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Star NTV Reporter's 'Mockumentary' Sows Discord

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Fictitious business tycoon Sergei Sotnikov, one of the characters in an episode of "Russia. Total Eclipse."

NTV has rehired star television reporter Andrei Loshak, known for his objective coverage on the network, to host a "mockumentary" series that plays on conspiracy theories and gets great ratings.

But a lot of viewers don't know it's fake.

According to estimates by the TNS rating firm, almost a sixth of the nation's viewing public tuned in to "Russia. Total Eclipse" on average when it appeared around midnight five days last week.

The hour-long show, openly hyped as a "mockumentary" but closely resembling an investigative report, airs outlandish exposés such as a supposed U.S. plot to destroy Russian culture, ordinary household rugs with a mind-bending "matrix," and a baby fetus

stem cell "injection of immortality."

The series was intended to make fun of such conspiracy theories, but with its host Loshak being commonly known as a credible reporter on the same network, the show itself has turned into a controversy.

After premiering on Gazprom-controlled NTV last Monday at 11:35 p.m., the show attracted a flood of commentary on the channel's website. Some viewers had taken it to be real.

"I watched those programs with interest, since something like that had not been shown before. And I see the only way from the situation that exists in Russia is a rebellion against the regime," a viewer wrote.

Another viewer, who identified himself as Oleg Yezhov, said that at first "the gathering in the dungeon was a shock, but then with the carpets it got funny."

Many have agreed that Loshak, known for his quality reporting for the channel several years ago, is a big reason why the show is getting attention.

"In this project, we are trying to bring some trends that exist in the society and on television to, I would say, a logical absurd," Loshak, who also works as an editorial director for Esquire magazine, told Kommersant FM last week.

He described the context as "Mamontovshina," a reference to Arkady Mamontov, a reporter for the Rossia channel who has been accused of using his programs as a Kremlin propaganda tool.

DULLES DOCTRINE

"Russia. Total Eclipse," directed by Pavel Bardin, most-renowned for his film "Russia 88" about the rise of the Nazi movement, uses in one episode a popular conspiracy theory about Americans wanting to destroy Russia by corrupting its elite.

It cites the so-called "Dulles doctrine," which, supposedly authored during the Cold War by CIA director Allan Dulles, allegedly lays out plans to secretly destroy the Soviet Union by corrupting its culture and moral values.

But the text actually originated in a 1971 Russian novel called "The Eternal Call." The Dulles link is bogus.

According to "Total Eclipse's" first episode, the doctrine was obtained by a group of Russian spies, including Anna Chapman, who was caught in June 2010 by the FBI in the United States.

In the episode, nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky and filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov seriously confirm that the Americans had such a plan.

Another episode about fetuses being taken from "Maternity Ward No. 9" to be made into anti-aging elixirs caused a big fuss on maternity websites, with worried mothers-to-be demanding to know where the place is.

Loshak told The Moscow Times that he thought the series would be a "barrel loaded with excrement." But he declined to comment on whether the show might affect his reputation.

Although Russians often call television a "zombie box," the majority of the country's citizens still get their news from television. NTV, received by 84 percent of the population, is among the nation's three most-popular channels.

Loshak told Dozhd TV on Friday that he didn't expect the episodes to be taken as reality by the majority of the audience, adding that the show was well-received by NTV's general director, Vladimir Kulistikov.

Loshak said Kulistikov had even expressed an interest in doing a follow-up project, an idea Loshak turned down. "I don't think I would play this game one more time," he said.

In a statement to The Moscow Times, the channel said it was not going to produce a similar show. "The project is unique and therefore cannot be repeated," a spokeswoman said.

The channel said on its website that the project was a "new genre."

HOMOINTERN

One episode about a nationalist State Duma deputy being behind a militant religious movement even duped Panorama think tank director Vladimir Pribylovsky. After watching the show, he actually started to search for the fictitious Sergei Sotnikov.

"Only when I checked everything I found out that such a person doesn't exist," he told The Moscow Times.

The episode portrays Sotnikov as battling against "Homointern" (Gomintern), an international gay organization whose name is a play on "Comintern," an influential Lenin-era Communist league.

The show's makers even created a fake website — svsotnikov.com — featuring a photo of Sotnikov, a bald man with a beard, sitting together with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill.

The biographical sketch on the site presents Sotnikov as a church patron, a deputy of the nationalist Liberal Democratic party, and a fighter against a "gay mafia" that had made several attempts on his life.

Loshak described the program as "non-political" but an attempt to show the "true state" of television's role in Russian society. Some critics have said the absurd show will tarnish the image of NTV, which has been denounced for smear campaigns in the past.

In March, the channel produced a show called "Anatomy of a Protest," which claimed that opposition groups paid protesters to rally. The program triggered a backlash among the opposition figures, with many calling for a boycott of the network.

"Regardless of what side of the barricades these people are on, Kulistikov's twisted personality is seen through," media critic Alexei Pankin said about "Total Eclipse," referring to the powerful Kremlin-connected head of the network.

An editorial in Nezavisimaya Gazeta said Loshak's project was being used by NTV's higher-ups for their own purposes.

"It is believable that Loshak was joking and that those who gave the green light to his show have appreciated it. But this is clear: While remaining a joke, this show can work for other ideological orders. It is sad that no one has thought about who would get the last laugh," the editorial said.

The newspaper comment was echoed by political pundit Pribylovsky, who said NTV's Kremlin-connected management has an ulterior motive behind airing the show.

"While Loshak was planning to make fun on NTV's programming, those in the management knew that people who have lost ideological guidelines would take it for real. That's why they supported it," Pribylovsky said.

While some viewers have praised Loshak and Bardin for witty satire, others were more skeptical.

"My view of this project is highly negative. I think they are playing with fire," said Mikhail Kozyrev, a senior producer at Dozhd TV.

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