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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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Gregory Feifer is an Institute Donors' Fellow studying the current political and cultural reshaping of Russia.

A Dose of Medicine: Animation in Putin's Russia

By Gregory Feifer

September 25, 2000

Last August, viewers tuning into NTV television late at night saw the debut of Stepan Kapusta and Khryun Morozhov on a program called *"Tushite Svet"* (Turn Out the Lights). Although they were seeing the new television personalities for the first time, some watching the new show may have had a strange feeling they'd seen the characters somewhere before.

They wouldn't have been entirely wrong. The computer-animated figures — a wisecracking pig and a worrywart rabbit — are grown-up versions of Khryusha and Stepasha, puppet characters on the beloved Soviet-era children's' show *"Spokoinoi Nochi, Malyshi"* (Goodnight, Little Ones). The two joined NTV anchor Lev Novozhenov in a ten-minute talk-show spoof lampooning both political punditry as well as the children's show.

The program discusses such topical issues as whether to resurrect a highly controversial statue of dreaded KGB founder Felix Dzherzhinsky in front of Lubyanka, the old secret- police headquarters, located a short walk from the Kremlin. Old-guard Communist legislators and extremists hoping to cause a stir periodically raise that subject. Despite the issue's gravity (tens of millions died thanks in part to Dzherzhinsky's organization), serious exchanges are not the order of the day on the show, which is shot using an MTV-esque plasticene background.

"Put Felix back up! [KGB employees] have nowhere to gather," snorts Khryun, the reactionary pig, in one show. His aim is clearly to come off as crudely and offensively as possible.

"What about a fountain, like before the Revolution?" asks Stepan, the rabbit, in his timid voice, nervous in his attempt to please everyone.

"Combine the two!" barks Khryun in reply. "Make a peeing Felix!"

Both animated characters have round heads, squat bodies and huge bulging eyes. Khryun has a large snout and a Hitler-like mustache to boot, and makes a spine-tinglingly annoying grunting sound with every phrase he utters. The easy-going Novozhenov, a popular fixture on late-night NTV programs, moderates between the two. Actually, he does more: he moralizes — even if subtly. After hearing the cartoon characters' radicalized views, the viewer cannot but sympathize with Novozhenov, whose suggestions seem the height of reason and moderation. "Perhaps we shouldn't rush to make choices so quickly," he says frequently. "Perhaps we should consider the other side's view." He sometimes appeals to society and even the president to act more reasonably—by not, say, calling for the imprisonment of businessmen or denouncing all Chechens as terrorists. Such views are heard frequently in Russia.

"Tushite Svet" sounds like pretty facile and boring stuff. In any western

"Tushite Svet," with anchor Lev Novozhenov moderating between Khryun Morozhov on the (viewers') left and Stepan Kapusta on the right. Pilot Studio animators spend many work-intensive hours to produce the program by superimposing the computer-animated figures to "interact" with Novozhenov.

country, it would be. In Russia, it is a dose of desperately needed medicine. Novozhenov acts to put the cartoon characters' extreme positions into perspective. The grotesque computer-animated figures serve to highlight the absurdity of their words, which, it deserves to be stressed, are common views heard every day.

The program is the latest brainchild of Pilot Studio, whose founders say the show —which runs four days a week — stands on the cutting edge of computer animation. To produce the program, the studio uses actors — strapped to an array of digital sensors controlling the cartoon characters' movements — who "interact" with Novozhenov on prerecorded videotape.

"It's a tremendous amount of work," said Pilot president and creative director Alexander Tatarsky, famed in Russia and respected abroad for his animated features. "No one in the world has ever done a daily show like this before."

