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# RUSSIA'S STS TELEVISION NETWORK

## A CULTURAL WINDOW TO THE WEST

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**Abstract:** Perspectives on Russian television focus mainly on state controlled networks. Russia, however, also has several important commercial television stations to whom little attention has been given. The most important of these stations is the entertainment network STS. The station was founded in 1996 when a subscription station AMTV merged with Saint Petersburg based broadcaster Channel Six and several regional stations to form Russia's fifth national broadcaster. After airing primarily Hollywood and Latin American series in the 1990s, the station began to produce Russian language series in 2003. Today the station is one of the most important entertainment brands in the former Soviet Union. This paper traces the history of STS and its importance in bringing new genres and production techniques to Russia. It also maps the network's explosive growth in the 2000s and its relationship with major Hollywood studios, most notably Sony. The influence of the station's two most important executives Alexander Rodanyansky and Vyacheslav Murugov is also examined. The paper then theorizes on what STS' current strategy may yield and what its current programs suggest about the changing nature of the Russian television market in an increasingly politicized environment.

**Keywords:** Russia, Television, Sony, STS, Hybridity, Cultural Odourlessness, Localization

### 1 Introduction

The typical focus of academic and popular works that examine media, and particularly television in the Russian Federation has been on two main aspects, news programming and propaganda. These discourses frequently circulate in the popular press, but academics have also mostly focused on these types of analysis.<sup>1</sup> While these are both

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Oates, *Television Democracy Elections*, Routledge, 2006; Stephen White and Sarah Oates, 'Politics and the Media in Postcommunist Russia,' *Politics* 23, 1, February 2003, 31–37; Olessia Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia*, Routledge, 2006; Stephen C. Hutchings, 'Saint Petersburg 300: Television and the Invention of a Russian (Media) Tradition,' *Television & New Media*, 9, 1, January 2008, 3–23.

real and serious aspects of the Russian media environment and worthy of examination, the fact that scholars in the West focus on them almost exclusively means that the focus has been entirely on the relationship of television to the Putin-led Russian state. The narrow scope of accounts of the Russian media has obscured many of the trends that have taken place in the realm of popular fiction. In particular, it has overemphasized accounts of the Russian media that are heavily influenced by political economy and underplayed the impact of several aspects of globalization on Russian television, particularly in the creation of television fiction.

This paper examines the history of the television station STS and its relationship to the development of entertainment television in Russia. The story of the growth of STS in the post-Soviet period is an important one in many respects. The station and the programming that it produces are examples of how Western culture spread following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The growth of the station and the shape that its programs ultimately took, speaks strongly in support of theories of cultural hybridity such as those of Marwan Kraidy that view the merging of local and global forms as the “cultural logic of globalization.”<sup>2</sup> While discourses around hybridity have progressed in recent years as online video platforms like Netflix have transformed how people consume content, STS’s story has more in common with earlier accounts of hybridity that emphasized the blending of textual elements than it does with newer articulations of the concept that have emerged as a result of technological change. This paper also examines the interaction of STS with the international television industry, which has been one of the keys to the station’s success. While many Hollywood studios have attempted to enter the Russian market in some form, they have often failed to gain a foothold in the market. STS has been the most consistent and useful partner for the Western majors. This interaction has involved complex cultural negotiations, often with the Russians in the dominant position. The experience of Hollywood companies in Russia speaks against the typical account of Western dominance and media imperialism that is often prevalent in the works of scholars such as Toby Miller.<sup>3</sup> These scholars, generally taking their starting point from unreconstructed Marxist understandings of media flows expect that powerful Western companies like Disney, Warner Brothers, and Sony would simply be able to impose their programming and production practices on culturally and economically weaker peripheral markets like Russia.<sup>4</sup> While the majors, and Sony in particular, have had a strong impact on the Russian market, this examination of STS shows that their power is much more circumscribed than typical accounts of cultural and media imperialism might suggest. This study, therefore, aligns with researchers from scholars like Albert Moran, Jean Chalaby and Silvio Waisbord whose studies of the international format trade noted that, despite the West’s dominant position in the creation and distribution of these texts, national context, local producers, and local tastes, mediate the way formats are adapted. This need for localization ultimately works against overt western dominance.<sup>5</sup> As Moran notes “TV formats continue to anchor their adaptations in the ongoing reality of the national.”<sup>6</sup>

