

Session 3: Russian Media Today

By Elizabeth Kemp

Imagine a place where the government controls everything you see on television. It controls what you see or don't see, what you hear or don't hear, because it owns all of the TV stations. This might sound like an eerie George Orwell book, but for Russians, that is everyday life.

On April 2-3, Miami University hosted the "Russian Journalism Under Fire Conference" at the Marcum Conference Center. Six guests spoke about everything from the history of journalism in Russia to the current state of Russian media and the current threats and dangers faced by Russian journalists today.

Oleg Panfilov, Alexey Simonov, and Andrei Zolotov spoke about the state of the Russian media today. While Russia has television, radio and newspaper coverage, all of which you'd find in western media, the three panelists highlighted the differences between Russian media (control, reliance upon different mediums), and Western media.

There are five main television stations in Russia, all of which are state-owned. Unlike newspapers in Russia, television is free, and therefore the more common source for news. Said Panfilov, director of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, stated that out of the five stations, "95 to 97 percent" of viewers watch the first or second channel only.

"There is no public control, so the state can manipulate how it wants to," Panfilov explained. There is little to no negative assessment of President Vladimir Putin or the government in either the newspapers or on television, making it difficult to distinguish between what is propaganda and what is controlled by the Russian political system.

Alexey Simonov, president of the Glasnost Defense Fund, pointed out that coverage by most local media (TV, radio, newspapers) keeps the vast majority of its coverage local, with less than 20 percent of its coverage going toward civil society or business.

"It's absolutely unnatural, everyone seems quite happy with the way it is though," Simonov said, believing that local coverage in Russia is a bit backward.

"It's a strange mixture: western counterparts and the Soviet matrix," said Zolotov, editor of *Russia Profile* magazine. While Western and Russian media might cover the same topic, the extent to which it is reported varies significantly. Zolotov said. Media in Russia is seen "as an instrument, not an institution", he said, since so much of it is controlled by the state.

In some areas of more independent media, such as St. Petersburg (which has long-running liberal roots), coverage tends to be diversified in terms of politics, but ultimately, stations' loyalties lie with the Kremlin. Zolotov explained that most media outlets are owned by Russian businessmen, for whom media is not their main business. Since business is effected by the government, how the stations cover President Putin and the government "decides the degree of love," Zolotov said.

Western influences on the press have led to Russia returning more toward Soviet-era policies, Zolotov said, with the Kremlin learning from other governments on how to control the press, hoping to bring it back from a state of corrupt journalism. But television remains the most popular form of media in Russia, and unlike other eastern

European media and press outlets, Russia's media has stayed in national hands, with President Putin as the backbone.

As Zolotov said, "Russian media...is a strange beast."