The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Soviet Manager Will Save Public TV

By Alexei Pankin

July 23, 2012



The creation of public television in Russia reminds me of the financial crisis that hit in August 1998. At that time, liberal economic reforms ended with the grandiose collapse and resignation of the government of the young reformer Sergei Kiriyenko. President Boris Yeltsin appointed Yevgeny Primakov, a Soviet politician, as prime minister, after which the country calmed down and the economy started to grow rapidly.

The decision to establish public television that will depend on neither the state nor a private owner was announced in Dmitry Medvedev's last presidential address in December as a measure to liberalize the political system. He gave three months for the concept to be worked out.

A group of liberal activists rallied around the presidential human rights council to support the project. To speed things up, the liberals decided to make do without extensive public discussion and create public television not by law but by presidential decree. In March, the press leaked a list of supposed members of the public television council. Subsequently, conservative television host Maxim Shevchenko asked why the proposed public television was

considered public if it was really "acting as the voice of a small group of pro-Western liberals."

Shevchenko also suggested that the creation of public television was actually part of a general "liberal conspiracy" seeking to keep leverage on power even after Vladimir Putin started his third presidential term.

In mid-April, Medvedev, while he was a lame-duck president, issued a decree indicating that both the editor and the public council to oversee the new channel would be appointed by the president. The liberal members of the presidential council hinted that these appointments would take place under Medvedev.

And yet on May 7, when Putin was inaugurated, it became clear that the "liberal conspiracy" had failed miserably. So now it was the liberals' turn to criticize the concept of public television. "I don't understand what is public about the public television station," Yulia Muchnik, host of Tomsk's TV-2 station, said in early July about the long list of candidates for the public television council sent to the president by the Public Chamber.

Last week, however, the matter was resolved in the best possible way. Putin appointed Anatoly Lysenko, a legend of Russian and Soviet television, to the position of editor-in-chief of the public television channel. Lysenko is well-known for producing excellent programs such as KVN, "World and Youth" and "Vzglyad." In addition, he was a true pioneer when he offered Russians an alternative to Soviet central television.

Conservative journalist Mikhail Leontyev wrote on his Odnako site: "The appointment of Lysenko to head public television has relieved everyone a bit. The man is definitely professional, honest and talented. This gives us hope that we don't have to expect any problems from this project in the near future." Even Leontyev's most liberal opponents would definitely agree with his words.

Maybe this is Russia's own special path to change. After institutional liberal and democratic reforms have been turned into a fraudulent farce, Soviet managers such as Primakov or Lysenko come along and solve all our problems to everyone's satisfaction.

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