

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

## The Talented Mr. Babitsky, World's Hottest Broadcaster <sup>[1]</sup>

The hottest news broadcaster these days is not one of the American network news anchors. He is not even an American, but a Russian. His name is Andrei Babitsky ("The Evening News, with Andrei Babitsky"?)

He is, of all things, a U.S. government-funded employee, a broadcast news correspondent for the congressionally-supported Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).

Its news programs are transmitted to Europe and the former Soviet Union, the Middle East and Southwest Asia 1,000 hours per week from its broadcast center on Wenceslas Square in Prague, the Czech Republic.

When Andrei Babitsky broadcasts reports from his native Russia, where he is based, he often becomes part of the story himself. That's what happened in his latest escapade, which caused ABC News to be kicked out of Russia.

RFE/RL spokesman Jeff Trimble, from corporate headquarters in Washington, D.C., told Worldcasting that Babitsky "was on vacation" when he conducted a video interview recently with Russia's most wanted terrorist, Shamil Basayev, in a secret forest location. He said Babitsky disclosed nothing in advance about his plans to do the interview. "He offered the interview first to ABC," says Trimble.

Chechen guerrilla leader Basayev is as bad as they come. He claims credit for the most horrific barbarities in modern Russia. Those include the seizure of a Moscow theater in 2002, in which 129 persons died, and several terrorist acts that followed, including seizure of a school in the Russian town of Beslan in which 320 persons died, mostly children; destruction of two airliners by suicide bombers killing, 89 persons; and a suicide bombing outside a Metro station, killing 10.

Babitsky somehow knew how to locate the most wanted terrorist in Russia, who has a \$10,000,000 bounty on his head, and who has eluded Russian security police for years. In the ABC Nightline interview, Basayev agreed that he is a terrorist, but claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is also a terrorist. "Officially, over 40,000 of our (Chechen) children have been killed and tens of thousands mutilated," said Basayev. "Is anyone saying anything about that? Responsibility is with the whole Russian nation." He promised more bloodshed.

Trimble said "RFE/RL learned of the Basayev interview and tape when contacted by ABC in early July, before the Nightline program aired; ABC called to say they had a tape from Babitsky and asked RFE/RL's permission to use it. But as the tape was Babitsky's, not RFE/RL's, it was not our call."

Shortly after the interview was shown on ABC's Nightline program, the Russian government

said it would not renew accreditation for ABC News journalists to work in the country. RFE/RL is also said to be concerned about repercussions from this incident. It is No.1 of all international broadcasters in Russia, with a staff of more than 100 full-time employees and 100 stringer/part-time journalists in that country, many of whom are working without accreditation because of a Russian government "loophole," which could be closed by authorities in retaliation for the Babitsky interview.

Trimble says "RFE/RL has reported on the interview, the Russian government reaction, and covered it also in on-air discussions about journalism and terrorism and other related topics. RFE/RL has not aired any portion of the interview."

It is especially embarrassing to Russian officials that Babitsky was able to arrange a meeting with the most wanted terrorist with apparent ease, while Russian security officials have been unable to apprehend him. Putin is believed to be especially peeved that the interview was conducted by Russian journalist Babitsky, whose reports over the years are perceived as being anti-government and sympathetic to Chechen guerillas.

In his other broadcasts, Babitsky has been critical of treatment by Russians of Chechen prisoners. In January 2000 he was arrested by Russian forces and mistreated during his one-month detention, after which he was put under house arrest in Moscow, charged with consorting with guerrillas and using false documents.

All of which, like it or not, gives Andrei Babitsky star power, essential in the business of broadcasting, including government broadcasting, to attract viewers and listeners. RFE/RL knows how to do this quite effectively.

The success of RFR/RL has continued unabated since its Cold War broadcast days. In the countries throughout its broadcast region it is generally ranked No.1 📄 as against competing international broadcasting services, including the BBC.

It has garnered a huge number of affiliate stations that carry its news broadcasts locally. Its Russian service, which began broadcasting in 1953, has 53 affiliate stations in cities throughout the country. In the nations of the former Yugoslavia, it has the staggering total of 200 affiliate local stations broadcasting its news.

RFE/RL has increased its audience through the Internet. In March 2005, its web sites registered nearly 9 million page turns, and its daily report, "RFE/RL Newslines," which analyzes political trends in Central Europe, is widely read.

So far as star reporter Andrei Babitsky is concerned, RFE/RL appears to be turning its cheek, perhaps to hide a smirk. "Andrei is on leave at this time and is due back at work soon," RFE/RL's Jeffrey Trimble tells Worldcasting. "He was not suspended. An internal investigation into his actions is underway."

Russian security officials will likely watch Babitsky's every future move, perhaps more carefully than before, as will his audience.

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