## 2 STS: From Regional Station to National Juggernaut

For primarily economic reasons, television production in Russia lagged in the 1990s and was limited to a few genres, most notably the police procedural. Production accelerated greatly in the early 2000s, with an increasing number of genres appearing on Russian television. These included war dramas, period costume dramas, and many literary adaptations. By 2006 Russian language programming had mostly displaced imported shows in prime time. The industry continued to grow rapidly through the late 2000s and 2010s, with new networks and production companies

2 Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity: The Cultural Logic of Globalization*, Temple University Press, 2005.

3 Toby Miller et al., eds, *Global Hollywood: No. 2*, British Film Institute, 2004.

4 Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed and Hernán David Espinosa-Medina, ‘A Clearer Picture: Towards a New Framework for the Study of Cultural Transduction in Audiovisual Market Trades,’ *Observatorio (OBS\*)* 8, 1, January 2014, 26.

5 Albert Moran, ‘Reasserting the National? Programme Formats, International Television and Domestic Culture,’ in *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay eds, Routledge, 2009, p. 149-158; Silvio Waisbord, ‘McTV Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats,’ *Television & New Media* 5, 4, November 2004, 359-83; Jean K. Chalaby, *Transnational Television Worldwide: Towards a New Media Order*, I. B. Tauris, 2005.

6 Albert Moran, ‘Reasserting the National? Programme Formats, International Television and Domestic Culture,’ 158.

emerging. One of the stations to gain prominence during this period was the television channel *Set' Televizionnykh Stantsiy* or STS. The station was founded on December first, 1996, when Moscow-based AMTV, Saint Petersburg's Channel Six and several regional rebroadcasters merged to form Russia's fifth national broadcaster.<sup>7</sup> The network's early years were unremarkable, as it struggled to create a brand identity. Under its first two general directors, STS grew slowly relying mostly on American and European imports. In early 2002 Alexander Rodnyansky was appointed to head the network. The company moved its headquarters from Russia's second city back to the capital which housed most of the country's production spaces. Given the trend towards primetime being dominated by domestically produced programs, Rodnyansky decided that STS needed to produce its Russian language series. The first program that STS produced was a costume drama set in nineteenth century Saint Petersburg titled *Bednaya Nastya (Poor Anastasia)* (2003-2004). It was very popular and marked the first time that STS had managed to reach a mass audience. The project was the station's first collaboration with Sony Pictures Television. Initially, Sony provided consulting on the technical and writing aspects of the series to STS and its partners. In less than a year one hundred and twenty seven episodes were produced, and the series was one of the most successful on Russian television.

Starting with *Poor Anastasia*, the series that STS brought to the screen differed sharply from most of their Soviet and post-Soviet predecessors. In the Soviet period, two factors had sharply constrained television production. The budding media often had difficulty accessing studio space and supplying itself with film stock since both were controlled by the Soviet film industry which saw television as inferior and therefore often refused to share its resources.<sup>8</sup> As a result, most Soviet television series had a short duration, usually about a dozen episodes. Long running series were relatively unknown. Soviet series were restricted to genres acceptable to the Communist party. This control meant that, for the most part, police and espionage dramas were most common. When the Russian industry began to produce new television in greater volume at the end of the 1990s, they were mostly mini-series, and creators returned first to the genres that had succeeded in the USSR. The most popular programs of the late 1990s were police dramas like *Ulit'sy Razbitykh Fonarei (Streets of Broken Lights)* a series set in Saint Petersburg and *Kamenskaya* based on a popular series of police procedural novels by Alexandra Marinina. According to Konstantin Kliutchkine, the creators of these series resisted Western cultural encroachment by creating series that were "baggy monsters."<sup>9</sup> He notes that these series combined multiple loose stories, privileged dialogue over action and "rather than emulating the gloss of the Western television image, they emphasize the smudge of the Russian picture."<sup>10</sup> These series were difficult to watch, appeared only sporadically and ultimately were poorly positioned to compete with relatively well-crafted series that emerged from the STS-Sony partnership. Younger audiences who were not steeped in style of Soviet entertainment quickly became STS's core audience.

