

# TELEVISION AND TOTALITARIANISM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

From the First Democratic Republic  
to the Fall of Communism

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## Context of Soviet approaches in the televisual space of the Eastern Bloc<sup>1</sup>

In the field of television, the Soviet Union became the East European leader. Its experience with television broadcasting, technology and programme content dated back to the 1930s, when regular broadcasting was launched in the USSR, as one of the first five countries in the world.<sup>2</sup> It was also the first regime to realize the propaganda potential of television to promote the country's 'great future', for which it used as many as four state channels in its peak form by the end of the 1960s, which was unparalleled in any of the smaller countries of the region. Unsurprisingly, the Eastern European countries in the Soviet sphere of influence asked for help and inspiration in rolling out television and the very question of what to broadcast. It was after all in the interest of the USSR to make sure that the countries under its influence had a functioning broadcasting system. In this respect, a certain sense of rivalry crept into the field. (Czechoslovakia, for example, 'pulled itself together' only after the launch of television broadcasting in the countries of its closest neighbours, East Germany and Poland.) It was already crystal clear that the exchange of programmes and later even orbital stations would allow for the spread of ideology through technology. Not only in Eastern Europe, but also in countries as far away as Cuba.

It would be absurd to blindly adopt Soviet experience in any of the countries of the Eastern Bloc; this group of states had never formed a monolith, but rather a complex of lands with different cultural and historical

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<sup>1</sup> First version of this text was published under the title *Television Nations of Eastern Europe* as an article a collective Czech and Slovak monography (Kaňka – Kofránková – Mayerová – Štoll 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Regular broadcasting in the inter-war period was launched on 22 March 1935 in Nazi Germany, on 10 September 1935 in France, on 2 November 1936 in Great Britain, on 10 March 1939 in the USSR and on 30 April 1939 in the USA.

