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Local TV Channel Broadcasts Rare Critical Segment About Putin

By The Moscow Times

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A television station in the Urals city of Chelyabinsk broadcast a two-minute clip criticizing President Vladimir Putin, a rare event in a country where television is tightly controlled.

In the footage on local channel Eastern Express, a woman is heard saying above dramatic music that Putin has "brought the criticism of all international rights organizations on Russia" and is allowing corruption on an "unimaginable scale."

"Under Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] the freedom of speech, the freedom of assembly and freedom in general are not at all welcome," she says in a comment that most channels in Russia would not usually air.

Valery Shagiyev, the head of Eastern Express, was not available for comment regarding the prime-time insert that followed a positive message on healthcare in Chelyabinsk, which lies 1,500 kilometers east of Moscow.

Local portal UralPolit.ru said the video was aired on July 31 by a disgruntled staffer and quoted Shagiyev as saying the person responsible for the "hooliganism prank" would be fired.

The video also referred to the unsolved murders of two Putin critics, journalists Anna Politkovskaya and human rights campaigner Natalya Estemirova and stands in stark contrast to the almost exclusively favorable coverage the president gets on state media.

Putin, elected to a third presidential term last year, has used state media to prop up his support among Russians, and few outlets dedicate much coverage to his critics. The Russian leader is criticized in print media and on the Internet.

Activists who staged protests in Moscow and other big cities in late 2011 and 2012 against his 13-year rule are also often portrayed in a negative light by the state-controlled media.

Opposition activists accuse Putin of clamping down on dissent and say the Kremlin is worried his popularity is falling, although polls show he is remains Russia's most popular politician.

Western governments have also voiced concern that democratic freedoms are being rolled back, criticism the Kremlin has dismissed as unfounded.

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