



Maria Eismont, Alexei Venediktov
Russia's rules of engagement

Independent Radio station Ekho Moskvyy is well known in Russia as a bastion of free speech. Editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov tells Maria Eismont about everyday dealing with death threats, censorship and the Kremlin

Maria Eismont: How does *Ekho Moskvyy* manage to survive in a country which is thought to be authoritarian and where the regime tramples on the press?

Alexei Venediktov: The first thing to say is that, in terms of formalities, we are rigorously law abiding. We take great care to ensure that we don't infringe the outer aspects of the law — so it's quite hard to catch us out, at least from the legal point of view. Of course if it's a question of being hit over the head with a hammer, that's another matter, but as regards the letter of the law we are very, very careful. Over the 12 years that I've been editor in chief, we have had to fight 18 court cases against very well known figures, and we lost just one. You simply have to be clear — either it's an out-of-court settlement or you win.



Alexei Venediktov Editor-in-chief of radio station Ekho Moskvyy

The second reason is that in the eyes of the authorities we are a showcase for the West, demonstrating that Russia has free speech. And of course we exploit our position. The third thing is that, as editor in chief, I've preserved the connections that I made in the Yeltsin era, at all levels of the establishment. In the event of a conflict, I always manage to get over in time to put out the flames.

ME: And where do you have to get over to most often?

AV: That depends on the problem. The fact that things have got as far as the prime minister, and the president, are well known. It's unusual, but it has happened. In principle I can always discuss things informally with highly placed officials in the legal profession and with well – placed politicians. I'm a firefighter. And the most important thing (perhaps I should have mentioned this first, not fourth) is that I made the rules of the game clear to our shareholder, Gazprom, from the start: "Either I'm answerable for everything, or it's goodbye. The choice is yours. It you want to sack me that's fine. But if you do appoint me, then I decide who works for me and whom I penalise. And you have to trust me." [Gazprom became the main shareholder in *Ekho Moskvyy* in 2001: 66 per cent of the shares are owned by Gazprom, 18 percent by Venediktov and the rest by Ekho Moskvyy's staff.]

At the time, as I understand it, former president Vladimir Putin agreed to this, and nothing has changed since. He confirmed it personally during the Georgian crisis [in 2008]. "You are answerable for everything!" he said. And this is true. Most recently, over the past three years, another element has arisen; we have become a genuine source of information for people who make decisions. I know (I'm not just guessing) that transcripts of what we put on air, or print-outs of the *Ekho Moskvy* site, are filed on the desks of higher officials. Apparently they don't have enough information. Because we have become a platform for debate, the decision-makers always study them, even if they do not always take part in our debates. Three or four years ago we created a platform for discussion about what Russia lacks. The presidential administration and the White House bureaucracy [in Moscow] listen to our forum and look out for what happens in it.

Indirectly, the result has been the creation of a [working] programme together with the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, because they understand that if there is a problem, then its resolution lies through debate. Otherwise the margin of error is too broad. The fact that power is vertically structured in Russia means that not enough discussion takes place about how decisions are made. Of course it's the same worldwide: the margin of error grows. As soon as a debate has taken place the margin of error narrows.

During the Ukrainian elections people were constantly calling me and asking for our data. They have data of their own, but all their facts tally with the Kremlin's. I have independent sources, which may coincide with what the Kremlin has to say, or they may not. They checked out our data — it's a kind of model for self-correction. I also think this may be what allows *Ekho Moskvy* to exist in the form it does.

ME: As regards your relations with Gazprom, did you make any kind of official written agreement or did you simply set the rules of the game verbally, so that everything hangs on a "gentleman's agreement"?

AV: It's clear to everyone that, since 2000, my main shareholder has been based not in Gazprom but in the Kremlin. Gazprom said they wanted two things from me: the first was profitability. Gazprom has no intention of supporting *Ekho Moskvy* financially. We have fulfilled this condition and even ended a crisis year, 2009, with a profit. All these years Gazprom hasn't put a penny into us — we were the ones paying them the dividends.

The second condition is that when unflattering news about Gazprom gets released we cannot hold it back: we are the mass media. The condition was that we would immediately give Gazprom the opportunity to respond to any allegations. This has been rigorously kept. Shareholders must be respected. So my instructions are that when anything negative is being said about Gazprom, we telephone the press office and say: "We are about to release such and such a piece of information, would you like to comment on it?" We only do this with Gazprom, and the editor in chief must give the instruction. That is all. Everything else is welcome to go to the Kremlin or the White House. Of course when people from Gazprom call and ask me to turn my attention to, for example, the fact that the chief executive has gone to Jordan or Algeria, then I pay attention. But I don't see any kind of personal threat in that. This agreement has been in place for the past ten years. I didn't think it would be like this.

