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Dumbing Russia Down; The Kremlin has largely marginalized Russia's intelligentsia. But 'Girls of the Military' is a hit.

BYLINE: By Owen Matthews and Anna Nemtsova**SECTION:** WORLD AFFAIRS; Pg. 0 Vol. 151 No. 13 ISSN: 0163-7053**LENGTH:** 1044 words

Is Russian intellectual life thriving or dying? Sometimes, it's hard to tell. This week culture mavens will flock to the Golden Mask theater festival, which will showcase the best of Russia's lively underground drama scene. Highlights include a satirical play by the Presniakov brothers featuring a surreal debate between George W. Bush, Tony Blair and Vladimir Putin. Guests of the Moscow Photo Biennale have received stacks of invitations to two dozen openings--and those will be just a fraction of the art shows, performances and readings scheduled for this week. Among them: a new play about Lenin by writer Victor Pelevin and a cutting-edge exhibit at a new-media gallery called the Electroboutique ViewStation.

But that's not typical. The 99.9 percent of Russians who are not on Moscow's high-culture circuit will have a very different set of cultural experiences: they can enjoy a television gala called "Girls of the Military," a novel kind of beauty-and-talent show that promises to add tanks and aircraft to the usual mix of bikini parades and contestants' mini-biopics. There's also the Russian version of the game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" and a selection of shows featuring washed-out old Soviet-era singers, interspersed with news reports that feature endless coverage of President-elect Dmitry Medvedev's daily visits and speeches.

So which is it? Cultural boom or bust? Without question, high culture is a minority pursuit in every country--and popular television is anything but highbrow. But in Russia, there is a breathtaking disconnect between an artsy fringe culture and the rigidly conformist state-controlled mainstream. On one level, Russia's oil-fueled economy has generated a lively arts scene, on par with any in Europe. But at the same time, the Kremlin's near-stranglehold of Russian media means that any kind of free political debate has disappeared completely from popular culture. That has left journalists, creative artists and academics in Russia feeling embattled, argues Catherine Nepomnyashchy, director of the Harriman Institute at Columbia University. "The government has effectively consolidated control over the mass media, while a popular entertainment culture of soap operas and game shows, detective novels and astrology has flourished, marginalizing the once respected and influential voices of the creative intelligentsia," she notes.

How did this happen? Russia's intelligentsia was once the arbiter of the nation's cultural values, says Masha Lipman of the Moscow Carnegie Center. Years ago a small group of educated, urban professionals had cultural values that were emphatically anti-Soviet. Thanks to glasnost, they were able push their radical ideas into the very heart of political debate, and for a few heady years, dissident culture became mainstream culture in all its chaotic glory. Leading cultural figures like writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and historian Yuri Afanasiyev held marathon televised debates about the state of the nation, and were watched by millions. As recently as a decade ago, Russia's top-rated television programs included punchy and controversial political magazine shows, like Yevgeny Kisilev's "Itogi."

Now in the putatively free Putin era, a new kind of censorship has taken hold, with the mainstream of Russian culture and ideas firmly controlled by the state. Cultural figures and thinkers who play by the rules are showered with money and acclaim while mavericks are marginalized. For instance, veteran

rocker Andrei Makarevich, of the group Mashina Vremeni, was once a mainstay of the Leningrad underground scene. Recently he played a concert in support of President-elect Medvedev, and now hosts a popular TV cooking show. Rock musician Yuri Shevchuk, from the same late-era Soviet music scene, joined in opposition protests last year in St. Petersburg and told the crowds that "Putin's stability is the grave of creativity." He is now denied access to television and to sponsorships, says music critic Artem Troitsky, because "no bank or business wants to risk getting on the Kremlin's blacklist."

To many, it is an insidious system that rewards conformity. "Our nation's horizons have narrowed; the Russian mind has closed," says former TV anchor Sergei Dorenko, persona non grata on Russian TV ever since he worked for an anti-Moscow candidate in Ukraine's 2004 elections. "Intellectuals feel lost. Our current leaders seek to inspire bourgeois values, but Russian bourgeois culture seems flat and faceless." There are signs, too, that even the limited space allowed for speech is shrinking, as current informal systems of control are replaced by an ever-tightening web of legislation. A 2007 law restricting hate speech and extremism has already been used to silence Kremlin critics. Now deeply conservative church groups have proposed a new set of laws to clean up the "immoral" content of television programming.

Mikhail Prokopenko, spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate, said last week that it intended to use its "influence and good relations" with the state to "protect children from the negative influence" of certain TV programs that "corrupt moral values." "The state intends to turn young Russians into zombies so that they do not have any independent political thoughts," complains Anna Tikhomirova, director of a Moscow-based center for the study of teenage development.

Still, pockets of free speech and creativity remain--just as long as artists don't attract too wide an audience. Dmitry Bykov, one of Russia's best-known writers, denounces state-controlled television for creating "imbeciles" out of Russians. Yet his "Novoe Vremechko" cultural TV show is tolerated by the authorities, largely because of its low ratings. The same goes for the often passionately anti-Kremlin Ekho Moskvyy radio broadcasts. In a nation of 140 million people, it attracts just 848,000 listeners at its peak. Meanwhile, a new generation of writers is starting to emerge, like Chechen war veteran Zakhar Prilepin, who writes brutal novels and short stories about day-to-day life in modern Russia. The question, though, is whether writers like Prilepin will shape Russia's intellectual future--or if it will be determined by a highly conformist mainstream.

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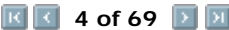
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