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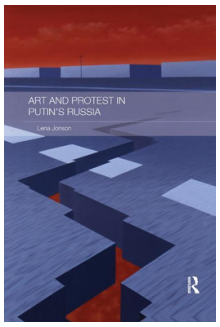

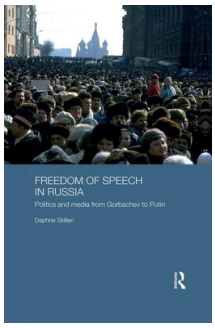

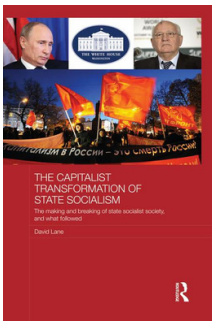

1 Introduction

It was freezing cold in Moscow on 24 December 2011 – the day of the largest mass protest in Russia since 1993. A crowd of about 100 000 people had gathered to protest against electoral fraud in the Russian parliamentary elections, which had taken place nearly three weeks before. As more and more people joined the demonstration, their euphoria grew to fever pitch. Although the 24 December demonstration changed Russia, the period of euphoria was tolerated only until Vladimir Putin was once again installed as president in May 2012. Repression then targeted the leaders of the new protest movement. This period of open protest, however, had raised expectations of further dramatic change.

How could a population that had been characterized as apolitical, passive and living under authoritarian conditions suddenly take to the streets? Why did demonstrations that usually gather only a few hundred people grow to become mass protests? Far from behaving like obedient subjects, people in a number of large cities throughout Russia began to raise their voices and claim their rights. Not all social strata were represented in the demonstrations. Most were well educated and came mainly from the so-called creative class and the middle class. Compared to the mass protests taking place in other countries at that time, the number of participants might seem insignificant – but it was a remarkably large number in the Russian context and it soon became evident that their discontent was over broader issues than just the elections. Theirs was a desperate cry against the way the country was being run – a cry of, 'No more! We have had enough!' A shift in values had obviously taken place. How had this come about?

This volume explores whether – and, if so, how – cultural factors helped to bring about the shift in values that preceded the outburst of discontent in Russia in 2011–2012. It takes as its basic assumption that culture – in particular, the visual arts – played a crucial role. Focusing on the visual arts, the study asks whether there were signs that predicted or laid the groundwork for the sudden outburst of mass protest. What role did the arts community and art itself play in facilitating the formation of the new values and attitudes that led to these developments?

Working in Moscow in the period 2005–2009, and with a background of a lifelong interest in Russian society, politics and cultural affairs, I perceived that what was happening on the art scene at that time had relevance far beyond art itself. And then, after fewer than two years, social protest exploded.

Introduction

Putin's return as president in May 2012 drastically hardened the political climate in the country. This study examines how the arts community reacted under conditions of renewed restrictions on freedom and what role remained for art in the new political circumstances.

The visual arts are interpreted here in a broad sense that includes painting, installations, video, performance, street art and other media. The study covers the period from Putin's rise to power in 2000, with a special focus on 2005–2013, which includes his second term as president (2004–2008), his four years as prime minister when Dimitrii Medvedev was president (2008–2012) and the almost two years after Putin's return as president following the March 2012 election. The present analysis deals almost exclusively with the Moscow art scene. There is a reason for this. Moscow is the Russian art centre, and most Russian artists tend to exhibit in Moscow even if they live elsewhere.

This book is about the role of art in society and in paving the way for protest. Thus, it is not an art historian's analysis of Russian contemporary art, but an empirical study with no pretensions to contribute to a theory of art history or political science. Nonetheless, it uses the theoretical literature to structure the analysis and to define key concepts.

Art and protest

Developments in other places and at other times have shown that value shifts usually precede great upheavals and that these shifts are often visible in the cultural sphere before they are articulated in political terms in wider society. Robin Wright writes about how the demonstrations in North Africa in early 2011 were preceded by changing values and beliefs among young people. They not only used the technology of Facebook and Twitter to promote their causes, but were 'also experimenting with culture – from comedy to theatre, poetry to song – as an idiom to communicate who they are and to end isolation caused by extremists within their ranks' (Wright, 2011: 5). A new atmosphere, a sort of counterculture, began to permeate the thinking. Roland Bleiker came to a similar conclusion in his study of the young East German poets of the 1970s and 1980s and their role in the process that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall (Bleiker, 2000).[1] He writes that the collapse of the Berlin Wall can be seen as the result of a slow and transversal transformation of values that preceded the overt acts of rebellion. Re-reading the events that led to this historic event, he emphasizes the role of the poets, the Bohemian artists and the literary scene in Prenzlauer Berg, the rundown workers' quarter of East Berlin. A counterculture emerged from these circles, as an ersatz public sphere that opened up opportunities for poetry readings, art exhibitions, film shows and the publication of various unofficial magazines (Bleiker, 2000: 245). These were inspired by the new discourses from the West, which spread through 'rock, beat and punk music, Franz Kafka and Marcel Proust novels, or, even "worse", literary traditions of an existentialist, avant-gardist or post-structuralist nature', which had political effects far beyond the infiltration of explicitly political messages. The events that deserve our analytical attention, he concludes, are not the moments

when revolutionaries hurl statues into the mud: 'Key historical events are more elusive, more inaudible in their appearance. They evolve around the slow transformation of societal values' (Bleiker, 2000: 181).

It is well known that both the visual arts and rock music had a similar liberating function in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s.[2] Ales Ervajec, the editor of a book on politicized art under so-called late socialism, highlights the contribution of the visual arts and culture in articulating and intensifying changing moods and values in the period leading up to the social-political upheavals of 1989–91 in the Eastern Bloc (Ervajec, 2003). Art and culture, he writes, 'expressed and mirrored historical processes at the same time as they were contributing to them'. Art, he says, 'was not only visibly expressing the ongoing events that led to . . . "the *first* transition" [away from communism], but also finding a unique way to articulate a historical, social, and political situation while the political sciences and social theory were still in that "unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into words cannot yet be"' (Erjavec, 2003: 7, italics in original).[3] His point is that the development of art was not only confluent with evolving demands in the political sphere, but also visualized what was going on in people's minds before it had been formulated in political terms.

Soviet underground non-conformist visual art challenged official truths and perceptions with some of these artists using mimicry in an ironic and often anarchistic way. Like the Russian rock musicians, the artists regarded themselves as apolitical rather than political. They did not actively participate in the dissident movement or consider their art to have political content. Nevertheless, as Boris Groys writes, the discourses of the Moscow Conceptualists on themes of void, emptiness and marginality as well as the Sots-Artists' mockery of official Soviet ideology changed people's perceptions of the world and how it is made visible (Groys, 2010: 2–3). In this way, art contributed to the change in values in wider society.

These examples highlight what may be called the *mind-liberating function* of art, which follows from the artistic effort to break away from established conceptions. This volume studies this function. The early Russian avant-garde of the 1910s provides an excellent example. In their creativity, the early avant-gardists confronted the accepted and established culture in a search for new modes of expression through questioning, confronting and provoking (Gurianova, 2012). The early Russian avant-gardists had no direct or immediate political ambitions. Instead, they were searching for a new ontology. Their views could be summarized as 'the politics of the unpolitical' (Gurianova, 2012: 10).

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière is in line with this ontological anarchist tradition. He sees the core of both art and politics as the questioning of established ways of understanding the world – questioning what he calls the *distribution of the sensible* (Rancière, 2004: 12), by which he means configurations of the sensory landscape, of what is seen and unseen, audible and inaudible, how certain objects and phenomena are related and also who can appear as a subject at certain times and places (Tanke, 2011: 2). The distribution of the sensible

is shared by society, defines how we understand the world around us and thus determines what is considered possible and what can be expected. He calls the established distribution of the sensible *consensus*. *Dissensus* is the questioning of the established view. Dissensus, according to Rancière, is 'a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given' (Rancière, 2010: 69). In this regard the functions of dissensus in art and politics are the same, although the forms may vary. In politics, dissensus takes place when people who do not count and are not listened to raise their voices and act beyond their place in society. He calls this process *subjectivation* – that is, the appearance of a political subject[4] – which is precisely what was seen in the streets of Moscow in December 2011. Consequently, the 'political' is for Rancière the relationships that evolve when the proper order is questioned. This is the approach taken in this book, and thus the subject of the analysis is art that questions the established structure of values and conceptions.

Subcultures and countercultures

On Open Museum Night in May 2008, Moscow vibrated with energy. Thousands of young people filled the streets on their way to view exhibitions of contemporary art. Traffic was congested in the narrow alleyways close to the former industrial area where Vinzavod had recently been converted from a wine store into a gallery complex. Cars were stuck in the middle of the street while the crowds surged past. Contemporary art had become trendy and popular among the young creative class. The art scene already attracted the rich and glamorous as well as intellectuals. Art was not regarded as political. No one seemed interested in politics anyway. Instead, contemporary art offered a new arena for creative and innovative thinking, something that was in great demand.

In June 2010 the Russian art group Voina (War) painted a 64-metre phallus on the Liteinyi bascule bridge in St Petersburg. When the bridge was opened for night traffic on the river, the huge phallus rose like a mighty sign of 'Fuck you!' to the building in the neighbourhood that houses the head-quarter of the St Petersburg Federal Security Service (FSB, formerly the KGB). The performance, 'Prick: a Prisoner of the FSB' (Khui v plenu u FSB), was perceived as a political act that resonated throughout Russia. In April 2011 the Voina group was awarded the prestigious Russian prize in contemporary art, the Innovatsiya Prize, for this performance. How could a state-financed art institution reward such an action? Clearly, something extraordinary had happened.

Protest by organized movements is rare in authoritarian societies. Scholars have concluded that it therefore takes other forms of expression and finds its way into cultural practice (Alinsky, 2009: 255). Other scholars have claimed that 'under repressive regimes, artistic and intellectual production are often sites of oppositional meaning, first, because creativity and artistic freedoms are so much at odds with authoritarian control; second, because the state goes to such lengths to repress them; and, third, because the ambiguity of the message and the popularity

of the artist often make it a costly strategy compared to repressing political activism' (Johnston, 2009: 18). Under conditions of heavy repression, art constitutes a significant proportion of oppositional culture. As repression eases, the textual form becomes more important (Johnston, 2009). Thus, the visual arts, theatre, music and literature are all crucial for the creation and development of sub- and countercultures as well as for their development into social movements.[5] The visual arts in particular might be expected to play such a role, especially at an early stage when protest has not yet been verbalized in society. This would become abundantly clear in Russia.

Various spheres of culture can offer a location or an arena for free space for experimentation. While the definitions may vary, one characteristic of such a place is a space where it is possible to interact beyond the reach of the oppressors. 'Space' should be understood both in a mental sense as free from hegemonic interventions and as the physical place where these activities are carried out (Leach and Haunss, 2009: 258).[6] In such a space, networks of people may develop subcultures and countercultures.

Alberto Melucci uses the concept of 'submerged networks' for groups that are dispersed, fragmented and submerged in everyday life but 'act as cultural laboratories for the experimentation and practice of new cultural models, forms of relationships and alternative perceptions and meanings in the world' (Melucci, 1980).[7] Such networks constitute the basis for countercultures, and from them social movements emerge (Johnston, 2009: 9).

These networks become visible when they engage in overt political conflict, but conflicts in society are often neither directly political nor overt. Instead it is a daily tussle over interpretation. Melucci emphasizes the importance of countercultural movements in opposition to what he calls the dominant codes in society. On the basis of the experience of protest in Western societies, he writes that emerging social conflicts have not expressed themselves through political action in the past 30 years, but rather by posing cultural challenges to the dominant language, to codes that organize information and shape social practices. 'It is the individual and collective reappropriation of meaning of action that is at stake in the forms of collective involvement which makes the experience of change in the present a condition for creating a different future' (Melucci, 1996: 8–9). Both subcultural and countercultural movements function as the antithesis to the established and proper order. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them. While subculture refers to networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects and practices through interaction (Williams, 2011: 3, 39), this study defines counterculture as a socially constructed identity based on values and conceptions that challenge those of the authorities and established society (Roberts, 1978).[8]

In his study of underground Soviet rock music of the 1970s and 1980s, Thomas Cushman defines counterculture as consisting of 'a stock of knowledge which, quite literally, runs counter to the dominant stock of knowledge in a society. . . . If culture is the practical knowledge gained in the course of communicating with

others in the process of living, then counterculture is simply practical knowledge which is the result of engagement in alternative forms of communication among actors engaged in the collective pursuit of alternative ways of living'.[9] Rock music lovers shared a socially constructed identity that he describes as 'an active code of resistance and a template which was used for the formation of new forms of individual and collective identity in the Soviet environment' (Cushman, 1995: 91). It was built on a distinction between a 'we' in opposition to the authorities and the established society. The underground rock music scene was a countercultural movement in its own right but also part of the broader countercultural movement developing in the Soviet society of that time. In this regard the late Soviet underground culture was a parallel to the contemporaneous Western protest culture.

Subcultures and countercultures often give rise to social protest movements: 'agents of resistance are created by virtue of alienation from aspects of the dominant culture and through their own self-affirmation' (Johnston, 2009: 10). What starts as apolitical resistance related to lifestyle may develop into social movements. Studies of subcultural movements in West Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1960s and early 1970s confirm this: they began by offering an alternative lifestyle as a challenge to what was then considered the stable and homogeneous 'way of life' of these societies (Brown and Lorena, 2011; Buechler, 2000; Cross et al., 2010; Dirke, 1997).

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci characterizes society and the cultural sphere as a competition for values, ideas and hegemonic leadership. Gramsci defines hegemony as the organizing principle of a ruling class that connects culture and ideology and permeates a given society (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971: 57–58, 80, 195). By securing society's consent, bourgeois hegemonic ideas and beliefs are constantly reproduced in society, but challenged by alternative, counter-hegemonic ideas and beliefs. Today, social scientists agree that all regimes do their best to uphold their hegemony of values, but semi-authoritarian and authoritarian societies in particular do so through force and the manipulation of opinion. In such societies, any questioning of the current hegemonic discourse immediately takes on political overtones.

In the late 1980s, the Soviet policy of Perestroika liberated art from the ideological directives that had controlled its form and content.[10] In the Russia of the 1990s, therefore, the cultural sphere was entirely free from any state or party intervention. The other side of the coin was that state financing of the cultural sector was cut drastically. When Russia's public political life was circumscribed after Putin came to power, cultural life and activities continued to be relatively free from state influence, particularly in the field of the visual arts. When the art market boomed in the first decade of the twenty-first century, private galleries and museums opened and former industrial areas were converted into art venues. Thus, the physical territory of art was expanding and the mental space for a subculture of contemporary art was soon in full bloom. Against this background, the major question arises of whether and how a countercultural identity developed within the Russian art community based on a sense of resistance to the evolving hegemonic consensus.

Protest and dissensus in art

The conventional concept of protest, which refers mainly to street demonstrations and actions, has been criticized for being too restrictive, so the definition has been extended to include more subtle forms of opposition (Brown and Anton, 2011). In this study the term 'protest' is used in a broad sense to include all kinds of 'materialization' of expressions of dissensus.

Rancière defines consensus as the dominant 'mode of symbolic structuralization that legitimizes the hierarchical order', according to which everything and everyone are given their places in a kind of 'normal state of things'.[11] Thus, consensus presents the community as an entity that is naturally unified by ethical values (Rancière, 2010; Rancière, 2004). In such a view of society, the specificities of the different parts of the community are ignored and dissenting views abolished (Rancière, 2010: 100, 189).

Dissensus, on the other hand, does not imply the existence of open conflict. Instead, it takes place as a hidden or indirect dispute over the framework within which something is regarded as given. Both aesthetic practices and political action seek to disrupt and alter perceptions and understanding, that is, to break away from 'the proper' and from 'our assigned places in a given state of things' (Rancière, 2010: 143). Yet, dissensus in art is expressed differently from dissensus in politics. While in politics it finds its form in *subjectivation*, in art it is *aesthetic rupture*. Rancière explains rupture as a 'process of dissociation'. The methods for this may vary. It may be the result of a strategy of ambiguity, intervention or over-identification. By splitting the assumptions of the consensus, a component of dissociation is introduced, thereby indicating a different angle, perspective or framing from the established one.[12] Such art does not prioritize the creation of an 'awareness of the state of the world' but rather openness in interpretation. Rancière is sceptical about an art that intends to raise the consciousness of the onlooker by establishing a straightforward relationship between political aims and artistic means out of a didactic purpose. Instead, art is to him an intermediary object, a 'third term', to which both the artist and the viewer relate (Rancière, 2009). Claire Bishop writes that what is significant in Rancière's reworking of the term 'aesthetics' is that it concerns *aesthesis*, a mode of sensible perception proper to artistic production. 'Rather than considering the work of art to be autonomous, he draws attention to the autonomy of our experience in relation to art . . . this freedom suggests the possibility of politics (understood here as dissensus), because the undecidability of aesthetic experience implies a questioning of how the world is organized, and therefore the possibility of changing or redistributing that same world . . .' (Bishop, 2009: 27).[13]

In order to detect 'protest' in its broad definition, this study uses the three basic categories of cultural factors defined by Hank Johnston: artefacts, ideations and performances. Artefacts are 'cultural objects produced either individually or collectively, such as music, art, and literature'; ideations are 'values, beliefs, mentalities, social representations, habitus, ideologies, or more specific norms of behaviour . . .'; and performances are described as 'actions that are symbolic

because they are interpreted by those also present at the action, the audience' (Johnston, 2009: 7). All three categories are social constructions.[14]

The present analysis is inspired by Rancière's concept of dissensus and Johnston's categories of protest, but an additional concept is central to this study – identity. The issue of identity consensus (the search for a collective 'we') is very high on the Russian agenda. It has caused problems over the centuries – and it continues to do so today – because it is loaded with political and ideological connotations. The creation of a collective consensus under Putin is therefore the starting point for the analysis of dissensus in this study.

Who are 'we'?

The Putin regime has felt the need, more than the Eltsin regime did, to create a sense of common national belonging, a 'new Russian idea'.[15] The Putin regime's search for a concept of identity and a feeling of belonging in accordance with its own political priorities and values became more urgent towards the middle of the first decade of the new century, against the background of the colour revolutions on former Soviet territory – most notably Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004.[16]

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, the loss of previous official definitions of what constituted the Soviet 'we' created a vacuum, and various definitions began to circulate. Soviet ideology had replaced a nation-state identity with a state identity that had a stance on ideological issues, religion, nation, ethnicity, and so on. The Communist Party regularly provided the authorized and updated interpretation of this identity.[17] In post-Soviet Russia, various identities developed that together provided a scattered picture of Russian identity. As old Russian and Soviet identities resurged, the populations of large cities developed new and fluid subjective identities typical of a post-modern society.

The break-up of the Soviet Union swept away all previous ideological and political directives on how the economy, society and art were to perform. A window of opportunity was opened for carrying out reforms. Soon, however, post-Soviet structures were restored from the 'wreckage and pieces of what was left' (Gudkov, 2012). The 1990s became a decade of lost opportunities with regard to transforming society and the system. When the decade came to an end, most reform ambitions were stuck or lost in new power constellations, a crashed economy, a weak state apparatus and growing corruption.

Vladimir Putin, appointed heir to Boris Eltsin in the autumn of 1999 and elected president in March 2000, immediately took measures to centralize and strengthen state power. Boosted by international energy prices, he managed to give the impression of a strong and efficient leader who would bring stability and a better standard of living to Russia's citizens. As soon as he came to power he initiated a policy reversal in an authoritarian direction, restricted the freedom of the media, started to manipulate the political scene and changed the rules of the election process in order to establish 'stability'. When the colour revolutions took place, he shared the fear of other leaders of post-Soviet states that something similar might happen in their countries. In March 2004 Putin was elected for a second term. This

was the beginning of a period of relative wealth. An economic boom followed from the inflow of petrodollars, and there were expectations that this situation would last forever. Russia seemed politically stable on the surface, albeit at the price of development in an authoritarian direction (Shevtsova, 2010).

The creation of a new Russian identity became a central task for the regime's ideologists. Putin chose a strategy of traditional, basic collective values. The aim was to promote state cohesion and to legitimize the demand for the unconditional subordination of Russian citizens. According to Zygmunt Bauman, identity is a construction, a 'fiction', and to transform this fiction into reality requires much coercion and convincing to harden and coagulate it 'into the sole reality thinkable' (Bauman, 2004: 20). Putin was trying to formulate such a fiction – a collective 'we'.

One major aspect of this collective identity defines the relationship between rulers and ruled. On the part of the regime, this entails finding a unifying concept. The definition of a 'we' by the regime and by groups close to the regime here constitutes the official, 'proper' way – consensus – of how things should be viewed, interpreted and evaluated. These efforts stumbled, however, because not everyone accepted them. Modern societies naturally include a growing number of individuals with multiple identities, and many of them do not recognize the predetermined identities defined by a dominant discourse of consensus. Moreover, Russians have often regarded those in power as 'them'– different from 'we'– but their alienation could not usually be expressed openly or directly.[18] The relationship between rulers and ruled has been and is reflected in different understandings of aspects of identity in national, political and religious matters, such as, for example, a national–ethnic Russian entity vis-à-vis a national–civic community, an Orthodox Christian unity vis-à-vis a non-confessional one, and a regime–loyal political community vis-à-vis a community of independent, free-thinking citizens.

Since the regime's new efforts were an attempt to create a common identity of rulers and the ruled based on political support for the regime, expressions of disagreement were often seen as signs of disloyalty. The sense of a growing gap in definitions of 'we' and 'them' constitutes the driving force behind the development of a 'counterculture'.

Protest on the art scene

In order to identify dissensus/protest in the art sphere, three specific questions are addressed. First, were there works of art that represented aesthetic rupture? Second, were there discussions and public stances by the arts community that reflected a counterculture? Third, did people from the visual arts in any way actively participate in the new protest movement?

Three categories of art are defined that differ according to how close to or far away they are from the prevailing consensus. Although the distinctions between the categories – an 'other gaze', 'dissent art' and 'art of engagement'– may not always seem razor sharp, they are nonetheless helpful and sufficient for this analysis.[19]

The first category of art, identified as an *other gaze*, is a subtle form of dissensus.[20] This art is ambiguous but implies a questioning, sometimes hardly visible, of established conceptions. It may function 'subversively' through its mere 'otherness'. It is important to point out that these artists most often deny any political motifs or motives. Nonetheless, their works may be interpreted as dissensus. The viewer's reaction determines whether that is the case.

The second category, *dissent art*, is defined by open disagreement with the official consensus. The term 'dissent' implies the existence of a contrary belief or opinion, or at least a different position.[21] The disagreement is, however, often indirect rather than direct. It may include an art activist element. The third category, *art of engagement*, is art intended to openly and directly intervene in the public sphere with a political message. However, it should not be confused with what in the West is called 'engaged' art or 'participatory' art.

The second and partly the third categories are in the tradition of provocation and rupture, dating back in part to the early Russian avant-garde of the 1910s. The techniques used by these artists – irony, parody, satire, laughter, mockery and burlesque exaggeration – follow the traditions of the carnival culture of the Middle Ages. Although the medieval carnival was a circumscribed and regulated activity, it contributed to liberate the mind from dogmatism and pedantry, and from fear and intimidation (Bakhtin, 2007; Platter, 2001: 54–57). The Soviet underground artists of Sots-Art in the 1970s and 1980s followed this tradition. The term *styob* was coined for exaggerated support for the target of criticism by mimicking its style and form. It was the 'exposure to mockery that leads to an irreversible and permanent profanation'.[22]

As the field of art in Russia expanded dramatically in the 2000s, explored new territories and extended into everyday life, Russian artists started to experiment, pushing the frontier between art and politics beyond its traditional border, in a similar way to processes that took off much earlier in the West. The Situationists of the 1950s and 1960s provided art with tools and techniques for political communication (Lievrouw, 2011). As the Internet and new social media spread in the West, new techniques were spawned for using art for political purposes (Lievrouw, 2011). The spread of Internet users in Russia at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century opened the door for such media activism there. This study classifies such media activism as 'political action' and discusses it in a separate chapter.

While protest through art raises the general question of the relationship between art and power, dissent art and art of engagement also raise specific questions with regard to the artist's role in politics. The late Russian avant-garde of the 1920s wanted to use art to create political awareness in the service of the utopian goals of the Bolshevik regime. Within a few years, these artists, who initially worked enthusiastically in the service of the new regime, were compelled to subordinate their grand plans to party directives. This experience led the Soviet non-conformist artists of the 1960s to reject any politicization of art and paved the way for a tradition of the non-involvement of art in politics among independent artists (Groys, 1992). This may partly explain why art in the service of a political agenda has encountered difficulties ever since in finding a foothold in Russia. The question

of whether there has been a change in this regard is examined elsewhere in this volume.

Johnston's categories of artefacts, ideations and performances are used here to highlight various forms of expression within protest in art (Johnston, 2009). The 'artefacts' analysed in this study are objects that have been nominated for the two prestigious annual Russian art awards, the Kandinsky Prize and the Innovatsiya Prize, shown at major exhibitions in Moscow, discussed in Russian art debates, or caused a strong reaction in society. 'Performances' are analysed as words and deeds by the arts community articulating protest by organizing exhibitions, seminars, discussions or publishing statements. The 'arts community' is not a homogeneous entity. The term is used here to indicate words and actions made public by people from the arts community. Discussions and statements are traced with regard to public stances in defence of common professional interests. This includes reactions in cases where its members are put on trial or threatened with legal action. Material about such activities can be found on websites, in art journals and other journals, in daily newspapers and on personal blogs. Ideational content is identified from exhibition catalogues, art reviews, articles and interviews with artists and art critics. The criteria for selection follow from what can be considered relevant to the identity discourses and art dissensus. Major art exhibitions held in Moscow during the years under study are included. Information on art outside the galleries – such as street art, performances and actions – was collected from the Internet, where these activities were usually well documented at that time. The selection of works of art in this study is determined by its research questions and is therefore not representative of Russian contemporary art as a whole.