ME: And in all that ten years you never received instructions on what to put on air and what to censor?

AV: There were two requests. I agreed to one and rejected the other. Over a period of ten years. They were worded like orders. They weren't just requests to highlight [Alexei] Miller's [chairman of Gazprom management committee] trip to Algeria. They told us: "There is no reason to release this information." On one occasion I agreed, because it was justified; on another I refused.

ME: Can I ask you for more details about what happened?

AV: No.

ME: Pity. And how are your relations with the Kremlin shaping up? Do you go there often?

AV: Over the 18 months of Dmitry Anatolevich's [Medvedev] presidency, we have met three times. One of these was a private meeting, and two were attended by other chief editors. I think we had about the same number of meetings with Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin]. They don't call me, but I telephone them myself. I call Surkov [Kremlin's political strategist] and ask him to see me; I call Gromov [Putin's former spokesman] and ask him to see me; I call Timakova [Medvedev's spokeswoman] and ask her to see me; I call Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, in the White House, and ask to be seen. Of course my work consists of collecting and analysing information. You may have noticed that the prime minister's press secretary Dmitry Peskov gave three interviews during the whole of last year. Two of these were with Ekho Moskvyy.

I need information, I need to get to grips with the thinking of people close to the decision-makers. And naturally I also meet ministers, deputy prime ministers, regional governors. It's part of the job. I think any chief editor should assess what's behind the decisions that are made, and that's something journalists can't do. They're just not at the right level. Some people refuse to meet, others agree. But I haven't gone to planning meetings since 1996. I once went to a planning meeting in [Anatoly] Chubais's [politician and business leader] office. Since then I've stopped going.

ME: Tell me about the programmes which you make with different state agencies such as the Interior Ministry [Ekho Moskvyy's broadcasts include government information programmes]?

AV: We call them the "Inquiries Office". The Interior Ministry's first public information programme was: "how children should behave in cities", for example. These programmes aren't made to create an image. They are devoted to concrete problems. If you've had a window broken in a car, or if a page in your ZhZh blog has been broken into [Zhivoy Zhurnal: the Russian version of LiveJournal blogging], we explain where you should turn and what to do. Our job is to clarify what rights people have.

ME: But programmes like these still improve the image of the Interior Ministry.

AV: If they do a better job, and give the right sort of advice, the population will be the first to gain, not the Interior Ministry. My job is to think about listeners, and if just one person takes up their advice and gets the right

compensation that will be proof of the usefulness of the programme.

ME: If you are closely in touch with high-ranking sources over a long period, consciously or not, you begin to identify yourself with them, and you may risk losing your impartiality. Don't you feel this is a danger?

AV: I understand that this kind of threat exists but it's important to remember that I came to the profession late, when I was already fully mature. I started working as a journalist aged 35. I used to be a schoolteacher and I know the value of flattery and gifts: "Here, we'll give you some exclusive information and you just ..." I understand all that. I am a peer of the president and the prime minister, midway between Putin and Medvedev in terms of age. I'm their generation, and older than many people who are taking the decisions now. I'm familiar with the types. I can see when the danger of corruption or bribery is looming. That is why I don't identify myself with these people.

I have few friends among politicians. I regarded myself as a friend of the late Serezha Yushenikov, I am friendly with the minister of education, Andrei Fursenko, but I also criticise him more than anyone else. We're friends, I like him and he seems to like me. We share a number of interests, we discuss many issues quite freely, including educational reform. And when I take the microphone I say to him, now I'm warning you, I'm going to give you a hard time. I do this and he doesn't take offence because we've agreed it in advance. There are another three or four people within the echelons of power who, you could say, are friends. But I understand very well that I should criticise them all the more fiercely, even for minor mistakes.

ME: Do you feel like the last bastion of free speech?

AV: No. I feel like a professional — if that doesn't sound too arrogant. It seems to me that we are doing a professional job and we don't think in terms of free speech. We simply don't think about it as an issue. We thought about it in 2000: we were fighting for freedom, because we saw a threat. We could see what was happening in NTV [television channel once famously critical of government, taken over by Gazprom in 2001], we saw how they closed the *Segodnya* newspaper, how they threw out the entire editorial team of the magazine *Itogi*. We could see the threat. People started censoring themselves because no one wanted to end up on the streets. Newspapers and magazines changed their tone, and everyone knows what happened to television.

