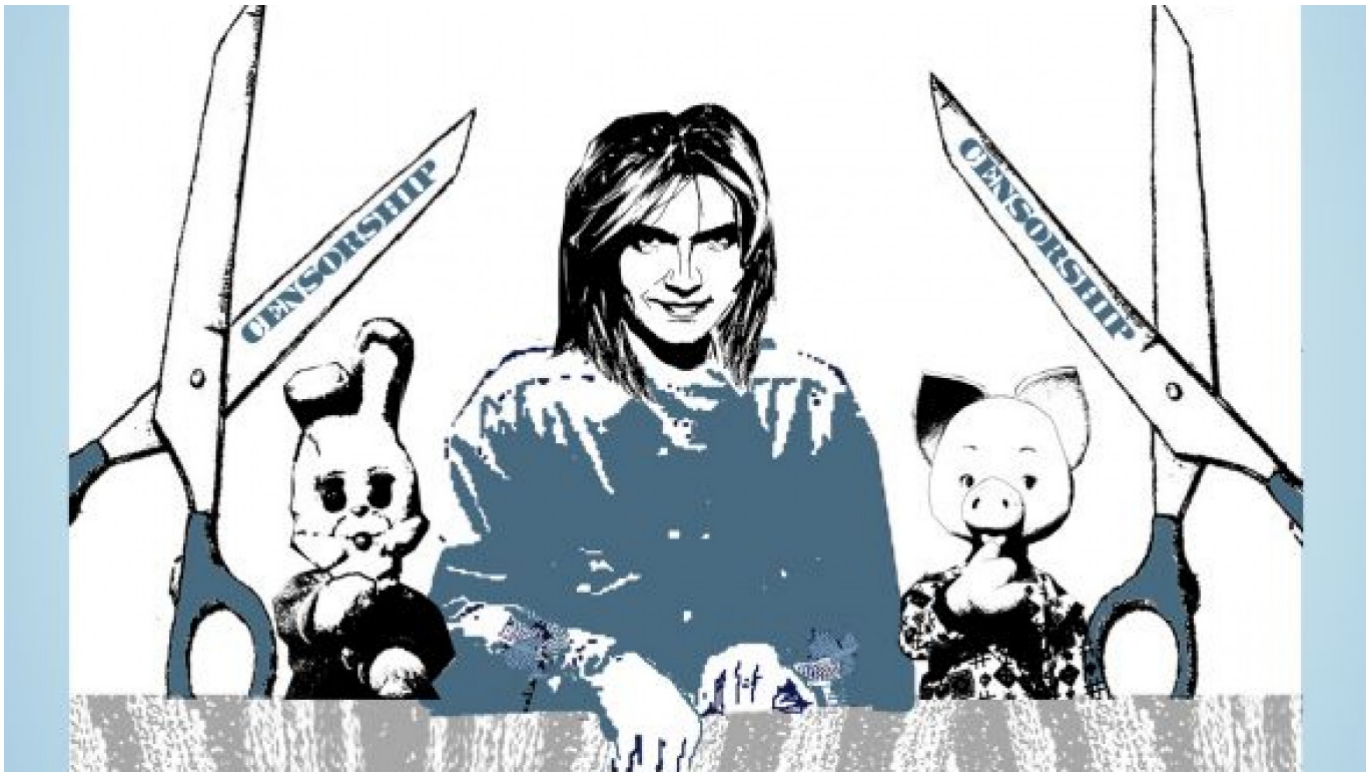
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Inthe Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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This week, long-running children's show "Spokoinoi Nochi, Malyshi," or "Good Night, Little Ones," stirred fears that a new law could lead to censorship of the cartoons — or the show even shifting to a louche 11 p.m. slot.

"Good Night, Little Ones" airs daily on Rossia 1. It has been broadcast since the 1960s, and the show's hypnotic title song and slightly bedraggled puppets — a dog, a pig and a hare — are deeply imbedded in the nation's subconscious.

The 10-minute show also includes cartoons, even though they get such a brief daily slot that I wonder how the toddlers retain the plot.

It was a remark on Ekho Moskvy radio station that unleashed a storm on Wednesday. A senior official at the VGTRK group, which runs the channel, said that the new law on protecting children from information, which allows the state to curb the Internet with a blacklist of sites, could also have consequences for a cartoon featured on the show.

The nannyish law calls for age certification of all content and says that scenes of smoking

and drinking beer or scenes encouraging violence should not be viewed until after the 11 p.m. watershed.

And the head of the studio of children and young people's programs, Tatyana Tsyvareva, told Ekho Moskvy that it could rule out a cartoon called "Just You Wait" that will air on the new season of the show.

"We only have two choices: break the law or show it late in the evening," she said, without saying whether the whole show would have to move its slot.

"Just You Wait" is a sort of Soviet version of "Tom and Jerry" featuring a wolf chasing a hare with plenty of cartoon violence. The wolf smokes a proletarian papirosa, rough tobacco stuffed into a cardboard tube, something hard to imagine all the kids going mad for, although some say they are useful for rolling joints.

Journalists also fretted over other cartoon heroes with nicotine habits, such as kindly Crocodile Gena in the Cheburashka films, who smokes a pipe in his time off from working in a zoo.

"Good Night, Little Ones" already airs at a late hour for a toddler audience — 8:30 p.m. — but this is normal in a country where tots are allowed to stay up late.

The show's makers denied the rumor, but it became one of the top discussion topics on Russian-language Twitter. It's a bit odd that people only really seem to engage with a law threatening to arbitrarily restrict their freedoms when it involves a cartoon character smoking a cigarette.

Adult-oriented channel 2x2 announced Thursday that it would cut the violent Itchy and Scratchy cartoon within a cartoon in The Simpsons to stay within the watershed, a measure that seemed half-baked given Homer Simpson's beer intake. It also said that South Park would move to a time after the watershed.

In other news on "Good Night Little Ones," the makers announced this week that long-haired pop crooner Dmitry Malikov would join the celebrity cast, including the former Miss Universe Oksana Fyodorova and actress Anna Mikhalkova.

The show seems to feel obliged to inject a touch of glamour to justify its primetime slot, even if it seems a little wasted on the kindergarten crowd.

Former policewoman Fyodorova became a presenter after being disqualified as Miss Universe in 2002, hopefully encouraging fathers to bond with their tots over the show. She compensates for her wooden delivery with lots of mascara, but has also been physically absent of late.

Malikov is another somewhat saccharine figure who plays the piano and has long swishy hair that he has shown off in an ad for an anti-dandruff shampoo. But he definitely doesn't smoke papirosa.

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