The successful partnership with Sony became one of the dominant aspects of the STS program schedule in the mid-2000s. Following the success of *Poor Anastasia*, STS commissioned forty episodes of an adaptation of the American sitcom *The Nanny* (1993-1999) which it purchased from Sony. The Russian series was called *Moia Prekrasnaia Niania (My Fair Nanny)* (2004-2009). *The Nanny* format had been successful globally, and because of its long duration on American television, it had over a hundred episodes which meant STS could proceed with a rapid production schedule. Certain aspects of the series needed to be changed to the Russian context, but most of these were surface alterations rather than changes to the core of the program. For example, the main character was changed from a Jewish American from Queens to a Ukrainian immigrant from the working-class Moscow suburb of Birulyova. Both the original and Russian adaptation emphasized social class as exemplified by dialect, Yiddish and Ukrainian slang in the respective versions. These types of distinctions between classes and ethnicities within a society are relatively universal and for a transnational adaptation to succeed they need only be localized by a partner who understands what will resonate with local audiences. The wager that STS and Sony made was that with the involvement of

7 Natalia Zavyalova, 'Novye televizionnye gorizonty — STS [New Television Horizons - STS],' *Gazeta Komersant*, 13 August 1997, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/182415>

8 Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War*, Cornell University Press, 2011, p. 188.

9 Konstantin Kliutchkine, 'The Kamenskaia Television Series and the Conventions of Russian Television,' *Kino Kultura*, January 2007.

10 Ibid.

consultants from Sony, STS could successfully adapt American sitcoms for Russian audiences and overcome the unease that they had with the genre.<sup>11</sup>

Their strategy was successful, and *My Fair Nanny* became one of the most-watched series on Russian television with nearly a quarter of Russian viewers tuning in four times a week. The lead actress, Anastasiya Zavorotnyuk, quickly rose through the ranks of the Russian star system and became the most popular female celebrity in the country. With some effort, the series overcame the stigma previously attached to the sitcom genre to become successful. Hostility to the situation comedy and its unfamiliarity to Russian audiences was so acute that the general director of STS Alexander Rodnyansky made media appearances trying to explain the norms of the genre to Russians. Most notably he appeared on an episode of a radio program *Telekhranitel* that focuses on the latest trends on Russian television on the culturally oriented station *Ekho Moskvyi*. On the program, Rodnyansky tried to explain the norms of the sitcom genre to the host Elena Afanaseeva and answered questions from listeners who phoned the station.<sup>12</sup> The efforts bore fruit and sitcoms are now a staple of STS's program schedule.

*My Fair Nanny's* success led to a long partnership between STS and the American studio. Eventually, they would produce five other hit programs. The relationship was not always frictionless. As is evident in the documentary *Exporting Raymond* (2010) about the American producer Phillip Rosenthal's experience bringing *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) to Russia, STS and the local producers frequently resisted the advice that they were given. The documentary is problematic since it highlights conflicts for the sake of entertainment and presents only the American perspective, thereby framing Rosenthal and Sony as protagonists opposed by uncomprehending Russians. It does, however, offer a rare glimpse of the negotiations that take place when adapting texts from one national context to another. While *Exporting Raymond* should be viewed critically, it is still extremely valuable in understanding the process of transnational cultural adaptation. For example, Rodnyansky rejected Rosenthal's pick for the male lead simply to prove that he was in charge. Those types of conflicts permeate the documentary. Sony's need to negotiate with its Russian partners and the fact that none of the other Western studios ever succeeded in Russia suggests that the models of political economy and cultural imperialism are inadequate to describe the complexities of transnational media transfers. Sony succeeded in Russia because it was willing to invest in the Russia market by placing personnel in the country for long periods of time to learn how to negotiate the cultural landscape and build relationships. Sony's consultants were not present in the writing rooms or on the set to impose a cultural agenda set by Hollywood; they were there to guide and teach their Russian partners, thereby ensuring the success and profitability of their series. Sony's role was much closer to a partnership with the Russians in the lead position than the type of center-margin account promulgated by a political economist. Sony exerted influence, rather than forcing its Russian partner into an American way of producing television or imposing a Western neo-liberal ideology.

