

Putin Saw TV Parody Before It Aired, Spokesman Says

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Grachyov playing the part of Putin in the NTV show "Yes, Mr. President."

President Vladimir Putin's official spokesman said Monday that Putin had watched in advance a sketch aired Sunday night on NTV that mocked the president for his diminutive stature and manicured public persona.

Russian television viewers are rarely exposed to criticism of the ruling elite in prime-time shows, and national media are frequently ranked as "not free" in international rankings of press freedom.

Responding to disbelief that the comic show, the first in a series, made it on air, Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Interfax that Putin always enjoys a good joke, even when it's aimed at him.

"He invariably welcomes humor, in the best sense of the word," he said.

Peskov hinted, however, that the head of state had preferred certain parts of the show over others, although he didn't elaborate.

NTV broadcast the show, titled "Yes, Mr. President," on the eve of the one-year anniversary of Putin's re-election to a third term as president. The role of Putin was played by comedian Dmitry Grachyov, who has parodied Putin on a number of occasions, including in his presence.

The pro-government channel had whetted viewers' appetites earlier Sunday by publishing an article on its website under the headline "'Yes, Mr. President!' We're Really Showing This on Air."

Bloggers spent the early hours of Monday morning debating whether the new show reflected a loosening of the Kremlin's grip over the media, even though similar hopes were quashed after Channel One broadcast a humorous cartoon on New Year's Eve in 2009 showing Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev dancing and singing.

Peskov seemed to suggest that Putin was content with the digs in Sunday's broadcast, which mainly poked fun at a stunt when Putin found Greek amphorae while diving, a "candid" documentary aired on NTV showing the president's rigorous daily routine, and his friendship with French actor Gerard Depardieu.

Past NTV attempts to satirize Putin and those close to him were not met so sanguinely by the president, and may have even contributed to the channel's loss of independence.

In early 2000, the channel aired episodes of a long-running satirical show called "Kukly" (Puppets) that lampooned Putin, including one that cast leading political figures as prostitutes at his beck and call.

Observers said at the time that the show was a major irritant for Putin, and later that year prosecutors opened a criminal investigation into NTV owner Vladimir Gusinsky.

In 2001, Gazprom Media acquired a controlling stake of 46 percent in NTV, effectively silencing its criticism of the Kremlin.

On Monday, state-run pollster VTsIOM said Putin's "trust" rating had slipped slightly, from 50 percent at this time last year to 48 percent. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev came in second in the ratings of top politicians, at 25 percent.

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