The present study also discusses whether there was more direct participation by the arts community in building a protest movement. The direct contribution of people from the cultural sphere to political mobilization in the autumn of 2011 and the winter of 2012, before the December parliamentary elections and March presidential elections, respectively, is analysed as political activity. The sources of material on political actions and demonstrations are newspaper articles, websites and documents directly from or about these groups and activities.

Art and the protest movement

How does protest communicated through art relate to political protest? We assume that a counterculture in art appears in parallel with a broader social counterculture. These are phenomena of confluence, but art – being strongly receptive to what is happening in the social environment – may articulate/visualize sentiments, beliefs and values before they are articulated in political terms. However, art needs to reach out to a wider audience if it is to have any effect on the spread of new values (Bleiker, 2000: 211).

Contemporary art has long been considered a small, isolated, marginal world in Russian society. Small circles of artists and intellectuals lived in Moscow in splendid isolation for years without any ambition to reach out to wider groups. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that art of dissensus reached members of the

creative class and groups within the middle class during the years under study.[23] These groups would turn out to be the key groups in the protest movement. The question is therefore *how* ideas of contemporary art spread among these groups. The emergence of an art market and the opening of new galleries in the first decade of the twenty-first century certainly helped. More and new categories of people showed an interest in the visual arts, and contemporary art attracted young urban students and professionals. It became trendy and fashionable to visit exhibitions in the galleries in central Moscow, such as Vinzavod, Art Strelka, Krasnyi Oktyabr and Garazh. This new interest in the visual arts may be assumed to have helped to make contemporary art a means for communicating new ideas and values to the Moscow middle class. These were also spread through the Internet to other cities, some of which were creating their own local art scenes. Thus, the ideas and values expressed through art were disseminated to the young, educated strata of wider Russian society.

As several commentators have pointed out, the protest movement that arose in December 2011 was values based, not based on material interests.[24] It was primarily a movement of the creative class and parts of the middle class mobilized through communication over the Internet and social media. Social science theory, based on the experience of various protest movements in the West since the 1960s, emphasizes the specific character of such movements. They relate to identities, and their concerns are directed towards cultural rather than productive and distributive relations (Buechler, 2000; Diani and Eyerman, 1992; Whittier and Robnett, 2002). They are not organizations in the traditional sense but loosely affiliated, informal, anti-hierarchical networks. As the availability of the Internet spread in Russia as well as across the world as a whole at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it became a tool of such networks (Firat and Kuryel, 2011; Lievrouw, 2011). An interesting question for this study is whether and how people from the cultural sector – with their knowledge of communications and new media methods and techniques – contributed directly to the mobilization of protest from 2011.

When in March 2012 Vladimir Putin was elected president for a new term, the political climate hardened. The protest movement had not yet been able to develop sustainable organizations. Whether and how such will appear is a question for the future. Whether art and the arts community will play any substantial part in this process in the future is also an open question. In the meantime, a more urgent question is whether art can continue as a space for counterculture in a situation where the political 'spring' has rapidly transformed back to 'winter', or if it will fall in line with new official injunctions of the day. Was the end of the spring of 2012 a sign that there never will be a summer, or was it a first sign that something – that still needs time – is in the making? These questions are returned to in Chapters 8 and 9.

An expanding art scene

During my more than four years in Moscow in 2005–2009, I closely observed the art scene by visiting exhibitions and by meeting and talking to people from the cultural sphere. Since then, I have regularly travelled to Moscow to keep abreast

of major art exhibitions and the latest events. The art scene is a 'moving target' as you try to keep up with the latest news. Thus, over the years I searched the Internet, paper media, bookstores and exhibition kiosks for material. The major principle was to continuously keep an alert eye on the flow of information. Apart from exhibition catalogues, only a few monographs and anthologies have been published on contemporary Russian art, and then primarily covering art up to the 2000s.[25] I also conducted interviews with artists, curators and art critics who told me about their work. The interviews were important in providing the specific *Fingerspitzengefühl* for understanding developments.

During the years under study, the art scene was characterized by a dynamic expansion and institutional build-up. In the period of economic boom, the interest in a potential Russian art market also boomed. With minimum state financing, private capital covered a large part of the costs of the institutionalization of art.

However, the first institutions of contemporary art had been created much earlier. In 1992 the National Centre for Contemporary Art (NCCA) was created under the Russian Federal Ministry of Culture. It was the result of the work of Leonid Bazhanov, who, as soon as Gorbachev's Perestroika allowed independent associations, created the Hermitage art association in 1986. He soon found a location on Yakimanka Street, which for some years became the hub of Moscow art life with exhibitions, seminars and concerts (Borusyak, 2009).With the Pompidou Centre in Paris as a model, he created the Centre for Contemporary Art. After he was offered a position in the Ministry of Culture, he was able to transform it into the NCCA in 1992, the first Russian federal state institution of its kind.[26] Later, branches were created in other Russian cities.[27] Private galleries were also set up after 1989: the First Gallery in 1989 (Pervaya galereya, later to become the Aidan Gallery), and the Marat Gelman Gallery and Gallery Regina in 1990. In 1999 the Moscow Museum of Modern Art opened at the initiative of Zurab Tsereteli, an artist and close friend of Moscow's Mayor Luzhkov, with financial support from the city government.[28]

Although the private market for Russian contemporary art was limited, private galleries and actors now came to dominate the contemporary art scene. Two large annual art fairs (Art Moskva and Art Manezh) had started in Moscow in 1996 and were well established by the early 2000s. They incorporated both national and international art, mostly commercial.

The economy improved, but the federal government only reluctantly allocated a minimal sum to culture in the state budget. It had limited interest in contemporary art and did not understand its value. Even so, it was persuaded that an international biennale of contemporary art could improve Russia's image abroad. The first Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art was held in the spring of 2005, with the major exhibition at the former Lenin Museum next to the Historical Museum on Red Square.[29] Several years later Mikhail Shvydkoi, who at the time had financed the Moscow Biennale as head of the Agency of Culture and Media, said: 'I did not like what I saw of contemporary art but I understood that it was necessary to support it'.[30] Two years later the deputy head of the presidential administration, chief ideologist Vladislav Surkov, even wrote the introduction to the catalogue

of the 2007 biennale. In 2005, the Innovatsiya Prize for Contemporary Art was instituted and the NCCA organized the contest. However, apart from providing the basic financing of the NCCA and a major part of the costs of the Moscow Biennale, the federal state did little to support contemporary art. Art had to depend on the private market and private financing.

Over the period 2005–2008 several new private galleries opened in Moscow. As Marat Gelman said in June 2008, 'People who previously thought of opening boutiques or fashion franchises now think of opening art foundations' (Chernysheva, 2008: 13). Former industrial areas in the centre of Moscow were converted into modern gallery districts. Rough but beautiful old brick buildings of factory architecture provided an excellent environment for the new *tusovka* (trendy gatherings) of art lovers.[31] Art Strelka (part of the former Krasnyi Oktyabr chocolate factory) opened in 2004,[32] and Art Play opened in a former silk factory at about the same time. In 2006 Proekt Fabrika was created on the grounds of the still functioning Oktyabr paper factory, and in 2007 Vinzavod (a former store for cognac and wine)[33] became an important art centre when several of the most important galleries moved there. The same year two private galleries/museums opened to exhibit the private collections of two businessmen – Art4Russia[34] and Fond Ekaterina.[35] In 2008, the Garazh Center of Contemporary Culture, funded by the oligarch Roman Abramovich, opened in a newly renovated former bus garage built by the constructivist architect Konstantin Melnikov in the late 1920s.[36] In 2008, Marat Gelman expanded his activities to the city of Perm in Western Siberia, when he was invited by the governor to open a museum of contemporary art in a grand Stalin-era former riverboat station.

In 2007 the Kandinsky Prize was created with private money as the second most prestigious art award in the country, complementing the state-awarded Innovatsiya Prize.[37] Both contests were organized in such a way that an expert council makes the initial selection of art works and an international jury of art specialists takes the final decisions on the awards. The Innovatsiya Prize and the Kandinsky Prize became *the* events of the year in the community of contemporary art, and intensive debate soon took place around them. Moscow had become a major centre of contemporary art for a quite logical reason – most of the private capital was concentrated in the city.

Critics complained that there were no counterweights to the influence of the market as there was no state-sponsored system of professional education in contemporary art, no education for art critics and no system of state grants to artists. The small Institute of Problems of Contemporary Art, set up in 1991 by Iosif Bakshtein together with a group of artists, came to play an important role as the first and only educational centre of contemporary art. With Bakshtein, a long-term member of the circles of Moscow Conceptualism, the tradition of the Soviet underground was transferred to and integrated into the worldview of the young artists who graduated from this programme each year.[38] More than 10 years later, the Moscow Museum of Modern Art also started courses in contemporary art.[39] Nonetheless, in 2013 state-organized or -financed education in contemporary art still did not exist, although a system of grants for artists was in development.

A restructuring of the system of art institutions would take place in 2012–2013 (see Chapter 8).

Structure of the study

This is a book about the role of art in society. It asks whether and, if so, how art contributed to the evolving protest movement of 2011–2012. The 'political' element of art is defined as participating in reconfiguring what is seen, heard and understood about the contemporary world. This takes form through aesthetic rupture. The narrative of the book follows a trajectory that comes closer and closer to the core of politics from the subtle art of an other gaze to dissent art and art of engagement, and from discussions within the art community to political action. The analysis runs from the development of a subculture to the buildup of a counterculture and discusses the direct contribution of people from the cultural sphere to the art-related activities of the protest movement.

The reader is taken closer and closer to politics in art. Chapter 2 provides the background to dissensus in Russian art during the twentieth century and sets out the political context of today's art – that is, the major parameters of the Putin consensus as it developed during his first two terms as president (2000–2008). Chapter 3 analyses art of an other gaze as the most subtle form of dissensus in art. Chapter 4 describes the conflict between art and the church, most notably the trial of the exhibition 'Forbidden Art 2006'. This trial is regarded as a crucial event in the development of a counterculture within the Russian community of contemporary art. Chapter 5 presents dissent art as art that disagrees with the official consensus. Chapter 6 focuses on the possible transformation of a subculture of art into a counterculture by analysing seminars, acts and statements by the arts community plus the category of art of engagement – that is, art that makes direct political statements. Chapter 7 concentrates on the political activities of the so-called new media activists during campaigns that preceded parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as the textual messages of slogans and banners at protests in December 2011 to June 2012. Chapter 8 describes the Bolotnaya Square demonstration in May 2012 as a political turning point and analyses art and politics after Bolotnaya. The concluding chapter summarizes the results of the study and relates them to the concept of subjectivation – that is, when people who normally are not listened to raise their voices in public.

Notes

1 In Bleiker, see especially the chapter on 'Political boundaries, poetic transgression'. On the example of Iran, see Kurzman (2009).
2 On rock music, see Troitskii (2007) and Cushman (1995).
3 Erjavec quoting Jean-Francois Lyotard (1988).
4 'A political subject is a capacity for staging scenes of dissensus' (Rancière, 2004: 69).
5 See, for example, the case studies of Brown (2011) and Lison (2011).
6 See their discussion of the concepts of 'space' and 'scene'. The way 'space' is used here is close to their concept of 'scene'. See also Polletta (1999: 1–38).

7 Quoted by Leach and Haunss (2009: 260).
8 Keith A. Roberts (1978) refers to the fundamental difference between a counterculture and a subculture. Counterculture rejects the norms and values that unite the dominant culture while the latter finds ways of affirming the national culture and the fundamental value orientation of the dominant society.
9 Cushman (1995: 7–8) makes a distinction between 'counterculture' and 'alternative culture', where the latter, although different from the dominant culture or norm, presents no challenge. This distinction can, however, sometimes be difficult to make. What may seem nonpolitical and fairly harmless can still have a political effect in the longer run. It may also be perceived by the authorities as a genuine challenge.
10 For studies of ideological directives in the cultural field in Soviet times, see, for example, Sokolov (2007), Groys (1992) and Clark and Dobrenko (2007).
11 Chantal Mouffe (2008: 9) explains it in the following way: 'What is at a given moment considered to be the "natural order" – together with the "common sense" that accompanies it – is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objective outside the practices that bring it into being. Every order is therefore political and based on some form of exclusion. There are always other possibilities that have been repressed and that can be reactivated'.
12 According to Rancière (2004: 63), 'Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning'.
13 Compare with Susan C. Haedicke's (2013: 45) notion that Rancière emphasizes the meeting between the artist and the spectator, claiming that a spectator achieves emancipation or critical awareness by translating what he sees into his own experience, linking it to what he already knows and, through that association, creating new awareness.
14 'Artefacts are not only materially constructed but also socially constructed. Even though they may be individually produced, their creation too is, in a sense, a social performance, because the audience is always in the artist's mind. Because of their performance, cultural artefacts can serve as the focus of numerous other performances after their creation. Both social performances and artefact-based performances, however, are closely linked to the ideations' (Johnston, 2009: 7).
15 Graeme Gill (2013) writes about the efforts by the Russian post-Soviet presidents to create a meta-narrative to fill the ideological vacuum that replaced the Soviet narrative. See also Billington (2004).
16 Compare the introduction of the official concept of 'sovereign democracy'. See Hayoz (2012).
17 Alexei Yurchak (2006: 10–14) writes about the Soviet Communist Party as the source of the official updated interpretation of the 'truth', thereby solving the 'Lefort's Paradox' between ideological enunciation and ideological rule in the Soviet Union.
18 For the gap between the intelligentsia and the authorities, see Shalin (1996). On peasants and the authorities, see Hosking (1997).
19 Brown and Anton (2011: 2) use the term 'subversive art', which could be a joint term for the last two categories above. They explain it thus: 'The concept of the subversive . . . functions in two senses: first, it refers to the activities of individuals and groups . . . operating with the explicit aim of disrupting politics and challenging dominant narratives; second, it refers to the effects of social actors and trends that, although not explicitly political, have been interpreted by dominant elites in political terms'.
20 Compare the term the 'other gaze' used by Groys in the sense of Russian unofficial art in the Soviet Union. Groys (2003: 55) had in mind Moscow Conceptualists and Sots-Art, first and foremost.

21 Compare Tökes (1975: 16).
22 On *styob*, see Beumers (2005: 245, 261).
23 The term 'creative class' as used by Richard Florida (2002) includes people in the knowledge-based and creative sectors such as scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and architects, plus people in design, education, the arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or creative content.
24 These demonstrations were described byYurii Grigorii (2012), a sociologist from the Higher School of Economics, as a protest 'against the very idea that loyalty can always be bought' and as a 'moral protest, a protest against corruption and greed, against the lack of moral order'.
25 An overview of Western and Russian art is provided by Andreeva (2007). A collection of articles about Russian artists previously published in the Russian media can be found in Kovalev (2005). Interviews with people from contemporary culture, among them artists, can be found in Bazhanov and Iro (2012). There are exhibition catalogues covering individuals or groups of artists, and of the collections of private collectors.
26 Author's interview with Leonid Bazhanov, Moscow, September 2007.
27 Nizhnii Novgorod, www.museum.ru/m3065; St Petersburg, ncca-spb.ru; www.ncca-kaliningrad.ru; Ekaterinburg, www.uralncca.ru.
28 www.mmoma.ru. For the development of the Moscow art scene in the 1990s, see Rekonstruktsiya/Reconstruction, 1990–2000 (2013).
29 www.moscowbiennale.ru.
30 Mikhail Shvydkoi at a meeting of the Cultural Counsellors of the EU member states, Moscow, October 2009.
31 Beumers explains that *tusovat* describes the activity of just being friends with a group not necessarily of the same composition (2005: 245, 261). Viktor Miziano uses the term to describe the socio-cultural phenomenon of the informal gathering around the art scene in the 1990s. He calls it a kind of personalized self-organization of the artistic environment in a world without institutions and state protection for the arts (Miziano, 2004: 15–42).
32 www.artstrelka.ru.
33 www.winzavod.ru.
34 www.art4.ru.
35 www.ekaterina-fondation.ru.
36 http://garageccc.com/ru/page/about.
37 www.kandinsky-prize.ru.
38 They have remained part of a loose network of former students, and Bakshtein, as an influential operator on the Moscow art scene, was also able to place his students in the art scene and connect them abroad.
39 www.mmoma.ru/about.

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8 The Putin regime: patrimonial media

> Journalistic freedom has turned into a tasty morsel for politicians …
> (Putin, 8 July 2000)

I The Putin Project

The success of the Putin Project was predicated on controlling the media. The question of 'Who is Mr Putin?' was genuinely perplexing, since he was brought into the limelight only when Yeltsin announced him as his successor, which was no more than seven months before he became president. The public knew less about Putin's pre-history than about any other leader, including Chernenko. The project went with the potentially dangerous reversal of policy from Yeltsin's free and open society, supposed to be in transition to a western liberal democracy, to an unclear system that was packaged as authoritarian democracy. In time, this hybrid became steadily more regressive as it moved from soft to harder authoritarianism and its sham democracy changed titles from 'managed' to 'sovereign' to 'majority' democracy. Initially, however, Putin was no more than a transitional figure. The point of the 'project' was to turn him into an unbeatable presidential candidate.

The rebuilt Kremlin media machine was put into motion to secure a smooth succession and retain the entrenched privileges of oligarchic capitalism. The top-down action, as the state sought once again to impose its project on an unwitting society, flouted the Yeltsin ethos where obstructive state power had been restrained. The Kremlin project would still use the ballot box but, whereas in 1996 Yeltsin felt it his duty to energetically campaign for office and dance for his supper, despite his heart condition, the young judo-master Putin would be given a dignified passage to power through the newly refined arts of image-making. The project required delicate handling and the professional expertise of the so-called 'political technologists'.

The concept of 'political technology' has a drama to it absent in the West. We talk of public relations and media consultancy without any sense of the magical frisson Russians attribute to the art of persuasion, which they tend to apply according to Machiavelli's *tractatus* on power. Nor do they seem to see

anything unethical in his realpolitik. One of the first PR companies in Russia proudly called itself 'Niccolo M'. According to Putin's initial spin doctor, Gleb Pavlovsky, Putin would be promoted by virtue of the politics of 'non-political power' – 'power without representation or the consideration of the interests of those being governed'.[1] The idea was to distance the leader from those to whom power is delegated on the tsar–boyar model, where peasants rebelled against the boyars while the tsar remained sacrosanct (*tsar' khochet, boyare ne dayut*). For the leader to maintain this aura, Pavlovsky applied his 'no alternative' strategy. He had been one of the bright young things Malashenko had brought into the team during Yeltsin's 1996 re-election campaign, and it was there that he learned the value of stirring up 'mythological fears' about the communists – fear of hunger, civil war, instability – so that people could be manipulated into thinking there was no alternative to Yeltsin.

Pavlovsky's strategy for the Putin regime was not to trample openly on freedoms, but to find more sophisticated ways of subjugating society to the state. In this way the myth of democracy could be retained, while changing the thrust of Yeltsin's liberal policies. In his 1996 'scenarios and technologies', Pavlovsky began to develop his art of persuasion influenced by the obscure language of French philosophy and postmodernism, hugely fashionable with the educated urban elite. Propaganda methods which 'fetishise' television no longer work, he said. The idea of 'information dramaturgy' was a more effective way of influencing the consciousness of the masses by transforming events into 'interesting and accessible plots (anecdote, scenario, myth – all these being aspects of socio-political dramaturgy)':

> The aim of propaganda and counter-propaganda is to create a window of inculcation on the level of the Real Socialising of the Mass Person, on the level of mass communications. The struggle to win is not determined by the administrative control of the media, but by dominating the grass roots level of mass communications – if you like, on the level of 'family chatter' and 'folk gossip'.[2]

Although in the 1996 elections Pavlovsky's ideas were one among many in the pot, the playacting and simulated reality of dramaturgy was central to the Putin project. One strand was to dissociate Putin from the dirt of politics. If we look at the regime's policy statements, most of them have been articulated not by Putin but by those representing him: managed and majority democracy by Sergei Markov, sovereign democracy by Vladislav Surkov. This distancing continues to this day where Putin removes himself from decisions and from blame. It was not his plan to free Khodorkovsky as a PR gesture before the Sochi Olympics, but the amnesty committee's; it was not he who enforced the annexation of Crimea but the will of the people expressed in their referendum. When the NTV group went to see Putin to ask him to intervene in saving the channel, his reply that he could not interfere in the work of an independent body such as the Prosecutor-General made satirist Viktor

Shenderovich snort: 'Ah – and I didn't know!'. There was a contradiction, of course, in the script between distancing Putin from political actions and ascribing to him the role of sole leader, without an alternative. It was the latter script that proved more successful, most of the domestic and foreign press assuming that nothing happened in the country without Putin's blessing.

In his role of figurehead, as part of the cult of personality his PR office had orchestrated, Putin has appeared in many carefully crafted personae. In one of the earliest, just after he had been elected president, he stands in braided navy cap and greatcoat looking out steely-eyed into the Barents Sea from the bridge of the nuclear submarine Karelia – master at the helm. In varying forms of dress and undress, he has featured as a superhero and a sex symbol: in judo poses, bare-chested riding a horse, fishing and swimming in Siberia, stroking (semi-drugged) Amur tigers and in a strange bird-like contraption taking the lead to head migrating cranes in the right direction. After a while the scripts flagged and when it turned out that the two fragments of ancient Greek pottery he was supposed to have found in the Black Sea had been a stunt, it didn't really matter. His spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, complained: 'Of course, they were left there or placed there. It's completely normal. There's no reason to gloat about it'.[3] Machismo and youth were important to the Putin image, so when he approached 60, there was nothing much his PR men could do when YouTube went viral with stories of probable cosmetic surgery and Botox treatment to explain the disconcerting puffiness around his eyes and cheeks. The weariness with the Putin image after a decade was revived only by the Crimean 'victory'.

Pavlovsky's 'no-alternative' strategy went to work as soon as Putin was named Yeltsin's heir. The war in Chechnya provided the first opportunity to show that there was no alternative to Putin as the strongman who had the situation in hand. He was tough (*krutoy*) and his liberal use of criminal slang (*blatnoy yazyk*) confirmed it. The unprecedentedly dirty campaign in the 1999 parliamentary elections ensured there would be no political alternative to Putin and the Unity party. Pavlovsky explains: 'To convince the voters of something that seems to contradict their natural, most personal interests, you have to present it as an expression of power to which there is no alternative'. The real forces, he said, should not be transparent, because 'technological power does everything that needs to be done but doesn't tell you what it's doing'.[4]

Pavlovsky is unfazed about revealing Machiavellian intentions; cynicism is so ingrained in the political system that the idea of fair play hardly enters into the picture. An ambitious journalist and intellectual, Pavlovsky has had a chequered career: as a dissident exiled to the Komi Republic, after he had informed on colleagues to escape being sentenced to a labour camp; as an editor of numerous journals, initiator of intellectual discussion clubs, founder of the news agency Postfactum; and in the 2000s founder of some of the first news websites in the country through his think tank, the Foundation for Effective Policy. He has had no qualms in discussing the deceptive

underpinning of political technology and the way it has permeated the regime's scripted reality. In this model, the façade of democracy is retained, but the props are hollow. Attempts are made to reconcile what is irreconcilable in concepts such as 'managed democracy' and 'dictatorship of the law'. Elections are held without undue rigging by rejigging electoral procedure beforehand, loyal opposition parties joust in fake contests, and parliament has returned to a rubber-stamp body, resembling the Supreme Soviet. A manipulated world where words and institutions are drained of their real meaning required a large public relations staff settled in the presidential administration and a chief ideologue to hold the framework together.

This was the role of Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's grey cardinal and an ideologue as important to Putin as Mikhail Suslov was to Brezhnev. Surkov has helped to design the spirit of the times: cynical, wealthy, manipulative. A half-Chechen who concealed his roots, he is described as hip, a conceptual artist who writes lyrics for rock bands and at the same time initiates huge pro-Putin rallies of the youth league Nashi with their skinhead mentality and the burning of books. Surkov has apparently written a novel about a corrupt PR consultant prepared to sell his soul for money, but he denies it, although it is written in his wife's name, and the whole of Moscow's elite gathered to see its stage adaptation.[5] Playing games was part of the political technologists' world, a self-referential hall of mirrors where truth gets distorted. Richard Sakwa writes: 'Surkov's philosophy from the first was that there is no real freedom in the world, and that all democracies are managed democracies, so the key to success is to influence people, to give them the illusion that they are free whereas in fact they are managed'.[6] Surkov stated: 'freedom is when you have (a car) to ride and things to buy'.[7]

The oxymoronic 'managed' democracy

What was 'managed' democracy? Sergei Markov, one of Putin's early propagandists, argued that post-communist Russia would be best served by 'interweaving' its well-established authoritarian traditions with democratic institutions, providing the conditions for 'Putin's regime of personal power'.[8] This power, he said, would be modelled more on de Gaulle than on Russia's own Byzantine emperors or the Latin American dictators (the Pinochet model was particularly popular). Its economics would be dirigism; its ideology – nationalism; its patriotic rhetoric a reminder that Russia would not bow down to the West. Managed democracy would ensure a stable pro-government majority in both houses of parliament, and put an end to the direct elections of unruly governors. In effect, democracy would lose its main advantage, the possibility of kicking out those in power, because it would be prevented from doing so by those managing it. 'Managed democracy' was therefore a nonsense, an oxymoron that fitted in the postmodernist arsenal of wordplay. It was not a new term – 'guided' or 'managed' democracy had been instituted by Sukarno in Indonesia in 1957, with the same goal of emasculating

representative government. The policies announced by Markov were all implemented in due course, which has restricted democracy's ability to free itself from its managers in the future.

What part did 'managed' democracy allot to freedom? Markov and the officials and journalists who lined up behind Putin repeated in chorus that freedom had never existed under Yeltsin; that it was all anarchy and disorder. The aim, therefore, was to protect the weak against unlimited freedom by applying Putin's slogan of 'dictatorship of the law', another unhelpful oxymoron. By fudging liberty with licence, Markov was able to play to the Russian public's widely-held belief of freedom as the carrier of violent, profligate behaviour. Nor was Markov coy about how the media would be subdued: 'there will be firm control over the mainstream media through financial–political control of its owners and through administrative–economic control of media owners over their journalists'. Markov does not flinch from calling this type of democracy 'manipulative' democracy and sees nothing unfair in using manipulation as a tool to hoodwink society because, as he argues, it keeps politics within the electoral system and does not resort to police methods.

