daily Izvestia became the first ever Soviet journalist to visit South Africa briefly. No wonder Soviet newspapers, which publish news reports, commentaries and analysis on South Africa. can rarely tell their readers about everyday life in the country seen not through the prism of big politics, but through the eyes of a fellow compatriot.

watching the quadripartite talHa and proapecte for a eettlement

in South weetern A$rica. Among other foreign policy ieeuee while givimg ewteneive coverage to Preeident Bothate trip to Mozambique, they rather played down his vieite to Malawi and Zaire or the trips paid to the region by UN Secretaryvaeneral and the Eepe, &_

An important phenomehon is the Soviet media giving space to the renown figures from South Africa to express their views on the situation in the country and the region. To name but a few ,one can mention a Joe Slovo’s article in the magazine "Kommunist" and another one by Alex Boraine in the weekly "Za rubezhom".

Reporting the internal developments in South Africa, the Soviet media focused on the anti-apartheid struggle, the activities of opposition organisations (with special emphasis on the necessity of organising a broad international campaign in their support), the authorities’ actions under the state of emergency law and the role of the armed forces. At the same time, they gave scarce information about the economy, trade unions, education, science, culture, the church and the life of women and young people.

Serious analytical material about South Africa was published in Izvestia, the central Communist Party daily Pravda, the Defence Ministry’s daily Krasnaya Zvezda, the weeklies Za rubezhom (Foreign News), Literaturnaya Gazeta (Literary Gazette) and Novoye Vremya (New Times) and the monthly journal Aziya i Afrika segodnya (Asia and Africa Today). The authors of those articles analysed the political situation in the country, the line-up of’political and public forces, the role and influence of political parties and

-9 . .e ._ ..-.w.....-_.a-_s.’...’r...a:.:t-_;v..a:.;:.w...l..a...4u.;et.._,.2-__.._....,
.;.. ...,.,..t-., . Y e.. um V -A1 . .._,. .. ,. .-... v_ .. ,. ,.,-. .
organisations, prospects for the settlement of the Angola and
Namibia problem and the foreign policy of the South African’
regime.
While conceding that the seuth Athgeen government has
adopted a more realistic policy with regard to the Namibian
settlement and withdrawal of its troops from Angola. the Soviet
press remains sceptical about the motives that forced the Botha
government to make concessions. Bearing in mind the history of
South African aggression against neighbouring countries and
violations by the South African regime of the agreements it
signed, it is also scepticel about the possibility of an early
settlement in South West Africa.
Seviet analysts writing about the political eituetien in
South A$rica today keep up the traditional eympathetic attitude
towards the mainstream opposition organisatione euch he the
AND, UbF or COSATU. They are as well making eerioue ettemhte to
analyse the proceee mt etratiticetion in the white and
nmn-white communities, the reeulte at President Bethe"
"reformist" policy and the role of the repreeeive organe of the
regime, the poeitione at various political pertiee and
erganisatione, the situation in the Bentuetane etc.
"King
At the same time, with tew emeptione,/South Atricen
political and public figures are practically unknown to hoviet
public. Writing profilee 0% political leadere 1% e novelty for
Soviet journalism, which actually came to being with the advent
o$ glasnoet, e0 Soviet readere e0 $ar have had an opportunity
to get acquainted with the key tiguree in the wmwld paliticeu
.N r_, _,_..-n.t._-,,...t..,s...,_.,e.e ,._.,- w. . ._.,._..t., .._._._$..e,..., M," u.v.
_...V.., .V-...7...-e .- .

1h general, all Soviet journalists and analysts agree that the apartheid regime in South Africa is doomed and neither terror nor reprisals can save it. They also believe that sooner or later South Africa will have to grant independence to Namibia and that the policy of aggression and confrontation with the "frontline" states is futile. The use of force and the suppression of the rights and freedoms of the black majority in South Africa testify to the weakness of the regime rather than its strength, though economically and militarily the apartheid regime is still stronger than all its adversaries put together.

As regardg the Soviet Union, it sharee worldwide concern about the suppression at human rights and violations of moral standards in South Africa. 80, the presa in the USSR halds that while one cannot rule out Moscowge political involvement in negotiatins on political settlement in the region, where Pretoria is taking part, the relatimns with the ruling regime are politically and morally unacceptahla aincm that would mean a direct at indirect recognitimn 04 the regimeww pretantione on lwgitimacy.

While the policy of glasnost continues to lift the restrictions which were imposed on the Soviet press or which the Soviet press imposed on itself in violation of the principle of freedom of speech and citizens’ right to information, the situation in the South Africa is developing in the opposite direction.

"Press freedom really means the right of ordinary people to know what is happening, to express opinions about it and to

know there are effective vehicles for that to happen,’ wrote deputy editor-in-chief of the Star Mr. Rex Gibson. "The opposite has been happening in our society. A frightened government; sensing the power of ideas whose time has come, is trying to defuse passions by frantically fostering the pretence that all is well. To this end, state television and radio have already been enlisted. Efforts are being redoubled to co-opt the press, one way or another" (Star, October 8, 1987).

