

## **The Internet, Not the Refrigerator, Defeating the Television in Russia, Latynina Says**

### **Opinion**

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**“...the Putin powers that be can’t escape a more final judgment of history. After all, Latynina says, while the Kremlin’s ‘Vremya’ program is being watched by ‘six million pensioners,’ Navalny’s film about the corruption of the core elite has been watched by ‘35 million young people.’”**

By Paul Goble for “Window on Eurasia”: April 10 – Since the onset of the economic crisis in Russia, most commentators have discussed the future in terms of a competition symbolically represented as between the television which portrays a rosy picture of life in Russia and the refrigerator which shows Russians precisely what their life has become. But even though the refrigerator has been gaining on television in recent months, a more important competitor to the state’s TV-centric message system may have emerged in the shape of the Internet, especially among the young, Yulia Latynina suggests; and that is why the Putin regime seems set on imposing ever more draconian limits on Russians’ access to that medium. In a *Novaya gazeta* article entitled “The End of Television,” the Moscow commentator says that the rise of the Internet relative to the television is “an unstoppable process which is comparable to the Reformation” and which will have comparable effects on Russia which did not undergo that transformation ([novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/08/72085-konets-televizora](http://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/08/72085-konets-televizora)). Most people still believe that Russians overwhelmingly take their views from television, but that “mythology” is simply wrong. It has never been entirely true, Latynina says; and the last several weeks since Aleksey Navalny’s film on corruption was released on the Internet have only served to confirm that fact and the trend away from television. Indeed, she suggests, this may very well be “the most important result of the [March 26] protests.” The numbers tell the story, only about six percent of Russians watch the television news and commentary program “Vremya,” according to official statistics. Moreover, the average age of these viewers is 63, also “an official figure.” Not only is its audience far older than the average for the population, but it is far less active. As for those who viewed Navalny’s film online, the YouTube counter put the number at 17.5 million. Latynina argues that this figure should in fact be doubled especially among the younger age groups. That means that “every second Russian citizen younger than 50 watched Navalny’s film” – a figure confirmed by the Levada Center which says 38 percent of all Russians had done so. The era of zombification is over, she continues. “The absolute majority of Russia’s active population is getting its information by other means” than television: by telephone, by social networks and from websites. Russians are making choices for themselves: they may like entertainment on state television, but “no one” is tuning in to propaganda shows. This change does not mean the authorities have lost their information advantages, but it is no longer so directly connected with television. Instead, it reflects the fact that “the powers are the powers” and thus have “a sacred status” for most Russians. It did before television ever appeared, and it will continue long after TV is displaced by the Internet. “The chief reason for the condemnation of the Ukrainian revolution by a significant part of Russian society is simply that Vladimir Putin

condemned the Maidan, and not that he did this on television," Latynina argues. And because that will continue, the Internet does not threaten the powers that be in the way many think. And that is why the comparison with the Reformation is so instructive. Martin Luther attacked Rome for its corruption, but in response, the church cleaned up its act in order to save the Roman Catholic Church. The difference with Russia is that the Putin regime can't do that because holding on to its corrupt benefits is the only reason for its existence. And thus the Putin powers that be can't escape a more final judgment of history. After all, Latynina says, while the Kremlin's "Vremya" program is being watched by "six million pensioners," Navalny's film about the corruption of the core elite has been watched by "35 million young people." Not surprisingly given its genetic code, the Putin regime is responding to the new power of the Internet in Russian society by trying to crack down on this medium, even though 75 percent of the population now uses the Internet on a more or less regular basis ([polit.ru/article/2017/04/07/hundredwords/](http://polit.ru/article/2017/04/07/hundredwords/)). Pro-Putin politicians are promoting bans on children visiting social networks, bans on officials using the Internet at work, and bans on anonymous screen names ([regnum.ru/news/society/2261007.html](http://regnum.ru/news/society/2261007.html), [rbc.ru/society/10/04/2017/58eb49db9a794749e015c948?from=main](http://rbc.ru/society/10/04/2017/58eb49db9a794749e015c948?from=main) and [znak.com/2017-04-10/milonov\\_vnes\\_v\\_gosdumu\\_zakonoproekt\\_o\\_registracii\\_v\\_socsetyah\\_po\\_pasportu](http://znak.com/2017-04-10/milonov_vnes_v_gosdumu_zakonoproekt_o_registracii_v_socsetyah_po_pasportu)). A majority of Russians back restrictions on children using social networks ([regnum.ru/news/society/2260938.html](http://regnum.ru/news/society/2260938.html)), but there is not only far less support for the other measures but also open opposition to their introduction with experts talking about how much Russia would lose by cutting itself off from the web ([lenta.ru/articles/2017/04/09/interneta\\_net/](http://lenta.ru/articles/2017/04/09/interneta_net/)).

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The commentary above is from Paul Goble's "Window on Eurasia" series and appears here with the author's permission. Contact Goble at: [paul.goble@gmail.com](mailto:paul.goble@gmail.com)