The plan then was to enforce regime change under Putin, base it on imperialist principles of statism and nationalism, remove the political freedoms society was beginning to enjoy, and implement this radical change without coercion or bloodshed. Political technologists were vital to this scenario by becoming the army that replaced a bloody Pinochet style takeover. Instead of violence, there would be hard-core manipulation.

Initially Putin was not in control of the project to make him a leader, nor did he have his own team. According to Pavlovsky, his team looked more like 'raisins in a biscuit' embedded in Yeltsin's 'family'. If Yeltsin had thought Putin would preserve his legacy, he made a fateful mistake. The 1998 August default had caught Yeltsin off guard and he looked to a strong man to hold the country together; moreover, he had always put greater trust in military men. Yeltsin's liberal aide Georgy Satarov says he stopped considering civilians such as Nemtsov and Kiriyenko. 'Putin was a chronological accident, the last in the chain', he told me. The choice of candidates was also obviously limited by the 'family', even if Yeltsin made the final decision. When Yeltsin resigned, it was the first time a Russian leader had given up power voluntarily, but there was nothing democratic about his 'tsarist gesture' in naming an heir, or what another newspaper mocked as 'hereditary democracy'.

For a person who had not harboured presidential ambitions, Putin was a lucky man. Everything fell into his lap. Yeltsin had transferred power to him, he had the 'family's' Kremlin administration at his disposal, political technologists were working out his ideological messages, state television was pushing him forward in the public eye, and numerous state journalists were complicit in the scheme. His early policies largely followed those set out by Yeltsin, but he managed to push them through more successfully because the nationalist majority in parliament was eager to support him. What is seen as

Putin's trademark of bringing order and stability to society originated in Yeltsin's state of the nation address of 6 March 1997 on 'Order in power, Order in the country'. Aware of the uses to which a law and order policy could be put, Yeltsin's message spelled out that 'dictatorship and suppression do not lie at the basis of establishing order, but rather a communality of aims, reason and accord, the energy of reconciliation and construction'.[9] Putin's hardline version settled for a 'dictatorship of the law'. 'In a weak state a person is helpless and unfree', he writes. 'The stronger the state, the stronger is personal freedom'.[10]

The fact that Putin came to power as the price of oil took off was remarkably fortunate for him as well. Such an economic advantage would have transformed opportunities for Gorbachev and Yeltsin in building their freer visions of society. In April 1986 when the Chernobyl nuclear reactor exploded and Gorbachev was dealing with the consequences of an almost bankrupt state, the price of oil was $10 per barrel. Throughout the 1990s it hovered between $14 and $19 per barrel while Yeltsin was struggling to pay wages and pensions and repay the Soviet Union's foreign debt. A month before Yeltsin retired, in November 1999, the price of oil took off to $25 per barrel. On Putin's watch it rose steadily to an average of $33 in 2003, $63 in 2006, skyrocketing to an all-time high of $143 in July 2008. Since then, the global financial crisis of 2008–9 has seen oil prices falling, which has serious repercussions for a regime that did not use the oil boom years enough to build the country's infrastructure or substantially raise the wages of lower-income groups living in neglected towns and villages.

While oil prices soared, it was not difficult to raise people's living standards, increase salaries and pensions and restore confidence in a society that had suffered economic turmoil. From 2000 to 2008 annual economic growth in real terms averaged 7 per cent, annual real wages rose by almost 15 per cent and the federal budget was continually in surplus. Thanks to media propaganda, people believed their prosperity was due to Putin's leadership. He had put things in order, showed the oligarchs their place, and presided over a booming economy. With television on his side, there was no one to say that he had established order at the expense of freedom, that he had kicked out troublesome oligarchs but installed his own cronies and those who did not meddle in politics, who continued to plunder society. In 2014, according to Credit Suisse, 110 billionaires owned nearly one-third of Russia's wealth. Putin himself is rumoured to be worth $40 billion, while the annual cost of bribery, as estimated by Transparency International is $300 billion, equivalent to the size of Denmark's gross domestic product.[11]

As Machiavelli said, *fortuna* is not enough to make a leader. Putin quickly showed he would not be an obedient tool of the 'family'. He had a strong personality, he was a clever tactician and he held firm views developed during his KGB days. He was quick to position his own people in government, mainly those from St Petersburg and the *siloviki* groups (those connected with security, the police and the military). By 2007, according to sociologist Olga

Kryshtanovskaya, one-quarter of the country's senior bureaucrats were *siloviki*; the proportion rising to three-quarters if people affiliated to the security services were included.[12] The system of government that developed was a network of shifting alliances operating behind the scenes with Putin as the main arbiter. Vladimir Pribylovsky has described the system succinctly: 'In Russia, official political parties (i.e. those registered with the Ministry of Justice) play a subordinate role to these administrative/economic groupings. It is the clans and patron–client networks, which lack any official or judicial status, that are the real players in the country's political life'.[13] This network of informal associations is kept together not by laws but by the old system of 'rules of the game', now expressed in mafia language as 'having an understanding' (*po ponyatiyam*). To stay in power, Putin needs to negotiate a delicate balance between these groups.

The 'illusions of the masses', said top independent pollster Lev Gudkov of the Levada Centre, were maintained by the belief that Putin's regime would preserve high standards of living and by the fact that no alternative rivals were permitted on the stage.[14] Putin's consistently high ratings of 70–80 per cent were more a response to him personally than to individual policies. When figures were broken down, such as with regard to his policy in Chechnya, his popularity tended to fall to between 30 to 35 per cent. An obedient mainstream media covered up the ugly picture of greed, conflict and corruption, focusing on the pleasures of a prospering, enriched society as seen not only in its mainstream television news but through the plethora of tabloids, celebrity gossip magazines and 'glossies' covering beauty, fashion and lifestyle, all of which grew rapidly with the economic upswing, encapsulated in the adopted word, *glamur*.

An indication of Putin's beliefs came in his Millennium Message while he was still prime minister. In it he revived the old chestnut of the 'Russian national idea',[15] the ultra-conservative values that were the mainstay of autocratic tsarist Russia. They were, he said, statism, patriotism and Russian greatness (*derzhavnost'*).[16] There had been no widespread urge for these values during the democratic transition and when several intellectual groups approached Yeltsin to suggest a reworking of the 'national idea' he was surprised, but asked his advisers to cobble something together. He was against the tsarist term 'national idea' and suggested calling the project 'An Idea for Russia'. His liberal advisers could not see its relevance to democracy and modernity either; moreover, the acceptance of any one state ideology, as the Communist Party had, was now prohibited by the Constitution. Nevertheless, his advisers set to work organising public discussions and distributing a series of public service announcements on television about honesty and cooperation, and that was the end of it. In a document handed to Yeltsin, one young adviser suggested two ideas for Russia: don't piss in the street and paint your fence.[17] Good advice, which meant make your life pleasant and comfortable and don't prevent others from doing the same. The Yeltsin ethos had no belief in 'exceptionalism' or messianic 'missions' that have been reanimated under Putin.

If democracy was too multifaceted to contain a national idea, Putin's narrow vision, borrowed from Russian autocracy, was popular. Not only the masses, but the professional classes, journalists and people in public life, who could have been taken for democrats of sorts or at least people with not entirely definable but not jingoistic views, seemed to be genuinely enthralled by the Putin rhetoric of greatness and statehood. At the best of times Russia is a hyperactive, nervous society, but there was more than the usual hysteria in the air when Putin took up the presidency, a thrill at the idea of enthronement. Because so little was known about Putin, people could fantasise and imagine him to be whatever they wanted. And what they wanted was the opposite of Yeltsin. People saw democracy as having failed, not that it had only just begun.

Still, enough was known about Putin to wonder about the uncritical response to this middle-ranking KGB operative espousing authoritarian views smattered with democratic phrases. Was it an indication of the level of conservatism in Russian society and its elite to embrace him so wholeheartedly, and what did western leaders and analysts have in mind when they greeted him so readily as a partner and ally? Tony Blair was the first foreign leader to rush to St Petersburg before the elections and give Putin's candidacy a boost. In due course, George W. Bush looked into his eyes and 'saw his soul'. He called him 'PootyPoo'. The belief in Putin as an ally in the war on terror and an advocate of free market economics was undoubtedly more important to western leaders than any adherence to democratic principles, the West having profited considerably (no questions asked) from Russia's oil and mineral assets and the capital flight into western financial structures. The Russian public came to see moral preaching about democracy as no more than 'double standards'.

It is not with surprise that we should look at Putin's extreme authoritarianism today; there was enough evidence in 1999. Almost the first piece of public information about him was when he returned the Andropov plaque to the walls of the Lubyanka, where it had been ripped off during the freedom celebrations after the 1991 coup. In 1999 he was probably the first person in five decades to propose a toast to Stalin in the Kremlin at a military graduation ceremony on Victory Day. Both acts were as audacious as his sayings of killing Chechens in outside toilets or calling them 'animals' and oppositionists 'traitors'. There were hardly any signs that he espoused liberal values. Many people thought he was charming; his critics said he had been trained to be charming as a KGB recruitment officer. In personal attitudes he was old-fashioned, macho and sexist, but traditional values are widely accepted in Russian society. He showed little imagination about the global modern world, dredging up values from the past that would later make up Russia's 'national idea'.

Allegations of corruption when he was mayor Sobchak's deputy in Petersburg were never properly investigated, although he was in charge of the lucrative domain of privatisation of property. One accusation against him of

rigging contracts in an import–export kickback scheme for food supplies worth $92 million was exposed by prominent democrat Marina Salye, a member of the City Soviet. Sobchak declined to sack Putin and said the accusations were groundless. Petersburg newspapers had reported the investigation at the time, but Salye felt that voters should be reminded before the elections, especially as she was horrified that most of her liberal colleagues were intent on voting for Putin. She was only able to get her article 'Putin Is "President" of a Corrupt Oligarchy' published online.[18] The *Moscow Times* also reported the previous allegations, but no Russian-language national outlet touched the story.[19] Some months later Salye was 'warned', and she vanished from political life into a remote village in the Pskov region, coming out only before she died to repeat her tale.[20]

In April 2000 academic Michael McFaul, later to become US Ambassador to Moscow (2012–14), during the heat of anti-Americanism, argued that despite ominous signs it would be wrong to conclude that Putin was an anti-democrat: 'The Russian president is simply too modern and too Western-oriented to believe in dictatorship. Rather, Putin is indifferent to democratic principles and practices, believing perhaps that Russia might have to sacrifice democracy in the short run to achieve "more important" economic and state-building goals'.[21] By 2003 McFaul and a co-author conceded: 'the evidence of an erosion of democracy … under Putin is now overwhelming'.[22] Obviously, the political technologists' spin was persuasive with the West as well, at least for a while. Yelena Bonner brushed aside the dithering, bluntly announcing in 2000 the birth of a new Stalinism. Diplomat-hero of the 1991 coup, Boris Pankin, sussed Putin out fairly accurately: 'He has known what he wants right from the start – Soviet power without communists'.[23]

Presidential elections, 26 March 2000

A word blurted out indiscreetly by Putin's campaign officials summed up the presidential elections – 'asymmetric'. Angered by allegations from the opposition media, especially Gusinsky's newspaper *Segodnya*, that they had violated procedure, the Putin team sent a letter to the media on 4 March 2000 saying they reserved 'the right to use all means in our arsenal to implement an asymmetric response to acts of provocation'. The sentence was quickly withdrawn, but there it was – 'an asymmetric response' – an open threat to the media. In fact, the Kremlin had already been using asymmetric methods to destroy the level playing field and crush alternative choices.

The mudslinging of the earlier 1999 parliamentary election had cleared the field of opponents. Putin declined to make use of his free broadcasting time and showed his ignorance of the democratic process by saying he would not sell himself 'like Tampax or Snickers'. (Why Tampax? remonstrated Yelena Tregubova later: 'for every post-Soviet woman, that is the main (if not the only) democratic achievement that's been experienced'.)[24] When a reporter asked Putin to outline his policies, he replied: 'I won't tell you'. Although Putin did

not say much, he was rarely off the screen in his capacity as acting president, travelling extensively around the country and behaving as if he had already won the race. The EU Tacis monitoring report called it a 'virtual' election, an early hint of what came to be known as Putin's 'virtual' or 'imitation' democracy.[25]

When Putin's image was seen to be too tough, ORT called in killer-journalist Mikhail Leontyev to interview him at home in the presence of his fluffy white poodle. The only serious television interview he gave was not to his own people but to David Frost for the BBC on relations with Nato, although the Russian press complained it could not make out which way he was leaning. He offered no electoral manifesto, but his views could be gleaned from his Millennium Message, an open letter to the press and an interview he gave to three Moscow journalists, published first in *Kommersant* on 10 March under the title Iron Putin, and a week later in book form as *First Person: Conversations with Vladimir Putin.*

By comparison with the money spent on Yeltsin's 1996 re-election, campaign financing was low: Putin's at $10 million and Yavlinsky's at about $15 million. However, the journalist Yuliya Latynina showed how the picture changed if 'administrative resources' that were used to promote Putin were taken into account. She calculated: 'out of the $170 billion gross domestic product, six to seven percent has been spent on elections in various ways – with state companies changing directors; with private companies changing owners; with loans given to the "right" governors; and with taxes forgiven to the "right" corporations'.[26]

According to the European Institute of the Media (EIM), Putin received almost one-third of all coverage in the national media. On TV news, he received close to 50 per cent of the total time. He even received the greater amount of coverage in the communists' *Pravda* (1 per cent more than their own candidate, Zyuganov), confirming that pro-Putin forces had made a deal with the Communist Party. The main democratic candidate, Yavlinsky, received the most negative coverage (41 minutes), but Putin received his share (29 minutes).

Given that the election had been clinched before it started, media coverage was not particularly hostile, except in the case of ORT. With Berezovsky zealously promoting Putin from behind the scenes, ORT not only gave far more hours to Putin (30 per cent, as compared to the next candidate, Yavlinsky, at 12 per cent), but conducted a vicious campaign against Yavlinsky.[27] ORT claimed that Yavlinsky had accepted huge donations from foreign sources, such as George Soros; accused him of exceeding the legal limits on campaign spending; alleged he had undergone cosmetic surgery to improve his appearance and, in a staged event, showed a group of gays announcing their support for him at a press conference – hardly positive publicity in a homophobic society. By constantly linking Yavlinsky to Gusinsky's media, ORT gave the false impression that NTV was biased in Yavlinsky's favour. In fact, NTV gave more coverage to Putin (29 per cent) than to Yavlinsky (14 per cent), and its coverage was more positive than negative. For Yavlinsky, however, the little positive coverage he received came from NTV.

NTV was playing safe, though giving opposition candidates a voice. It was in an unenviable position. NTV had earlier asserted its right to promote whatever candidate it wanted, mainly with Yavlinsky in mind, but it was uncertain how far it could step out of line. It had backed the wrong horse in the parliamentary elections and was taking a critical stance on the second Chechen war. It now faced the wrath of the Kremlin, which was putting pressure on it financially. Press Minister Lesin also held a Damocles' sword over ORT and Moscow's TV Centre, announcing a month before the elections that their licences would be up for tender. TV Centre, under its new general director Oleg Poptsov, was fairly even-handed in its coverage, but Luzhkov had already succumbed to the Putin camp. More surprising was the threat to ORT. As Berezovsky was using his influence and money to orchestrate Putin's rise to power, this could only be a warning that he would no longer be top dog on the channel. When ORT received its licence the following year, Berezovsky was no longer in charge.

There had been a great deal of reshuffling of top posts and poaching of journalists from commercial channels before the elections. Most sensational was state RTR's new boss, Oleg Dobrodeyev, whom many considered a TV guru. He had shocked the industry by resigning from NTV, where he and Yevgeny Kiselyov had been the creative duo. Some accused Dobrodeyev of abandoning a sinking ship, but he had been at loggerheads with his colleagues for a long time over the channel's criticism of the Chechen war. Earlier, during the Kosovo conflict, like most Russian nationalists, he had firmly supported their brother Slavs in Serbia and chaffed at Gusinsky's neutrality in the conflict. As soon as Dobrodeyev resigned from NTV to go 'nowhere', as he said, he was snapped up by Putin. Dobrodeyev became the head of RTR and the whole VGTRK state complex. He has remained in the post ever since, for 16 years so far. ORT's Konstantin Ernst, who was appointed head of ORT before the elections, has remained in post for the same period of time. It used to be a joke in Soviet times that one man had headed Gosteleradio for as long as 14 years, until finally removed by Gorbachev. The pro-Putin broadcasters, who showed their worth in promoting the new authoritarian politics in this first Putin election, have outdone even what was considered the 'stagnation' of the Brezhnev period.

Putin won 52.9 per cent of the vote. A serious piece of investigative journalism published six months later in the English-language *Moscow Times* turned up evidence to show that 2.2 million stolen or falsified votes in regions with questionable electoral reputations, such as Dagestan and Tatarstan, had been decisive in preventing a second round.[28] It is unlikely that Putin would have lost the elections, but it would have made a huge dent to his 'no-alternative' image. Interestingly, the eight-page report received no immediate response from the Electoral Commission and nothing substantial in the Russian press, except for a furious attack by *Izvestiya* against foreigners meddling in Russian affairs.

The second Chechen war

After more than a decade, open censorship returned to Russia with the military campaign in Chechnya. As we saw in Chapter 2, the war that started in September 1999 was so interwoven with Putin's rise to power that the suspicion has never receded that it was specially instigated for that purpose. Chechnya was Putin's winning card in the elections as well. It was a popular war not only with the public but with journalists. Apart from long-standing anti-Chechen animosity among Russians, the situation had turned ugly with greedy Chechen warlords, massive hostage-taking for big money, stories of torture and slave labour. Some journalists had also been kidnapped and Berezovsky is said to have paid millions to free them. It was all qualitatively different from the first Chechen war of 1994–6 when Russian journalists had defied Yeltsin's reasons for going to war and had helped bring hostilities to an end. At that time, they had reported from conflict areas within Chechnya and interviewed Chechens on the ground. Now the situation had changed. Journalists were embedded with the armed forces, the war was filmed on television from permitted military positions, and information came from the Ministry of Defence.

The Rosinform centre had been set up as the exclusive source of information on the war, placing a virtual ban on Russian and international correspondents getting into Chechnya. Journalists wishing to visit Chechnya were required to obtain additional accreditation from the Mozdok military headquarters in North Ossetia, which was almost always thwarted. Journalists working in neighbouring Ingushetia were required to hire armed security guards, who made sure they did not slip into Chechnya secretly. If they managed to cross the border, usually by bribing officials, they were often arrested, detained, interrogated for hours, and in the case of international journalists, threatened with expulsion. At the same time PR tours were organised for journalists to promote the Kremlin's picture of the war. It was left to reporters such as Anna Politkovskaya and the human rights activist and writer Natalya Estemirova, assassinated in the course of their work, to show Chechnya in later years from the point of view of a suffering population and a human tragedy

Although support for the war initially stood at 71 per cent, the Kremlin knew how quickly public opinion could change if accurate information got out on television. Only the independent press published stories about atrocities committed by Russian troops, the killing and plundering of civilians, and the indiscriminate razing of the previously elegant capital of Grozny. Just how threatening the Putin regime could be to independent-minded journalists was seen in the Babitsky affair.

The Babitsky scandal

Andrei Babitsky was a long-standing reporter on Radio Liberty, a US Congress-funded radio station which was popular in Russia, employing mainly Russian reporters and transmitting their take on events. Hostility to Babitsky

lay not in the venue (in this case), but in his reporting, which officials perceived as favouring Chechen rebels, and which many independent journalists also found not to their taste. There was a mixed response to his report on the beheading of Russian servicemen by Chechen militants and his attempt to defend the rebels:

> Chechens cut the throats of soldiers not because they are sadists with an inclination to treat soldiers with particular cruelty, they are trying to show war in a clearer, more visible, distinct way, to reach out to public opinion and explain that war is really happening, a frightening cruel war.[29]

After his last phone call to the office on 15 January 2000, Babitsky disappeared. Information leaked to a colleague suggested he had been detained by Russian forces while attempting to leave Grozny and was held in the notorious Chernokozovo 'filtration' prison camp. Military officials at first denied that they knew anything about his whereabouts, but later admitted he was in their custody. Only after growing protests from journalists and the personal intervention of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who happened to be visiting Moscow, did the authorities agree on 2 February to bring Babitsky back to Moscow and release him. But on 4 February Putin's press office announced that the federal authorities were no longer responsible for Babitsky's fate, as he had volunteered to be exchanged for a group of soldiers captured by Chechen rebels. An FSB video clip of the exchange shown on television seemed to prove the opposite: a grim-looking Babitsky appeared unwilling to be handed over to masked men under a convoy of arms. Branches of the security services denied any knowledge of a swap, although the defence minister told ORT he wouldn't be sorry if ten Babitskys were exchanged for one Russian soldier. Chechen rebel leaders had no knowledge of a swap taking place either.

Many of Babitsky's colleagues feared he had been killed in a botched FSB job. Undaunted by official threats, sections of the media kept the case in the public gaze. *Obshchaya gazeta*'s editor, Yegor Yakovlev, gathered willing newspapers to bring out a joint special emergency issue of his paper, which came out in times considered to be of great danger to free speech. The inconclusive video, contradictory accounts by officials and the issuing of national and Interpol arrest warrants for Babitsky all fed suspicions that Babitsky had been set up.

Finally, on 25 February, officials announced that Babitsky had been detained in a prison in Dagestan with a false Azerbaijani passport. Prosecutors said he would be charged with holding a fake passport and for alleged links to Chechen rebels. Babitsky announced he would go on hunger strike. That seemed to do the trick. On the same day Putin intervened, upbraiding the interior ministry's handling of the case and suggesting Babitsky should be released, although the charges were not dropped for some time. Official

vindictiveness did not end there. Babitsky's wife had rushed to Dagestan to see him, but when Babitsky was flown back to Moscow in an empty plane she was not informed, and had to make her own way back.

On NTV and at press conferences, an exhausted Babitsky related his account of the story. His captors had taken away his documents and given him the fake passport. He had been transported across Chechnya into Dagestan in the trunk of a car. He had not agreed to be traded for prisoners of war, as the FSB had claimed. He knew that the masked men, who had taken him away after the swap, belonged to a pro-Kremlin Chechen group; but he did not know who his captors were in the last few weeks. He could not be certain they were FSB, but one of his guards used secret services slang. During his incarceration in the Chernokozovo detention camp he had been beaten, but nothing in comparison to others, he said – inside, it was like the Stalinist and Nazi concentration camps.

When Putin was asked about Babitsky in his conversation with journalists during the electoral campaign, he called him a 'traitor':

PUTIN: He worked directly for the enemy. He wasn't a neutral source of information. He sided with bandits … that's what happens to people who fight on the side of the enemy …

INTERVIEWER: Journalists don't fight.

PUTIN: What Babitsky did was more dangerous than firing a gun.

INTERVIEWER: And how about freedom of speech?

PUTIN: We understand freedom of speech differently. If you mean direct participation in a crime, I will never agree with you. Shall we repeat his opinion on decapitation?[30]

In the book version of the newspaper article, Putin's remarks about Babitsky were deleted. It was still unacceptable to speak in such rough terms. In this interview he also calls Oleg Kalugin a traitor – perhaps more understandably, given Kalugin was formerly head of the Leningrad KGB and vocal in denouncing the secret services during *glasnost*. At that time Kalugin was seen as a hero. Officially, not any more.

Puppets – the cherry on the cake

A test of the limits on free speech was NTV's witty political satire *Puppets*, which Yeltsin had put up with for years. These mini masterpieces were the cherry on the cake of free speech in the 1990s. All prominent politicians came under fire routinely in these sharp skits, but the new political climate proved to be less tolerant. The first blow came from St Petersburg University's rector and other dignitaries, who were part of a group that had nominated Putin for president. They signed a petition, claiming the show had committed a criminal offence and that Putin had been defamed 'with a special rage and frenzy'. This kind of talk sent alarm bells to journalists such as

Leonid Radzikhovsky, writing in the daily *Segodnya*, that obeisance and fawning were conditioned reflexes not only with the gullible masses but among the intelligentsia:

> We are now seeing the beginning of a stormy romance between a section of the intelligentsia and Putin. So far the romance is one sided – Putin doesn't even smile back. But small things don't stop those who are rushing to 'swoon at his feet with love'. They know who they are and who *he* is. In fact, the oddest thing is that not all by far love Putin for the same reasons that Dorenko loves Berezovsky and Berezovsky loves Dyachenko. Many playing up to the authorities are disinterested – they just aren't able to live any other way.[31]

This attitude of deference was revived on a big scale under Putin. Famous film director Nikita Mikhalkov's documentary about Putin was described by critics as cringingly subservient. When Kremlin policies needed support, most notoriously on the day of the Crimea referendum in March 2014 to decide its union with Russia, there was no problem in finding hooray intellectuals. More than 500 signatures appeared on the Ministry of Culture's website in one day – celebrity figures who could not remain 'cold-hearted observers' of the fate of Crimea; while the Union of Writers expressed in language not noticeably literary that 'fascist thugs' and the 'West's destructive forces' had carried out a coup in Kyiv which would soon, like the Third Reich, begin to burn books. In contrast to Soviet times, many intellectual opponents signed a robust counter-assault on *Novaya gazeta*'s site. The event was called a 'war of signatures'.

Those who had wished to ban *Puppets* would have been outraged by the scriptwriter Viktor Shenderovich's lampoon that came out for International Women's Day during the 2000 presidential campaign, showing the Duma as a brothel and politicians as prostitutes, most of them eager to oblige Putin for a price. Attired in outlandish women's clothes and make-up, the communist Zyuganov-puppet appeared as a sadomasochist in black leather, democrat Yavlinsky was virginal, and parliamentary speaker Seleznyov and Moscow Mayor Luzhkov were madams from rival brothels:

SELEZNYOV: Well, how do you like them?
PUTIN: What is this?
SELEZNYOV: They're all ready to love you.
YAVLINSKY: That's not true.
SELEZNYOV: He's just a tease … What's your orientation?
PUTIN: The traditional kind. But, of course, there will be some innovations.
SELEZNYOV: Wonderful! We have something for every taste … Some sado-masochism – you want to give it a try?
ZYUGANOV: Hit me!
PUTIN: What for?