ME: But you didn't change your tone? Why?

AV: We didn't change our tone. The risks were high and all this cost me a lot of grey hairs. For example, I am decidedly against a belief in the uniqueness of the journalistic collective. I take the decisions I think are right. If my colleagues don't agree with me, they will either leave or they'll choose a different editor in chief. So, in effect, I took all the decisions, but I knew that a significant proportion of journalists would be behind me. If they had thrown me out, they would have thrown me out, that's all. I'm completely sure that 90 per cent would have stayed and carried on working and they might even have amended their position. I'm like a buffer for my journalists. I take all the flak. Some have left. Some have changed profession, some have gone into publications which are totally loyal to the authorities. As I see it, in doing so they changed profession. And some stayed. New people have come in, young, insanely committed, savage. Now I have to hold them back. In their eyes I am a conservative and a "Putinist" collaborator.

ME: Does free speech exist in Russia? Let's define it as the possibility of expressing any point of view.

AV: In a professional capacity, you can talk freely. There is a limit though: television. For the Russian authorities, television is not "media". It's a resource, a division of the military staff, a propaganda department. If they do free speech in a propaganda department you might lose the elections. Even the kind of elections we have over here. That's why it seems to me that on television the only people who can speak freely are those whose views concur with those of the authorities. You can see how the authorities are changing their position. Journalists who were rubbishing the US recently, now lick its boots because they've been told it's our friend and partner. But there are, undoubtedly, also limitations in the editorial policy of *Ekho Moskvy*. For example, in the 1990s we took the decision that we would not touch the private lives of our politicians. Their private lives are irrelevant, except in a situation where the president is having an operation and it is unclear whose finger is on the button. We had access to Boris Yeltsin's medical card and, ignoring all kinds of threats from the security services, we stubbornly reported the level of iron in his blood, because we felt it was important. We also had access to the medical card of his wife, Naina Yosifovna, who incidentally also had an operation at the time.

ME: What about Putin and Alina Kabaeva [Russian gymnast romantically linked with Putin in media]?

AV: We reported this with a reference to a newspaper, but it doesn't affect policy in any way, it doesn't change the picture. I was out of the country at the time, and it was outside the scope of what we normally do. This is a self-imposed limitation, although I understand how many listeners we'd have if we reported on the personal lives of celebrities, their illnesses and death. And believe me, we have very good sources. But we don't find it particularly interesting. We can read all about it in a paper called *Life*.

ME: As regards your audiences — aren't they a threat to the authorities? Might you not stir them into unwelcome behaviour?

AV: Eighty-three per cent of our listeners have been through higher education. Our listeners are independent people; they can't be forced to merge with the crowd. Our audiences — and we have studied this — are decision-takers who make choices in their personal lives, as well as in public and political life. These are people with a strong sense of self-esteem. They aren't going to merge with a crowd running to tear down the gates of the Kremlin. They are individualists. But you must also understand that the decision-making establishment accounts for a huge proportion of our listeners, and they aren't going to run off anywhere. That's not our mission in any case. We don't have a messianic mission — our job is to inform and entertain. These are dull, professional duties, and all we do is perform them.

ME: What about the medical advice programmes [broadcast on the station]?

AV: That's advertising. It's how we survive. One solution for us would be to take money from shareholders; then it would be clear that our information policy should be determined by them. Fine, but if we take money from shareholders we'll be obliged to pay them back in some way. Or we can earn money ourselves, in accordance with the law, and then policy is determined by the editor in chief. It has to be said that medical information programmes are

the price we pay for independence, but I'd point out that all the doctors we put on air have a state licence, the state has given them permission to do all this. We can't be the experts halfway between the state and the medics. They have the licence; they have the right to advertise. It's their responsibility. *Ekho Moskv* should not carry any responsibility for this advertising, if the state has accepted it. What kind of responsibility would we be talking about anyway?

ME: Let's talk about security [Venediktov received a death threat last year — an axe in a log, delivered to his home].