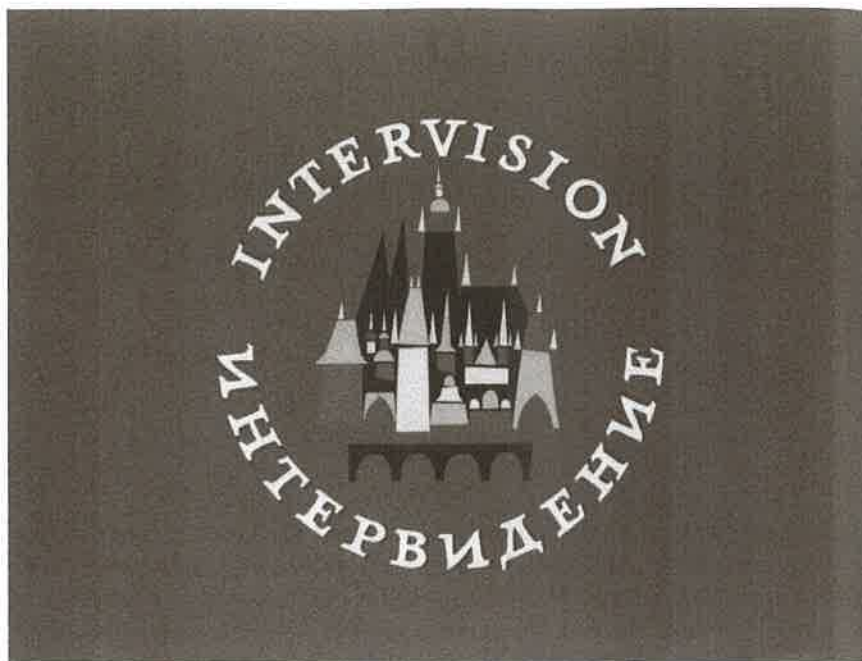


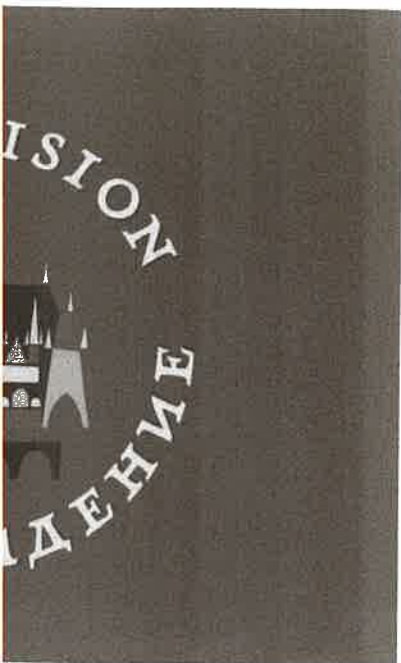
FIGURE 6.1 *The jingle of the international organization for the exchange of television shows in the socialist bloc. (Source: APF CT, 1975).*

developments. The Soviet Union differed from its 'satellites' in every aspect, namely the territorial vastness of the state, distribution of population throughout this vast territory, linguistic diversity (there were 130 nations and nationalities, newspapers were printed in 56 languages), differences in national traditions and cultures including diverse degrees of historical and cultural development (Šmíd 1989: unnumbered).

The Soviet Union struggled to provide television coverage across its enormous landmass and it would be difficult to coordinate. Full coverage across the USSR was not achieved until the mid-1960s when individual studios were connected with the help of cables and radio relay routes, namely after the launch of satellite Lightning<sup>3</sup> in 1965, which enabled the first signal transmissions between the Asian and the European parts of the USSR. About 40 satellites of the Orbita type<sup>4</sup> were launched in the years

<sup>3</sup> [Молния-Molniya]

<sup>4</sup> [Орбита]



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1965–1988, enabling the reception (or exchange) of Soviet programmes among other countries in the Eastern Bloc. Siberia did not receive a television signal until 1976, when another system, The Screen<sup>5</sup>, was launched into orbit. Let us add that the third orbital system was one called Moscow<sup>6</sup> launched in 1979, whose satellite Horizon<sup>7</sup> could receive the complete Soviet first programme – which was re-broadcast by Poland completely, for example. An important advancement for Soviet television was the construction of its Moscow headquarters in Ostankino (1967–1970), which later became even more technologically advanced in 1980 as it provided global broadcasts of the summer Olympic Games in Moscow. Despite all of these efforts, securing a unified programme for a country as large as the USSR presented major organizational problems. The main news programme *Time*<sup>8</sup> had to be broadcast five times every day in order to cover the ten different time zones of the vast empire. Such problems were naturally irrelevant for the rest of the Eastern Bloc countries.

### Taking over the organizational patterns

The day considered to be when regular television broadcasting began in the Soviet Union is 16 June 1949. It was named The Television of the Soviet Union<sup>9</sup> and used a post-war norm of the 625-line television system. Gradually, broadcast operations were launched elsewhere in the USSR: in Leningrad (1948), which assumed the new 625-line system on 1 May 1951. Kiev, Ukraine was to become the third Soviet broadcasting centre (6 November 1951) while the Baltic states followed suit in the 1950s: Riga, Latvia (6 November 1954), Tallinn, Estonia (19 July 1955) and Vilnius, Lithuania (30 April 1957).<sup>10</sup>

Under the influence of the Soviet Union, television broadcasting was launched in seven of the 'satellite' countries of Eastern Europe in the same decade. The first one was Warsaw (25 October 1952, *Telewizja Polska*, TVP), followed by East Berlin (21 December 1952 – first organized by *Fernsehzentrum Berlin*),<sup>11</sup> and next came Prague (1 May 1953, *Československá*

<sup>5</sup> [Экран-Экран]

<sup>6</sup> [Москва-Москва]

<sup>7</sup> [Горизон-Horizon]

<sup>8</sup> ['Время-Время']

<sup>9</sup> [Телевидение Советского Союза-Televidenie Sovetskogo Sojuza]

<sup>10</sup> See the study of the constituent history of Soviet television, Evans 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Sometimes the beginnings are marked by another date, 21 December 1955, when the construction of basic lines of communication was finished, in 1956 the TV organization was named Deutscher Fernsehfunk, DFF, in 1972 renamed as Fernsehen der DDR, DDR-FS, which lasted until its termination in 1990.