ZYUGANOV: And then I'll hit you! And then you'll hit me again! … In front of everyone, publicly!

PUTIN: No …

SELEZNYOV: You don't understand anything. You're just very young still. Later, closer to election time, he'll quietly give in to you. But in front of everybody – he has to seem terrible![32]

When the political campaign against Gusinsky began, NTV received a written ultimatum from the Kremlin's chief of staff Voloshin which set out three points: to stop reporting on corruption, the Chechen war, and to remove the puppet depicting 'the first person' (written in large letters). Shenderovich obliged, removing the puppet from the next skit which was set in the Old Testament desert; bringing him in instead as a burning bush, issuing his version of the ten commandments through Moses (Voloshin), who chants Thou shalt not kill – 'except in outhouses and people of Caucasian nationality', and so on through the commandments.[33] But the fun soon came to an end. It was not the sharp skits that made Putin incandescent, but one where he is depicted as Tiny Zaches from an E. T. A Hoffmann story about an evil dwarf who is perceived by villagers to be beautiful because of a magic spell. Shenderovich was surprised to find out that it was not his 'powerful literary metaphors' that had offended Putin, but the size of tiny Zaches.[34]

Puppets ran on NTV between 1994 and 2002. There were 362 episodes.

II Putin and free speech

Throughout his time in office Putin has paid lip service to free speech while overseeing its precipitous decline. In the beginning, if he disliked the message, he complained that the media outlet was not 'genuinely' independent; if free speech was exercised by his opponents, he claimed they were abusing their freedom. His support of free speech is proclaimed in speeches over the past 16 years. In his first open letter in 2000 he claimed that 'now, already, our press is free for ever'.[35] In his first state-of-the-nation address he announced that 'free speech is and will remain an unshakeable value of Russian democracy'.[36] In 2014 he said, 'Free media, the right of citizens to receive and spread information, is a fundamental principle of any democratic power … and must be strictly observed'.[37]

As 'imitation democracy' started to work immediately, it follows that free speech, its centrepiece, would not be authentic either. In the first state-of-the-nation address, Putin took a paternalistic approach. The media are immature, they need time to develop and he will not interfere in this, but 'we are obliged to guarantee journalists real freedom and not freedom for show'. His first step was to shift the media's dependence from the private to the state sector, so that they would not interfere with the regime's interests:

The Putin regime: patrimonial media

> We have not yet managed to draft precise democratic rules that would guarantee the fourth estate's genuine independence. I would like to stress 'genuine'. Journalistic freedom has turned into a tasty morsel for politicians and major financial groups and a convenient instrument of infighting between clans.

The giveaway phrase is that free speech is too 'tasty' to share. Although Putin accurately describes the infighting between clans, he omits to say that he represents one of these clans, or that pressure is an aspect of the state as much as the private sector:

> The economic inefficiency of a significant proportion of media outlets makes them dependent on the commercial and political interests of the bosses and sponsors of these media outlets. This makes it possible to use the media for settling scores with competitors and, sometimes, even to turn them into mass disinformation outlets and into a means of struggle against the state.

In a democracy, there is nothing illegal about 'struggling against the state' if there is no call for violent overthrow, no incitement to riot, no exposure of classified information. In fact, it is part of democracy to call the state or government to account. NTV and other opposition journalists humorously noted that Putin aligned himself with Louis XIV's *l'état, c'est moi*. In Putin's mind, to attack the barbarism taking place in Chechnya or the FSB's persecution of Babitsky was to be anti-state, even treasonable, rather than simply critical of government conduct.

Putin: the state as a coy damsel

It is interesting to examine Putin's off-the-cuff remarks about the media. In public Putin is usually affable and polite, but every now and then, especially when he relaxes or gets angry, he blurts things out that arguably illuminate what he really thinks. On these occasions, Putin invariably shows contempt for the media as a free institution. His exasperated outburst after Anna Politkovskaya's murder showed how little respect he held for her or even for her bravery.

On a few occasions Putin has used macho imagery about the media that he seems to find amusing. At a 2004 press conference in the Kremlin, Putin's jokey reply to journalists who accused him of muzzling the media was: 'a real man should always try and a real lady should always resist', he said. He elaborated: 'the authorities have always tried to avoid criticism, while the media have always tried to unearth everything they can to draw the authorities' attention to their errors'.[38] The analogy annoyed media professional Yelena Rykovtseva, one of the few women journalists who took exception to this remark: 'Those in power don't just "try", but "violate" primitively, and the

press "surrenders" without showing much in the way of "resistance"'.[39] It was not the first time Putin had baited the media for 'unmanly' responses to state pressure. He seemed to be saying: either fight or stop complaining. In 2006 another jocular female metaphor slipped out, this time to Western journalists in Shanghai inquiring about the state of media freedom. 'If you have nine pregnant women, it doesn't mean one of them will give birth in a month. You need time to mature'.[40] Putin obviously felt these were light-hearted remarks, but (as Freud might agree) they are all sexual and derisory. In 2010 the only comment he could make about the internet was that half of it was 'pornographic'.

Putin: journalism and spying

In an interview on CBS's *Sixty Minutes* with Mike Wallace in 2005 Putin declared that journalism was like spying. 'You know, journalism, as it relates to collecting information, differs little if at all from intelligence work', he said.[41] He said much the same a few years earlier to Larry King: 'Intelligence people are very close [in] their duties to the stuff in mass media. The same purpose to gather information, to synthesize it and to present it for the consumption of the decision makers'.[42]

How far does Putin take this analogy? As a case officer stationed in East Germany recruiting a network of foreign nationals to work as spies for the KGB, he would have had contact with Soviet and German journalists. The relationship between foreign correspondents and intelligence operatives working abroad is always tense. Both are seeking information and snoop to get it. Accredited journalists hold the advantage by having access to places that are off limits to others: they have contacts, knowledge and clout and can be valuable informants to their intelligence agencies, be it the KGB, CIA or MI6. Carl Bernstein, of Watergate fame, after studying the relationship between the CIA and the press in his country, wrote in 1977 that 400 US journalists had secretly carried out assignments for the CIA in the past 25 years, but that this consensus had been shredded during the Vietnam War.[43] Today, without the same deference in the West to spy agencies, the relationship is more varied: some journalists may pass on small bits of information, others may be involved in complex schemes.

Despite this, there is a principled difference between journalists and spies in their function and method of operation, between openness and deceit, between serving the public interest and serving the state. Ideally, the exposé-conscious journalist is the mirror opposite of the secret service operative. The professions are as mutually exclusive as the sacred is to the profane. Of course the hack may well prostitute his profession – journalism has long been called the world's second oldest profession, a saying much quoted in Russia – but a journalist who violates his responsibility to protect the public (including a foreign public) and his sources from the state is profaning the profession.

The journalist-spy comes together in ways that are generally considered acceptable only when the cause is widely lauded, such as the 'fight against fascism' in the Second World War. The wars in, say, Vietnam and Iraq have not had that consensus. The same legendary aura surrounded the *Pravda* correspondent Mikhail Koltsov reporting from the Spanish Civil War, when the Soviet Union supported the fight against fascism while the western allies remained aloof. Koltsov was honoured by Ernest Hemingway in his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the character of Karkov: 'He had more brains and more inner dignity and outer insolence and humour than any man that he had ever known'.[44] But for all Koltsov's brilliant reporting and cooperation with the NKVD, on his return home he was tortured in the Stalinist camps and executed either in 1940 or 1942 on the false charge of spying for the enemy. The Russian journalist-spy is an altogether different phenomenon from glamorous western spy-journalists such as Ian Fleming and Graham Greene.

During the Soviet period journalists posted abroad would be expected to snoop for the KGB and GRU: that was something they had to live with, whether they liked it or not. The opposite was also true: spies masqueraded as journalists. When Putin thinks of journalist-spies he must have this picture in his mind. It follows there was nothing new in turning journalists into servants of the state. With a cynical KGB eye, all he had to do was to observe the journalist community in the 1990s, when so many were prepared to use the media as an instrument for enrichment, to know how manipulable they were. It may well explain the feeling of contempt he seems to have for them. It may also have made him feel he could clamp down on the media early in his term of office without resistance. Maybe, because of this, he feels journalists cannot be trusted. He has demonstrated this many times. On one occasion, responding to criticism in front of relatives of sailors trapped in the *Kursk* submarine, he shouted angrily: 'Who's saying that? Television? Then it's lies, lies, lies'.[45] Perhaps Putin's distrust of journalists is connected with his doubt that anything approximating the truth exists. In the interview with Mike Wallace he said: 'I worked in intelligence and know how information and information bulletins are made. After all, this is determined to a considerable extent by the political attitudes and bias of those who do it'. The assumption is that there is no truth-telling, only propaganda – the dominant view of his political technologists and the ruling elite. It follows that journalists need to be managed to gather 'trustworthy' information that reflects appropriate interests, which is what the Doctrine of Information Security, his main media policy document, sets out to do.

Some journalists have remarked on Putin's inability to understand what free speech is. Radio Ekho Moskvy editor, Aleksei Venediktov, said he was amazed by Putin's profoundly Soviet view of the media: 'Your job is to support the state', he told Venediktov. When Venediktov explained that the media weren't meant to be instruments of the state, Putin did not understand: 'for him there was the state press and the anti-state press'.[46] Mikhail Berger is also quoted as saying to a German journalist that Putin refused on principle

to talk to journalists from Gusinsky's press: 'I only speak to people who share my opinion', he said.

The first three journalists Putin invited to visit him on becoming president is telling. One of them, ORT's Sergei Dorenko, was not surprising, as his propaganda had helped to bring Putin to power. But the other two were the most ultra-radical conservative editors in the country: Valentin Chikin, editor of the old hardline communist newspaper, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, and Aleksandr Prokhanov, editor of the nationalist–imperialist-racist newspaper *Zavtra*. Both men played important roles in opposing Gorbachev's party reforms and used their newspapers as mouthpieces of the 'red-brown' parliamentary forces to attack Yeltsin's democratic changes. They supported the anti-democratic 1991 coup. They were out-on-a-limb right-wingers considered by many as the 'loony' fringe.

If Putin's preference lies with the ultra-conservative media, does he receive rounded information? From what Putin's press secretary has said, news gathering has remained extremely important for Putin – 'sometimes we're wondering what is the limit for a human being for absorbing this huge amount of information', Dmitry Peskov has stated.[47] According to him, staff work around the clock to prepare TV digests and recordings for him from traditional media and internet; and he follows TV news in English and German. But according to Pavlovsky, Putin's information is not diverse. 'Russian authorities do not have reliable information. It depends … on more or less trusted officials and such information is always changed and corrected, because it is in the interest of any trusted official to remain a trusted official'.[48] There are the public opinion polls that cannot be fully trusted (with the exception of the independent Levada Centre), nor are respondents necessarily reliable. The consequence of suppressing free speech usually has a boomerang effect and this was most visibly demonstrated when the administration was caught unawares by the anger aroused at the Putin–Medvedev presidential swap in 2011.

Putin's fear of not having the situation under control determines all arrangements with journalists. As a wide-eyed 24-year-old reporter working in the Kremlin pool, Yelena Tregubova describes the pressure put on journalists in her book, which caused a sensation when it was published in 2003. It may have been the reason for a bomb exploding outside her apartment door four months later, or perhaps it was because she had embarrassed Putin by revealing a flirtatious lunch he had invited her to when he was FSB chief. It was certainly the reason for her being sacked by *Kommersant* a few weeks later. Restrictions demanded by the Kremlin press service began immediately Yeltsin announced his retirement, she says, before Putin had become president. Under the press service's new head, Aleksei Gromov, questions to Putin were forbidden unless they had been approved by him beforehand, and the same rule applied to questions to delegates who accompanied Putin on official visits. What amazed Tregubova was that most of her colleagues did not remonstrate (she says they acted like 'mutants'), but simply competed to

establish good relations with Gromov on his terms: in fact, there was even the thrill that they might become 'the new elite of journalism!'.[49]

The same scenario was repeated in the White House, the seat of the administration, when Putin changed places with Medvedev in 2008 to become prime minister. Accredited journalists had been in the habit of roaming the corridors and dropping in on officials (only the fifth floor around the prime minister's office was exempt), but the rules changed in advance of Putin moving in. Reporters were confined to the press room; they could meet senior sources and aides if they had received their consent, as well as permission from the press secretary, and a press officer had to escort them there and back. The White House pool could only look back with nostalgia to the days when reporters had been allowed to sit in on cabinet meetings during the Chernomyrdin period between 1992 and 1998.[50]

Putin never experienced or witnessed the euphoria of *perestroika.* A few months after Gorbachev came to power he was posted to Dresden in East Germany. He remained abroad from August 1985 until early 1990. Mary Elise Sarotte points out that from the viewpoint of a Soviet loyalist, what Putin might have seen in Dresden before the Berlin Wall came down probably filled him with horror, especially when tens of thousands of East Germans clashed violently with police, army and Stasi forces at the Dresden railway station trying to leave the country after Honecker had closed the borders.[51] From what Putin has himself revealed, his experience was not pleasant. As the senior person on duty in the Soviet Cultural Centre when the building was besieged by angry crowds threatening to break in, he says his main concern was to conceal top secret dossiers on German agents who had worked for the KGB. Taking a few bodyguards with him, Putin went outside to calm the protesters, fooling them into thinking he was only a translator and that there were no officials in the building.[52] The experience left him angry and resentful at Moscow's disloyalty in offering no support to KGB officers on the ground; and one of Putin's traits, on which most agree, has been his staunch loyalty to his old bosses and the institutions he has worked for.

Not only Putin, but many Russians, see scenes of people's liberation from the point of view of bloody revolution. Jubilant protesters are seen as rioting, anarchic mobs. Moreover, in this case, Putin was the hated enemy that had propped up a repressive regime. Putin probably took back hostile images from East Germany's liberation, just as Andropov did when he served as Soviet ambassador in Hungary after the Soviet Union put down the uprising in 1956. This experience influenced Andropov's repressive anti-dissident policy of 'containment' when he became the KGB's powerful chief. Instead of Stalin's all-embracing terror, Andropov's method of instilling fear in the population was to target selected high-profile dissidents (Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, Bukovsky), incarcerating or exiling them at home or expelling them from the country. Andropov's policies have undoubtedly had an impact on Putin, who has found ways of containing or 'managing' important sections of the media and the 'tastiest' of them all – television.

Putin's first nine months in power

Among the independent media there was a growing apprehension of the state taking control, each day bringing fresh evidence of journalists being harassed, making it more difficult to get a story or talk to officials. Yet freedoms were so much taken for granted that it did not seem likely they could simply vanish in a puff of smoke. One journalist expressed her irritation at what she saw as wishful thinking on the part of the democrats: 'Nothing in Putin's image seems to have perturbed the Russian "democratic" and "reformist" political elite. The democrats seem to have simply closed their eyes to the dangers posed by this creeping sabotage of democratic institutions'.[53] In a survey carried out in 2000, only one-third of the public thought free speech was endangered.[54]

VGTRK executive Oleg Dobrodeyev saw the state as the natural guarantor of freedom and stability: 'Big state-owned television companies are better protected and less subject to political whims, and they have no political games of their own to play, which is very important when applied to our political landscape'.[55] Such political naivety about a state without interests was common; not so with Yevgeniya Albats, who responded that the state was the 'largest oligarch of them all'.[56] When a Petersburg journalist wanted to know what liberal-minded Nikolai Svanidze, state RTR's top presenter, had to say about safeguarding free speech in a situation where KGB officers were dominating the regime, he snapped: 'What exactly do you have against the KGB? Would it be preferable to put Berezovsky in their place?'. This became the dominant narrative, repeated endlessly in the state media. RIA Novosti was among them:

> Opinion polls indicate that media freedoms of the nineties have been rejected … Society was exasperated by free-and-easy illiterate journalists, their indiscriminate use of all sources of information and methods of getting it … It was an open secret that television during that period turned into one of the most corrupt areas of the 'grey' Russian economy. The private media empires … were exploited ultimately not to serve society, but to promote the commercial and political interests of businessmen.

It was hard to defend the oligarchs and their leading journalists who had abused their exercise of free speech, and even comic to see them posturing as martyrs, but in 2000 they were fighting not only for their survival but for the survival of free speech. But they had lost the high moral ground to mount a campaign against what had become the massive media propaganda machine they had allowed to develop.

To show that Putin and the regime were intent on grabbing control of the media from the start, it is worth looking at Putin's first nine months in power, from March to the end of 2000. The move against the media oligarchs was swift. Gusinsky's Media MOST empire was the first on the hit list.

The Putin regime: patrimonial media

Masked commandos burst into its offices in May 2000, two months after Putin became president, and in a series of raids tried to nail Gusinsky on various criminal charges, all of which failed. Another ploy followed. NTV's investor, Gazprom Media, had always been accommodating, but it suddenly called in payment of a $211.6 million loan. At the same time a reshuffle took place in Gazprom Media with Press Minister Lesin putting Alfred Kokh in charge – a 'hired killer', responded NTV satirist Shenderovich,[57] referring to Kokh's bitterness after the NTV book scandal. All this was nothing compared to the shock when Gusinsky was thrown into Butyrskaya prison for embezzling state property. Had the Kremlin gone too far, asked sociologist Boris Kagarlitsky? 'Before, the oligarchs were untouchable. Not even political rivals could be thrown in jail for corruption, since it was obvious that all members of the elite could, and should, be jailed on these grounds, including those who were jailing others'.[58] Whatever reservations one might have had about Gusinsky's role in the political life of the country, the purpose of his arrest was clear. 'Those who dare criticise the Kremlin should watch out', Yevgeniya Albats concluded.[59]

Gusinsky was released a few days later and the charges were dropped. He fled to Spain. From there he broke the news that he had been blackmailed into signing an agreement on 10 July by Kokh and Lesin to hand over his media holding to Gazprom in exchange for a cash payment, debt forgiveness and a pledge to end the criminal prosecution against him. He produced the pledge with the signatures for the media to see – so-called appendix 6. When Gusinsky's story hit the press, the Kremlin responded immediately. Putin said he was outraged and Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov reprimanded Lesin publicly, but no further action was taken against him. Instead, showing what it meant to break an 'understanding' with the Kremlin, the Prosecutor-General's office attempted to have Gusinsky extradited first from Spain, later from Greece, and to obstruct every attempt he made to save his empire and pay his debts. By early 2001 NTV had already been raided 27 times.

The campaign against Gusinsky took a pause during the *Kursk* nuclear submarine accident, which Putin handled so badly it could have been his undoing. The *Kursk* sank in the Barents Sea killing all 118 sailors on board during ten days in August. If Putin had not taken five days to return from holiday in Sochi, if the authorities had felt they could make decisions on their own and accepted foreign aid from ships close to hand, evidence shows the sailors might have been saved. It was a disaster for Putin's image at a time when the press was still uncowed and able to expose him and his officials.

The authorities withheld information, misinformed reporters and distraught relatives, and allowed only state television RTR access to the scene. In disgust, NTV, ORT and independent newspapers undertook their own investigations. *Komsomolskaya pravda* printed a list of the names of the sailors on board, which it bought from a naval officer for $600, because naval command declared it to be a military secret. One of the most infamous scenes was NTV's footage of a meeting between officials and relatives of the dead crew.

When the distraught mother of one sailor began to shout at officials, a medic approached her from behind, injected her with a sedative, and she was carried from the room. The whole of Russia watched as a grieving woman who had dared to criticise the government was silenced. When NTV was accused of being unethical in its coverage, the company replied: 'Would you have preferred that we operate like the government network? Our correspondents reported that the reality was ten times more dreadful'.[60]

The *Kursk* tragedy showed how a catastrophe could be made worse when officials covered up information, but the lesson Putin took from the incident was to ensure he would never again be exposed. *Glasnost* had begun with the exposure of major disasters, but now cover-ups and lies on a scale which reporters had thought would be impossible were happening again. State pressure on the media became more intense. It hit Berezovsky a few months later, as he revealed in an open letter he wrote to Putin. He had received an ultimatum from a highly placed official to sell his 49 per cent share in ORT to the government in the next two weeks or go the way of Gusinsky. He wrote a prescient letter in defence of private media:

> It will be easier for you to govern, the people will live more peacefully, and there will be far fewer people to raise unpleasant questions; after all, they won't have the powerful defence that TV *glasnost* gives them. You won't have to curtail your vacation and immediately look for money to help families of the dead. And one fine day, people will wake up and discover that they have unanimously approved the sending of the Russian army to some far-off country to supply fraternal assistance.[61]

Not long in retirement, Yeltsin could not restrain himself from criticising Putin's handling of the crisis. Of course he should have returned immediately from Sochi, Yeltsin said. It was incumbent on the head of state to show 'human compassion'.[62] Putin was particularly ridiculed when CNN's Larry King interviewed him several weeks later and asked: 'What happened to the *Kursk*?' Putin replied with a slight smirk: 'It sank'. Apologists jumped to his defence – what else could he have said to such a stupid question. An anecdote in multiple variations was born. Question: 'What happened to truth in our country?' Answer: 'It sank'.

Berezovsky's favourite anchor, Sergei Dorenko, unstinting in his critical coverage of the handling of the *Kursk* accident and the Chechen war, whose muckraking journalism had earlier helped Putin win the elections, was taken off the air. Dorenko believed the order came from Putin. He revealed at a press conference that he had been invited to see Putin several times and Putin had asked him to join his team. Dorenko had politely refused, but he was less flattering now, telling Bloomberg television: 'He wants me to be a laser beam that creates him, because without television he doesn't exist'. *Moskovsky komsomolets* was pleased to see the back of Dorenko, who had blackened their patron Luzhkov's name: 'Farewell, snitch!' ran its headline, mocking the

new union that had been forged in the face of persecution between sworn enemies Dorenko and Kiselyov.[63]

In many ways Dorenko, the killer-journalist, exemplified the late 1990s oligarch-backed style of journalism. Telegenic, charismatic and unethical, his buccaneering forays into television exuded the spirit of *volya*: freedom to do what he wanted, to enrich himself, to sneer at opponents, to accuse them without proper evidence. At the same time, he was not easily intimidated: he openly defended private media and commented wryly on Putin. 'Not I, nor my colleagues on NTV, fully associate the interests of our native land, our Russia, with the state machine, which the president heads. The State and Russia are not one and the same thing'.[64] The audience loved him, because he was dramatic and outspoken. He may have been Berezovsky's attack dog, but he was not going to be anything as dull as the state machine's loyal mouthpiece. In due course, however, he became part of the obsequious Putin landscape.

Nor did the new politics suit Berezovsky, who found himself at loggerheads with the president he had pushed to power. Rather late in the day, he tried to transfer his ORT shares to a trust, managed by his favourite journalists, and keep the channel from turning into a Kremlin propaganda outlet. He began to oppose Putin in public, to finance political parties and started a philanthropic foundation. But when prosecutors reopened the Aeroflot case and summoned him for questioning into the embezzlement of nearly $1 billion, Berezovsky fled to Britain before the year had ended, where he was given political asylum. He became Russia's bogyman, the Kremlin's most hated person, heaped with all manner of vile deeds. In reply, Berezovsky pursued and financed events from abroad to denounce Putin, to expose his alleged involvement in the apartment bombings and the death of Litvinenko in London from polonium 210.

A good deal of what happened to Berezovsky's shares in ORT was revealed in the sensational case of *Berezovsky* v. *Abramovich* in the High Court in London in 2011. Putin's determination to wrest the shares from Berezovsky were negotiated through Roman Abramovich and hammered out at meetings in different parts of the world. According to Berezovsky, the threat delivered to him from Putin was to surrender all his business interests or they would be seized, and a colleague was thrown into prison as a 'hostage' to force him to submit. The ORT shares were sold to Abramovich for £150 million as part of the general package Berezovsky received.

In the space of this short period of Putin's first nine months, a number of media institutions also came under the hammer. The Judicial Chamber for Information Disputes, the media regulator that was highly respected during its seven years' work, was abolished. The Freedom of Information Act, which Yeltsin had been trying to push through since 1997 against the unwavering opposition of the bureaucracy, was dropped. A new one was passed in 2010 already in conditions that made it unlikely to be implemented properly. The guide to curbing the media, the Doctrine of Information Security was drafted.

So-called press enemy no. 1 Lesin was involved in most of the repressive measures, but the media were still sufficiently bold to give Putin third place in infamy. The year ended with Putin's request to reinstate the music of the Soviet national anthem, which liberals considered an insult to the victims of repression.

A year into Yeltsin's retirement, he gave his only interview to *Komsomolskaya pravda*. He had been particularly upset about the return of the Soviet anthem, which he associated with party bureaucracy. He was diplomatic about Putin's 'tact and sensible firmness' in relation to Berezovsky. Was there a threat to free speech, the journalist asked. 'You could look at it like that but you don't need to', Yeltsin replied. 'There's no threat to free speech. I'm more concerned that some people take this freedom to mean that everything is permissible; they lose a sense of proportion'.[65] Yeltsin might have been thinking more of the kind of problems he had faced. Later, privately, in conversation with Boris Nemtsov, who used to visit him in retirement, his views were harsher. Nemtsov says: 'He was extremely annoyed that free speech began to erode under Putin and that the institution of elections was being destroyed. He didn't speak publicly about it, but he spoke to me about it repeatedly'.[66] Nemtsov confirms that Yeltsin's public silence was probably connected with the deal he had made with Putin for his and his family's immunity from prosecution. 'Otherwise', Nemtsov adds, 'knowing Yeltsin's character, it is impossible to understand why he has kept quiet all this time'.

