

United Russia Pundit Calls State TV Biased

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An influential United Russia pundit has appealed to President Dmitry Medvedev to create public councils to prevent bias on state television and to raise its overall standards.

The appeal by Olga Kryshтанovskaya, a United Russia member and head of the Institute of Applied Policy, could mark the start of a drive for public television, but some politicians dismissed it as a populist stunt ahead of State Duma elections.

While stopping short of criticizing political programming on state television, Kryshтанovskaya described it as biased and trite and complained that it promotes immorality and violence.

"Everyone is fed up watching armed, unshaven men running around ... or people hysterically screaming or begging for mercy," she wrote in an appeal published on her Facebook page late last week.

The country's three main television channels, Channel One, Rossia and NTV, are all state-controlled and remain the main source of news for most Russians, despite the rapid growth of Internet use.

Other prominent figures have also complained about programming, but their criticism has largely gone nowhere. Notably, television host Leonid Parfyonov harshly criticized the news coverage on state television during an event organized by Channel One last November, but his remarks were not broadcast by any of the three main channels.

Kryshtanovskaya urged her Facebook friends to sign a petition to Medvedev to create councils comprised of citizens who would participate in forming the broadcasting policy for the state television channels.

Hundreds of Facebook users have signed Kryshtanovskaya's appeal, including teachers, social workers and journalists. "Let's say no to the wave of violence and alcohol-related fights," wrote one signatory, Sergei Rublev.

Andrei Richter, who teaches media law at Moscow State University's school of journalism, said Kryshtanovskaya's proposal might be a "half-step" toward the creation of public television. "This idea has been cooking for many years, but social media has given it a new boost," he said by telephone.

In 2006, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and television host Vladimir Pozner appealed to then-President Vladimir Putin to establish public television, but legislation to establish the channel failed to receive Putin's support.

Nina Ostanina, a Communist deputy and a member of the Duma's Family, Women and Children Committee, criticized Kryshtanovskaya's statement as a populist demand ahead of Duma elections in December. But she said the Communists, who have long complained about being snubbed by state television, might support it if United Russia took it seriously.

Representatives for the Kremlin and United Russia had no immediate comment on Kryshtanovskaya's proposal. Kryshtanovskaya was not available for comment Sunday.

Ivan Zassoursky, a member of the presidential commission for human rights, said the country's leadership would have to intervene personally for any changes to occur because growing advertising revenues left little incentive to shake up current programming. "The authorities these days see state television as a cash cow, not an instrument for the public good," he said.

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