### 3 STS Becomes the Market Leader

Sony's success and their ability to help their Russian partners produce popular programs allowed STS and its major production partners to develop their in-house talent. Writers trained on co-productions with Sony went on to create original Russian programs that shared many characteristics with American sitcoms. The first of these programs was the original series *Papiny Dochki* (*Daddy's Girls*) (2007-2013). The series was developed and produced by one of STS's in-house studios. This sitcom is notable for several reasons. It is the first original Russian sitcom to be developed without any assistance from a Western company, and it quickly became one of the most popular series in the market. At its peak in 2008 and 2009, the series was drawing nearly a quarter of Russian viewers

11 Dana Heller, 'Russian 'Sitkom' Adaptation: The Pushkin Principle,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 31, 2, 2003, 60–72.

12 Alexander Rodnyansky, 'Smeshit' po-russki: fenomen fil'ma Moia Prekrasnaia Niania [Laughter in Russian: The My Fair Nanny Phenomenon], interview by Elena Afanaseeva, Radio, 16 January 2005, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/tv/34025/>

four nights a week.<sup>13</sup> The series resembles the Sony sitcoms in several ways, relying primarily on physical comedy and character stereotypes to drive the humor.

While the program was a landmark for the Russian industry and STS, it was not particularly innovative. A Russian producer who worked on the program suggested that “the whole concept by itself ... it's a good concept, but it's nothing overwhelming... They are [Russian] stories dealing with Russian reality rather than adapted American reality.”<sup>14</sup> The Russian reality he refers to are problems either with the idiosyncratic school system, the Russian legal system, corruption, struggles with housing, or the outsized role of oligarchs in Russian society. Regardless of its conventional structure, the program represented one of the first successful comedies of the post-Soviet era that told Russian stories in a humorous and engaging way. Its similarity to sitcoms from America, supports Kevin Robins idea that transnational television becomes hybridized through “structures of common difference.” By this term, he means that as the media globalize, audiences across different national borders consume similar kinds of media products, but inflected with national or local variations.<sup>15</sup>

Supported by Sony co-productions and an increasing number of original series, STS went from a distant fifth in the national ratings in Russia at the beginning of the Rodnyansky era, to consistently jockeying with state-controlled NTV for third place. It was also during this period that STS began expanding. Its parent company, STS Media Holdings, began purchasing smaller channels in Russia and parts of the former Soviet Union including two channels in Russia, a satellite station and channels in Moldova and Kazakhstan. This expansion meant that by the end of Rodnyansky's tenure at STS, it had grown from a nearly irrelevant Russian channel to the premiere entertainment brand in the former Soviet Union. The firm was valued at approximately four billion dollars, making it one of the most valuable media holding companies in Europe at the time.

## 4 The Murugov Era: STS's Global Cultural Ambition

On the twenty-fourth of June 2008, Alexander Rodnyansky ended his tenure as the head of STS and was replaced by well-known Russian producer Vyacheslav Murugov. The latter's tenure is controversial. Under his leadership, STS launched several of their best rated, most celebrated programs and made major strides towards becoming a supplier of formats to the international market. At the same time, the station struggled to maintain its position in the Russian market, falling from fourth to sixth place. It came to rely on one production studio for most of its popular programs and passed up formats and genres that its rival TNT used to surpass it in the overall ratings.

Murugov, who as a producer had spent a great deal of time on the floor of trade fairs like MIPTV and MIPCOM, believed that there was an opportunity for Russian companies to create formats to supply an increasingly demanding transnational industry. In his opinion, much of the market for formats had by 2011 become stale and repetitive. To move forward as a producer of programming that would be appealing to audiences outside of Russia, STS had several problems to overcome related to what Joseph Straubhaar calls “cultural proximity.” By this, he essentially means that people prefer to consume media from a culture similar their own. This concept means that Russian cultural products would be successful in the countries with which it shares cultural ties but not elsewhere since Russian culture is somewhat distinct from those of Western nations.<sup>16</sup> The program that marks the movement toward being the producer of programs that appeal and sell in the international marketplace, and thus overcomes these problems, is *Kukhnia* (*The Kitchen*) (2012-2016).

13 'Papiny Dochki Vernutsya Na Tv S Kino Klishe [Daddy's Girl's Returns to Television with Film Cliches],' *Variety Russia*, 6 May 2012.