III Doctrine of Information Security

As we saw in Chapter 2, the September 2000 Doctrine of Information Security established an ideological framework for controlling the media. It was an entirely KGB/FSB document, approved by Putin, drafted by the Security Council, the powerful Kremlin advisory body then headed by Sergei Ivanov, Putin's long-time associate and fellow KGB veteran, and stacked with former KGB generals. In attendance were the seven new presidential plenipotentiaries, five of whom were generals in the military, police or security services. They represented the new division of the country into seven federal districts, bringing the regions more closely under the control of the Kremlin. They would ensure regional media did not go out on their own trajectory. It was nothing if not an FSB document.

What, one might ask, in a supposed democracy, in peacetime, were the media doing in a document concerned with intelligence and national threats to the Russian Federation? As suspicion and paranoia are integral to the military and security services, it comes as no surprise that they would be on the outlook for national threats, but if all domestic media that were private and independent were considered threats, it meant that the authors of the Information Doctrine were already identifying them as 'the enemy within' long before they began to be called 'fifth columns' 12 years later. If, as well, foreign media were seen as hostile and a challenge to Russia's superpower

status, then it indicated how early in the regime Russia returned to cold war suspicions.

Several months before the publication of the doctrine, a secret document from the Kremlin's presidential administration was leaked to *Kommersant*, recommending conspiratorial methods of controlling society. The media section of the document, which was leaked in April (the comprehensive document was leaked a month later and has been reposted online by Karen Dawisha),[67] has been dubbed Version Number 6, after Chekhov's story *Ward Number 6* about a lunatic asylum, so sinister are the implications behind the text. Because society is not 'morally' prepared to accept the 'suppression of opposition' and the 'takeover of the media and information communications', Version Number 6 suggests a dual agenda should be followed: one to be open (official), the other to be hidden. The aim of the hidden agenda is:

> to take control of different media outlets, designate the use of specially gathered information, including that of an incriminating nature. Drive the opposition media and media sympathetic to the opposition to financial crisis, remove their licences and certifications, create the conditions by which the actions of every concrete opposition media outlet can be controlled or disabled.[68]

This subversive document, backing FSB entitlement to meddle behind the scenes, shows the kind of thinking that went on in the president's team while the façade of democracy was being created. Overall, the document confirms the repressive intentions behind the Doctrine of Information Security, as well as the different attempts since 2000 to blackmail and disable media standing in the way of the Kremlin.

More than a few political analysts ignored the dangers of the Information Security Doctrine at the time because it was not legally binding. The doctrine, together with other keynote statements, such as Sergei Markov's on 'managed' democracy and Putin's Millennium Message, have clearly acted as blueprints with long-term perspectives that have been implemented with almost military precision. Their extraordinary longevity has been noted by Dawisha and co-authors Hill and Gaddy, who commented that 'to a remarkable degree, the goals he outlined in the Millennium Message remain the priority today, more than twelve years later'.[69] Today, 16 years later, the doctrine's goals on the media remain the same: to prevent ungovernable sections of the media from interfering with 'trustworthy' messages that the Kremlin wishes to communicate to the Russian people and the world. There has been no cut-off point to these goals; instead, these trustworthy messages turned into propaganda, hate speech and lies in Putin's third term.

The two major threats, privately owned media and foreign media, were considered dangerous because they had their own interests at heart or they had an interest in the truth. Left to their own devices, private media would disseminate a pluralism of views that would interfere with the regime's

attempt to build a semi-monopoly on opinion at home. Foreign media failed to convey the country's domestic and foreign objectives properly, and disseminated western values which competed with the regime's attempts to celebrate Russia's traditional norms. Inevitably, the tenor of the document was punitive. 'In the text you often find words that define an information war and an information weapon, but you don't have any words about democracy', noted media rights advocate Oleg Panfilov.[70]

Private media ownership and foreign media have received special and separate attention over the years. The assault on the private sector and on media oligarchs has been ongoing. Although the most sensational clampdown occurred when Gusinsky and Berezovsky were hounded out of Russia, the screws tightened after every major crisis. The Information Security Doctrine itself was rushed forward for publication after the *Kursk* crisis as a warning to the media to stop its criticism over Putin's handling of the accident. The screws tightened further after the terrorist hostage-taking of *Nord-Ost* and Beslan, after the Yukos trial, after the colour revolutions and the wars with Georgia and Ukraine. Because the process of curbing the media went in fits and starts, the political technologists' tactics of mystification as to whether or not Putin supported free speech and democracy seemed to work in allaying the worst fears.

The regime concealed its intentions so well that each blow against private media was seen usually as the last, as there would be no need for further Kremlin clampdowns in a supposed democracy. In 2003, when television channels were under state control, political analysts assumed the press would be left alone. The print runs of newspapers were low: *Kommersant*, with a circulation of about 115,000 copies at the time was hardly a menace in the enormity of Russia, yet because it was the main business newspaper it was suspect and pressure was put on Berezovsky in exile to sell. By 2005–6, after Kremlin-friendly owners had bought most of the press, people assumed the small alternative sector that remained would be safe, if for no other reason than to let officials boast that free speech was not dead. But with disaffection in 2012 and Putin's act of defiance over Crimea, censorship spread to all domains of free expression and the internet and it became more a matter of counting on two hands what national independent outlets remained.

In the case of foreign media, the strength of anti-western feeling depended on major events taking place outside Russia. Fear of the colour revolutions led to the setting up of the international satellite broadcaster RT, and its huge and rapid expansion after the Ukraine crisis of 2014. New laws were adopted to prevent the spread of foreign-funded organisations with 'foreign' ideas of human rights.

The overkill and fear shown by the regime to any form of protest are hard to explain except in terms of the FSB preponderance in the administration. Observing a protest demonstration in 2006 of no more than 2,000 protesters, dwarfed by police and OMON anti-riot squads, former presidential candidate Irina Khakamada was stunned: 'It's just laughable. So many dogs, so many

policemen, all the streets closed off, helicopters flying around. For me, it's paranoia'.[71] The flow of petro dollars together with political apathy, at least up to 2009, gave no cause for such fierce reprisals, especially as these liberal protests were not usually accompanied by violent Molotov-throwing rioters, burning of cars and window-breaking. But the fears of a kleptocracy at its ill-gotten gains, and the lack of legitimacy in its farce of democracy, engendered uncertainty and the possibility of what Gleb Pavlovsky calls Russians' tendency to nihilism when 'everything can change at any moment'.[72] The FSB mentality and Putin's own instincts appear not to be satisfied with anything less than what the doctrine called 'informational and psychological influences on the mass consciousness of society'. Fingers itching to engineer the soul have been held back only by the need to retain some democratic credentials.

In the next two sections we will see how the Doctrine of Information Security's goals were implemented in (i) the assault on privately owned media and (ii) the control of foreign media and western influence.

(i) The assault on private media

In dismantling media freedoms, Putin destroyed what had been Yeltsin's greatest achievement. It is hard to build and easy to destroy. It took one year, 2001, for the Kremlin to destroy the private media empires and begin hacking away at fragile democratic institutions that had only begun to take root. That year there were still three main competing television stations: state-owned (RTR), hybrid (ORT), private (NTV). By the end of the year all three were virtually under state control.

The takeover of NTV was the most dramatic blow to free speech. Its talent and professionalism had been an inspiration to quality journalism. However gross the interference of Gusinsky's business interests in its journalism, he had given something back to society in creating the first viable media complex in Russia. He had ensured that his media outlets had highly trained journalists and state of the art equipment. At least this was more than Berezovsky had done, throwing money into the media mainly for short-term self-serving gains. There was of course hubris to the fall of the tycoons, so much extravagance and such lavish projects, such as Gusinsky's satellite network NTV Plus, all done by cosying up to power and borrowing as much money as they wanted without a flicker of concern about paying taxpayers back.

Gusinsky's financial borrowings made him vulnerable. As the earlier anti-crime raids had not ensnared him, prosecutors took advantage of the massive debts Media Most had run up with Gazprom and other banks (up to $1.5 billion). In November 2000, Gazprom Media had written off Media Most's debts in exchange for an increased stake in NTV from 30 per cent to 46 per cent. Gusinsky and his top managers held 49.5 per cent of NTV's shares and, of that, 19 per cent was collateral on a Credit Suisse First Boston loan guaranteed by Gazprom. When Gazprom Media got the backing of a minority US shareholder, Capital Research Management, holding a 4.5 per cent share,

it called in the loan. Gusinsky hoped he could save NTV by negotiating a deal with CNN's media mogul Ted Turner, in a consortium with George Soros. But before negotiations went too far, Gazprom Media swooped on an NTV shareholders' meeting on 3 April 2001 and threw Gusinsky and his associates off the board. NTV refused to accept the decision because of contradictory court rulings and submitted two lawsuits to challenge the shareholders' meeting. Boris Jordan, a US banker of Russian descent, replaced Gusinsky as director general of NTV. Alfred Kokh, director general of Gazprom-Media, became NTV board chairman.

On 14 April 2001 without bothering to wait for court appeals to be resolved, Gazprom-Media sent private armed guards to break into the NTV studios at 4 a.m. on Easter Sunday, conveniently when Putin and Lesin had flown to Chechnya, so the break-in would have to compete for news headlines. Things moved quickly. The following week the new management closed *Segodnya* and *Itogi*, the latter a joint venture with *US Newsweek*. *Newsweek* pulled out and the joint news and current affairs ventures that had been so plentiful in the 1990s declined.

About 70 demonstrations were held in support of NTV, one brought out 15,000 people, the largest for a decade in Moscow. But the enmities that had accrued within the journalist community meant that mobilising massive support was unlikely. The Union of Journalists held meetings, petitions were signed and when the joint *Obshchaya gazeta* special emergency edition came out it was endorsed by 62 publications from different parts of the country. Small demonstrations were held, one in Pushkin Square on 17 May 2000 with about 2,000 people, which I went to. The old free-and-easy atmosphere that had been taken for granted over the last decade had vanished, especially the sense of a 'right' to be there, without having to look suspiciously at the police. TV presenter Vladimir Pozner explained why so few colleagues came out to support each other:

> One is cowardice, the desire to gain the good will of the authorities. Another is greed, the desire perhaps to grab a piece of this very sweet pie. Another is envy, because NTV has remained Russia's most professional channel and this brings out malice. There are many factors, but I'd say that of course the main reason is stupidity. People don't understand, looking on silently or washing their hands of the way their colleagues are being treated, that this is a sample of what will inevitably happen to them precisely because they are silent.[73]

Those who maintained that there was no political motivation behind the takeover (such as Chubais) would have closed their eyes to the details of the case. Media Most's crime was to have taken out a multimillion-dollar loan without having the funds to pay it back, but ORT and RTR were in the same position. ORT had not repaid a huge loan issued in 1998 and VGTRK (which ran RTR) had even more sins to its name. Yelena Rykovtseva, basing

her investigations on the Audit Chamber's report of February 2001, showed that Media Most's viability as a successful company was far greater than that of VGTRK. NTV's advertising revenue of $60 million was twice as high as VGTRK's, which was a loss-making company that had taken out loans higher than it needed to buy expensive foreign cars and securities. Its advertising income was lower because it was paying for its middleman, Video International, the company founded by Lesin. Rykovtseva concluded that if the two companies were measured by the same yardstick, 'VGTRK would have long since been declared bankrupt, its chairman Oleg Dobrodeyev would be under investigation and media minister Mikhail Lesin, who worked with VGTRK since its creation in 1991 and was largely responsible for its financial matters, would be sitting in prison'.[74]

There was a personal dimension to Putin's attack on Gusinsky. Vladimir Pozner talked of a 'vendetta' between them and their falling out on two occasions,[75] and it was said at the time that Gusinsky had threatened him with words to the effect that 'without us, you're nothing'. Putin more or less confirmed many years later that 'some' oligarchs had come to him when he was acting prime minister and told him 'you should understand, you'll never be president'.[76] There is little doubt that the oligarchs felt their money and influence entitled them to behave badly. One story from Gusinsky's PR office tells of him barking orders to Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, as if he were a junior partner. Former *Kommersant* editor Andrei Vasilyev passed on to me what Berezovsky had told him: that Gusinsky had tried to blackmail Putin, and Putin had asked Berezovsky's advice about what to do. Berezovsky had replied: 'you're the president, go for him'.[77] At the time Berezovsky was supremely confident the same thing would never happen to him. Perhaps he had forgotten his boast after the 2000 elections that he could 'have a monkey elected president using one TV channel'. He ended up losing both his channels.

The Kremlin's war with the media empires produced bitter resentment in the journalist community. It pitted journalist against journalist, raised moral issues that had been neglected, and pushed employees into being heroes or scabs. Instead of coming out in solidarity with NTV, the other two channels, RTR and ORT, gave more time on air to the Prosecutor-General's accusations than to Media Most's lawyers. Political and personal dramas went public as colleagues accused each other of treachery and deceit.

In an open letter, VGTRK chief Dobrodeyev called Yevgeny Kiselyov a hypocrite, saying he should stop pretending NTV had ever been independent, as it had always been a Kremlin channel. He accused Kiselyov and Gusinsky of covering the war in Chechnya negatively as a bargaining point, and they would change their tone if the Kremlin prolonged their credit. In the process, Kiselyov was risking his colleagues' jobs, while he himself 'will be whisked away on his boss's jet, his boss's yacht'.[78] When Dobrodeyev learned how Gazprom-Media had been kicked out of its premises, however, he began to

behave erratically. Announcing his resignation as head of VGTRK, feeling 'profound guilt' towards Putin for 'acting spontaneously and impulsively', he rushed over to NTV. Perhaps he was appalled by what he called the 'burial of television news journalism', as the high quality of NTV's news service had largely been his creation. Some, including a former friend and protégé, Vladimir Kara-Murza, were sceptical of Dobrodeyev's motives. Kara-Murza stopped him in the hall at NTV and asked him what he was doing there. Dobrodeyev said: 'Volodya, freedom of speech is not just you. And you should have a greater degree of freedom to understand this'. As far as Kara-Murza was concerned, Dobrodeyev had come to sow discord and divide the loyalties of colleagues, many of whom still kept in touch with their former mentor. 'Dobrodeyev left for one night … just to pull us apart. Putin didn't sign his resignation, so it turns out he stayed at RTR and scattered us'.[79]

Some of NTV's best journalists were among the 40 who resigned, led by Kiselyov.[80] Two top presenters stayed on: Tatyana Mitkova, who eventually replaced Kiselyov; and leading presenter of infotainment, Leonid Parfyonov, who was infuriated with Kiselyov's politics. Parfyonov wrote an open letter, accusing Kiselyov of treating people like 'cannon fodder' and making a nonsense of both freedom and speech: 'I can no longer stand listening to your preaching in the reporters' room – those ten minutes of hatred'.[81] Kiselyov hit back at Parfyonov's 'arrogant individualism', slagging him off for being a 'poseur and coward'. In this round of insults, the new NTV boss, Alfred Kokh, praised Parfyonov's taste and style, to which satirist Shenderovich responded on the NTV website: 'We have bad taste, Mr. Kokh, but we are not morons. And we know what will happen if ("when") you come to power at NTV'.[82]

The editorial team that resigned from NTV was invited by Berezovsky to work on his private channel, TV6. He had made peace with Gusinsky and together they hoped to prevent the state from encroaching upon their space. Both owners were working as émigrés from abroad. TV6 had been a minor family channel, but it was the second private channel and the fourth network in terms of national reach. The original staff protested at the rude influx from NTV, but Berezovsky had given guarantees that people would not be left without a job. However, the 'persecuted', as media professor Anna Kachkaeva said, pushed out their neighbours. The channel's recent head, Aleksandr Ponomaryov, felt ashamed at having persuaded his team to think they were lucky to work with such glittering colleagues. Instead, he said, 'they came as if no one had been here before them'.[83]

The Kremlin's determination to crush the NTV rebels had not abated and it turned its attention to TV6, embroiling it in legal wrangles. The fact that the channel's reporting had become less oppositional was not enough to save it. Although Berezovsky held a 75 per cent share in the channel, a 15 per cent stake was held by Lukoil-Garant, a pension fund owned by Russian oil giant Lukoil. Berezovsky offered to buy their shares, but the fund refused. Lukoil,

like other vast corporations, had their reasons for staying on good terms with the Kremlin, if they wanted to gain licences, export quotas and favourable tax treatment. The Kremlin's fist was obvious when Lukoil-Garant acted against its own financial interests to bring a bankruptcy suit against TV 6, demanding that the station be liquidated at a time when it was actually beginning to make money. It invoked a rarely used clause of the Russian law on joint-stock companies, which stated that a company can be liquidated if its debts exceeded its assets for two years running. TV6 had been unprofitable, but its ratings had doubled since the arrival of NTV's journalists and its advertising had increased. The channel's managers were about to break even and believed they would make a profit the following year, but the court refused to consider the company's financial position as of January. Significantly, this clause had already been repealed as inappropriate by the Duma a few months earlier, but it did not take effect until 1 January 2002. TV6's screen blanked out at midnight on 21 January 2002 for insolvency by order of Press Minister Lesin. Sports came on the screen the next day. To add to the dirty dealings, a video of Yevgeny Kiselyov engaging in sexual activities with two women appeared on the website kompromat.ru. It was presumed to have been filmed secretly by the FSB.

A last chance for independent television remained with a tender set for March 2002 for the vacated TV6's licence – now called TVS. The Federal Tender Commission, responsible for awarding broadcasting licences, still retained liberal members from Yeltsin's years, some of whom discussed the stress they were under to do the right thing. A number of professional groups were bidding, but Kiselyov's team won in the end. Its consortium, Media Socium, was selected because it was backed by a large group of oligarchs (such as Chubais, now chief of the energy grid, and aluminium magnate Oleg Deripaska), which gave it the financial advantage. It also meant that no single investor would be able to influence the editorial line. The deal compromised Kiselyov in the eyes of former supporters because of his efforts to stay on top at all costs, even if it meant working with a Kremlin-backed consortium. Yeltsin had made a suggestion that he head the consortium as a guarantor, but the offer was vetoed by Putin. Instead, it was headed by Yevgeny Primakov, a rival turned ally of Putin. The deal was seen as a cynical marriage of convenience to appease everyone.

It didn't. TVS was plagued not only by financial troubles and infighting among the oligarchs but also by management and legal disputes and conflict among the journalists. The oligarchs claimed the journalists wanted too much money, the journalists said the oligarchs were not putting enough money into the station, and they had not been paid for months. TVS broadcast precisely for a year, from June 2002–3. It was taken off the air by Lesin because of its financial problems (illegally, since the media law stipulates that a channel can be taken off the air only by a court order, and there was none) and replaced by a state-run sports channel (without a public tender). The government had become less concerned about covering its tracks now that it had a monopoly

on television. It was rumoured that Chubais and Deripaska separately had tried to buy the channel, but to no avail. Obviously, Putin was not prepared to take any chances with the elections imminent in 2003 and 2004.

TVS was the last major 'independent' private nationwide territorial channel in Russia. Its demise left the Kremlin in de facto control of all the major television news stations and networks. It had taken the television industry back to the Soviet era, where no private media had been allowed to exist. Censorship had returned, not in word but deed. The situation differed from that of the Soviet Union only in that some pluralism still existed in smaller television channels and other media outlets. But from now on the vast majority of television viewers would be spoon-fed.

Information Security Doctrine: (ii) the foreign threat

As the Information Security Doctrine shows, the West was perceived as a threat early in Putin's presidency, although it was not until later that action was taken. Loss of superpower status was felt deeply in Russia's nationalist circles; an overblown sense of humiliation at the loss of parity with the USA and a constant anxiety for its own sovereignty and national interests. These fears manifested themselves during the colour revolutions that took place in countries of the former Soviet Union: Georgia's Rose Revolution (2003), Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004) and Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution (2005). To Putin and his entourage these popular rebellions were not expressions of local discontent with corruption and crony capitalism, but attempts by the West to weaken and divide Russia. When Putin experienced Russia's own protest movement in 2012, he snapped that it was time to 'break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams'.[84]

Plans to challenge US media hegemony came early in the Putin regime – in 2001 when Press Minister Lesin returned from a trip to the USA, smarting from a US State Department report that criticised his ministry's record on free speech. He called a press conference at home, putting forward projects to improve Russia's image abroad. 'I've long ago stopped being ashamed of the word "propaganda"', he said. 'We need to propagandise Russia in the international market, its positive side, or we'll look like bears in their eyes, wandering the streets growling'.[85] Lesin mentioned various projects he had in mind: to fund US free speech NGOs, to publish a document that would expose 'free speech and free activity of the media in the USA', and to organise a big campaign promoting Russia on US media. Nothing came of these ideas, but RT, when it emerged, was Lesin's brainchild.

Originally called Russia Today (news from Russia was not good publicity and the name was abbreviated), RT was Russia's English-language 24-hour satellite TV news channel, also coming out in Spanish and Arabic, to vie with the likes of BBC World, CNN, Al-Jazeera and other international broadcasters. With a start-up capital from the state of $30 million in 2005, it was receiving between $300 and $500 million by 2015, with Russian and foreign

staff resident in Moscow and Washington. As the Kremlin's mouthpiece, RT justifies Russia's rollback of democracy and downplays most popular political movements aspiring to democracy, whether in Ukraine or Syria, as manifestations of anarchy, chaos and western interference. RT claims to have reached a billion viewers on YouTube, but in the UK its daily audience in 2015 was 90,000, less than such obscure channels as Zing and Viva.[86]

Unlike Russia's home channels, RT is not prohibited from displaying a pluralism of views on non-crisis events and sometimes invites interesting guests that do not get to be regulars on western television, such as Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Žižek, Julian Assange. It claims to provide an alternative perspective on major global events. Seeing things differently would have been a valuable television strategy and one located in Russia's own literary tradition of 'estrangement', but just as the Formalists were rejected by Soviet ideologues, Russia's creative past was not a source of inspiration for Putin's executives. They claimed to be different, but remained trapped in a narrow, authoritarian tradition. More often the pluralism of RT resided in broadcasting marginal views, conspiracy theories and crackpot ideas; anything to break the Anglo-American mould and annoy its advocates. To counter British politics, it has given a good deal of time to the controversial views of George Galloway and Nigel Farage; to aggravate Americans it gives a platform to 'truthers', who believe 9/11 was the work of the US government and not Islamist militants. There is nothing RT likes better than US race riots, which take Russian memories back to the endless propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s of Ku Klux Klan lynchings. RT engages in Russian diplomacy's favourite game of tit for tat and 'whataboutism'. When RT's editor Margarita Simonyan was asked why the station gave airtime to 'truthers', she replied that it was morally comparable to western media coverage of the 1999 apartment bombings. She herself did not believe in 'truthers' but – 'what about western media reports saying that Vladimir Putin was behind the bombings?'[87]

On closer inspection, the political technologists have created yet another postmodernist phenomenon in RT. This could be witnessed in the sensational 2011 poster campaign, which won international advertising awards and was displayed on countless billboards and full-page newspaper advertisements around the world. The poster depicted the face of US President Barack Obama and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad superimposed over each other with the question: 'Who poses the greater nuclear threat?', followed by RT's logo – 'question more'. It was glib but thought-provoking, although the latent message was actually saying something about the nature of truth. If you cannot distinguish between two such opposed figures as Obama and Ahmadinejad, what does it tell us about truth, except that there is no truth. This is RT's standard message: stop criticising us and our versions of democracy, because our truth is as good as yours. 'I don't believe in unbiased news', says Simonyan,[88] repeating Putin's views conceived in his spy days that news only reflects vested interests.

RT's first broadcast in December 2005 was coordinated with two policy moves designed to decrease the West's influence on Russia. One was Surkov's announcement on 6 February 2006 of the doctrine of 'sovereign democracy', a new label to attach to the regime's democracy that reflected the fear, ever since Kosovo, that its sovereignty was threatened by western aggression. Sovereign democracy confirmed the right of countries to determine their own domestic and foreign policy without interference from outside. It did not practise what it preached, as we see later in the interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, accusing the West's democracy-promotion NGOs of fomenting the colour revolutions. Russia's policy may also have been fear of the UN's new policy of 'responsibility to protect', that had come into effect a few months earlier, in September 2005, and gave the international community the responsibility to intervene in a country if citizens' human rights were grossly and systematically violated, a consequence of the tragedies in the Balkans and Rwanda.

The other policy move to counter democracy promotion came with the January 2006 amendment to the Law on Non-Governmental Organisations, an attempt to close down NGOs which received any level of funding from western international development agencies or private philanthropic foundations. The amendment introduced further bureaucratic reporting requirements and draconian rules on financial accounting. The NGOs that were targeted were mainly those supporting human rights and environmental issues, media and election training. The demands became even more severe, as we will see, in Putin's third term in office, when NGOs were labelled 'foreign agents'.

Editor of *Profil'* ('Profile'), Georgy Bovt, explained the attempt to tighten control over foreign NGOs as a Soviet-era phenomenon: 'These people have enormous difficulty understanding the difference between civic and political activity, especially since in their day and age "political" was almost always synonymous with "subversive". Your average KGB colonel in the late-Soviet era would have found it hard to believe that a foreign organization could do anything in Russia without a hidden agenda'.[89] It was the reverse side of the time when the Communist Party, with an agenda in mind, had funded communist parties all over the world. Some western critics share the Kremlin view that foreign-funded NGOs are 'stooges' of a more malign western agenda. While it is true that US or foreign capitalist values are promoted in certain NGOs concerned with marketisation, for the most part there has been no agenda to democracy-promotion NGOs other than to provide training and awareness in fostering liberal values, which is why donors were originally invited into the country in the Yeltsin era and why they are now vilified under the Putin regime. If these NGOs instil ideas of regime change in their struggle against authoritarianism, corruption and censorship, it is because of the regime's violations of democratic values. Because Putin refuses to acknowledge that Russia is not a democracy, he needs to find other reasons, such as 'foreignness' to prevent the dangers they represent.

The Putin regime: patrimonial media

To compete with foreign-funded NGOs, an umbrella institution called the Public Chamber (Obshchestvennaya palata) was set up to provide grants for NGOs on a smaller scale. This was one of the regime's 'virtual institutions', officially independent, as required of institutions designed to oversee the state, yet imposed from above and connected with the state. In other words, they tended to fund GONGOs – a term for NGOs that represent an arm of repressive governments. In 2007 Putin attacked the civil society community as 'jackals' scavenging at foreign embassies: 'who count on the support of foreign funds and governments and not the support of their own people'.[90] Human rights NGOs could not count on the support of the Public Chamber when state officials were harassing some of the best and most worthy of them, such as the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, whose heroic members exposed military abuses and travelled to the most dangerous parts of Chechnya in search of their lost sons. In the absence of free media, civil society was taking the brunt of public oversight.