Ahead of Its Time

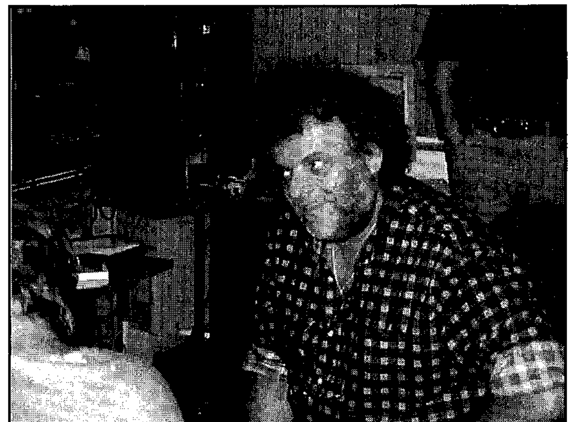
Pilot is unique among animation studios for more than just Khryun and Stepan. A division of the studio also produces a popular cartoon program called "Mike, Lu and Og" for the U.S. cable-television Cartoon Network. The show, created by Pilot director Mikhail Voldashin, revolves around a New York City girl who wakes up one day to find herself on a tropical island with a bizarre array of Polynesian-looking natives speaking in American and English accents. "The program is about getting along with different types," said general producer Anatoly Prokhorov.

The show — whose scenario outlines are sent to Moscow by its American producers — represents a rare case in which a U.S. channel uses an entirely foreign product. Pilot carries out most of the creative work, but farms out such labor-intensive stages as coloring to South Korea.

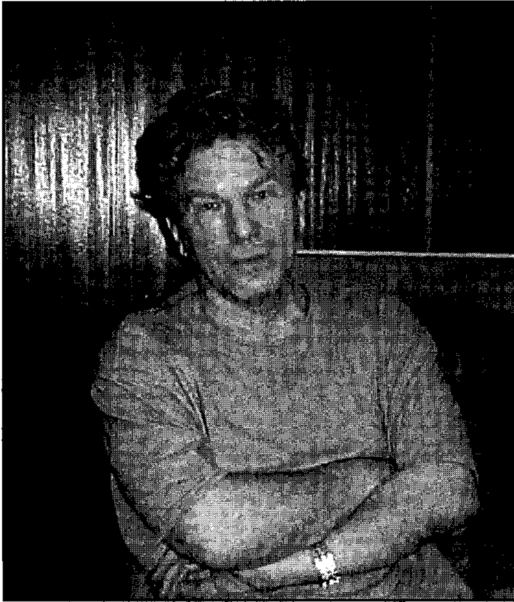
"It's an unprecedented project for a Russian studio," Tatarsky said.

It is also a task for which Pilot is suited. Tatarsky — whose trademark curly-mop coif is instantly recognizable — co-founded the studio in 1988 with Prokhorov and Igor Kovalyov, who has since left to work in Hollywood. It was the country's first independent animation studio, and has gone on to win many accolades and a long list of prizes around the world, including the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or and the Nika, Russia's version of the Oscar.

When I visited the studio, it was abuzz with last-minute preparations two days ahead of the premier of "Tushite Svet." The company occupies two old, nondescript Soviet-era office buildings tucked away on a small side street in an upscale pre-Revolutionary neighborhood called Chistye Prudy. Securing the facilities was a tricky business, Prokhorov said. A decree from Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov last decade allowed the studio to occupy space in the building, which formerly belonged to the Soviet-era Light Industry Ministry. But Legprom, one of the old



Alexander Tatarsky, Pilot Studio's co-founder, president and creative director. The studio spends much of its time carrying out Tatarsky's artistic visions.



Anatoly Prokhorov, Pilot's general producer. He is also involved in other work, including creating Internet projects and animation and theater criticism.

ministry's private spin-offs, didn't want to share accommodations, and Pilot only forced its way in after filing several court suits.

The main entrance is typical of such buildings: dark and dank with a guard in a booth inside the entrance who lets no one pass without proper identification. Up a flight of dimly lit stairs, a corridor leads to a brighter part of the building taken over—and partially renovated — by the Pilot studio. Posters depicting characters from the studio's films and programs line the main hallway. Here, too, stand rows of stately old wooden benches the studio rescued from a scrap heap where they had been put after being torn out of a demolished synagogue. Employees greet each other cheerily as they duck in and out of their offices.

Prokhorov, a mild-mannered former theater critic, led me into the main conference room, which had been purposefully left unreno- vated. It was lined with crooked Soviet-era wood paneling, some of which opened to reveal secret doors, one of which led to a bathroom. "We thought the room was great," Prokhorov said. "It captures the ethos of those times, so we decided to leave it untouched to remind us." The panels are now lined with plaques showing the myriad awards the studio has won over the past decade.