*televize*)<sup>12</sup>. The list continues with the launch of television in Bucharest (23 August 1955, *Televiziunea Română*)<sup>13</sup>, then Budapest (1958, *Magyar Televízió*), Sofia (7 May 1959, *Balgarsja televizija*)<sup>14</sup>, Belgrade (1959, *Jugoslovenska Radiotelevizija*) and finally Tirana (29 April 1960, *Rádio Televizioni Shqiptar*).

These countries more or less accepted the Soviet organizational approaches, although they had to adapt them to their own specific conditions. All had to consult with the Soviets. Poland had to welcome twenty-four Leningrad specialists who came to assist, that is, oversee, the launch of its television broadcasting (Michalski 2012: 19). According to the Soviet pattern, central administration (commonly on the level of the Culture Ministry or as a special committee) was created in most of the countries. This was in charge of construction and operation as well as broadcasting. The State Committee for Television and Radio<sup>15</sup> in Moscow was established in 1957, gaining even more power in 1970 when it was upgraded to the level of a Soviet Ministry whose chairman was a member of the government, or the Council of Ministers of the USSR.

Almost all countries of the Eastern Bloc adopted this model (often with names such as the State Committee for Radio and Television) and differed only in their view on whether television and radio should be lodged under the same roof or rather as two independent organizations. Having started as a department of radio in many countries (e.g. Poland or Czechoslovakia), television gradually gained its independence. Television became an independent medium in its own right, governed by its own institutions in Czechoslovakia in 1964 and in East Germany in 1968. In Hungary, radio and television were separate from the very beginning, while in Romania both media shared common finances, planning departments, and technology. In Bulgaria, the situation took a different turn altogether, when television incorporated the radio. In Albania, television and radio broadcasters continue to share studios.

In Yugoslavia, the situation was different still. Yugoslavia was a federal state and although the headquarters of Yugoslav television were in Belgrade, each state (or autonomous province) had its own radio and television committee. Each of the relatively independent Yugoslav states broadcast both the national programme, 'Yugoslav', which was mainly in Serbo-Croatian, as well as regional programming in the respective languages. Unlike in the other

<sup>12</sup> First under the name of *Televizní studio Praha* [Television Studio Prague] and *Ústřední televizní studio* [Central Television Studio], the name *Československá televize* [Czechoslovak Television] did not appear until 1 October 1959.

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes stated as 21 August 1955, the official date being 31 December 1956.

<sup>14</sup> Sometimes listed as 26 December 1959.

<sup>15</sup> [Государственный комитет по телевидению и радиовещанию СССР, Гостелерадио СССР-Gostelradio]

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the Soviet organizational model to their own specific conditions. They had to welcome twenty-four hours a day, that is, oversee, the launch of its television (19). According to the Soviet model, the level of the Culture Ministry was created in most of the countries. The organization as well as broadcasting. Radio<sup>15</sup> in Moscow was established when it was upgraded to the level of a member of the government, or

adopted this model (often with radio and Television) and differed from radio should be lodged under different organizations. Having started as a radio (e.g. Poland or Czechoslovakia), television became an independent medium governed by its own institutions in many countries. In Hungary, radio began at the beginning, while in Romania television departments, and technology. In turn altogether, when television and radio broadcasters

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[Television Studio Prague] and Ústřední Československá televize [Czechoslovak Television] on 31 December 1956.

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states of Yugoslavia, Slovenia aired Slovenian broadcasts first, and country-wide Yugoslav ones second. This hybrid system was particular to Yugoslav television, as was the fact that, aside from state television, a commercial station KOPER (Capodistria), supported by the Italian government, was permitted to broadcast in Italian for the country's Italian minority. Burton Paulu asserts that 'Yugoslav broadcasting provides an ideological bridge between the typical Communist and democratic systems' (Paulu 1967: 57).