Without foreign-funded NGOs, the population would learn less about human rights violations in their country. It was in 2006 that the Soldiers' Mothers exposed one of the worst cases of 'hazing' in the army, a form of ritualistic indoctrination which is widespread. It concerned a 19-year-old conscript, Andrei Sychev, of the Chelyabinsk Tank Academy, who had been beaten and tortured and refused medical treatment, as a result of which he had to have both legs and his genitals amputated. A whistle-blower, one of the army doctors, leaked the information to the Soldiers' Mothers, who took the story to the media. The Defence Minister, Sergei Ivanov, heard of the case from journalists at a press conference three weeks later and replied confidently that nothing serious had happened or he would have been informed. The furore could not be stopped. Putin personally intervened to order the ministry to conduct the investigation quickly and provide Private Sychev with financial compensation and housing. Earlier, Sychev's mother had complained to the press that she had been repeatedly offered money by unknown officials to drop the case.[91]

How many of the multifarious abuses in the country have seen the light of day? If we take cases of hazing for one year, 2005, by the military's own count there were 2,798 cases of abuse, 16 soldiers killed, and an additional 276 men who committed suicide. Since Sychev's case, despite continuing figures of killings, beatings and suicides, the Defence Ministry has done little to eradicate brutality in the armed forces. At least through human rights NGOs cases occasionally come out into the public domain. Although suspicious of the West, the Kremlin has not been queasy about hiring vastly expensive foreign PR companies to improve its image on the global stage. Ekho Moskvy reported that due to the US PR firm Ketchum's vigorous lobbying, Putin was named *Time* magazine's 2007 Person of the Year.

As part of the onslaught against the media, a case was instigated against the most successful media NGO, the Educated Media Foundation (formerly Internews), which was funded by a variety of foreign grants. Its remit was the

training and development of regional television stations. As one of the first NGOs of 1992, Internews trained about 15,000 journalists, producers, media managers, media lawyers and web designers throughout the regions over its 15 years of work. Its popular director, Manana Aslamazyan, had nurtured some of the most sophisticated and prosperous of the 500 independent regional stations that flourished in the 1990s, especially stations in Moscow, Yekaterinburg, Tomsk, Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk. The last of these TV stations, Tomsk-2, was forced to close down in 2015, despite strong local protest.

As usual, a pretext was found to destroy the former Internews. In January 2007 Aslamazyan was detained at Moscow airport for not declaring a trivial amount of excess cash. She had forgotten to mention that she had the equivalent of $2,567 more in cash than the allowed limit of $10,000. Instead of a fine, she was charged with smuggling, which could mean up to five years in prison, and the foundation was accused of money laundering. It was raided by the economic crime unit, which confiscated all its documents, computers and servers, effectively terminating the foundation's activities. A petition in Aslamazyan's defence, signed by over 2000 people from all over the world, was sent to Putin. The charges against her were eventually dropped, but the foundation had been destroyed completely. The former Internews was the first of the media NGOs to be targeted.

Terrorism in Nord-Ost *and Beslan*

With the Kremlin in control of the main national television networks, who was to say whether government mismanagement, corruption and deceit were being covered up? Journalists on the third channel, NTV, had not been entirely tamed after a decade of free broadcasting, and there were newspapers and smaller electronic media still working robustly, although their impact was uncertain when over 90 per cent of the population received most if not all of their knowledge of the world from the large state TV stations. Two of the bloodiest tragedies connected with Chechen terrorism, which took place during this period, showed that even the huge lies exposed by the remaining media could not affect Putin's general popularity.

It is worth remembering how the first major hostage drama, which took place in June 1995 in Budyonnovsk, was resolved by comparison with the Putin regime's methods. A band of about 130 Chechen fighters led by the notorious rebel leader Shamil Basayev had indiscriminately dragged civilians off the streets of this southern Russian border town, herding over 1,000 people into a hospital, with the result that 147 civilians were killed. There were no government attempts at cover-ups; in fact, Prime Minister Chernomyrdin's negotiations took place in a phone conversation on television – the famous scene of Chernomyrdin's call: 'Shamil Basayev, can you hear me?' To save civilian lives, journalists were permitted to go to a press conference demanded by the rebels, and rebels were allowed to leave the hospital with a

group of volunteer hostages, including 20 journalists, who were released after they had crossed the border into Chechnya. The takeover did not pass without some botched-up Russian commando raids and unnecessary killings, but the crisis ended in peace talks, negligent security ministers were sacked, and the media reporting was open and thorough. One of the reasons so many were killed in hostage-taking in the 2000s was the lack of open and trustworthy information available.

The major terrorist attacks in the 2000s took place at the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow during the performance of a musical, *Nord Ost*, on 23 October 2002 (the siege is referred to as *Nord-Ost*); and in a school in Beslan in North Ossetia on 1 September 2004. In both instances the authorities obstructed journalists and blocked information. As the *Kursk* accident had shown, the instinctive reaction of the authorities was to lie and cover their tracks. Again, by withholding information, a great number of lives were lost. The tensions at Beslan were so great that the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media defined the situation as a triple credibility gap: between the government and the media, the media and citizens and government and citizens.

In the *Nord-Ost* siege, Chechen terrorists held 916 hostages for three days until special forces ended the standoff by pumping an unknown gas into the closed hall, disabling hostages as well as terrorists. The horrifying detail was that out of the official figure of 130 dead, only five were actually killed by the terrorists; the rest were poisoned by the gas. There were so many questions: why were all 41 terrorists killed while they were unconscious when they could have been questioned? Why were unconscious people crammed into buses and left to die when they needed artificial respiration immediately? Why did the authorities refuse to reveal the name of the gas that was used, leaving doctors unable to treat patients with proper antidotes to save their lives? If the gas was a military secret, as the authorities maintained, where was the debate about the ensuing cost in lives? On 31 October the Ministry of Health announced the drug to be a powerful opiate fentanyl, but its precise composition has remained a mystery.

Having learned his lesson from the *Kursk* tragedy, Putin was on the spot. He asked forgiveness in his television speech for not being able to prevent so many deaths, but immediately hailed the assault a success: 'We have achieved the virtually impossible'. Western newspapers were shocked at the callous indifference to human life, but the Russian dynamic from the public was different. Putin was praised for his quick and firm actions that had prevented a bloodbath. According to VTsIOM, 85 per cent of respondents backed Putin's handling of the siege. The independent media expressed horror. *Kommersant* ran the headline 'Overkill', quoting a witness: 'they poisoned us like cockroaches'. The *Moskovsky komsomolets* headline 'Saved or killed?' asked, 'why are we being offered only one version – everyone could have died, but only some did'. Aleksandr Minkin retorted: 'We now know what Putin meant by "wiping them out in the outhouses"'.

Scenes that were splashed across the media of a dead Chechen leader after the storming of the theatre showed him with a bottle of cognac by his side, although hostages confirmed they had not seen him smoke or drink. The Chechen 'black widows' among the suicide bombers (those whose husbands had been killed in the war) were portrayed as drug addicts with needle marks on their arms, who died with syringes at their feet.[92] Whether or not these shots were doctored was taken up ten years later by Kseniya Sobchak in one of those rare moments in Russia when journalists publicly accost their colleagues to try to get to the bottom of things. Sobchak read out a statement that REN TV's Olga Romanova had written on the internet: 'People working on TV at the time knew very well where that bottle had come from; correspondent Arkasha Mamontov went to the buffet to get it, opened it and put it by the corpse'.[93] Sobchak was interviewing Mamontov on TV, with Romanova on the phone. Mamontov denied her allegations and said he wasn't even in the building at the time. Did she see it herself? She had not, and would not name who had, but she said there were a lot of witnesses and dared him to take her to court.

To clamp down on criticism, the Press Ministry was busy handing out 'warnings' that threatened the licences of undaunted media outlets. The government's own *Rossiyskaya gazeta* received a reprimand for publishing a front-page photo that showed doctors in white coats dragging a dead body from the theatre. NTV was singled out for interviewing hostages' relatives and allegedly live reporting on the movements of special forces around the theatre building, which they denied; and soon after Boris Jordan, who had replaced Yevgeny Kiselyov at the channel, was also removed. Radio Ekho Moskvy was in trouble for taking a cell-phone call from the theatre and airing interviews with hostages, as well as a half-hour interview with a terrorist. Later, editor Aleksei Venediktov said it was the right decision to give the hostages and their relatives the right to speak; 'but I met with the press minister and I agreed with him that terrorists shouldn't go on the air anymore'.[94] The ministry had warned that statements from terrorists could contain coded messages.

By comparison with *Nord-Ost*, the handling of the Beslan school siege was even worse. The use of censorship and false information is thought to have contributed to the ensuing slaughter in which at least 334 people died, of whom 186 were children. In this horrendous crisis, when teachers and schoolchildren were packed into a hall in extremely hot weather with little food and water for two-and-a-half days, surrounded by explosives, officials made unprecedented efforts to muzzle and harass journalists, and are even suspected of drugging two of them. It showed the Kremlin's obsession with the media and with controlling its image. Officials of PR departments of all the security structures involved in the hostage rescue operation (Interior Ministry, FSB, the Prosecutor-General's Office) arrived in Beslan on the first day ostensibly to keep the public informed, in fact to obstruct journalists.

The official lies were outrageous, and newspapers said so: 'a chronicle of lies' (*Moskovsky komsomolets*); 'lies provoked terrorists' aggression' (*Novaya*

gazeta); '54 hours of lies ended with children dying' (*Russky kuryer*). 'One cannot defeat terror with lies … but the official accounts were filled with lies', said Ekho Moskvy's editor Aleksei Venediktov; 'those who were taken hostage in Beslan paid a very high price for these lies', said Professor Yasen Zasursky, dean of Moscow State University's journalism faculty.

Defying information received on the ground in Beslan, state broadcasters announced the number of hostages as three times lower than in fact there were, claiming the rebels held 350 people when the actual number was 1,200. Survivors later told journalists that suppressing information and minimising the importance of what had happened enraged the terrorists and might have increased their aggressive behaviour towards the hostages. The terrorists were listening to the news on radios and taunted hostages: 'Maybe we should kill enough of you to get down to that number'. Many of the casualties occurred as Russian forces stormed the school after explosions went off in the gym and a fire started. Later evidence indicated that rocket flamethrowers thrown by the military from outside started the fire which killed the hostages.[95]

When CNN, the BBC and radio Ekho Moskvy were sending out live reports of the storming of the school, and correspondents from the smaller REN TV were doing their best to keep information flowing by phoning through the latest news, as they were too far from the scene to get footage (Russian journalists were pushed further from the scene than their foreign colleagues), and NTV, after a pause, remembered its previous professionalism and began to broadcast without breaks for several hours, even managing to show video filmed by hostage-takers inside the hall – while all this was taking place on the ground, state television's First Channel and Rossiya broadcast their normal afternoon schedules. An hour into the battle, First Channel interrupted its programmes with news from Beslan for ten minutes and then began to show a soap called *Women in Love*. Rossiya stayed with Beslan for an hour and then resumed its normal entertainment schedule.[96]

No official representatives gave interviews. Putin was once again in Sochi when the crisis started and although he returned to Moscow he was kept at a distance, so as not to appear embroiled in the crisis. He said a few words on television on the third day and paid a brief visit to Beslan, arriving and leaving in the middle of the night. It was said he was being protected from the wrath of mothers who had lost their children. The worst indictment of Putin came from the Beslan Mothers' Committee, who asked him not to attend the memorial ceremony for their children. The worst indictment of state television came when grieving parents and relatives physically attacked state television crews for reporting lies about the number of hostages and hushing up the scale of the tragedy.

Without official information, independent journalists did what they could, speaking to anguished relatives, which was prohibited to state channels, and piecing together the tragedy from survivors' accounts. Doctors had been warned not to talk to the press. The 4 September issue of *Izvestiya* was devoted to photos of the assault with a full-page front cover of a man

carrying the limp half-naked body of a schoolgirl. A few days later, *Izvestiya*'s respected editor, Raf Shakirov, was sacked for being 'too emotional'. It was said the paper's owner, Vladimir Potanin, who had brought an end to *Izvestiya*'s halcyon days, had asked Shakirov to resign after receiving a reprimand from the Kremlin.

There was still the issue of Anna Politkovskaya's mysterious 'poisoning'. Many public figures had tried to act as mediators, but the authorities were particularly concerned to keep Politkovskaya away from the scene and prevent her from making use of her contacts with Aslan Maskhadov, the moderate Chechen leader, to persuade him to help end the siege. This was not regarded positively by the authorities. Writing for the UK's *The Guardian*, Politkovskaya explained that an FSB man at the military airport in Moscow had offered her a seat on a flight to Rostov. On that flight she had drunk a cup of tea and woke up in a hospital bed in Rostov. 'The nurse tells me that when they brought me in I was "almost hopeless". Then she whispers: "My dear, they tried to poison you". All the tests taken at the airport have been destroyed – on orders "from on high", say the doctors'.[97]

The other incident of poisoning took place in Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia. Georgian journalist Nana Lezhava, of Rustavi-2 TV, was given a cup of coffee during an FSB interrogation and came to her senses the next day in an isolation ward. Tests taken in Georgia later showed she had been drugged. Other journalists were harassed and detained, including a familiar name, Andrei Babitsky, who was prevented from flying to Beslan by being sentenced to five days in prison in Moscow for alleged hooliganism.

Many journalists were shocked at the extent of state television's subservience. NTV revealed a semi-official memo that had been circulated during the siege to state journalists, demanding censorship on almost everything, from troops deployed to names and nationalities of witnesses, relatives and hostages. Forbidden, too, were: political analyses of the crisis and options for tackling it; close-ups of crying relatives and, after the siege, of corpses; words such as 'special operation' and, of course, the phrase (for a whole year already) 'war in Chechnya', especially as, according to officials, what had happened was not connected with Chechnya but with international terrorism, and reports alleged that Arabs had been seen at the school. Deputy news editor at the Rossiya channel, Yevgeny Revenko, sought to fend off criticism for transmitting false information by saying journalists were merely reporting the authorities' statements and – 'it must rest on their conscience'.[98]

Veteran broadcaster, mentor of *perestroika*'s golden youth, Eduard Sagalayev, would have none of it:

> During Beslan, I'm talking to [my former colleagues] and I'm saying, 'I understand you couldn't say anything about the true number of hostages, but why couldn't you show the parent holding the sign "There Are More Than 800"? You could have told the Kremlin that the cameraman was to

> blame – "It was beyond our control". You could have fired the cameraman. But show it!
>
> And they answered, 'Eduard, you don't know who we have to deal with'. But I know perfectly well who they're dealing with. And what I'm worried about now is the state of my own colleagues.[99]

If journalists working on state television had an opportunity en masse to protest and reject the subservience Putin and his officials had imposed on them, this was the time to do it. The crisis made a mockery of the stability and order Putin had touted. The Chechen fiasco had triggered not only *Nord-Ost* and Beslan but a whole spate of suicide bombings. The mismanagement, lies and callousness peaked in Beslan and could have stirred feelings of moral outrage, reviving the spectacular spirit journalists had shown during *perestroika* and the early Yeltsin years, but that did not happen. 'It is tempting to blame Vladimir Putin', wrote journalist Arkady Ostrovsky, 'but the truth is more complicated … Russian TV has been complicit in the shrinking of its independence … they are not helpless pawns'.[100] When Sagalayev and Irina Petrovskaya sponsored a protest letter over Beslan, Sagalayev said a flood of hatred poured down on him. 'They said I was looking for cheap popularity'.

Beslan was a point of no return for Putin and those journalists who crossed the Rubicon with him. It meant acceptance of Putin's increasingly authoritarian regime in exchange for rewards. The oil economy was booming, Moscow-based TV journalists were well paid and people were enjoying a higher standard of living than ever before. Those who did not become Putin followers gradually moved into alternative and social media.

After Beslan, Putin consolidated his political dominance. He insisted that sweeping political changes had to be made to combat terrorism although, as commentators have noted, the changes made after crises never had anything to do with the original problem. In this case changes were made to the electoral system: an end was put to the direct election of regional governors, who had been a major independent force under Yeltsin; and an end to the election of independent members of parliament, who had made up half the Duma and provided a way that popular independent figures, often liberals, could get into parliament. This brought an end to meaningful elections and the genuine rotation of government. The earlier Duma and presidential elections of 2003–4 had already seen the liberal parties Yabloko and Union of Right forces wiped out, and the communists losing half their votes to nationalist and statist parties. In effect, in so short a period of time, Putin held all the levers of power in his hands.

Andrei Illarionov, Putin's chief economic adviser who had steered the booming oil economy, resigned at the end of 2005 after regular outbursts of anger at the erosion of democracy, especially after Khodorkovsky's imprisonment and the redistribution of Yukos to pro-Putin factions. He saw the fault not only in Putin but in the public's indifference:

> To begin with, Chechnya's freedom was violated and many people died in that war, but many citizens of Russia decided that this did not concern them. Next media freedom was violated, but many citizens of Russia decided that this did not concern them either. Then private business freedom was violated, but Russians decided that this did not concern them either. Next the freedom of political parties and the freedom to elect governors and local authorities were violated; then the freedom of operation of non-governmental organisations, freedom of religious convictions and freedom of expression on the internet were violated, but citizens of Russia thought all the time that this did not concern them and that they did not need to defend this. As a result, no freedom remains in Russia now.[101]

The 'patrimonial' media

Having taken control of the major television networks, the Kremlin turned to media outlets which it considered second rank in importance. These were the privately owned national newspapers and second-league electronic outlets. The Kremlin's almost obsessional drive to add to the list of media it already had under its control has led today to what can be called a 'patrimonial media', because of the uniquely Russian relationship that has developed between private media tycoons and the Kremlin.

In this relationship the state has invited or allowed Kremlin-friendly oligarchs to acquire media outlets as long as they keep their journalists in check on the state's behalf. Deals are done behind closed doors. The first step usually requires pressure to get owners to sell, as we saw in the case of Gusinsky and Berezovsky, but preferably done without the drama, which it is possible to do with less powerful individuals. The second step is to negotiate with a friendly oligarch, often a long-time Putin associate, who would understand his duty to the state or be bound by clan loyalties. Media property acquired in this way belongs to the owner only in the relationship of servitor to master. If the owner does not abide by the rules of the game, the property can be retrieved. One can call this extortion, if we look at it in terms of Russia's political mafia mentality; or we can look at it in terms of the pull of history and Russia's autocratic legacy.

Putin has borrowed extensively from Russia's past to prop up his own statist system, and the submissive relationship that has developed between media and the state is not dissimilar to feudal relations that existed in Russia for centuries, basically from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries. Historian Richard Pipes uses the term 'patrimony' to define Russia's type of feudalism where 'conflicts between sovereignty and property do not and cannot arise because, as in the case of a primitive family run by a paterfamilias, they are one and the same thing. A despot violates his subjects' property rights; a patrimonial ruler does not even acknowledge their existence'.[102] It was possible to push people into this old pattern once the principles of democracy and the Yeltsin era had been devalued and destroyed.

The Putin regime: patrimonial media

Compared with Russia, feudalism of the Western European type was a very different system, based on contracts and rights that had developed between vassal and lord. In Russia the law played no role, as private and state property were almost indistinguishable. The Russian landlord held land on condition of state service in a non-reciprocal relationship: what the sovereign (*gosudar'*) gave, he could take away. Interestingly, Pipes shows that this autocratic system was largely accepted by landowners and there were only three significant attempts to change it.[103] An acceptance of the tied and binding relationship we see today between private media owners and the state has roots in this patrimonial mentality where oligarchs, at least publicly, appear to maintain a harmonious relationship with the state. To take the comparison one step further: formally, the landlord did not own his serfs either (*krepostnoe pravo*), so that both landowner and serf were committed to serve the tsar. A journalist's relationship in this recreated feudal set-up would incline naturally to furthering the interests of the state over and above that of his media boss. In this patrimonial system of ranking both the media owner, however wealthy he may be, as well as the journalist, lack independence and are bound to serve Putin, as the figure of the personalised state.

There are probably few countries in the world where the media industry, with thousands of outlets and networks criss-crossing Russia's vast spaces, submits to the will of a leader in a capitalist system; even, say, in such a despotic capitalist state as Pinochet's Chile. In repressive capitalist societies private media owners of major television stations and newspapers do not have such enforced ties: they either willingly support and promote a regime through their outlets or their media are banned or they are in perpetual struggle against the regime. It is not customary for a wealthy private tycoon to submit so abjectly to the state. By contrast, in a communist country, such as China, the media have not been allowed to partake in China's rampant capitalist enterprise and have largely remained in the position of the Soviet media under Brezhnev in the 1970s. Some commentators point to a similarity with Russia in Turkey's media, based on an extreme form of patrimonialism called 'sultanism'.

Strictly speaking, those who talk of the 'Sovietisation' of the media today are inaccurate, except in so far as the Soviet system also replicated the patrimonial one. Of course we understand the comparison but it misses the point, because for the media to be 'Soviet' would be to nationalise them, whereas what we see is a tortuous attempt to create a capitalist version of bonding with the state. The patrimonial system offers other virtues to the regime, because to have a tied owner is preferable to one you have to entice or lobby to support you. The set up plays to the same political technologists' script where owners and their media outlets appear to be private and independent, but are chained down by a variety of external factors. Formally, the regime can and does insist that private independent media exist in robust form.

Those who dismiss the patrimonial relationship as a façade and hence no more harmful than a matter of playing games, do not take into account the trauma of normalised lying. In the first place it encourages the schizoid approach to reality that characterised the Soviet system. It produces wary, cautious, alienated relationships within the journalist community and society, making any journalistic endeavour to try to create a fourth estate less likely. It changes the relationship to work. It demands a patriarchal response and dampens critical thinking. It dramatically changes the impact of censorship when it is turned into self-censorship.

Self-censorship places the blame on the individual. If obstructions to free speech are so intrusive that a person gives up the struggle, it is still the case that no one has forced the person to give up. Self-censorship turns the journalist into a victim, much in the same way as a rape victim, if he or she has failed to stand up and denounce the rapist, whatever his or her reason. It may be because the collective culture would revile the individual or because the state would crush him or her. This makes Putin-style censorship more perverse than Soviet censorship, where journalists were under the heel of the editor and the editor was under the heel of *Glavlit*. It was not their fault, then, if the final stamp came from a faceless bureaucracy. Of course, if you wanted, you were free to complain, for which you might lose your job or go to prison, but in most cases it would not affect the fate of the article. That was the whole point of using Aesopian language so as to wriggle through *Glavlit*. But in self-censorship it is possible to publish if you have the guts. When President Medvedev told journalists on a number of occasions in 2010 to ask him anything they wanted, no one came forth with serious questions. It was as if the necessary reflexes no longer worked.

The jet-setting billionaire oligarchs may not personally be happy about owning media assets; certainly there is criticism from investors that these enormous oil and metal empires are straying from their core business. When the foreign press talks of media being 'awarded' to loyal cronies, it may not be seen as a reward at all but more like a duty. If you cannot use your media outlet for personal ends (like Gusinsky and Berezovsky did), and if it is not a profit-making endeavour (if it is news and not celebrity tabloids), it becomes more of a burden than an asset.

Russia's private media owners have been co-opted into working within this patrimonial system, where property is private in law but feudal in fact. Most private outlets are parts of large media holdings owned by oligarchs, who also possess and run massive industrial and financial corporations. Some media tycoons go back to the Yeltsin era, such as Vladimir Potanin. Most of the newcomers are part of Putin's clique. Ekho Moskvy's editor, Venediktov, who has had opportunities to talk to Putin, confirms the feudal mentality: 'Putin thinks that journalists are instruments of the owners of the media. He told me so. And if the owner is good, the instrument will be safe; but if the instrument is bad, the owner has to be changed'.[104]

Patrimonial media ownership

After the crisis year 2005 following the Beslan siege, the turnover in newspaper acquisitions and smaller TV channels became fierce. Pressure was put on owners to sell to pro-Putin oligarchs, sometimes using intimidation and *kompromat*. In 2001 Gusinsky had sold all that remained of his media outlets in Russia. Berezovsky hung on for longer, financing his newspapers from abroad, but from 2005 he also began to sell. Many outlets since then have been sold and re-sold several times over the last decade. The new ownership networks tend to be complex, but they all show increasing concentration in the hands of oligarchs and corporations that form a tight web of business and media interests linked with the Kremlin political elite.

The last independent national private channel, REN TV, with a small (4 per cent) share of viewing but with a prestigious name, went under the hammer in 2005. Owner Irena Lisnevsaya said in 2014 that she had been under pressure to sell for two years. REN TV depended on support from Anatoly Chubais by virtue of his position as director of the electricity monopoly Unified Energy Systems, which held 70 per cent of shares in the television company. Chubais had been pressured into selling the block of shares to Yury Kovalchuk, a close Petersburg friend of Putin. Lesnevskaya had tried to see Putin, with whom she was acquainted, without luck; but she managed to persuade former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, now an executive in the gas industry in Russia, to speak on her behalf and suggest that he buy some of the shares. Lesnevskaya hoped the German input would protect her channel. Schroeder asked Putin if he would permit him to buy a block of shares out of Chubais's portfolio. Putin replied: 'No. Chubais's block will go to the state; you can buy shares from Lesnevskaya's portfolio'. It caused the journalist Pavel Lobkov, who was taking an interview with Lesnevskaya on Dozhd' TV online to gasp: 'What a deep understanding the head of state has of share ownership in TV companies!'.

TIKHON DZYADKO: Do you think that now ten years later Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin is just as knowledgeable about the mechanism of media joint-stock companies?

LESNEVSKAYA: Of course, much better than you or I because the details aren't made transparent to us …

DZYADKO: It turns out that these people decide the ideological work of the media.

