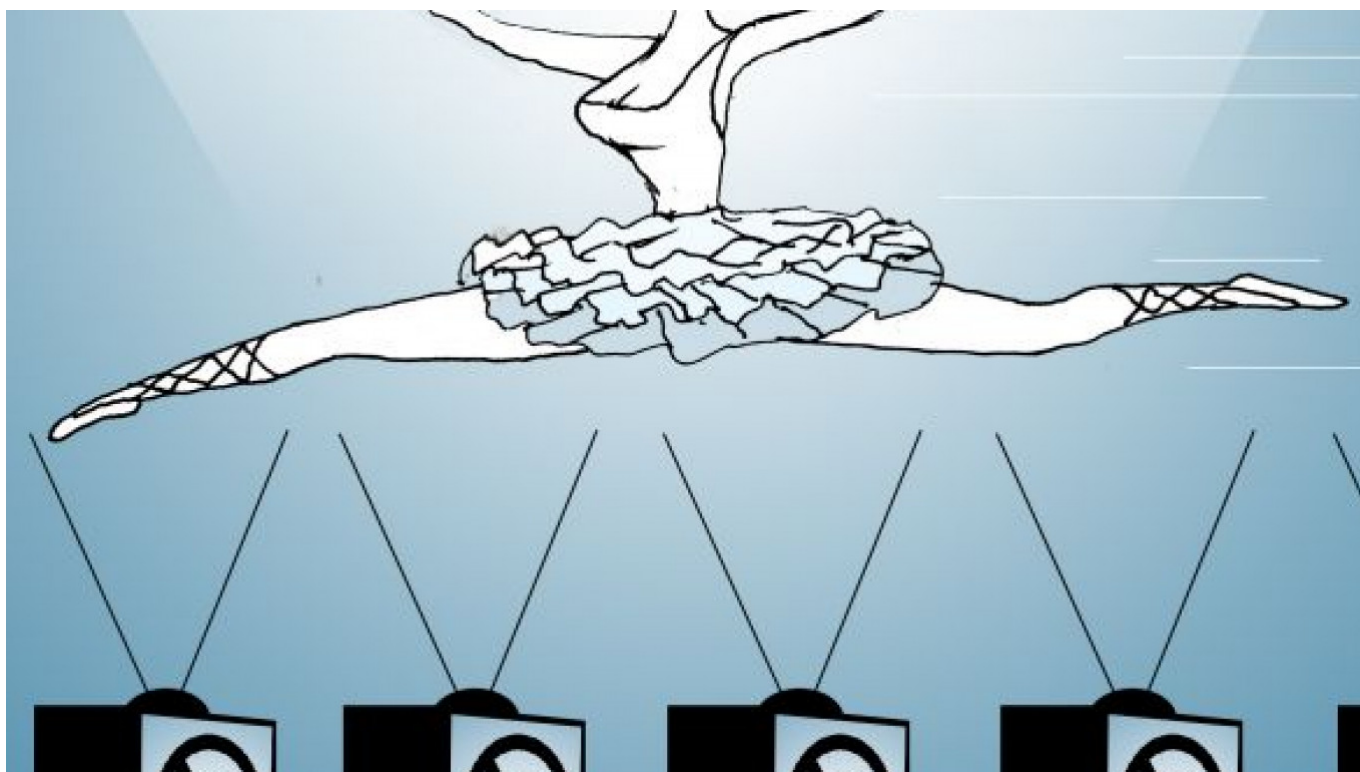


## In the Spotlight

By [Anna Malpas](#)

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This week, ballerina Anastasia Volochkova was once again the subject of earnest political commentary, as she alleged in her blog that the shadowy Kremlin adviser Vladislav Surkov personally ordered Channel One to take off the air a trashy talk show about her birthday.

Absurd though this sounded, it was true that the channel pulled the show at the last moment on Friday, after airing it in the Far East, and that NTV also pulled a talk show with Volochkova on the same day, in what looked like a joint decision to cut off her oxygen. And the reason would seem clear: her surreal transformation into a political hot potato, after she called the United Russia party “shit” in an interview with Radio Liberty, and vowed to walk out, saying the party forced her to sign a letter against jailed oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Channel One told Kommersant that the show was pulled because it did not meet “ethical standards,” and another reported reason was that Volochkova once used the word “shit.” Russian television is still pretty prudish, but this did not hold water, as a bleep or edit would have fixed it. And anyone familiar with “Let Them Talk” would be surprised to hear it was overly concerned about ethical standards.

It's a tabloid of a talk show, recently moved to prime time because of its high ratings. Its first television interview with spy Anna Chapman was a real coup in December. It never misses an opportunity for tears, however nasty the undertones. In a recent show, it forced a Russian girl who was adopted by a loving Irish family and had no wish to meet her birth family, to watch a harrowing video of her babbling, alcoholic wreck of a mother.

The show with Volochkova, posted on YouTube, is the usual mixture of sentimentality, with her small daughter lisping a poem; titillation, with her nude photographs blown up on a huge screen; and bitchiness, with arch-enemy, it-girl Ksenia Sobchak making a surprise appearance and exaggeratedly air-kissing her.

Sobchak mocked Volochkova for posting nude photographs on her blog and explaining that she wanted to prove her breasts were not silicone. As a ballerina, "Nastya" should be thinking about the latest ballet stagings or "a new way of life," Ksyusha advised affectionately.

Yelena Drapeko, a State Duma deputy for the Just Russia party, in turn attacked Volochkova for claiming that she was dropped from the Bolshoi because she refused to get roles via the casting couch. "They're all gay, there's no one to sleep with there," scoffed Drapeko, telling Volochkova that she had ruined pure young girls' dreams of dancing at the "temple" of ballet.

Actually, the bizarre thing is that Volochkova should be so upset about the show being pulled, since most people would class it as humiliating.

I spoke to Volochkova this week and she seemed most upset that Channel One was now likely not to show a concert for her 35th birthday that it filmed at the Kremlin Palace, featuring pop stars such as Filipp Kirkorov. She was rather sweet. What I liked most was her assistant asking me to wait on the line because "Anastasia is getting dressed."

Volochkova has revealed herself as a surprisingly entertaining blogger, in a step away from her usual frilly public persona. This week, she tried her hand at satire, with an entry about going to a hunting lodge where you can go on a groundhog shoot — or okhota na surkov in Russian, nudge, nudge. Groundhogs, presumably the derivation of Surkov's surname, are "very cowardly animals" and their meat has a "characteristic, horrible smell," she wrote pointedly, adding with regret that it wasn't the season so she wasn't allowed to shoot any.

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