Almost each of the Eastern Bloc televisions broadcast in multiple languages. Yugoslavia, with its ten language versions of the main news programme *The Daily*,<sup>16</sup> was exceptional, though each of the states tried to cover the needs of linguistic minorities. Apart from Czech and Slovak being two equal languages (e.g. the main news programme was hosted by Czech and Slovak speakers who alternated, if not after each headline or programme, then at least on the different days of the week), Czechoslovak television offered programmes in Polish, Hungarian, and Russian. East Germany was unique in that it had a common language with its closest Western 'capitalist' neighbour. This troubled the 'socialist' ideologists of the time as the TV signal of the West German channels ARD and ZDF covered almost the



FIGURE 6.2 Soviets television sets called *Leningrad* purchased by Czechoslovakia to watch the first broadcast ever. (Source: AMŠ, 1954).

<sup>16</sup> ['Dnevnik']

whole territory of the GDR and thus it was not easy to prevent the nation from watching those stations. For a while, the authorities found a way around this in that the East German and Russian TV sets which were available to buy in the GDR were only able to receive VHF signals and not the UHF used by West German broadcasters. However, this changed after the launch of the second East German programme in 1969 using UHF and thus requiring TV sets which were able to receive both wavelengths. At that time, an open ideological struggle was initiated by the so-called counter-programming – let us mention the programme called *Black Channel*,<sup>17</sup> which selected news programmes from ARD and ZDF, provided a new ideological context and offered ‘proper’ commentary to avoid any kind of ‘misunderstanding’ on the part of the East German citizens.

### Television content

A brisk programme exchange was taking place within the Eastern Bloc. An important platform for this exchange was an organization called Intervision<sup>18</sup> (5 September 1960), founded as a special unit of the international organization OIRT.<sup>19</sup> Its founding members were the Czechoslovak, East German, Hungarian, and Polish broadcasters, who were later joined by the Soviet Union (1961), Bulgaria (1963), Romania (1963), Mongolia (1974), and Cuba (1978). Surprisingly, Finland became a member (1965), despite being simultaneously a member of the ‘competing’ West European Eurovision (founded in 1954). Naturally, each of the East European television broadcasters imported Soviet programs to a certain extent, not as a result of a political imperative, but rather to fill broadcast schedules. Bulgarian television cooperated with the Soviets most extensively; it even had twenty of its employees stationed in Moscow in order to coordinate the so-called *Soviet Fridays*. This kind of practice was a rarity in the Eastern Bloc. The ratio of Soviet programmes in Bulgaria was as high as ten per cent, which was quite a logical result of its historical development, as the USSR provided extensive material support for the construction of TV studios in Sofia as well as the transmitters, not to mention other cultural similarities with

<sup>17</sup> [‘Schwarzer Kanal’]

<sup>18</sup> Intervision was founded, shielded by the OIRT organization and based in Prague. It was gradually joined by: People’s Republic of Albania (or ‘the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania’ from 1976), Belorussian SSR, People’s Republic of Bulgaria, People’s Republic of China, Estonian SSR, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Lithuanian SSR, Latvian SSR, Moldavian SSR, People’s Republic of Mongolia, People’s Republic of Romania, Ukrainian SSR, Democratic People’s Republic of Vietnam, Cuban Republic, and Finland.

<sup>19</sup> [Organization Internationale de Radiodiffusion et Télévision]

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Russia such as the common orthodox faith. Intervision provided special live broadcasts during major events such as the celebrations of Yuri Gagarin's space mission (1961) or celebrations of the socialist Labour Day which was broadcast by Polish TV, for example, on 1 May 1963. Polish TV also had a special department for socialist countries which selected programmes from the other befriended countries. Intervision did not just facilitate content sharing between East European broadcasters, but also other international activities such as the Teleforum shows and festivals in Moscow, the longest continuously running international television festival Golden Prague (which continues to this day), the Leipzig Festival of Cultural and Documentary Films, Sopot International Song Festival, The Sea Festival in Riga, Golden Orpheus in Bulgaria, Prix Danube in Bratislava, and others.

