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Putting the Court on Trial: Cultural Memory and the Politics of Television Programming
on the “Court of Time”’s Episode about Itself.

The paper discusses the talk show “Court of Time” that aired on Channel Five in the second half of 2010 before being discontinued. Mimicking the format of a court of law, historical personalities and events were put on trial. The evident political orientations of the show’s hosts - Nikolai Svanidze in the role of judge, and Leonid Mlechin and Sergei Kurginian as prosecutor and defense attorney - heightened the political actuality of the historical questions under discussion. In 2011-2012 the show made a comeback on Russia 1 in a slightly altered format.

A telling discrepancy quickly became apparent between the results of the studio audience vote - siding with the liberally inclined Mlechin - and the opinion of viewers at home as expressed through online and televoting - supporting the ‘pro-Soviet’ views of Kurginian. A special broadcast was called to discuss the ‘incorrect’ voting of the home audience and how it should be interpreted, appropriately named “Sud nad sudom (Trial of the court)”. The analysis focuses on this particular self-reflexive episode.

On the basis of the case of “Court of Time” the paper explores memory politics and the politics of TV programming in this particular time frame. To what extent and to what aim are implicit and explicit (dis)similarities drawn out between the historical topics under discussion and contemporary political issues? What effect do the political orientations of the hosts have on the content, dynamics and outcomes of the debates? To what extent can the show be regarded as a platform for political discussion, and what impact did the show’s strategies for viewer engagement have on its dynamics? What conclusions can be drawn about the motives behind its discontinuation, and reappearance in altered format? Can the case shed light on the societal tensions that culminated in street protests in 2011-2012?