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Creating Heroes on YouTube and Boob Tube

By Alexei Pankin

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The Russian Reporter weekly magazine recently published a list of the 100 most memorable political events of the year. First place went to former Novorossiisk police Major Alexei Dymovsky, whose appeal to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin led to nationwide Interior Ministry reforms. Posted on YouTube in November 2009, Dymovsky's complaints about corruption and inefficiency in the law enforcement system unleashed a flood of pent-up grievances against the police. The video also sparked a flurry of comments in both the offline and online media. One month later, President Dmitry Medvedev issued a decree on measures to reform the Interior Ministry.

Shortly before the Russian Reporter ratings were released, Kommersant reported on the huge popularity of the "Glukhar" program on NTV. The main protagonist of the series, police Major Sergei Glukharev, commits exactly the same offenses that Dymovsky complained about. Glukharev takes bribes, beats suspects and even organizes an occasional murder. At the same time, he solves crimes and risks his life in the line of duty to protect the weak and the

vulnerable. What's more, he's charming, making him a distorted kind of Robin Hood who is both corrupt and benevolent. On the whole, the public views him as a positive character.

The station is already exploiting the image of the show's hero in other formats, while competing channels are feverishly shuffling their own prime-time programs out of the "Glukhar" time slot knowing that they don't stand a chance against the popular show that has an almost cult-like following.

Thus, Dymovsky, the rebellious policeman, and Glucharev, the charismatic one, have become national heroes. There is a reason for this paradox. Glukharev is the hero of an aging television audience. These are people who lived through the optimistic hopes for democracy and the free market during the perestroika years of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the severe stress of the 1990s under President Boris Yeltsin, and the relative prosperity and long-awaited stability of the 2000s under then-President Putin. If you want to understand the popularity of former Mayor Yury Luzhkov during most of his 18-year reign or the continuing popularity of Putin and Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, then just watch several episodes of "Glukhar."

Young people, on the other hand, have largely stopped watching television. They prefer the Internet. And that is a completely different form of media consumption. Strictly speaking, the "revelations" contained in Dymovsky's video post were child's play compared with what investigative journalists working in the traditional press have been reporting for the past five years. But the video appeared on the Internet — a forum where viewers could immediately write their comments and share new video material. This gave rise to a new social movement that sent an agenda for the president. What's more, nobody had to leave the comfort and privacy of their own home, stage a rally or set up headquarters to make their voice heard.

There is a large gap between the older television viewers and the younger "digital generation," which is the driving force of social modernization. Those of the older generation realize that new technologies and the drive for modernization are rapidly making their skills obsolete. But at the same time, those who are 40 and older vote in much larger numbers than the 18-to-40 crowd. This means that in any free election, the older generation would vote for someone like Glukharev by an overwhelming margin. Building a bridge between the two groups is becoming a social imperative.

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