Eastern European broadcasters also had some access to Western programmes, namely sports programmes or live broadcasts of sporting events. The first example of one such transgression of ideological boundaries was the broadcasts from the winter Olympic Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy (1956), which were broadcast in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Other broadcasts from the West included the winter Olympics in Innsbruck (1964) and the joint cosmic flight Soyuz-Apollo (1975).

Naturally, each of the Eastern Bloc countries tried to cover the whole spectrum of television genres, ranging from programmes for the young, musical programmes, documentary series, live broadcasts or recorded versions of theatrical performances, coverage of prominent social (political), cultural,



FIGURE 6.3 Yuri Gagarin in the broadcast of CST and the entire Eastern Bloc. (Source: AMS, 1961).



and sporting events, to news reports and propaganda.<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, political supervision was present throughout, be it in the selection (or exclusion) of artists, songs, theatrical repertoire or even censoring cinematographic films broadcast on television. The most blatant demonstration of ideology was certainly visible in news reporting and TV journalism. Newscasts were dominated by unsubstantiated information on meeting the socialist 'plan' (large building projects, mining, agriculture . . .) and 'heroes of socialist work'. News regarding the hostile 'imperialist' world was presented in a fittingly negative or even seditious tone. The regime used all possible means to sustain its monolithic world view, and did not tolerate alternative opinions. In short, it realized all too well that television was the most powerful tool of propaganda and the loudest trumpet of socialism.

Some original programmes gained popularity in different countries; in Poland, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia, live TV broadcasts were popular, as were recordings, and later adaptations of theatrical plays – in Poland, one of the most popular programmes was called *Television Theater*<sup>21</sup> (1952–2011) (!).



FIGURE 6.4 Russian language courses began broadcasting in CST in 1960. (© M. Peterka, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> There are numerous studies dedicated to the media (namely film) and propaganda of the Soviet Bloc, e.g. Taylor 1979/1998 or Powrie-Stilwell 2007.

<sup>21</sup> ['Teatr Telewizji']. For more see Michalski (2012).

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Television, as a new medium still waiting to be fully utilized, employed theater to accomplish its cultural and educational mission, to provide cultural experience even to those who would not, or could not afford to, visit the theater. The same was true for sports matches, which were popular already in the radio era. Aside from political programmes there were various language courses, educational programmes of different forms called 'television academies', original dramatic work, and the development of cooperation with established film industries (the TV in East Germany directly cooperated with DEFA; Czechoslovak Television with the Czechoslovak State Film Agency,<sup>22</sup> etc.) was becoming of increasing importance. One of the necessary dramaturgical keys to the production and planning of the programme was of course the wide range of different (mostly political) anniversaries, birthdays, or deaths of statesmen, and other occasions.

In Hungary, there were no broadcasts on Mondays in a bid to encourage families to spend quality time together, rather than in front of the television. At the same time, the Bratislava studio in neighbouring Czechoslovakia was launched and began to broadcast Hungarian programmes for the Hungarian minority settled in southern Slovakia, and the signal could be received in Hungary as well. This custom was practiced until 1989.

## The expansion and keeping of the colossus

As the number of Soviet television channels was gradually increased (a second channel was launched in 1956, a third in 1965, a fourth in 1967), there was growing interest and demand for other broadcasters to widen their range of programming.<sup>23</sup> One of the reasons for this was the attempt to introduce color television, with three different (mutually incompatible) systems of color scanning and transmission which were available in the late 1960s – the West German PAL, the French (or in a modified form Soviet) SECAM, and the American NTSC. It appeared that the new programmes were a suitable experimental space for trying out the particularities of color. On 7 November 1967, the Soviet Union became the first country of the Eastern Bloc to introduce color transmission on its newly launched fourth programme designed for culture, sports, and entertainment, with color broadcast of a parade celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Great October Revolution. Although PAL offered better color transmission than SECAM and was also more stable, it was the political decision of the Soviet

<sup>22</sup> [Československý státní film]

<sup>23</sup> Second channels were launched in Latvia 1966, in Romania 1968, in East Germany 1969, in Poland, 1970, in Yugoslavia, 1970, in Czechoslovakia, 1970, in Bulgaria, 1975. Yugoslav RTV Zagreb was the only one to have launched a third programme, 1988.