Censorship and the effective moulding of the press have resulted in a crisis developing in South Africa with regards to press freedom in the country. The crisis became acute with the declaration of the state of emergency on June 12, 1986. The media were _- and still are -- severely curtailed, and all sources of independent news gathering suppressed. But curbs on freedom of speech and expression have long been a fact of life in South Africa. Individuals and organisations have been silenced, banned, proscribed and restricted as the present regime has sought to stifle all forms of democratic opposition to and criticism of its policy of apartheid in all its various manifestations.

The regime’s control of radio and television through the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) ensures that the public hears and sees only the censored versions of news, events and developments both in South Africa and the world at large, which the Bureau for Information (the government,s propaganda arm under the state of emergency) passes on to them.

Government restrictions, in the name of state security, on the free flow of information have created ah atmosphere of fear, ighorance and paranoia. Most of all that part of the population (the whites) which might be able to wield some influence has been kept in wilful ignorance of the true state of the nation and the world, since public debate has been effectively stifled.

The recent harsh measures against New Nation, South, Weekly Mail, Crisis News, Learn and Teach and A1 Qalam appeared to be but the last actions in the war the Nationalist Party wages for 40 years against those papers that give voice to mass opinion contradicting the Defence Act, the Prisons Act, the Internal Security Act and the Suppression of Communism Act to name but a few.

The first bannings of newspapers took place during the 19505 when Guardian was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act in 1952, followed by two of its successors, Advance (1954) and New Age (1962). The magazine Fighting Talk was banned in 1963. More recently, in 1977, the World and Weekend World were banned, as was the Christian Institute publication Pro Veritate.

Warns Professor Keyan Tomasselli of the contemporery cultural studies unit at the University of Natal: "Any newspaper, no matter what its political allegiance, will be tempting state interventidn if it continues to give space to what the government calls ’revolutionary supportive elementsi. In this way Pretoria was hoping to sanitise embarrassing information both locally and internationally" (ANO, Dec. 15,

1987).
For years South Africa’s attitude to the USSR and its policy gas influenced by the concept of general onslaught. The break-eff by Pretoria of consular relations with the Soviet Union in February 1956 was the logical aftermath of a foreign policy resulting from the Suppression of Communism Act passed six years earlier.
For decades South Africans received meagre information (or misinformation) about the Soviet Union mainly from Western sources which had little affection for the USSR. They received only the information that fitted in the official doctrine of general onslaught. As a result, newspaper editors learned how to handle information about the USSR without special instructions: everything that did not squafe with their cbncept of the Soviet Union and socialism went straight into the basket.
Most periodicals continue to handle news and features about the Soviet Union in the same way if they do not come from the traditional Western sources or do not square with traditional concepte. And the government hag enough meane to discipline thoae who may dare to question the wisdom of this practice.
"My government will not allow the South African press to . be used as a tool of war in the hands of the foreign or other aggressors," warned South Africa’s Minister of Home Affairs Mr. Stoffel Botha (The Independent /UK/, Oct. 10, 1987).
It should be noted that in recent months South African media have moved away a little from the principle of writing

bad things or nothing about the Soviet Union. Journalists from the newspapers Pretoria News, Star, Beeld and Rapport have travelled to the USSR. One may aasume that their reportg questioning or confounding some old cliches were an eyew opener $or many South A&ricans, especially white, though they contained their share of stereotype Judgements and factual errors. Incidentally, even the first positive information about the Soviet Union was met with disapproval and, strange though it may seem, that disapproval came not from the government but from colleague journalists. As Soon as Mr. Peter Sallivan wrote in the Star that "communism has its own drawbacks, but has certainly achieved some remarkable advances for the majority of its population, something South Africa would do well to emulate," the Financial Mail launched the following invective: "There is something about the Johannesburg Star today that is reminiscent of the Rand Daily Mail in its declining years: an erosion of intellectual vigour and growth of ideological insipidness" (Financial Mail, Aug. 5, 1988). As a matter of fact, the government so far maintains a state of benevolent neutrality with regard to the journalists' trips to the USSR and the publication of their reports, but since there is nothing to suggest that the apartheid regime is going to abandon anti-communism as part of its ideology, the present "thaw" is rather a tactical manoeuvre. Playing "the Soviet card" is part of Pretoria's new "active diplomacy." This view is confirmed by the fact that in any contacts with officials or public figures or scientists the majority of white South Africans visiting the USSR look for some

confirmation of their thesis about "a change in the Soviet policy to South Africa" or, at least, for some hints that the Soviet Union may reduce its support for the liberation movement in exchange for the establishment of relations with the apartheid regime. The South African media seize at every statement made in an interview or private conversation that may confirm their thesis, though, even when taken out of context, they indicate the opposite.

The South African government has its own reason for doing so, while the white community apparently wants the outside world, the Soviet Union included, to stop oetracize them as lepers in the international community. Meanwhile in the USSR the public wishes that children and adults in South Africa are no longer scared with the warde "communist" and "total onelaught".

It is not that the "image of an enemy" can be replaced with an "image of a friend" overnight. But the wish of people (bo’fk wkih and back.)

in the Soviet Union and South Africarto know more about each other’s country is natural and the mass media can play a crucial role in that. either poeitive or negative. Which way it takee will dmpend aleo on other farme 0% learning each other better, like the current meeting in Leverkuwaen;