14 Interview with Russian Producer, interview by Author, 17 October 2014.

15 Kevin Robins, 'What in the World's Going On,' in *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production*, Paul du Gay ed, SAGE, 1998, 11–66.

16 Joe Straubhaar, 'Global, Regional, Transnational, Translocal,' *Media Industries* 1, 3, February 2015.



*The Kitchen* is notable in several ways. It has the highest budget of any Russian sitcom ever produced at approximately two hundred thousand dollars per episode.<sup>17</sup> The large budget, at least by Russian standards, allowed them to produce a program which in many ways is visually comparable with Western, single camera situation comedies. Through the first three seasons, *The Kitchen* was a ratings success, outperforming other programs in its time slot and helping to reinvigorate the STS brand as a whole.<sup>18</sup> The finale of the third season set an all-time ratings record for a Russian series, attracting about thirty percent of viewers in Moscow and twenty-five percent in the rest of the country.<sup>19</sup> The series continued to generate strong ratings in its last three seasons, never falling below twenty percent of viewers nationally.

*The Kitchen* was created with the format market in mind. The removal of most of the cultural markers that would have signaled it as being Russian makes the series culturally odourless. Koichi Iwabuchi defines cultural odour as the elements which tie a cultural product “with widely disseminated symbolic images of the country of origin” often in a way that can be disconcerting to audiences outside the country of origin.<sup>20</sup> *The Kitchen* is designed to be a culturally odourless product. The setting is an important aspect of this cultural odourlessness. The series set in an upscale French Restaurant called Claude Monet, and though the series obviously takes place in Moscow, because of it takes place in a milieu common in the era of globalization it could easily be transferred to another city. The *mise-en-scène* used in the series depicted in Figures 1 and 2 is very generic. Far from resembling a Russian restaurant the expensive furniture of the dining room and white-tiled industrial kitchen could be a French Restaurant in any global city. The only significant cultural marker that appears in the restaurant are the head Chef's fan paraphernalia, displayed in his office for his favorite sports club, FC Spartak Moscow (Figure 3). As part of the localization of the program, these items could easily be changed to match the new context.



Figure 1. The dining room at the Claude Monet restaurant (Image capture from STS' official Youtube channel).

17 'STS Vkladyvaet 8 Mln Dollarov v Serial, Dejstvie Kotorogo Proishodit Na Kuhne Restorana [STS Is Investing 8 Million Dollars on a Show Set in a Restaurant Kitchen],' *Broadcasting.ru*, 9 July 2012, [http://www.broadcasting.ru/newstext.php?news\\_id=85960](http://www.broadcasting.ru/newstext.php?news_id=85960)

18 'Kukhnya na STS Ponravilas Strane [The Kitchen on STS is the nation's favorite],' *Variety Russia*, 25 October 2012.

19 'Tretiy Sezon Kukhni Zavershilsya s Rekordnymi Reytingami [Third Season of The Kitchen End with Record Ratings],' *Variety Russia*, 4 April, 2014.

20 Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Duke University Press, 2002, 38.



Figure 2. The Kitchen at the Claude Monet restaurant (Image capture from STS' official Youtube channel).



Figure 3. The Chef's office complete with Spartak FC paraphernalia (Image capture from STS' official Youtube channel).

The non-diegetic music the series uses is another element that suggests that it is aimed at audiences outside Russia. Typically, Russian series license non-diegetic music from Russian artists since it is less expensive than using music from well-known Western artists. *The Kitchen*, however, uses music almost exclusively from the cannon of global culture. Most prominently the program features songs from Beyoncé, Neon Trees, Enya, OK GO, and REM but virtually all the music used in the series comes from a host of English-speaking artists or the library of classical music. In fact, through the first sixty episodes of the series, non-diegetic Russian music is used in only three instances. As the effects of economic sanctions began to affect the Russian economy after 2014, the program used less known Western bands and more Russian popular music but still maintained its global flavor. For the most part, through all six seasons, the music used in the program is familiar to audiences outside the Russian-speaking world, adding to the odourlessness of the series'.