LESNEVSKAYA: No, I think they only implement Vladimir Vladimirovich's requests and grab everything they can. It's unlikely they sit and direct and watch.

LOBKOV: I'm dashed if I can see Yury Valentinovich Kovalchuk inspecting all his 148 media outlets.

LESNEVSKAYA: I don't think he knows what's going on there. Why should he? There are specially trained people receiving special salaries for that, managers who are responsible for ideology.[105]

REN TV was Kovalchuk's first media acquisition. Since then his National Media Group has become the largest and most influential media holding in the country. Among its acquisitions (either which it owns or has a majority stake in) are St Petersburg's Fifth Channel, *Izvestiya*, radio Russian News Service, the entertainment channel holding STS-Media and the advertising monopoly Video International. The First Channel, 25 per cent of which had been in Roman Abramovich's hands since Berezovsky had been forced to sell his shares, was now bought by Kovalchuk for a rumoured $150 million.[106] That gave him three national TV channels. Yury Kovalchuk (and his brother Mikhail) are among Putin's most trusted friends. His St Petersburg-based bank Rossiya is known as the main bank that serves the Putin entourage. For that reason, it was targeted for sanctions by the US after the Crimea standoff. The National Media Group had been put together by Mikhail Lesin in an apparently mysterious and 'unethical' manner. This happened during President Medvedev's term in office, and enraged him to such a degree that Lesin was sacked in the harshest tones for 'systematic violations of discipline', including not observing 'the rules of state service and the ethical behaviour of a state servant'.[107] The attack may point to murky business negotiations or to political rivalry, for Lesin has always been Putin's man and until his death the most powerful player in media politics under his regime.

During the 2012 protest movement, Lesin was brought back to deal with the new dangers to the regime. Appointed as head of Gazprom Media, he was there to make patrimonial rearrangements. Yuliya Latynina, a journalist who has managed to decipher the hugely tangled network of media ownership relations, analysed the process. As soon as Lesin was installed, Gazprom Media bought out billionaire oligarch Vladimir Potanin's media company Profmedia, which added considerably to Gazprom Media's stable of TV and radio stations, newspapers, cinemas, film production and online portals. Previously Gazprom Media had been attached to the parent company, Gazprom, but under Lesin it was bought by Gazprombank, controlled by the Kovalchuk brothers. That meant, says Latynina, that 'practically all television channels, radio stations and other major assets not already owned by the state have now come under the control of the Kovalchuk brothers'.[108]

Putin's fear of 'monopolisation' by private media, as expressed in the Information Security Doctrine, must have been assuaged by his friend Kovalchuk holding the vast share of the private sector in his hands. Kovalchuk has, in effect, also acquired a monopoly of the advertising market. As owner of Video International (originally founded by Lesin), Kovalchuk owns 70 per cent of the advertising market. The other 30 per cent belongs to Alcasar, which sells advertising for NTV. Through Gazprom Media, however, which has controlled NTV ever since Gusinsky was kicked out, Kovalchuk's group has influence over NTV

as well. With the advertising industry in his hands, Latynina believes Kovalchuk rivals the 'Soviet media behemoth Gosteleradio'.[109] This is the ownership pattern that exists in 2016, but the incestuous interweaving of different serving oligarchs shifts frequently, securing the political needs of the regime.

The ownership of major newspapers and journals also changed to more loyal hands in 2005: *Nezavisimaya gazeta, Moskovskiye novosti, Trud, Versiya* ('Version'), *Ogonyok*. The most important acquisition was the broadsheet daily *Kommersant* with its publishing house, previously owned by Berezovsky and his business colleague Badri Patarkatsishvili, and sold to metals tycoon Alisher Usmanov in 2006. Although Usmanov bought the newspaper through his own iron ore company, Metalloinvest, he was also director-general of Gazprominvest Holding, fully owned by Gazprom. The boomerang always returns to the Kremlin.

In this way Russia's wealthiest men, high up on Forbes's list of the richest people on the globe, who have made money in energy and finance and may have no interest in the press, hold on to even relatively modest media outlets and have started investing in the internet. Alisher Usmanov, in 2013 the richest man in Russia (and the UK, where he is a resident and owns one-third of Arsenal Football Club), with a £13 billion fortune, controls the biggest internet provider in the Russian-speaking world (Mail.ru) and later bought stakes in social networking site Vkontakte and the schoolfriends' site Odnoklassniki. Another billionaire media tycoon, Aleksandr Mamut, owner of Britain's largest book chain Waterstones, entered the media business in 2006, mainly buying into internet and social media. Together with Potanin, he holds the rights to the Cyrillic segment of LiveJournal and, through their media company Afisha-Rambler-SUP, they own the web portal Rambler and news sites (such as lenta.ru).

Despite their Midas-like wealth, the patrimonial relationship means media owners jump when called upon. In 2011, when a scandal occurred in Usmanov's journal *Kommersant-Vlast'*, which published a photograph of a spoiled ballot paper with insulting graffiti about Putin, it ended with the sacking of the general director and a number of journalists. During the heated atmosphere of the Crimean crisis, Mamut sacked the editor and a journalist at lenta.ru, when they received a warning from the media regulator, Roskomnadzor. Critics noted scornfully that some owners were sacking journalists now even before the Kremlin asked them to. Every tycoon fears competitors and rivals more powerful than him, who may jostle him out of the way. 'When a publisher is told that he may lose his business if he does not fire an independent-minded editor or close a publication, his decision to comply is certainly economic. And just as certainly, it is political', writes Masha Gessen.[110] It raises Russian eyebrows, however, when foreigners do the same. Condé Nast was mocked when it removed a highly critical article on Putin from the Russian edition of the magazine *GQ* but not from the US one.

Alternative information sources: (i) traditional media

A few traditional outlets have shown a proven record of independent and uncompromised journalism, against all attempts to deny their editorial autonomy. One of the longest lasting beacons of freedom has been radio Ekho Moskvy, which started broadcasting in 1990. Most truth seekers follow its news, programmes and blogs. To be 'alternative' in the media world courts danger and its editor, Aleksei Venediktov, a familiar figure with his halo of wiry hair, has had numerous physical threats. Since an axe on a chopping block was left outside his apartment in 2009, he is accompanied by a bodyguard. Venediktov calls Ekho the 'mausoleum', because it has become the Kremlin's showcase to give the impression that free speech exists. Venediktov likes to point out that the radio's main shareholder is state-controlled Gazprom Media, which owns 66 per cent of the station, with the journalist collective owning the rest. Theoretically, Ekho hangs by a thread and could be closed at any moment. On occasion Putin has ranted against its coverage, and during the protest movement in 2012 accused it of pouring verbal 'diarrhoea' on him. At other times Venediktov has been invited to Putin's meetings with trusted media executives. Venediktov's recipe for success has been to invite a wide spectrum of political opinion on the website's blogs, embracing most of the liberal great and good, as well as mavericks and a handful of pro-Putinists. Among the latter have been Prokhanov, Dorenko and Margarita Simonyan. Venediktov insists that Ekho's aim is professionalism: to provide alternative, not oppositionist, information.

Its wide range of opinions is both what keeps it afloat and causes internal conflicts. 'I create a model of society with my radio programmes. If we had a free press in the country, I wouldn't have to', he says.[111] Venediktov is tough, sometimes rude with his audience and intransigent with the authorities. In 2014, warned by Press Minister Lesin to sack a journalist or be sacked, he refused to take orders. The incident involved an old scandal over former Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov's son, who had all charges dropped against him after running over a pensioner on a pedestrian crossing. When Ivanov's son drowned in an accident, Ekho's Aleksandr Plyushchev tweeted that there was a 'higher justice' after all (he later apologised). Venediktov's defiance was based on the radio station's charter and on the media law, that it was up to the editor to make decisions on the staff and up to the journalist collective to decide whether to fire the editor. Venediktov won this round, and he has won many others, but the authorities have become more vindictive since the Ukraine crisis. Political problems also come with advertising losses, as companies fear the impact that politics will have on their businesses. Ekho currently has four million listeners, who tune into the radio station daily, and more than three million a month who read the site. One of the reasons the radio is still on the air, says Venediktov, is that the Kremlin also needs a pluralism of information.

The Putin regime: patrimonial media

The newspaper *Novaya gazeta*, the heroic crusader against the Chechen war and corruption, sees itself in opposition to the Kremlin. It has paid a high price for its independence, with six of its journalists murdered. 'We don't serve the powers that be, we're in conflict with them', says deputy editor Vitaly Yaroshevsky. Against all the odds, it has retained its purity. As a rule, it will not report the well-known rants of Zhirinovsky or Prokhanov, which get well covered elsewhere. Nor does it use leaks suspected to be from the FSB ('people have come offering money'), because it could be an attempt to incriminate them. 'The authorities never ring to demand anything from us, they know we're not under their control', says Yaroshevsky. 'They wouldn't want to ring us, we might do something about it'. As a result, the staff gets half the salary of those at *Izvestiya*, says Yaroshevsky, while he doesn't get a bonus or a special car or medical insurance. 'But you're not ashamed to work here', he says.[112]

Novaya, as it is known, started in 1993 and comes out three days a week. Its print run in 2014 of 242,650 shows it is doing well (by comparison with *Kommersant*'s at 81,390 and the pro-Putin 'yellow' newspaper *Komsomolskaya pravda* at 183,215). The paper is known for its frank investigations, among which have been articles about business firms directly connected to Putin, ministers using shady means to build luxurious villas on the Black Sea, money disappearing from Sochi Olympic Games constructions, and Putin's so-called palace (it was referred to as 'a palace built for Putin'), which was hurriedly resold.

There have been many attempts to close or bankrupt *Novaya*. In 2003 judges slapped $1.5 million damages against it in two defamation cases: one for alleging that Krasnodar region's top judge was living well beyond his means; the other alleging a bank's money-laundering activities. This was an astonishing fine given that the previous 54 libel cases came to a total of only $50,000. In the end, after *Novaya* offered an apology, the defendants agreed to an amount that would allow the paper to continue publication. In the internet age, it is regularly the target of cyberattacks. On one occasion, in April 2011, the attack was so strong that its website, which typically received 70,000 to 120,000 visitors every day, was getting 70,000 visit requests every 14 seconds.[113]

The paper is 51 per cent owned by the journalist collective. Gorbachev is a supporter, his 10 per cent shares managed by oligarch Aleksandr Lebedev (with 39 per cent), who is also owner of London's *Evening Standard* and other media outlets in the UK. Lebedev's commercial ventures have suffered heavily as a result of his connection with the paper; and whether Gorbachev's name will help is a moot point, since it made no difference when he was on NTV's board in 2001.

Another staunch outlet, the liberal weekly, *Novoye Vremya* (also using its English title, the *New Times*), survives with a small print run of loyal supporters. Bought by Irena Lesnevskaya after she was forced to sell REN TV, she gave the paper as a gift in 2013 to its editor, Yevgeniya Albats, an

outspoken journalist, also from the *perestroika* era. As well, the public can turn to an old standby, the Russian-language foreign broadcasters, such as Radio Liberty and the BBC Russian Service: both have cut their radio services but continue their websites.

Other sources in the press can be called 'fellow-travellers': they allow a certain amount of political freedom and do what they can. A powerful editor such as Pavel Gusev, who owns the profitable tabloid *Moskovsky komsomolets*, will play a fine balancing act and see what he can get away with. A number of papers are in this category (*Novyye Izvestiya, Argumenty i fakty*). Business media, such as *Kommersant*, are given a freer rein, perhaps because of a felt need for accurate information in the financial domain, but even this changed in Putin's third term. Foreign-owned business newspapers, *Vedomosti* ('Gazette') and *Forbes* were sold to Russians, and Russia's own RBK, a large media holding consisting of publishing ventures, a wire agency, website and TV channel that was not scared of investigating suspicious financial ventures, owned by oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, was pressured into sacking editors and senior journalists in 2016. The last straw it seemed was RBK's coverage of the Panama Papers and in particular the personal life and business affairs of Putin's younger daughter, who had been operating under an assumed name. Prokhorov, the last remaining billionaire supporting opposition media, fell into line in the patrimonial system once gun-toting police stormed his premises and threatened his 10 billion-dollar financial empire.

(ii) Internet and social media

Russians used to say, 'it's not news if it's not on television'. That saying remains true today for the majority of the population, but the spread of internet and social media has fractured the regime's hold on information and television's monopoly. From 2001 there have been attempts to restrict the internet, but it was not until 2007, coming up to the elections, when regular internet users had reached over 29 million, 20.8 per cent of the population, that serious methods of control began to be considered.[114] As Russia has tried to avoid falling into the category of non-democratic states, such as China, Belarus and Turkmenistan who have built firewalls, the FSB hired hackers and young 'patriotic' bloggers instead to crash systems, spam opposition websites and flood chatrooms at required moments. Denial of service hacker attacks were particularly common when protest demonstrations were being organised.

Online users have continued to increase rapidly. By 2010 there were almost 60 million in the country – the highest number in Europe.[115] Russians have been enthusiastic users of social networking sites, with President Medvedev leading the way with his website and Twitter account. In 2011 the number of bloggers in the Russian LiveJournal segment exceeded two million, making Russia the second 'LiveJournal addict' country after the United States, with its five million bloggers.[116] In 2016 there were over 102 million internet

users,[117] but as we have seen users and social networkers are not necessarily avid news followers. Nevertheless, the increase of social media from 2011 gave a huge boost of confidence to the educated urban class and to the protest movement. Newspapers set up their own websites, and many independent online news sites and blogs became required reading for anyone seeking reliable information. In January 2011, when a suicide bomber blew himself up at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport, the news was first broken on Twitter at 16.44, after which international news sites picked up the story, and only two hours later did Russia's state-run TV channels announce the attack.

Cooperation between traditional and citizen journalists on the internet has encouraged civic activism and self-help. Because of the Putin regime's terrible record of responding to emergencies, people turned to the internet to solve their problems. During the 2010 wildfires that raged through central Russia after the worst heatwave for more than a century, with Moscow choking in hazardous smog from peat bogs surrounding the city, not only did officials play down the impact of the disaster and its death toll, they were incapable of offering standard health and safety guidance. The blogosphere became the survival call centre. People on social media set up a round-the-clock system to monitor and exchange information, organise units of firefighters, set up early warning systems and find volunteers to provide medical help:

> Yesterday we went to Kulebaki to bring them everything they needed – firefighting equipment, food, protective devices that were purchased with bloggers' money. Our mission to the 'hot spot' was organized by i_cherski, who, as you know, is filling in voluntarily for our temporarily incompetent leadership at the Ministry of Emergency Situations.[118]

By filling the gap in the information space, the internet reawakened political activism. It brought people together to fight the battle to preserve Khimki's oak forest from highway construction; car owners in Moscow connected online in the 'blue bucket' campaign against VIP cars using their flashing blue lights to travel at high speeds, causing accidents; meetings were organised online against the unpopular governor of Kaliningrad, which led to his resignation. In Putin's dysfunctional system, the internet was taking on the job of being 'more than an internet', which had been the role of the media before most outlets had been taken over by state alliances. The internet was now journalist, social worker and local councillor.

Out of this tumultuous traffic emerged a new breed of informal political leaders. The most famous and audacious was Aleksei Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner and blogger, who was brave enough to say what everyone knew: that Putin's United Russia party was a party of 'swindlers and thieves'. The slogan went viral and became part of a large web campaign against corruption and electoral fraud. Navalny's charisma lay in his irreverent humour, shrewd tactics and serious research. A former member of Yabloko, with two degrees in law and finance and a stint at Yale University,

Navalny initiated some of the most imaginative anti-corruption projects on the internet. He took on state corporations, defending the interest of minority shareholders, suing companies to force disclosure of accounting documents. He posted the results of his investigations on his blog (navalny.livejournal.com), until he was put under house arrest in 2014 and forbidden by the court to use the internet. He first made his name after revealing leaked documents of a $4 billion scam at the state-owned pipeline company Transneft. The website he created (rospil.info) holds information on corrupt government procurement deals; and he continues to be a constant thorn in the side of the government, providing documentation of alleged corruption. Whistle-blowers and crowdsourcing have turned his lonely crusade into a national campaign.

Such personal popularity, when most public figures stand in Putin's shadow, has thrust Navalny up against Putin and raised the hypothetical question of what he would be like as president. Although a symbol of the liberal opposition, he is a nationalist, which gives him a wider appeal than democrats could attain but makes him suspect with some of the opposition, especially as in the past he has been involved in Russian marches, where nationalists are prone to making Nazi salutes and talk of 'Russia for Russians'. He has toned down his nationalist rhetoric since becoming the focus of public interest, but still asks controversial questions. In the 'Stop feeding the Caucasus' campaign, which to some has racist connotations, Navalny speaks of the size of the federal subsidies to Chechnya and the implications that has for keeping the ruthless tyrant Kadyrov in power. He is one of the driving forces behind the attempt by candidates of small democratic parties to stand for elections, he himself having won a stunning 27 per cent of votes in the Moscow mayoral elections in 2013.

The internet has broadened the protest movement to the literary and artistic world, linking it to conceptual art, rock music, theatre and street performance, such as Pussy Riot's punk acts. Dissident writers and artists have participated in public debates and blogs to counter the pro-Putin *glitterati*. Satire returned in the wildly funny *Grazhdanin Poet* series ('Citizen Poet'), produced by former *Kommersant* editor Vasilyev, recited by the lovable actor Mikhail Yefremov and written by the literary virtuoso Dmitry Bykov in rhymed verse, imitating famous poets and laced with political innuendos. One of their sharpest skits was '20 years and bugger all to show for it' (*Dvadtsat' let – ni khrena net*). The series was first tried on Dozhd' TV for a pittance ('for two Mojitos', interjects Yefremov), and became hugely popular with the urban elite, playing to full houses on tour to major cities ('they didn't want to miss out before we got thrown into prison', interjects Yefremov). The spirit of rebellion came to a peak with the rigging of elections in 2011–12.

IV Putin's third presidential term: truth and alternative realities

The tandem politics of Medvedev–Putin had destroyed the no-alternative-to-Putin strategy. Feeble though Medvedev's presidential term had been, it opened up new vistas and choices, and brought excitement to the upcoming 2011–12 elections. When Medvedev nominated Putin for president on 24 September 2011, saying the decision had been planned long ago 'in the period when our comradely alliance was being formed',[119] anger and frustration broke the 12-year political silence. The presidential swap may not have been planned in this way, because Medvedev had implied earlier his wish to seek a second term, but the lack of a contest did not go down well.

Putin's attempt to grab another six or perhaps 12 years of power led to the largest wave of protests since the fall of the Soviet Union. As president, Medvedev had amended the Constitution to extend the presidential term from four to six years – fortunately not seven, which was what Putin considered the best length of time. It meant Putin could be in power until 2024. He had already spent eight years as president and another four as prime minister. Theoretically, he could be in power for a total of 24 years. Even Brezhnev had only managed 18 years in the country's totalitarian past. His record could be equal to Stalin's 24 years in power.

The call for 'Russia without Putin' became a serious challenge to his legitimacy and terrified a regime striving to hold on to power by any means. It seemed to catch Putin unawares when he was first booed by a disgruntled crowd at a martial arts fight. Putin had succumbed to the 'habit of adoration', Gleb Pavlovsky said, himself having been dropped from the presidential team for criticising Putin's return.

Two events in particular struck fear at the heart of the regime, both expressing people's power: (1) the opposition protest movement in Moscow from December 2011; and (2) Kyiv's Euromaidan that toppled the corrupt reign of President Yanukovich in November 2013 and rejected closer integration with Russia in favour of Europe. From the regime's point of view, the two were connected, although the loss to its sphere of influence in the region was not as threatening to the existence of a plundering elite as a liberated pro-western, pro-democracy, anti-corruption Ukraine and the encouragement that would give to the home-grown protest movement that had developed. The Doctrine of Information Security's anticipation of threats from internal and external enemies had, in the eyes of its FSB advocates, come to pass in these two events.

The reactionary forces Putin unleashed in his third term plunged Russia into its darkest period, resembling some of the unedifying moments of Soviet and tsarist history in its embrace of intolerance, jingoism and violence. Contempt for free expression poured into every aspect of life. Not only politics but morality too were in the dock. The regime hit out at non-traditional lifestyles, non-conformist beliefs, religious and sexual orientations. Those who opposed the regime's Ukraine policy were pilloried as disloyal, unpatriotic

and treasonable. De facto censorship was imposed on grounds of obscenity, blasphemy and sedition – words with imprecise meanings that could ensnare anyone in their trap.

Although state-controlled media were in a position to blast their version of events over any large-scale dissent, the situation was considered so dangerous that the offensive went to new levels. Accusing the West of stoking rebellion in Moscow and Kyiv, the regime broke its tenuous ties with the western camp and in the process dropped the pretence of being a democracy western style – although still clinging to the word. Instead, it turned to the Orthodox Church and its anti-western, anti-modern views to articulate a new 'democratic' identity based on Russia's 'traditional' values and what were seen as the virtues of the 'Russian world'. These features were largely defined in negation of liberal cosmopolitanism, which was 'un-Russian' (*nerussky*).

As we saw in Chapter 1, the unreformed Orthodox Church, with its mixture of capitalism and medievalism, chimed with Putin's assertive revisionism in a church–state alliance that was aptly described as 'Orthodox Church FSBism' (*pravoslavnyy FSBism*). It was no surprise that, aside from political repression, free speech's other enemies were resurrected – religious dogma and conformism – the threats to free speech that concerned J. S. Mill as much as political repression. The church–state alliance justified ultra-nationalists dredging up old chauvinist and xenophobic views that tsarist vigilante groups such as the Black Hundreds had represented. The most symbolic image of this regression was a Cossack in uniform lashing members of the Pussy Riot group with his knout as the young women tried to protest at the Sochi Winter Olympics: tsarist brutality in the modern age. Given the right to arbitrate on fundamental questions of morality and decide what was to be considered 'depraved and corrupt', the Orthodox Church decreed that being gay or swearing or blaspheming were not Russian values.

What is un-Russian?

Presumably, Pussy Riot is un-Russian, the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community is too, as well as all political opponents, free thinkers and critical inquirers. Words were bandied around indiscriminately by state-affiliated media to vilify liberals and non-conformists as 'fifth columnists', 'traitors', 'Russophobes', 'foreign agents' and 'undesirables'. It was as close as Russia had come to Stalinist enemy mania, which could not but ring alarm bells when 'enemies of the people' had been thrown into labour camps and shot.

The most un-Russian of values were human rights, a part of the western liberal package of freedoms which, as we saw in Chapter 1, was feared and rejected by the Soviet Union and the Orthodox Church long before the Putin regime regurgitated it. Human rights NGOs were to be labelled 'foreign agents' if they received any financing from western donors. An amendment passed in November 2012 required NGOs that carried out 'political activities'

to register with the Ministry of Justice as 'foreign agents', stamp 'foreign agent' on all their publications and websites and to submit to frequent bureaucratic surveillance. Most of the NGOs refused on principle to register. As far as they were concerned, the term was libellous, with Stalinist and cold war implications of treacherous intent. When the ministry hesitated to implement the law, Putin pushed it forward in a speech addressed to the FSB at the height of the protest movement, saying that 'no one had a monopoly on the right to speak in the name of Russian society, especially not structures managed and financed from abroad and thus inevitably serving other interests'.[120] Prosecutors launched a nationwide campaign to inspect and search hundreds of NGOs, raiding offices, seizing documents and records, fining and suspending those that had not registered. Many have since closed down, unable to receive Russian donations and afraid to apply for western grants for fear of stigmatising the organisation and those involved with it.

The net was cast to miss social service charities but catch human rights organisations, women's and LGBT rights groups, environmental activists and the Moscow offices of international organisations such as New York's Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Golos, the Russian independent election monitor, which had inspired volunteers in their masses to go out and observe the notorious 2011 parliamentary elections, was constantly harassed even though it claimed not to have received foreign funding since 2012, raising contributions from online sponsors. Nevertheless, it was cynically labelled a 'foreign agent' a month and a half before the September 2016 parliamentary elections, disqualifying it and its observers from admission into polling stations. Earlier, one of the few remaining media training NGOs, the Regional Press Institute in Petersburg, headed for 21 years by Anna Sharogradskaya, was labelled a 'foreign agent' and made to pay a large fine (the equivalent of $6,800), when she boycotted the law. The label is 'disgusting', she told me. 'It implies not only that you are a traitor, but that you are being paid to betray your country'. Another media rights organisation, the *Glasnost* Defence Foundation with its well-known director Aleksei Simonov, and the only outfit left that monitors the death and persecution of journalists, investigated by the indomitable Boris Timoshenko, has been slapped with the 'foreign agent' label. The word *glasnost* in the foundation's name points to it as one of the first NGOs in the country, and its logo – '*glasnost* is a tortoise crawling towards free speech' – poignantly ironic.

By June 2016 there were 102 groups on the Justice Ministry's list of active 'foreign agents'. But death by strangulation was not enough, and on 23 May 2015 Putin signed another bill giving prosecutors the power to declare foreign and international organisations 'undesirable' (*nezhelatel'nyy*) and ban their activities if they present a threat to the constitutional order, its defences or its security. This was a pretext to threaten or oust major international human rights watchdogs, some of whom have already left the country because of the difficulties they face. Heads of defiant NGOs face criminal prosecution and fines of between $6,000 and $10,000 or up to six years behind bars.

The laws on 'un-Russian' behaviour were adopted one by one with great speed at the height of the Moscow protest movement, passed almost unanimously by parliament and signed immediately into force by Putin. On 30 June 2013 the law that bans propaganda for homosexual and non-traditional sexual relations to minors was adopted by 430–0 votes and one abstention.[121] This law prohibits holding gay pride events, speaking in defence of gay rights or equating gay and heterosexual relations, which can result in fines of up to $31,000. In the same year laws were passed that made offending religious feelings a criminal offence punishable by up to three years in prison – seen as a response to the *Pussy Riot* case – and passed 308–2; a bill outlawing advertisements on abortion, often the main form of birth control; and the ban on swearwords, basically targeting four 'obscene' words and their thousands of derivatives, collectively called *mat*, used with relish by anyone from thugs to poets of genius like Pushkin. Such laws have left a fog of confusion. Was Tchaikovsky un-Russian because he was a closet gay, and should *Swan Lake* be banned for minors?

