

Transcript of our interview with Zoya Sheftalovich, Politico contributing editor:

*Looking at what's happening on Russian state television at the moment, do you see any signs of the discussion moderating in any way, moving towards peace or not?*

I would say just the opposite. The discussion is really moving more towards more extremist views so there's a lot more talk about so-called tactical nuclear weaponry. There is a lot of talk about taking out Ukraine's infrastructure, freezing Ukrainians. There is a much more vociferous kind of move toward really encouraging war crimes and the reason for that is it's very clear to the local media and to the local educated audiences that the war is not going well. So now there's this desire to pivot and to use ever more increasingly dangerous types of rhetoric in order to try and kow Ukraine. But even if you watch some of the Russian state television shows, some of the panel discussions, even those where previously you wouldn't have this level of talk about nuclear weapons, you have talk about deploying nuclear weapons. And the important thing to remember is that in Russia - and I've spoken to Russian reporters who've worked in newsrooms in various - they get instructions from the Kremlin everyday. They have a phone call, they have an editorial meeting; that then filters down into the newsroom and they decide what their line is going to be that day. The things that we're seeing on Russian TV; it's not like it's independent pundits and independent media folk who are deciding what line to take. These are lines that are being fed down to them and it's a traditional, very well oiled propaganda machine where the Kremlin will have people who are more extreme, people who are less extreme and essentially it's designed to make Vladimir Putin look the guy in the middle who's a reasonable fellow and who's not going to be taking Russia into World War III by attacking a NATO country. Just last night there was talk of 'oh well we should go and assassinate the Prince of Wales because he's in our region we should go and assassinate the Prince of Wales'. It was a panel show and there were several panelists, one of the panelists says 'let's go and assassinate the Prince of Wales', another says 'oh no no no, are you suggesting that we attack at NATO country? Then we really will have a World War 3 scenario and then we'll feel the full force of NATO'. So there's this kind of moderating effect and it's designed to make Putin look like he's the reasonable guy in the middle. But it's all directed from the top. The rhetoric is getting more extreme because Russia's desperation is becoming more extreme.

*Nevertheless it is possible to find, for example, Opposition politicians suggesting that we should make peace. There was Yaakov Kedmi have a strong rant about how immoral it was to bomb Ukraine cities. There is a fair bit of dissent allowed on television. What is the purpose of that?*

It's to essentially let the air out of that dissent. It's canvassing what is seen to be a broad range of views so that those who are watching the TV can say 'oh we do have dissent represented, we do have these sorts of views coming up'. But if you actually watch these panel programs, very frequently the people calling for peace are making quite a nebulous call for peace. When you start drilling in to what this so called call for peace is, it becomes apparent there is real no real call for peace because they don't want to negotiate with the Zelenskyy regime because they view Zelenskyy as the main element of the problem for Russia in that he is someone people are getting around, he is someone people are fighting for. If you're watching little snapshots of Russian TV, it may look like there is dissent. But if you're watching the full kind of scope there are multiple admissions by people on these panel programs, where they talk about the fact that 'well who are we going to negotiate with? We refuse to negotiate with Zelenskyy'. They want to negotiate with a regime that they themselves put in to place and that is acknowledged.

And sure there are other people who are sort of saying 'look we shouldn't be doing this or that', again on the same program last night I was watching there were a few kind of voices that are the more moderate voices that they wheel out to be the kind of peaceniks. They'll say things like 'well we shouldn't be killing prisoners of war because the Ukrainians will kill our prisoners of war' and then they'll get shouted down by someone saying 'no, no, we need to liquidate people because you don't know the details and the people who are liquidated are being liquidated for a reason'. There is this kind of manufactured broad spectrum of views that gets represented but it is designed as a sort of theatre.

So there are people who are designed to look like idiots because they're proposing some kind of peace with a regime they can never deal with because they are so called Nazis. Then there are other people who are saying 'no, no, we need to use nuclear weapons' and it's this confusing cacophony of voices that are intentionally put up as a different variety of voices because that is the way the Russian propaganda machine has developed. Even if you look at Russian political parties, you have very few actual legitimate Opposition political parties, if any at this point, because they fund political parties to oppose Putin's United Russia although technically speaking Putin is an independent President but United Russia is his party. Putin himself and his various apparatchiks fund politicians across the spectrum. They are designed to make it appear as if there is an alternative but also to make it appear like Putin is the reasonable guy. That's why we had, until he died, Zhirinovsky, a very famous, very nationalist Russian politician, who called for the invasion of Ukraine.

But his kind of vision of what Russia would take from Ukraine was two thirds of the country. There's a famous video of him cutting a birthday cake where it's in the shape of Ukraine and cuts it and says 'well this bit is ours and this bit is theirs' and he's leaving a third of the cake for Ukraine. But these are politicians who are encouraged, their campaigns are funded by Putin and his cadre because they are designed to be the left of Putin and to the right of Putin so he looks like the reasonable guy. If you're watching snapshots of it, it appears like there is dissent. If you look at the fact there are people to the right who are more nationalist and more war mongering than Putin, it appears like there is a spectrum.

But the point is that that is the point; it's a manufactured system where it really is designed to appear as if there are opposition voices and people who are more reasonable, but those people are not independent people. You do get some breakthroughs. So there will be, on occasion, people who come on TV and genuinely seem to be arguing for an end to the war. But if they are legitimately dissenting they very quickly get shut down and you never see them again. The people who are repeatedly, night after night, going on these TV shows - any message they are sending is part of a state sanctioned plan to create an appearance of a certain thing. At the moment, because the war is going so badly for Putin - because there's no way of arguing with the fact that they've had to pull out of Kherson which was essentially their only major gain in terms of a larger Ukrainian city and they've pulled out of multiple areas — essentially they have to acknowledge that on television. Because if they don't acknowledge that it loses credibility.

People can see things, they have access to social media, they can see videos of Ukraine hoisting the flag in Kherson and bringing down all of the Russian flags. They see that footage out there so they [Kremlin] need to spin a narrative that puts that into some kind of palatable panacea for the masses. That is why you have some people wheeled out to say 'maybe we should have talks about peace' and then other people saying 'what we need is victory'.

Basically everything you see on Russian TV, everything you read in Russian state newspapers is really directly a narrative framed by the Kremlin.

*You say it's to create a theatre. Is the outcome of the theatre that the peaceniks are not allowed to win? That the hardliners are essentially allowed to win at the moment? Is that basically what it's about?*

It's about essentially having these peaceniks look weak and silly and having these hardliners come in and bash them over the head. And having someone come in through the middle and say 'oh hold on fella's let's be reasonable; we're not going to kill all the Ukrainian prisoners of war because that would be silly, we're not going to murder the Prince of Wales because that would be silly, we're not going to be an aggressor to a NATO country because that would be silly, we want to have peace talks, we just don't want to have those peace talks with the current regime because they're Nazi's'. And it looks kind of reasonable to the people at home because they've heard the peaceniks sounding very, very weak and silly.

They've heard these hardliners also sounding silly because they're suggesting things that everyone knows are terrible ideas. So this middle ground Putin is running — which is hammering Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, taking out their energy and essentially trying to freeze people to death — that looks kind of more reasonable at that point. So called partial mobilisation looks kind of reasonable; 'well guys you know we can't do this crazy thing of bombing a NATO country, we can't do a crazy thing like killing a prisoner of war and murdering we meet on the streets, but let's just have this more reasonable thing of partial mobilisation because we need to buck up and get our act together'. It's designed to make those quite unpalatable, very difficult, expensive things which really are hitting people where it hurts; it's designed to make all those things look more reasonable and palatable.