The actual animation work takes place in an adjacent building, which contains more offices and conference rooms. A long, wide corridor leading from the main entrance is lined on one side with computers over which studio employees sit hunched. The passage ends in an entrance to a large room where most of the production work takes place on computers and editing equipment. In one corner, actors don their digital sensors and act out the animated characters' movements. Shelves in a small side room overflow with objects made of plasticene. The opening credits are filmed here with a camera fixed above a glass table and pointing down to take multiple shots of plasticene moved around on the glass.

In addition to his other innovations, Tatarsky was the first Russian animator to use plasticene in the 1980s. "It happened parallel with but separately from developments in the West," Prokhorov said. "We were shut off from most western work."

Since then, much of Tatarsky's animation has developed popular and cult followings. His films include "Padal Proshlogodnii Sneg" (Last Year's Snow Was Falling) — which won him initial acclaim in 1983 — "Sledstviye Vedut Kolobki" (Kolobki Lead Investigations) in 1987, and "Bratya Piloty" (The Pilot Brothers) in 1996. The idea for the "Tushite Svet" project was a joint studio effort aimed at putting to use mathematical computer models Tatarsky and several other Pilot animators used recently while working in France.

"It's very complex and costs a lot to come up with the models," Tatarsky said. "It's cheaper to use what we already have, even though it limits us. For example, we can't use very large figures, and the ones we have are cut off at the waist."

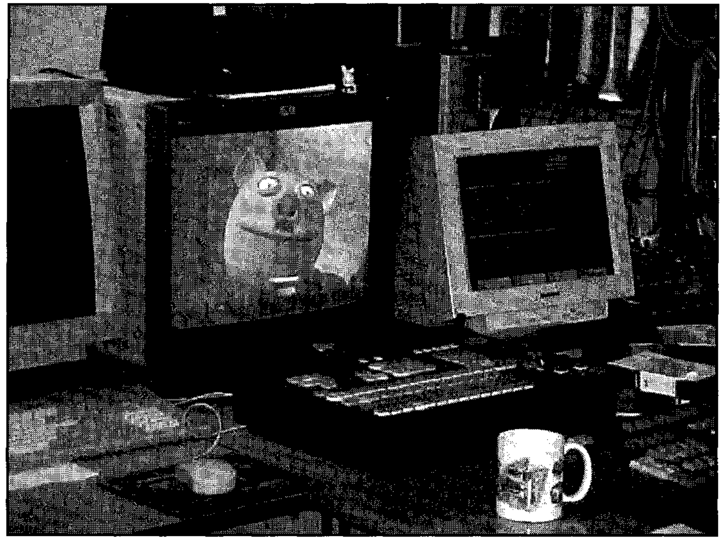
Prior to working on "Tushite Svet," Pilot Studio had

Creative work. Tatarsky and Prokhorov, who gestures to an actor wearing digital sensors how to move his arms.

already produced a computer-animated talk-show host as well as a video game based on its characters, who, like Khryun and Stepan, have Pilot's trademark short statures, large mouths and bulging eyes.

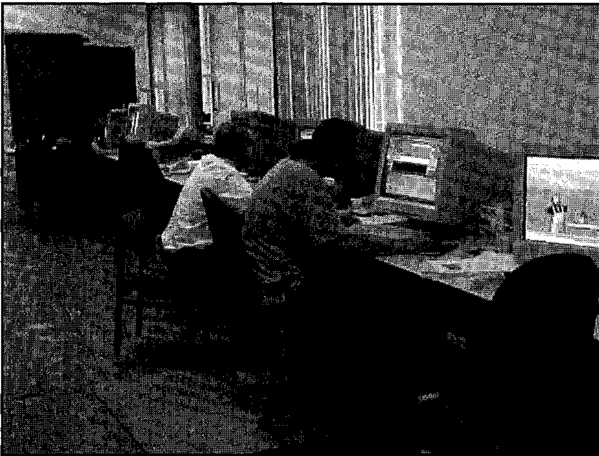
Constant Troubles

With their previous and current successes, one would think Pilot's producers would have little problem finding outlets for their projects. Far from it. Political and economic instability, most notably 1998's financial meltdown, has made potential foreign partners and investors wary of projects in Russia. "Schedules are more important than quality in the business," Prokhorov said. "People have heard about Russia's problems and are worried they won't receive work on time."



