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State Television Thumbs Its Nose at Medvedev

By Alexei Pankin

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When President Dmitry Medvedev met in December with the directors of the top television stations Channel One, Rossia and NTV — all of which are state-

controlled — he told them to bring their news reporting in line with the more unbiased coverage typically found on the Internet. But in January, those stations made it clear that they had no intention of bowing to Kremlin pressure.

The proof came with the celebration of the 80th anniversary of the birth of Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin. These three stations, along with two smaller national channels, TV Center and Zvezda, aired specials for the event that focused almost exclusively on Yeltsin the man, not the politician. In fact, Yeltsin's widow and daughters appeared in these programs so frequently that the fact of his having founded the modern Russian state was lost against the apparently more notable achievement that he was a wonderful father and husband.

Yeltsin's supporters were also given a few words. Not surprisingly, the authors of Yeltsin's Constitution, introduced in 1993, had nothing but praise for the document, and the architects of his liberal economic reforms argued that those policies were ideally suited to the needs of the time. The result was a sort of sugary, self-congratulatory fete, flavored with a dash of liberal propaganda and served to a national television audience. Afterward, Kommersant reported that the shows earned lower than average ratings.

Online reports and commentary were the exact opposite. For example, according to a survey on the Moskovsky Komsomolets web site, 41 percent of respondents felt that Yeltsin's primary contribution had been handing over power to Vladimir Putin, and only 5 percent cited his market reforms. A similar survey on the RIA-Novosti site reported 78 percent of respondents agreeing that, under Yeltsin, "nothing was achieved, and Russia gradually deteriorated into a Third World country." A talk show on Radio Liberty concerning Yeltsin's legacy garnered twice the number of web site responses than did a similar program on the seemingly more pressing question of why nobody managed to prevent the recent terrorist attack at Domodedovo Airport. Only one post was positive.

Although the contrasting television and Internet coverage of Yeltsin's legacy is a vivid example of what Medvedev is attempting to correct, the subject also provides an excellent opportunity for the two different media to hold a meaningful discussion that would bring their agendas into closer alignment — all the more because the Yeltsin epoch can be gauged by several measurable indexes. For example, Russians' average life expectancy in the 1990s was the same as it was from 1950 to 1952. According to economist Vladimir Popov, the murder rate rose from between 7 to 12 killings per 100,000 people in the years from 1985 to 1989 to 34 murders per 100,000 in 1994. Only in 2009 did it fall back to 15 murders per 100,000. According to official statistics, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population earns an average of 20 times more than the poorest 10 percent. That is already sufficient grounds for a scandal, but according to calculations made by statistician Grigory Khanin, that number is actually 30 times more. Khanin has also found that in 2007, labor productivity in Russia was 30 percent lower than it had been in 1987.

If television and the Internet ended their standoff, the result would be a richer and more informative discussion of every subject, from Yeltsin's legacy to modernization. For now, however, the major television stations are bent on proving that the Kremlin can't order them around.

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