Union that all its satellites would have to take over the SECAM color system without exception. Quite understandably, Latvia (1974), as a Soviet Republic, and Bulgaria (1972), a faithful friend of the USSR, introduced SECAM color transmission; as did East Germany, which launched its second channel on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of its existence (3 October 1969). An interesting situation occurred in Romania, which also introduced color broadcasts in line with the Soviet standard in 1968, but later switched to the PAL system (1983). Czechoslovakia also officially opted for SECAM (1973), despite the fact that its new Prague television complex Kavčí Hory was equipped with PAL technology, and in order to keep its obligations to the Soviet Bloc, it went on to place a decoder in front of the transmitter and thus managed to broadcast in line with the Soviet norm. This manoeuvre made it much easier, more effective, and cheaper to change back to the Western norm after the fall of the regime, as there was no need to invest in new technologies; all there was to do was to 'merely' get rid of the decoder. Then there were countries which never allowed the SECAM system to be enforced and insisted on PAL – even within Eastern Europe. To an extent, there was an element of resistance in this choice, as countries attempted to maintain their own integrity, at least externally. This was mostly true for Yugoslavia and the strongly Catholic Poland (both in 1971).



FIGURE 6.5 CST broadcasting was teeming with the Russian or Soviet element in all types of programmes. The leading singer, Karel Gott, who used to go on tours with the Red Army choir, the Alexandrov Ensemble, sings in the programme Russian Romance [*Ruské romance*]. (© Miroslav Pospíšil, 1977).

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To illustrate the greatness of the television nations behind the Iron Curtain it is possible to have a look at the statistics of 'telefication' from the end of the socialist era (1988). Television ownership was most widespread in East Germany with 363 television sets for every 1000 citizens, in comparison to West Germany, which had 373 television sets per 1000 people. The Soviet Union did far worse in this respect, but the numbers vary – 296 television sets per 1000 people may seem in comparison with the other countries rather low; however, that amounts to 84 million television sets scattered among its 278 million inhabitants. Similarly, Czechoslovakia had 287 television sets per 1000 people. It is necessary to view this data in the context of TV set production – the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany were at the same time manufacturers of TV sets, so they could also supply their domestic markets; the most massive manufacturer, of course, being the USSR. (East Germany produced TV sets under a Soviet technological licence.)

This chapter has tried to show that even the Soviet, or Eastern Bloc countries, did not manage to form a compact whole. A certain extent of independent thinking or autonomy was traceable in those countries which were not directly incorporated into the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia, which shared a lot of common features of state governance with the Soviet Union, at the same time moved away from the Soviet model to a large extent, or better to say – it went its own way. The infamous interventions (Hungary, 1956; Berlin, 1961; Czechoslovakia, 1968; Poland, early 1980s) were in fact desperate attempts to solve problems by force, either external or internal, and the significance of these moments was naturally reflected on TV screens as well. For all of them, let us mention the situation in Czechoslovakia in 1968, when TV technicians were hiding in different places with walkie-talkies in order to confuse the invaders. Eventually, they placed their camera on the Cukrák transmitter, located near Prague, where the Warsaw Pact tanks were just approaching, and provided the TV viewers with images of historical drama in a live broadcast. We can find another infamous example of foreign intervention during the state of emergency declared in Poland in 1981–1983, when Poland's second channel went black for two years.<sup>24</sup> Despite all of its military interventions, the Soviet Union did not manage fully to subdue its satellite countries.

<sup>24</sup> Some countries restricted their broadcasting even without political interventions, e.g. Romania reduced broadcasting during the economic crisis in 1980; in 1985, it cancelled its second channel completely for economic reasons while the first channel was limited to mere two hours at primetime and six and half hours at weekends.

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