Editing equipment in the main room in which "Tushite Svet" is produced. The screen features a still of Khryun Morozhov.

"Cartoon Network risked a lot on the [Mike, Lu and Og] project," Tatarsky added. "They agreed to go ahead on August 18, 1998, a day after the crisis began. If we didn't succeed, no Russian company would have landed a contract for another 10 years."



Pilot animators hunched over their computer screens making sure the animation details are just right.

To help stay afloat, the studio has switched from producing films to exclusively doing television work, which is more profitable. But if western companies are afraid of losing money in Russia, local television stations don't have enough to spend. "The market for our technology doesn't yet exist in this country," Tatarsky said. "We're ahead of our time."

Tatarsky isn't entirely happy with recent developments, saying he enjoys making films significantly more than overseeing television projects. "Television work is unpleasant because you need to produce several programs to improve the quality," he said. "Films have to be good the first time."

Tatarsky cites "Kukly" (Puppets), an NTV satire that uses caricature puppets resembling major political figures. The popular show is a direct knock-off of the English "Spitting Image" series, and has generated controversy for, among other things, using a Vladimir Putin puppet to make fun of the president. "'Kukly' was bad for one year," Tatarsky said. "Now it's quite good." The program has gone on to win fame in part by drawing threats from Putin supporters, who have repeatedly called for the show to be cancelled.

Meanwhile, the fate of "Tushite Svet" is not yet entirely clear. The program was originally slated to run on NTV on a four-week pilot schedule. "It doesn't have any sponsors," Prokhorov said. "They have to see the program first."

Tatarsky says he hopes the program — If successful — will run for a year.

Russian Influences in the West

In addition to its animation and production studios, Pilot also boasts a school of animation, many of whose graduates go on to work for the studio. Pilot also funded research and published books last decade. However, Prokhorov, whose various callings have included animation criticism, said the studio was forced in the middle 1990s

Mock-up photos of anchor Lev Novozhenov that are used in the animated opening credits of "Tushite Svet."

A collection of plasticene figures sculpted for use on "Tushite Svet."

ment begins to crack down on its critics, those critics go covert. That reaction is part of the intimate connection between politics and culture in Russia.

In 1825, for example, the accession of the authoritarian Tsar Nicholas I marked the end of a period of relative freedom of expression under the more liberal Alexander I. Nicholas lost no time in asserting his authority. His coronation had been opposed by the Decembrists, a group of gentry and intellectuals who had amassed an armed and motley collection of individuals in St. Petersburg to stop Nicholas from coming to power. Nicholas's first action was to take his revenge.

In fact, the Decembrists had precious little chance of effecting any kind of change. Their feeble albeit highly symbolic stand was plagued by division. When they staged their short insurrection in St. Petersburg, the Decembrists were quickly put down. A number of leaders were executed. Others were exiled to Siberia. Nicholas then promptly overturned a number of Alexander's liberalizing reforms. He shut down newspapers and journals and embarked on a reign notorious for persecuting critics.

to cut back its research and publishing activities. Pilot's influence continues nonetheless. Prokhorov estimates that about half the country's animators have studied at the studio. Pilot's students are also spreading the studio's style in the West. A number of Pilot graduates, for example, produce cartoons in the United States for the Nickelodeon cable network.

That's not entirely unexpected. Despite being largely cut off from the West, Soviet-era animation was renowned for its high quality. While Hollywood churned out countless episodes of Tom bashing out Jerry's brains and vice versa, Moscow produced animation illustrating fairy tales and created children's classics that featured not gratuitous violence but plots imparting such wisdom as the need to bathe regularly.

