

Public Television Is Good for Democracy

By [Alexei Pankin](#)

August 08, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

During the Petersburg Dialogue public forum held in Hanover in late July, President Dmitry Medvedev posted comments on his blog under the heading: “Public television is good. How could it work for us?”

There is no need to explain how important television is for Russia. For the world’s largest country in terms of territory, television is essentially the only means of communicating the national agenda. It is not only a mechanism for influencing public opinion, but also a means of forming social values.

Around the world, public television has been a key institution of democracy. It is no wonder that broadcasting began as an exclusively public enterprise in Western Europe. Private broadcasting was permitted only as late as the 1970s — and even then with regulations that were intended to promote the public interest.

Medvedev’s statement is revolutionary because it represents a decisive break with the practices of his predecessors, at least in words. Former President Boris Yeltsin approached

television much as he did privatization: by personally granting broadcasting licenses — for example, NTV. Or he handed over state companies — such as Ostankino, which is now Channel One — to his favorite oligarchs with the expectation that they come to his aid when necessary, which they did during the 1996 presidential election. Arguing that he was preventing censorship, Yeltsin vetoed radio and television broadcasting legislation passed by the State Duma in 1995 that would have created a regulatory body not falling under his direct personal control.

Then-President Vladimir Putin started out having a liberal attitude toward the media. “Only self-sufficiency can ensure independence,” he said at the beginning of his presidency, speaking equally of state and private media. The flip side of that policy became not so much dependence on the state as a symbiotic relationship in which the national television channels report the official version of news, politics and social issues.

In this sense, Medvedev’s support for public broadcasting that would not be dependent upon the state or business interests is a major departure from the pseudo-democratic and pseudo-liberal ideologies of his predecessors.

But then Medvedev focused on fiscal concerns. “How much would it cost?” was the only question Medvedev asked regarding the need to make reforms that would be as important as changes currently under way in the armed forces.

But the price tag is the least important consideration. Far more important is the question of which mechanism could be put in place to ensure public control over public television. Would it be a single public station or a network of regional stations or both? Would programming be broadcast over the airwaves or over the Internet? Who would staff the public broadcasting administration when Russia has no prior experience in this field?

These are just a few of the questions the president should ask before wondering where he would find money for something that has not even been thoroughly considered.

Public television would be a revolutionary transformation for the country’s mass media, and it has received a blessing from the top, without which absolutely nothing happens in this country. As for formulating the principles that should guide public broadcasting, that is a job for the public to tackle.

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