AV: The axe story is perfectly clear. It was an attempt to intimidate or an attempt at ridicule — an executioner's block with an axe! It was a log like an executioner's block — just so you understand this. Under the door, at night. Just as well that my eight-year-old son didn't see it. They didn't think about that, of course. It was an attempt to intimidate me, not to make me leave the country. People understand this. It was no coincidence that on the same day a youth movement had a meeting nearby. All this isn't coincidental. It was intended to cause distress, to incline me to self-censorship. Politkovskaya's killing did huge harm to investigative journalism in Chechnya. All good chief editors, starting with *Novaya Gazeta*, withdrew their correspondents from Chechnya. A hint was given, the hint was taken.

These events are not in the same category — they belong to very different categories — but they reflect a similar trend. Intimidate, trouble, get them to think about their families. We get these SMS messages. A presenter is doing a programme and she gets a message over the internet: "We know that your son is in year six in such and such a school. Here he is coming. We're watching him." How can a presenter carry on after that? And this happens, if not daily then weekly, to different presenters. I do take these threats seriously. I've started employing security guards — not quite guards, watchmen — and we've installed video cameras by the entrance. Our son gets taken to school and we collect him afterwards. Of course it's serious.

If I want to be a professional journalist I have to protect myself, and my family, or I should stop. I've talked about this to the people at the top, as it were, not just about myself, but about journalists in general. It has to be said that there was a time when one of our journalists, Yulia Latynina, was being followed by cars without number plates, but with state passes. I had a meeting with the director of the Federal Security Service [FSB], Mr [Alexander] Bortnikov, explained the position, and showed the photographs that had been taken. He appointed someone to take charge of this, people were identified, warned and since then, to date, no one has followed her. I am grateful to Bortnikov for dealing with this. It puts psychological pressure on people. On everyone. People leave their jobs, they don't want to work, they come and say quite openly: "Listen, can we go work for a music station?" Of course they can. I can understand them perfectly.

ME: But are there enough good, serious journalists in Russia? What do you think is happening in journalism today?

AV: I think people carry a huge burden of self-censorship in Russia. Everything I've been talking about is connected with fear. We don't know what many of our colleagues are capable of. We see them on television, we read them in newspapers, we hear them on radio and it's obvious that, for some reason, they aren't fulfilling their potential. Russia has virtually no investigative journalists. I think Anna Politkovskaya was the last. What's more,

even my colleagues from well-known magazines, like *New Times*, aren't doing investigative journalism. We don't pretend that we do it either, but we say quite openly: radio doesn't do investigations. We can't show documents over the radio, we don't believe in audio recordings, we wouldn't be able to prove the authenticity of what we say to our listeners. We can't undermine the trust of our listeners by saying: "We have this document." How would we show it?

ME: On the internet.

AV: Well. The Internet is a story in itself... it's the sort of medium where you can mess with photographic images.

ME: As you can in a newspaper.

AV: That's different. When you publish in a newspaper you are answerable to media law. When you publish on the Internet you aren't answerable to any kind of law. Our site isn't a mass medium. Our site is my personal web page, you might say. There is no law about responsibility for the publication of false documents on the internet. But we can call on another journalist who does investigations to come on air. I even wanted to create a programme called "investigative journalism".

And then it dawned on me — who on earth would I invite to take part in it, in Russia? There isn't anyone. That's why this heavy burden of self-censorship, which weighs of course both on my journalists and on me (and it's not just fear of losing your job, but also a fear of being maimed), all this affects your subconscious. When I see that one of my journalists is censoring himself, I try to move him, I arrange for somebody else to take his place, and let him do something else. The idea is to take the pressure off. But it doesn't always work.

ME: Is self-censorship exclusively the result of fear? Perhaps it's just a lack of competence in doing investigative work?

AV: It's fear. The new generation sees it as the norm of course. The fact that people who were working freely in the 1990s now work in a way that is no longer free is the result of fear. People who came into the business after 2000 see the self-censorship, they understand that one shouldn't allow oneself to do it, but they don't think why. This shouldn't be happening. You say it's incompetence and in a sense you are right, of course. But in the case of those who were working in the 1990s, it's only fear. At best, they leave the profession.

ME: Haven't you ever wanted to leave, yourself? Have you thought about it?

AV: Once a week. There are times when you seem to be hitting your head against a wall. My position may be easier than most. My complicated relations with decision-makers secure the work of my radio station.

Published 2010-08-04
 Original in English
 Translation by Irena Maryniak
 Contribution by Index on Censorship
 First published in *Index on Censorship* 2/2010
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