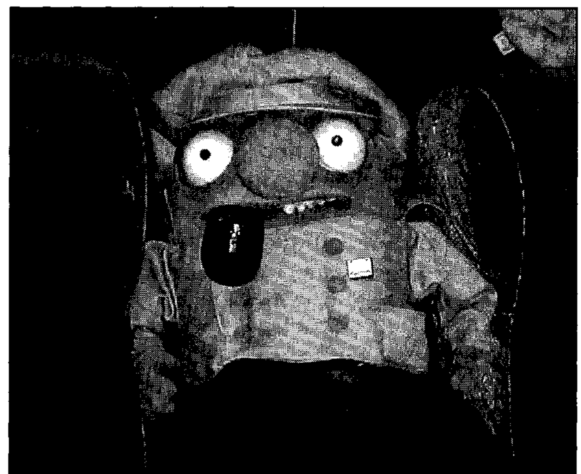
Prokhorov said Pilot's own style is heavily influenced by the Eastern European Zagreb school of the 1960s, which itself drew on Hollywood styles created by animators such as Tex Avery, Chuck Jones and Fritz Lang. "For economic reasons, our animators have now gone to the West and created a full circle of influence," Prokhorov said. I had expected to hear that influence in animation today is flooding in from the West. On the contrary, millions of western children tuning into Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon watch programs that bear the hallmark of Pilot's style.

Political Repression and New Forms of Expression

It was not too much of a surprise to see daily politics discussed by computer-animated figures on "Tushite Svet." It even seemed logical. With growing de-facto censorship in the country, perhaps it's becoming safer for cartoons to voice criticism than their human counterparts. (Although there's no shortage of political talkshows presented by real people yet.) If that development in animation does in fact reflect a tendency in Russian society, it would be nothing new, for it has often been the case that when the govern-

That development forced journalists, scholars and other intellectuals to end to their limited criticism and discussions concerning how to improve the workings of the Russian state. Some began instead to turn to the abstract. They looked to the Germanic states, where freedom of expression also didn't generally characterize daily life. Such Russian luminaries as Alexander Herzen, the journalist and philosopher, devoured the theories of Hegel and the Romantic writings of Schiller, taking them as models. Instead of political discourse, Russians engaged in metaphysical ruminations about the Absolute.

The communists, in their turn, made Nicholas and other



A stuffed toy figure of one of Pilot's trademark characters displaying the usual grotesque features.

backward-looking tsars such as Alexander III and his son Nicholas II look truly enlightened. The fear that became a way of life under the Soviet Union existed in too recent history to have been forgotten today. So when President Putin began talking about installing a "dictatorship of the law" earlier this year, critics jumped on the significance of the first word. (The essence of "dictatorship" was easily remembered; but few Russians are old enough to remember actual rule of law). In the hindsight of half-a-year, it's already possible to say they weren't in the least bit wrong to do so.

After having spent the better part of a decade hurling bitter criticism at former President Boris Yeltsin, many Russians now think twice before taking Putin to task. Criticizing the president now seems an unwise thing to do, as if — given Putin's huge popularity — it were traitorous. That serves to highlight the fact that for all his faults, for all the corruption built up under his tenure, Yeltsin actually tolerated dissent.

Indeed, there was much to criticize in the Yeltsin regime. In the second half of his presidency, incapacitated by heart attacks and subsequent operations, Yeltsin presided over a period in which politics descended to the level of a Mafia turf war. In that, his rule mirrored those of a striking number of other reforming leaders. The reigns of Ivan the Terrible, Catherine the Great, Alexander I and Alexander II (who emancipated the serfs) are usually divided — in mythologized historiography at least — into initial periods of reform and openness and later periods of increasing authoritarianism.

Despite Yeltsin's massive shortcomings — perhaps the chief of which was to tap Putin as his heir in the hope of protecting himself and members of his political clan — he came to power as president because he was a truly populist politician. Kicked out of the Party in 1987, Yeltsin suffered through a period of debilitating depression, and saw a new opportunity as a politician in the winds of change. He was elected Russian president — when Russia was still a Soviet republic — because he appealed to the populace. He later stood on a tank championing opposition to the attempted *coup d'état* in 1991, displayed seething hate for the Communist Party, and expressed a genuine desire for a better future for Russia. Perhaps the country was lucky in that westernization and reform coincided with Yeltsin's quest for political dominance. Upon becoming president of post-Soviet Russia, Yeltsin turned over the economy to a group of young reformers and let them have their way. Their reforms are much criticized today, but the critics often forget how wondrous it was that they could take place at all.

Even when Yeltsin began to live as a presidential recluse, he allowed and encouraged free speech and individual rights. Like any western leader, he never questioned press criticism — he was above that. In that sense, he truly seemed to have revolutionized Russia, having eliminated the notion of censorship in one easy swipe, never looking back. (Of course Yeltsin had a tremendous amount of help from the then-forward-looking Mikhail Gorbachev, who laid the groundwork.) Under Putin, it is clear that priorities have changed. That's evident in the president's rhetoric alone. Unlike Yeltsin, who sometimes used the bully pulpit to call for decency and respect among the populace, Putin generally tells his subjects that the state's might and honor come first.