Most of the humor in the series revolves around conflicts that take place in the restaurant or relate to the romantic misadventures of the series' philandering protagonist Max Lavrov (Mark Bogatyrev). The restaurant portion of the humor is primarily related to head chef Viktor Barinov's (Dimitri Nazarov) alcoholism and gambling addictions, and the kitchen staff's efforts to cover up their leader's shortcomings. The video below shows a compilation of the Chef's drunken escapades and exemplifies the humor that emerges from it. It was compiled by STS and posted on YouTube as part of a promotional campaign leading up to the sixth and final season of the program.

Video 1. A promotional video produced by STS highlighting comedic moments caused by the chef's alcoholism. *The Kitchen: Top 5 Moments When Chef was Underfoot*, STS Media, 23 October, 2014. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

A recurring theme in the series are the practical jokes played by two chefs, Fedya and Senya on their peers. Again, some of these were compiled by STS as YouTube promotions.

Video 2. A promotional video produced by STS highlighting pranks pulled by junior chefs Fedya and Senya. *The Kitchen: Senya and Fedya's Best Pranks*, STS Media, 10 October, 2014. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

Some comic situations also arise from the competition of the head chef with his counterpart at the Arcoboleno a competing high-end restaurant on the same block. The humor of the series is bound up in the everyday experiences of globalization, such as the increasing number of people working in contingent service industry jobs, the increased normalcy of work environments where men and women work together, creating the possibility of romance and the fact that several people working in the kitchen are illegal migrants.

For those familiar with the Russian market, the program is recognized as a landmark in production quality. A vice president of international programming at a US studio whose area includes Russia put it the most bluntly stating that "*The Kitchen* has changed the game... It's one of the first shows, it's so bright and airy and not just mired down in dark, ashen Russia.... it could be shot anywhere. It feels like any country that I don't understand the language."<sup>21</sup> When asked if they believed the program might be viable on the international market they answered "seeing *The Kitchen*, I could, but before that, I didn't."<sup>22</sup> The fact that the series has drawn the attention of media giants outside of Russia for its quality is a rare achievement for that industry and suggests that Murugov's vision of STS supplying programs to the international audience could come to fruition.

The first step in the direction of becoming a provider of formats for the world market occurred on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013 when STS announced that it had reached an agreement with the international arm of the American network CBS to distribute *The Kitchen* worldwide.<sup>23</sup> Under the agreement, the former Soviet Republics remain under STS's control. CBS has the rights to the series' format in all the markets outside of that zone excluding Israel. Obviously, this is a very important agreement from the Russian point of view. While CBS holds the right to *The Kitchen*, it has yet to commission a pilot for the program. The only sign of *The Kitchen* in the United States thus far is its availability for streaming on the internet based services Hulu and Amazon Prime.<sup>24</sup> Three adaptation of the program to date have appeared in Georgia, Estonia, and Greece. These productions may not be a significant achievement given that those countries have strong cultural and historic ties to Russia.<sup>25</sup> While the success of *The Kitchen* internationally remains somewhat unclear, this has not stopped STS from pushing forwards with further efforts to develop programs for the

21 Interview with the VP of International Development and Programming at a US Studio, interview by Author, 17 July 2014.

22 Ibid.

23 Katerina Kitayeva, 'Russkaya Kukhnya Dlya Amerikantsev [Russia's The Kitchen for Americans],' 26 November 2013, <http://rbcdaily.ru/media/562949989726542>

24 Vladimir Kozlov, 'Russian Broadcaster CTC Media Sells Content to Hulu,' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 7 July 2014, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/russian-broadcaster-ctc-media-sells-716978>

25 'Serial Kukhnya adaptiruyut dlya Gruzii [The Kitchen Gets a Georgian Adaptation],' *The Hollywood Reporter: Russian Edition*, 10 July 2015, <http://thr.ru/article/7134/>

format market. The company created some other culturally odourless programs such as *Posledniy iz Magikan* (Last of the Magikans) and *Angelika* both of which use similar structures to remain culturally odourless. These series are part of an increasing number of international series structured around “universal” story elements that “in any given television series is what might enable its subsequent adaptations in different countries around the world.”<sup>26</sup> Neither *Last of the Magikyans* or *Angelika* have achieved the success of *The Kitchen*, but they point to the fact that STS's broader ambitions are not isolated to one program. They continue to invest heavily in new programs with this goal in mind.

