

Residential Fellowships Program
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AUGUST COUP IN A COMMUNICATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The process of reforms, started by Mikhail Gorbachev, paradoxically, though at the same time quite naturally, culminated in the August coup, one of the most important events in the history of the Soviet Union and the rest of the world, equal in its importance or even surpassing October Revolution.

The coup provided answers to many questions: What is the composition and hierarchy of the opposition to Gorbachev?, What is the composition and hierarchy of pro-democracy forces in the country?, What is the popular attitude towards rule by force in the Soviet Union? and so on. At the same time the coup posed quite a number of questions: Was Gorbachev in any way implicated in the coup?, Did Yeltsin know anything about preparation for the coup?, To what extent was Gorbachev incommunicado during the coup?

One of the major questions posed by the coup is the question about the role of the mass media and other types of communication during the coup. The situation in the country during the August coup differed from the situation at the time of preceding coups and coup attempts mainly in the following three ways: a) the state of the Soviet society (striving for democracy coupled with absence of strong fear of possible persecution), b) political scene (the existence of strong opposition movement) and c) communication network (existence of elaborate system of modern communications, which the coup plotters could not possibly block). Extensive use of the communication network by the opposition and the activities of the Western mass media was one of the most important factors which led to the coup failure. For example, Bonner, Sakharov's wife, considers that Radio Liberty along with Muscovites can be considered a savior of Russia.

The main aim of the project is to analyze the role of the mass media and other types of communication during the

coup. The coup is being analyzed currently from different points of view. There are even sexological interpretations of the coup, mystical interpretations: Gorbachev is being considered as an evil spirit or a good spirit, a mutant. But there has been no comprehensive analysis of the coup from a communicative point of view. The existing book-length descriptions of the coup either refer to communicative aspect in passing (see, for example, *Eyewitness: A Personal Account of the Unraveling of the Soviet Union*. By Vladimir Pozner. Random House, 1992) or concentrate on a particular medium (see, for example, *Seven Days That Shook the World: The Collapse of Soviet Communism*. By Stuart H. Loory and Ann Imse. CNN Report, Turner Publishing, Inc., 1991).

In analyzing the role of the mass media and other types of communication during the coup most of the attention will be paid not to the functioning of a particular mass medium or type of communication but to the way it affected the development of the course of events and their final outcome.

Theoretical framework of the project is based on Professor George Gerbner's theory of "instant history". According to this theory, modern communication networks make it possible to spread information about a certain event with such speed that the audience can influence or take part in the event in question. Influence of the audience or its participation creates another wave of information, which, in its turn, produces reaction on the part of the audience, which once again triggers off information wave ... The speed of information distribution creates in the audience a feeling of presence and this feeling, in a sense, urges the audience to respond. The general effect is that of speeding up the course of events. Most effectively the theory of "instant history" can be applied to the events which constitute historical turning-points.

The project will investigate not only mass media communication, but all types of communication, including interpersonal communication and even rumors. The use of private means of communication will also be analyzed, due to the importance of their role during the coup. For example, former dissident Bukovsky, who is now living in England, managed to establish through his friends (who were equipped with transmitters) a communication link with the Soviet Union via Poland. He immediately passed the information he received to the Western press.

In addition to the analysis of the role of the mass media and other types of communication during the coup, the project envisages analysis of the coverage of the coup by the Soviet and Western mass media. The analysis of the coverage is aimed at finding out the differences and peculiarities of the Soviet and Western coverage of the coup

as well as at looking at the factors lying behind these peculiarities and differences. The analysis of the coverage will be carried out both synchronically and diachronically. The diachronic analysis will make it possible to see the evolution of the coup discourse in the Soviet and Western mass media.

The investigation will be carried out through the analysis of publications pertaining to the coup, TV and radio broadcasts as well as some other documents and materials available to the investigator through his contacts.

Washington-area resources will facilitate research for two major reasons: due to the expertise available through the Woodrow Wilson Center (fellows, guest speakers) as well as other institutions located in the area, and due to facilities of the Library of Congress.

The results of the investigation are planned to be published as a book.

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