Thus, when I first proposed my fellowship topic to the Institute of Current World Affairs, Russia was in a significant way a different place. It may have been confronted by most of the same problems it has today; it may also have been dogged by the same corruption and arbitrary power exercised by the country's law-enforcement agencies. It was different because it seemed to be headed in a different direction. The stock market was booming. The number of western and western-style publications and television programs had mushroomed. Russians were traveling more abroad and it seemed the country, despite its myriad woes, was moving toward a brighter future.

Since then, Russia has suffered a ruinous and humiliating economic collapse, vented rage at the West for bombing Yugoslavia, begun a second war in Chechnya and elected as president a former KGB spy. Putin has vowed to crack down on lawlessness and attacked business and regional leaders whose power, he says, have grown out of proportion. Those at the receiving end of Putin's ire also happen to be political opponents. Moreover, Putin's government has gone after the usual gang of critics, mostly journalists. Prosecutors briefly arrested Vladimir Gusinsky, founder of the country's only independent television station, NTV, and have harassed a number of correspondents who produced coverage unfavorable to the Kremlin. Gusinsky is now living in Spain, fearing to return to Russia. The Kremlin is putting pressure on NTV's parent company, Media-Most, to sell the channel to a state-aligned enterprise. Even Boris Berezovsky, the controversial billionaire who helped engineer Putin's rise to power, has been pressured to sell his 49 percent stake in state-controlled ORT television to the government. While some analysts say Berezovsky's friction with the Kremlin is manufactured for western consumption, the fact remains that the state wants control over the media.

I had initially proposed in part to study the effects of westernization and the attitude Russians have toward the West and its influence. Since then, the country's attitude has markedly changed. My working thesis had been that Russia absorbs western influences but transforms them into something uniquely Russian — unique in the very method of adaptation. Russians often displayed a sense of superiority to the West: "We can do it better!" they seemed to say, and in some cases they did. But the receptivity to western influence seemed to be taken for granted. Now the West is more openly shunned by increasing numbers of Russians. Perhaps that's natural. Envy, fatigue with looking to the West for models, remaining cut off from past cultural traditions — all contribute to the need to reject outside influ-

ences and beat the chest. In an attempt to create a new nationalism, however, a new so-called "national idea," images from Tsarist and Soviet history are appropriated ad hoc. Divorced from their previous meaning, this cultural currency loses value.

At the same time, I had earlier envisioned that I would perhaps write less about politics and more about culture. However, since the country experienced its massive political realignment this year and last, politics — as at the end of the communist era — have once again begun to overshadow all aspects of life. It would be hard to discuss cultural trends without first detailing the ever-changing political situation that shapes them. Meanwhile, events are moving fast. In one example of Putin's growing influence, ORT's controversial anchor, Sergei Dorenko, was sacked in September during the standoff between Berezovsky and the Kremlin over control of the channel. Dorenko is close to Berezovsky, and he had been airing commentary lambasting the government for its bungled public relations during the aftermath of the *Kursk* nuclear submarine's sinking last August. (When still allied with Putin, Berezovsky and Dorenko admitted to collaborating on scripts for Dorenko's Sunday night program in which the presenter shamelessly skewered Putin's opposition with unproven allegations of corruption, depravity and even murder.) After the falling out between Berezovsky and Putin and Dorenko's subsequent firing, Bloomberg news agency secured a telling interview with the former anchor.

Plaques in Pilot Studio's Soviet-style conference room showing just some of the numerous awards the studio has won.

"We know that it's not justice that Putin is exercising against Gusinsky," Dorenko said of Berezovsky's one-time bitter business rival. "It's a punishment for non-loyalty to Putin personally. The same with ORT, to punish Berezovsky for non-loyalty.

"What happened to me was very simple. The president invited me to be a member of his team three times, starting January. He invited me to speak personally with him. He called me into a small hallway between rooms and said, 'I am very grateful to you for what you did for me.' I said, 'Vladimir Vladimirovich, I appreciate your gratitude but I did nothing for you. I fought against ideas.