This attempt to gain international recognition is central to the future of STS, since the Russian market is becoming increasingly saturated and competitive. As a result, they have invested significant time and effort into the venture. Vyacheslav Murugov stated in an interview that reaching this agreement required a large investment from the Russian side including the creation of promotional materials in English, including a roughly six-minute trailer with subtitles and English narration and an information book that breaks down the program's performance in Russia by market segment.

Video 3. A promotial video for *The Kitchen* with English narration and subtitles produced by production company Yellow, Black and White for use at industry trade fairs. Please visit the [online version](#) of the article to watch this video.

He also said:

It is impossible just to sit in a chair and hope that someone will call and say “Hey we want to purchase *The Kitchen*... we had to build huge displays in Cannes where we placed large billboards. It required a great deal of preparation. It seemed like the right moment to get into this market. The Americans and the whole world are waiting for new formats.”<sup>27</sup>

Accounts like the one above, coming as they do from industry trade publications are somewhat problematic since they are often structured to promote a particular narrative, in this case that of STS's growing global ambition. They do, however, reveal the discourses that Russian producers are themselves promulgating. They are, therefore, important sources of information despite their origin. The expense and effort to create promotional material for the series at industry trade shows reflects STS's willingness to take its products to the international market and invest heavily in getting its programs adopted. It also reflects the serious ambitions of STS. *The Kitchen* is the result of a decade and a half of STS copying, hybridizing and experimenting with a Western genre, but also having a deep engagement with Western companies like Sony from which they learned how to create series for both domestic and international audiences. If *The Kitchen* is successful in the West or elsewhere, it would represent one of the first significant Russian contributions to international culture since the collapse of communism. It is a bold undertaking by STS that represents an intense desire by Russian producers and Russian companies to gain recognition as an important cultural player again.

## 5 Present and Future Challenges for STS

While STS has international ambitions, it remains a Russian company and as such its relationship to the state ultimately affects what is its representational practices and its future. Even though it is an entertainment only network and there is relatively little engagement with politics, STS is still clearly vulnerable to pressure from the state and actively works to keep itself from running foul of mandates coming from the Kremlin. For example, a gay character on *The Kitchen* was rewritten after the first season to comply with Russia's 2013 law banning “gay propaganda.” STS has also had to restructure its ownership following the passage of new media ownership laws in Russia. The Putin government's reaction to the protests that swept their allies out of power in Kyiv (Kiev) was to try to make such a revolt impossible in Russia by forcing

26 Isadora Avis, 'Adapting Landscape and Place in Transcultural Remakes: The Case of Bron/Broen, the Bridge and the Tunnel,' *International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*, 1, 2, Winter 2015, 130.

27 Ksenia Boletskaya, 'Vyacheslav Murugov Televidenie-Eto Ne Kanaly Eto Khity [Vyacheslav Murugov - Television is Not About Channels it is About Hits]', *Variety Russia*, 4 October 2014.

foreign-owned media outlets to shut down or to transfer ownership to a Russian company. Though the media law did not target STS, its passage forced Sweden's Modern Times Group to sell its forty percent stake in the network to a Russian consortium dominated by Putin allies and to delist from the NASDAQ. The Putin government has used numerous tactics to control the political content of the media. Both NTV and REN-TV, leading channels of anti-Putin dissent in the early 2000s were handed over to Kremlin allies after their owners were arrested on false charges.<sup>28</sup> Both the change in the types of representations possible on STS and the forced changes in its ownership structure point to some of the problems and trends that one finds in authoritarian capitalist states with regards to television and other media platforms. While, as Michael Idov noted, the Kremlin does not police fiction particularly carefully there is a fear among creators that a wrong move might lead the state to intervene.<sup>29</sup> As an international format consultant put it "the show runners and the people doing the show, we'll self-censor. There's no office at the network [or] at the production company who were looking at script... but simply, you have to be an idiot to take that chance, because, you know, they'll just take your show away."<sup>30</sup> The Russian government and its allies in the economic elite, the so-called oligarchs, currently own all major media outlets. If they must be shut down at some point, the decision can be made to seem at least somewhat legitimate. They can argue, as was the case with both NTV and REN-TV when they were brought under the control of Putin allies, that these were business decisions relating to debts owed or the will of a board of governors, rather than a directly political operation.<sup>31</sup> While these arguments rarely convince critics in the West, people in Russia seem to give such arguments at least some credence. The state, in Russia at least, leaves the semblance of a free market media system in place, for the most part forcing stations to fund their operations through advertising sales. It, however, wants to make certain that these media assets cannot ever be used against the state. Therefore, the state or its allies in the economic elites own and control all of the major media outlets. Even if they never produce programming that could be considered even remotely political, they are watched with a wary eye. Typically only people who are well connected both within the entertainment industry and the political establishment are allowed to manage the six national broadcasters. This arrangement is similar to those found in other authoritarian capitalist states like China, Vietnam and newly emerging authoritarian capitalist states like Hungary and Turkey.<sup>32</sup>