"On Aug. 29, he invited me again and said, 'I want you to be a member of my team, because I will control ORT.' I said, 'I am a member of the team of my viewers.' He said, 'So I see you haven't made a decision yet.' I said, 'I have made a decision, to be a member of my team of viewers.' This was after a video I made about the (sinking of the nuclear submarine) *Kursk*. He thought I was a betrayer. This is how he thinks.

"Putin admits only one opinion, one point of view. He thinks in these terms. He wants all the channels to be controlled by him, because he is a virtual president, a virtual product. Like any spirit generated by something, he wants to control the machine that created him.

"He bases his power on the virtual power of TV. People wanted order, but what is order? For intellectuals, it means to stop robbery and violence on the streets. For others, I think it means, kill blacks and Caucasians. Today I am pushed out of my job, without explanation. But it was because of Putin."

The following week, Gusinsky said he had been forced under threat of imprisonment to sign an agreement saying he would sell his Media-Most company to Gazprom-Media, seen as a tool of the government. Gazprom-Media asked the Prosecutor General's Office to press charges, and it agreed to investigate.

While the Kremlin is not exercising outright censorship, as did the Soviets and tsars, its actions amount to the same. As so often in Russian history, this endgame — control over the press — is now being fought along different lines, ostensibly western ones. Instead of using secret police for its political repression, the Kremlin is using a commercial enterprise to buy shares in the entity it wants to control. That illustrates a common form of westernization: new means used to achieve old ends. Institutions have changed, but it is still the informal ties — witness Putin's alleged insistence on personal loyalty — that run the show as they did before.

"No One Knows About Us"

As the jockeying for the country's airwaves continued in the corridors of power in late August, I attended the

KROK joint Russian-Ukrainian animation festival. The event kicked off with an hour-long screening of animation from around the world in an old Soviet cinema theater in the center of town. Pilot Studio's contribution — which previously won the Cannes award — was my favorite entry.

Members of the KROK festival's jury on stage during the event's kick-off. Tatarsky stands fourth from the left.

The five-minute short features a caterpillar entranced by a game of badminton played in the field in which he is feeding. When a badminton bird happens to land near him, the caterpillar climbs onto it. Expecting to revel in the ability to fly through the air, the caterpillar is instead rudely subjected to a nauseating experience, slammed back and forth and twirled around in mid-air. After the caterpillar finally falls out — and undergoes a bout of vomiting — his wings suddenly sprout. Unlike other butterflies that immediately take to the air joyously around him, he's no longer sure about the "gift" of flight. The film is funny, and it uses sound and visual images subtly. Voices cleverly fade in and out of hearing and each time the badminton bird is walloped by a player, we see it from the caterpillar's point of view: twirling trees and grass receding into the distance as the bird flies upward.

Pilot's Prokhorov, who sat next to me at the event, produced the cartoon. Tatarsky came late, making it just in time to take his place on stage as part of the jury, which would be judging films for the following week. The self-congratulatory atmosphere that always pervades such events — that's generally the point — was prevalent here, but it was tempered by the acknowledgment of the difficulty of creating animation in Russia. Nevertheless, in an age in which the film industry dominates — even in Russia, where once-mighty studios are crippled by lack of funds — animation is still taken seriously. All the more so because with very few exceptions, most films coming into Russia and the few going out are not worth the celluloid on which they're captured.

Vladimir Gusinsky and his NTV — which, it's worth remembering, broadcasts Pilot's "Tushite Svet"— may be under fire, but that doesn't faze Pilot's founders. For a distant observer like me, their dedication to their medium is ever more valuable when so much else in Russian life seems to be falling apart. If culture, as some argue, is truly society's highest achievement as the vessel of civilization, nowhere is that more evident than in Russia today, where ventures such as Pilot's contrast so deeply with the increasing depravity of everyday life. While that may cause some to despair, Pilot's founders are optimistic. As they launch their latest project on NTV, they hope contracts from abroad will pick up in the next two to three years. "Russia is a giant country, but produces only a tiny number of cartoons," Tatarsky said. "We have some great directors, but no one knows about us." ❑

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Phone: (603) 643-5548 E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599 Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator: Gary L. Hansen
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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