For all its past successes, the future of STS is now unclear. It has fallen behind many of its competitors, and despite its best efforts the new programs that it has premiered have failed to attract the massive audience that its popular programs of the 2000s and early 2010s achieved routinely. The changes in Russian media laws forced the company to leave the NASDAQ and seek financing in Russia. Along with the new ownership restrictions, the damage done to the Russian economy is constraining STS's ability to raise capital and create compelling original programming. The network has been forced to increase its percentage of foreign programming, particularly Hollywood films, to make up the difference.<sup>33</sup> The station's gambit to become a provider of formats has yet to come to fruition, meaning that much of the programming produced with this goal in mind failed to find a large domestic audience or to expand STS's revenue base by selling formats.

The station still has a good reputation and strong connections to television and media industries in the West. It remains well positioned to take advantage of the expansion of new platforms and the associated need that media companies in the West have of finding new sources of content that attract audiences. However, the station has tended to cater primarily to multi-generation family programming with broad appeal, which in certain senses runs against the grain of the "quality television" that new platforms and cable stations seem to prefer. Other Russian networks, like the state-owned Channel One, are better positioned to take advantage of the move towards so-called "narratively complex television."<sup>34</sup> There are certainly Russian production companies that are beginning to produce these types of series,

28 Ben Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin*, Yale University Press, 2014, 44.

29 Michael Idov, 'My Accidental Career as a Russian Screenwriter,' *The New York Times*, 7 January 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/magazine/my-accidental-career-as-a-russian-screenwriter.html>

30 Interview with international format consultant, interview by Author, 10 July 2014.

31 Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia*.

32 Bilge Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*, University of Illinois Press, 2016.

33 Vladimir Kozlov, 'Russia's TV Network CTC Media Re-Ups with Hollywood Majors,' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 14 April, 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/russia-s-tv-network-ctc-883910>

34 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York University Press, 2015.

but it is uncertain whether the STS brand could accommodate television programs of this kind. It is also increasingly unclear what role the Russian state and its stringent regulations will play on STS. In the past, the network benefitted from the fact that the state broadly ignored entertainment programming. With renewed conflict with the West, this situation might change at any time, and because of the network's close ties with Hollywood, it might suffer from those types of changes more than other Russian networks.

## 6 Conclusion

While STS is struggling more than it did a few years ago, its legacy within the Russian industry is clear. The network has been the greatest importer of genres and techniques from the West. The programs listed above are essential for understanding the slow but steady turn of the Russian industry to accepted international media standards. It is also essential for understanding the slow shift of Russian audiences towards genres that are, ultimately, Western in origin. STS has had the deepest and most sustained relationship with the West, primarily through its strong ties with Sony. This interaction with Western companies and especially the station's ties with important Hollywood studios cannot, however be classified as cultural imperial or Western domination of the kind predicted by political economy. In fact, STS has shown its ability to resist Western corporations in co-productions and take what it learns from them to create Russian versions of Western genres. This phenomenon has put Russia at the cusp of reasserting itself as a cultural producer and competitor to Western media firms on the world stage for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Because of its experience with Western genres STS is clearly the network most likely to produce a program that might be widely exportable back to the West or other large television markets. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to suggest that STS is a cultural relay between Russian and the international television industry. STS and its programs represent the movement of Russians towards a culture more in line with international norms. Given the enormous popularity that its programs have sustained over the long term, the influence of STS's westernizing impulse is only likely to continue to grow.

## Biography

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