According to the Orthodox Church, faith, nationalism, belief in the Fatherland are Russian values. According to Putin, Russian morality involves patriotism, self-sacrifice, family and spiritual values. In the West, Putin explained on television, people are more pragmatic and consider personal success as the greatest good. 'People in the Russian world' have a sense of 'higher moral destiny', because a person thinks 'less of himself and more of the outside world', said Putin - even those people who have made billions, he added.[122] This meant that human obligations were more important than human rights, and that individualism should give way to serving the state. Putin has admitted that as a divorced man he cannot claim to be a role model, but he failed to mention living with a female partner and children in a normal non-traditional relationship although as Putin's private life is taboo and only gossiped about, this remains in the realm of conjecture. Putin has always endorsed traditional conservative values, but not until now did they begin to take on the status of a national ideology, with Putin reaching out for reinforcement to nationalist and xenophobic parties in the West; Viktor Orban in Hungary, Marine Le Pen in France, providing a loan to her far-right party. The shock of the Brexit referendum and the demented vitriol of Donald Trump as a Republican nominee for the 2016 presidential race gave a huge boost to the Putin regime's widespread use of demagogy and abusive public discourse. Trump, said Putin, is 'brilliant and talented, an absolute leader in the presidential race'.[123] Sections of western society channelling their frustration against governments seen as mealy-mouthed liberals 'soft' on migration played well to Putin's tactics of scapegoating and enemy mania.

The term 'un-Russian' raises the same hackles among Russia's liberals as the term 'un-American' did under McCarthyism in the early 1950s, when thousands of alleged communist sympathisers were accused of being disloyal and subversive. The American 'psychosis' at the peak of the 'red scare' equated political criticism with hatred of one's country. There is the same edge to

the current debate in the West as to whether computer wizards who have leaked classified information to the mainstream media are heroes or traitors. When the UK's *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger was asked whether he loved his country, after having published surveillance tapes leaked by Edward Snowden, he said he was surprised by the question because of the illegitimacy of equating criticism with betrayal. He replied, 'Yes, we are patriots and one of the things we are patriotic about is the nature of democracy, the nature of a free press and the fact that one can, in this country, discuss and report these things'.[124]

Rusbridger's response adheres to a system of universal values, that being a patriot does not depend on loving your country, right or wrong, but abiding by democratic principles valid for everyone. By ghettoising 'un-Russians', Putin returns to the divisiveness of Lenin's formula of those with and against us or, in terms of religious sectarianism, the pious against the heretic. Putin's academic mouthpiece, Sergei Markov, having already defined 'managed' democracy, now cobbled together a new idea that would allow Russia to call itself a democracy – this time, a 'majority' democracy:

> Russia defines its political system not as a liberal democracy with an emphasis on the rights of minorities but as a democracy that respects the rights and wishes of its majority … [and aims] to protect it as much as possible from an aggressive minority … LGBT lifestyles are immoral and sinful, and while individuals have the right to live as they please, they have no right to promote such behaviour among others who find it alien and offensive … Russia is effectively pioneering a new concept: the 'zoning of public space'. LGBT minorities are free to pursue their chosen lifestyles and values, but only within private zones.[125]

For a country that in its history has endorsed the Pale, pogroms, spy mania and the deportation of ethnic minorities, to talk of 'zoning' people with impunity shows the extent of Russia's unwillingness to be responsible for its actions, the depth of its amnesia and the capacity to dissemble without a blink. It was only in 1989 that Yury Afanasyev had caused a sensation by mocking the 'esteemed aggressively obedient majority' of time-servers that had for 70 years propped up a repressive and dysfunctional Communist Party, and already the same issues, in the same terms, were cropping up again: Russian history spinning in its isolation, playing mirror image games with itself. The 'aggressive minority' is accused of causing Russia's social and economic ills, and the scapegoating device is working successfully once again. The lack of a free press means there is no one to force the issue, to remind the public of what it so easily forgets, and to sort out the political complexity.

The main criticism of a majority democracy is its potential for mob rule, expressed long ago by de Tocqueville as the 'tyranny of the majority'. Today the term 'majority rule' more often refers to an electoral system, which in the modern age tends to be limited by the separation of powers, the rule of law, the

free press and other pillars of democracy, none of which has an independent existence in Russia. As Putin enjoys enormous popularity with the majority, it is convenient to stigmatise the minority and claim that its 'aggressive' non-traditional ideas have been boosted by western propaganda. One of the state media's main arguments is to point to the West's spineless permissiveness which is so 'excessive', Putin says, that people are seriously talking about registering parties 'whose aim is to promote paedophilia'.[126] It appears then that the minority is depraved, sodomite-and-paedophilia-loving as well. This is bizarre, but the lack of free media enables such nonsense to be voiced.

The mutation of free speech

By manipulating the concept of free speech, Putin ideologues have tried to ridicule democracy's 'sacred cow' – in the words of one-time editor Vitaly Tretyakov. The intention to make free speech politically expedient and capable of dividing society from its opposition has created attitudes Yeltsin always feared because he knew it would lead to separating the 'clean' from the 'unclean'. It was autocratic Russia's standard way of flushing out opponents. Today, among the elite that stands behind Putin's regime, the level of cynicism is so high that the threat of free speech has mutated into a denial that it exists. Thus, while Putin continues to proclaim free speech has not been subverted, his gurus juggle with its meaning. Propped up by Marxist-Leninist antecedents devaluing free speech as bourgeois liberal ideology and by more recent postmodernist views that truth is relative, it is easy for Putin's PR gurus to mould notions of free speech in ways that will assist the Putin regime's control of the media. But because the regime fears losing credentials within the Western community, it is necessary to devalue the pre-eminence that democracies give to free speech.

Tretyakov set himself this task early in the regime: 'In democratic societies freedom of speech exists not because it is the highest value, but because this society's survivability and expansion cannot be secured without it. Freely expressed thought is easier for government to control than thought unexpressed'.[127] Censorship, says Tretyakov, is imposed indirectly 'so that the "sacred cow" of freedom of speech remains inviolable'. Because he, like many of his colleagues, is unable to envisage how free processes in society can work, any more than did the critics J. S. Mill argued with in the nineteenth century, he claims it is impossible for any society to allow free and diverse ideas to exist because that would inevitably interfere with unity and, if necessary, the conduct of war:

> Freedom of the press, pluralism of opinions can thus lead to the disintegration of the society or the state, which, by the way, we clearly saw in the history of the USSR disintegration in 1987 to 1991. The Russian leadership has learned this lesson very well.

Basically, the concept of opposition is not acceptable to Russian authoritarian thinking unless it is 'loyal', hence controllable. The argument, often repeated today, is that what may seem to be free speech is not, actually. What might have been thought to be free speech under Yeltsin was not; it was anarchy and chaos because if freedom is not 'managed' people will suffer. The fundamental assumption of Western thought and practice that free speech goes with regulation, checks and balances, the rule of law and other practising democratic institutions that are real even if not perfect, is dismissed as pulling the wool over citizens' eyes. The double standard of western democracies, Tretyakov believes, is that they claim to be free but are actually controlled by 'politically correct or behind-the-scenes or psychological methods or at least never directly on behalf of the government'. But who is pulling these strings? Typically, it is assumed the state does the controlling, because there is no belief in the view that representative government and civic institutions can work responsibly.

Political correctness arouses particular contempt from Putin ideologues. As the notion involves a desire not to offend or discriminate against diversity, it asserts the integral part minority views play in liberal democracies; views that are especially important, said Mill, because they do not conform. This flies in the face of Sergei Markov and his colleagues' aim to justify eliminating minority views as delinquent and alien to society. Of course, Russia's frequent taunts about the West's political correctness play to a darker script, attempting to stir up divisions in the West over traditional Enlightenment-era freedoms and the views of cultural and religious minorities, such as Islam, especially set against the background of international terrorism, war and migration. There is no doubt that these conflicts raise difficult questions and heated disagreements, but the debate in the West is taking place openly while Russian television does not tolerate an alternative agenda.

Without the witch-hunt rhetoric against opponents and minorities that gained momentum during the Moscow anti-Putin protests, the majority of Russians might not have been as prepared to accept the unprecedented hate propaganda that followed two years later against Ukrainians.

(i) 'Bolotnaya' – the protest movement

The word 'Bolotnaya' came to denote the protest movement in Moscow and some of the larger cities. Literally, it referred to the city square, Bolotnaya Ploshchad, in central Moscow, where some of the main protests had been held. The word had resonance, meaning 'bog' or 'swamp' – Yeltsin had once said that only free discussion would ever pull Russia out of the bog – and it was here that many Russians tried to regain their freedom and self-respect by making their voices heard. 'We exist', Aleksei Navalny proclaimed.

The protests were about values, not economics. The protesters were educated, professional and internet savvy, sometimes the children of the superrich. They had come, writes professor Yuly Nisnevich, to meet others like

themselves 'who were equally unwilling to be subjected to humiliation and lies'.[128] The protests were undoubtedly influenced by the first flush of the Arab Spring, which had helped to oust long-term tyrants. The Arab Spring's slogans of freedom and human dignity, the demand that people would no longer be humiliated and marginalised as they had been for decades, highlighted the Russian condition when once again, in words so often used before, people were being pushed around like a 'herd of cattle'.

The protest movement began the day after the parliamentary elections on 4 December 2011 in outrage at widespread vote rigging. For the first time the internet had been used to spread evidence of electoral violations. Amateur videos and online testimonies of ballot stuffing and repeat voting were posted on YouTube and other sites by thousands of volunteers, who had gone out to monitor the ballot. Whether or not Navalny's campaign to persuade voters to vote for any party except Putin's United Russia was effective, the mood was not with Putin. Even officially United Russia limped in with less than 50 per cent of the vote, losing its two-thirds majority and the ability to rewrite the Constitution at will. As Putin's legitimacy was based on his popularity, the protests and his own poor showing in the presidential elections three months later, on 4 March 2012, had serious implications. The OSCE reported that almost one-third of polling stations registered irregularities during the count.[129] Officially Putin won almost 64 per cent of the vote, but in Moscow he managed only 47 per cent. Given electoral fraud and voter coercion, analysts calculated that he might have actually scored no more than 30–35 per cent in Moscow. Having lost the most important city in Russia, the question was whether he could maintain credibility.

The protests exuded a liberating, almost carnival atmosphere. As well as the rallies, there were debates, happenings and performance art – the most famous being Pussy Riot's punk prayer. Creative protests were devised, such as the circle of unity formed by people holding hands along the Garden Ring road (*Sadovoye kol'tso*), a 10-mile loop around the Kremlin; and a similar circle of protesters driving cars and hooting round the Ring, flying white balloons and ribbons symbolic of the movement. For Putin, the reference of the white ribbons to the 'orange' ribbons of the 2004 Ukraine revolution was like a red rag to a bull: his response was to call them 'condoms'. As for the protest movement, he derided it as a conspiracy by the US State Department through its funding of Russian democracy-training NGOs.

Although the protests set out to be peaceful, the overreaction by the riot police, with 300 to 700 people being detained at some rallies, only helped the movement gather momentum. Massive rallies on 10 and 24 December on Bolotnaya Square and Sakharov Prospekt with 100,000 people were held to protest the results of the Duma elections. On the eve of Putin's inauguration on 6 May 2012, a 20,000-strong protest on Bolotnaya saw the most brutal clashes with riot police, which activists claimed were deliberately provoked. A Gazeta.ru correspondent observed police dragging women by their hair, spraying gas and beating people indiscriminately. Navalny's pain as the police

almost break his arm frogmarching him to a police van can be witnessed on YouTube.[130] The demand for honest elections turned into general calls for an end to the corruption, inequality and lawlessness associated with Putin's rule.

Although the majority of protesters were young (between 20 and 45 years), the ethos was inclusive. It involved the Solidarity movement activist Ilya Yashin, who had first raised the cry against rigged election results; anti-corruption blogger Navalny; socialist Sergei Udaltsov; the flamboyant socialite journalist Kseniya Sobchak; the Khimki forest environmentalist Yevgeniya Chirikova; Putin's former finance minister Aleksei Kudrin and billionaire oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov. Together with them were some of the 'young' democrats, now from an older generation, who had kept the flame burning in such opposition groups as the Other Russia (Drugaya Rossiya) and the Dissenters' Marches of 2008–11 (Boris Nemtsov, Gary Kasparov, Vladimir Ryzhkov), as well as the National Bolsheviks (Eduard Limonov), who had held protest meetings every 31st of the month for several years in defence of the right to free assembly enshrined in article 31 of the Constitution.

There was a 'new kind of community and communication', wrote sociologist Aleksei Levinson excitedly about the movement; 'its very existence or rather, the amazing and inspiring fact of its emergence, was intoxicating'.[131] When people asked who the organisers were, the answer was Facebook and Twitter. Either because of the new digital technology or because of lessons learned from past history, that the 'means' of protest were as important as 'ends', the spontaneous and leaderless rallies had an organic flow. Repeated demonstrations in support of those detained in prison displayed solidarity. It was significant that police had instructions to grab anarchist posters depicting Kropotkin and Makhno; these classic anarchist forms of communalism and mutual aid went entirely against the regime's understanding of anarchy, drummed into every TV viewers' head, as dire chaos and disorder. The lack of leadership was one reason why the Leninist Limonov quit the movement and soon found his niche in the Kremlin camp. It can be argued that it was not so much the type of organisation, as the movement's isolation from the majority of society that made it unsustainable in the face of the tough police backlash.

Catching the mood of the moment, a new internet TV station appeared giving full coverage to the protest movement. Called Dozhd' TV, it had emerged out of the radio station Serebreny Dozhd' ('Silver Rain') and later moved to cable until the regime began to harass it. Dozhd' called itself the optimistic channel and spoke to the internet generation. Owned by Natalya Sindeyeva and her businessman husband Aleksandr Vinokurov, this was Moscow's sophisticated rich elite. They moved their studio into a famous converted chocolate factory Krasny Oktyabr ('Red October') in the city's fashionable art district and were vital as part of the liberating mood that flourished for a few years. It was behind a number of websites and magazines of which Slon.ru still remains. Dozhd' employed young, hard-hitting journalists, and brought back some of the excitement of television in the 1990s. It

showed its hand from the start by inviting liberal public figures to read the articles of the Constitution on air. The station ran a white ribbon as its logo during the protests, justifying its policy of being 'more than' journalists by hoping to become 'mediators' between protesters and the state.

Alternative realities: internet versus TV

Analyst Stanislav Belkovsky called the protesters ROGs – the Russian educated city dweller in English (*russkyy obrazovannyy gorozhanin*), who did not want to be oppressed by the rest of society's low political consciousness, encouraged by state TV.[132] Levada Centre's Boris Dubin put it this way: 'Internet Russia came out on the square, while TV Russia stayed at home'.[133] Society had become polarised by the news bulletins people followed. Liberals and truth seekers went to the internet and hardly ever switched on television, while the majority followed the main terrestrial news channels as people had always done. Those who followed news of the protests on internet said they felt they were living in a parallel universe from those whose information came from TV. Mainstream TV journalists themselves insisted they would no longer pretend the protests were not happening after their channels initially responded with silence. But the arsenal of lying that began to emerge from pro-state channels was far more disturbing than the original silence.

The concept of 'Soviet reality' (*sovetskaya deystvitel'nost'*), as we saw in Chapter 4, was a way of encouraging people to be part of something that was fictive. It had to be called 'Soviet' precisely because it was not real, otherwise it would have been obvious. There is no need to talk of real reality. As we have seen, 'realities' have been invented at different periods of Russia's history as ways of deliberately limiting the real world and forcing it into a framework that subscribed to an official ideology. It meant that an alternative ideology and the rest of the multifarious world outside could be blocked out. In Putin's third term TV became the reality conveyor by which most Russian citizens lived.

Previously the internet had escaped overt censorship partially because Putin did not understand information technology. In his reductive way of thinking, he had earlier dismissed the internet, and had largely ignored Medvedev's enthusiasm for social media, his 2.5 million Twitter followers, and his project for building a Silicon Valley in Skolkovo, near Moscow. Putin rarely uses the internet himself. He has always been happier in marathon live television discussions, where he is able to charm the invited subservient audience without ever confronting hard questions, speaking for four hours or more in the tradition of communist leaders.

The protest movement and the Ukraine crisis changed Putin's approach to the internet. In his eyes, the regime was being subverted by the combined forces of the IT crowd and foreign funders, inciting NGOs and protesters to rebel. He lashed out at the internet as 'a special CIA project'. That was how it had been conceived, Putin said in April 2014, and it is 'still developing in this

way'.[134] The protest movements, he said, had been a conspiracy organised by the US State Department. It was in this period that the first serious attempt to clamp down on the internet was made.

The regime had used its propaganda machine in the past to channel bias, 'asymmetry', exaggeration and lies, although its main success had been in eliminating pluralism and alternative views from the mainstream. Before the Ukraine campaign, television had already begun to take uglier forms. NTV's two-part documentary *Anatomy of Protest* in 2012 alleged that footage of people standing in a queue receiving 'money and biscuits' were protesters being paid by the US State Department. As information spread online from those who had witnessed the episode being faked with a rent-a-crowd, the internet hit back. Bloggers responded on social networking sites, hackers got into the NTV website and covered its logo with the words 'violence, stupidity, lies', words which start with the same letters as NTV. For a while cries of 'Shame' followed NTV crews, and a rally of 400 people demonstrated 'Against Brazen Lies on NTV' outside the Ostankino building, where one-quarter of them were detained. Some of NTV's staff felt ashamed and apologised for their channel. But not NTV's executive, Vladimir Kulistikov: 'My people, who are making ratings for NTV, they are quite all right. All the others can go, I don't care about them. But nobody left this company, by the way! Why? Maybe I pay them too much money!'.[135]

Worse was to come when apparently faked information was used as evidence to pin criminal charges on Left Front activist, Sergei Udaltsov. Grainy footage from a hidden camera showed him supposedly plotting with foreign backers, including a Georgian leader from the Rose revolution. He was also accused of planning to secure financing from a fraudulent bank and hiring Chechen rebels to carry out provocations in Moscow. As a result of the documentary's allegations, the powerful Investigative Committee opened a case against Udaltsov, who was sentenced to four-and-a-half years for plotting mass riots at the 6 May Bolotnaya demonstration. So was Leonid Razvozzhayev, who had fled to Ukraine and alleges he was tortured into signing a false confession, abducted and brought back to Russia. They were among 30 people arrested that day who have endured different fates as a result of the notorious trials and the court's insistence that mass riots had taken place.

(ii) Putin: Crimea returns to its 'home port'

It was as if the FSB's Information Security Doctrine written in 2000 had been drafted especially to bring Crimea back into the bosom of Russia. A national threat had been found, in a self-fulfilling prophesy, and rewarded with imperialist aggrandisement. The Security Doctrine's justification for gaining control of the media to protect the country's national interests received its most cynical expression in the annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine. The finely honed state-controlled media machine pumped out nationalist passions to the point of mass psychosis, winding up hatred

against Ukraine and the West. Here we see the doctrine's 'trustworthy' messages in action. Putin's Ukrainian adventure could not have succeeded without 14 years of media pummelling, concealed censorship and financial inducements. It showed how dangerous the inane media squabbles of the 1990s had been to allow things to come to such a pass.

Just as the Kremlin's 'virtual' democracy was a fiction, so was its fake version of events in Ukraine, claiming that a fascist, neo-Nazi junta had seized power in Kyiv, compelling Russia to intervene and 'protect' Crimea's Russian majority. The fact that no one had been hurt was beside the point. Moreover, according to a Ukrainian survey conducted in 2011, 71 per cent of Crimeans were content living in Ukraine.[136] By comparison, more than 100 people had died in Kyiv from police brutality unleashed by Ukraine's pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovich. If, from the West's point of view, Kyiv's revolutionary movement was a protest against corruption and a desire for closer ties with Europe, for Putin it was a personal humiliation which ruined his plans for incorporating Ukraine into a Eurasian customs union. The bonds between Ukraine and Russia were close, but there were also tensions. Russians stereotype Ukrainians as their country cousins (in the derogatory term *Khokhol*), while Ukrainians cannot forget the Holodomor, the man-made famine under Stalin that took over three million lives. Russia's sense of superiority made Ukraine's rejection all the more humiliating, but Putin's aggression has had the opposite effect on Ukraine. As indicated in polls conducted by Andrii Bychenko, head of Kyiv's respected Razumkov Centre, it has helped to consolidate Ukraine's sense of nationhood and brush away the remnants of Soviet mentality (this poll did not include the separatist areas). The centre's data show that if in 2011 only 17.8 per cent said they would vote to join Nato if there was a referendum, in 2015 43.3 per cent were in favour.[137]

A decade previously, in 2004, Russia had been ignominiously rejected by Ukraine's Orange revolution, and the Russian experts it had sent over to rig elections in favour of Yanukovich had almost literally been thrown out of the country. Some of the usual suspects were back, notably the Kremlin's ideologue, Surkov, orchestrating operations in Crimea. He was one of the first to be placed on the US's blacklist of sanctions after Crimea's annexation. Surkov's postmodernist scenarios could be detected in the fabrications and theatricality the Russian media passed off as reality. Levada Centre's Lev Gudkov monitored the impact of TV's daily disinformation on the population:

> An atmosphere of complete unprecedented hysteria has been created in Russia, arousing passions and uncertainty, and imposing the idea that Russians in Ukraine are under threat – 67 per cent of respondents think that radical Ukrainian nationalist organisations of some sort are to blame; and 54 per cent think that in such a situation Russia can quite legally deploy troops into the country and impose order. This is the result of the intense false aggressive propaganda of the past weeks … [the belief] that a coup has taken place and that it is not just nationalists who have

> come to power but bandits, Nazis, fascists and followers of Bandera, although few have any idea who Stepan Bandera was.[138]

Nothing could be worse for Russians than the name of Bandera. With Ukraine's unhappy history wedged between Stalin and Hitler in the Second World War, Bandera was a Ukrainian patriot who had at first been imprisoned but was later supported by Nazi Germany in his fight for independence from Soviet rule. Meanwhile, the Ukrainians themselves had made a serious mistake in the first days of Euromaidan when a motion was passed in parliament to remove the status of Russian as a possible second official language where a region wished to make it such – a constant fear of Russia's diaspora in the near-abroad. Although the bill was repealed five days later by the acting president, the damage had been done. It was full sail ahead after that for Russian TV to stoke extravagant fears of Ukrainian nationalism, especially of the small militant Right Sector party which had played a leading role in the early street battles. How exaggerated that was could be seen in the Ukrainian elections a few months later when the party received 1.80 per cent of the vote.

It was also true that anti-Semitism had blighted Ukraine's history, especially the pogroms of the late nineteenth century under the Russian Empire, as well as the collaboration of some groups with the Nazis, but anti-Semitism was entrenched in Russia as well, and its current policy of hatred of Ukrainians and overt discrimination against minorities showed Russia had not progressed very far in its tolerance threshold. Mikhail Khodorkovsky's response speaking in Kyiv was that the number of fascists in Kyiv was no greater than on the streets of Moscow and Petersburg. To which Mikhail Leontyev replied on his programme *Odnako,* (14.03.2014), that Khodorkovsky had a 'pathological hatred of his own country'. The over-heated political climate allowed no room for discussion.

The spin that Russia's TV gurus devised for the hate-Ukraine campaign was to put Euromaidan into a Second World War script. The repeated use of the words fascists, Nazis and anti-Semites to brand Ukrainians forced Russian minds back to the horrors of the Great Patriotic War. The word 'punisher' (*karatel'*) had been used only to refer to the Nazi SS troops, but it was now being used against Ukrainian fighters. In Putin's triumphalist annexation speech in Moscow, he called Ukrainians opposed to Russia 'nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites' who had resorted to 'terror, murder and pogroms'.[139] In the same speech he referred to opponents of the war at home as 'national traitors' (*natsional-predateli*), a term from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, that had journalists scurrying to find out which other politicians had used such an abhorrent term. A good script also pays attention to music and voice, all of which were carefully orchestrated for news broadcasts to provide an atmosphere of menace. Dmitry Kiselyov, having already achieved infamy in his gay bashing, performed theatrically every Sunday, swaying slightly and

gesticulating with his hands in balletic poses, talents he had not displayed earlier in his career.

Aggressive and outlandish lies were disorientating, but viewers and bloggers began unravelling reports shown in Russian broadcasts. Only those browsing the net, however, would know of the volume of them. There were lies of different kinds, some overstepping all ethical boundaries. There was the First Channel's footage of panicked Ukrainians in cars fleeing to Russia from right-wing fascists, except that a Ukrainian blogger proved that it had taken place at the Polish border; or a photo of a child claimed to have been killed in Donetsk, who had died in Aleppo, Syria, a year earlier.[140] The use of images of children was a favourite, sometimes taken from movies, as well as the fake story of the crucified child discussed in Chapter 4. One Russian blogger simply got angry when a state newspaper reported that the upper house of parliament had 'unanimously' approved the use of military force in Ukraine, and published screen shots that showed only 90 of the body's 166 members had voted.[141] Another news story reported that the Ukrainian government was building a 'concentration camp' for pro-Russian supporters, only it was an EU-funded project to build a holding centre for illegal migrants.[142] There were lies big and small, but never ending. The First Channel allotted almost 32 per cent of its time to the conflict in Ukraine, ignoring domestic issues.[143]

From Ukraine's point of view it has been tricky to find the right balance between protecting free speech and dealing with Russia's hate messages channelled through cable and satellite operators to its Russian-speaking Ukrainian audience. After Crimea's annexation, Ukraine's broadcasting council called for an end to the transmission of Russia's leading channels based on information 'threatening Ukraine's national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity, promoting war, violence, cruelty, spreading inter-ethnic and racial hostility'.[144] At least 15 channels have been suspended by a series of court orders and some of Russia's journalists and top TV executives have been barred from entering the country until the end of 2017. On the other side, the separatists have closed down Ukrainian channels in Eastern Ukraine and the Russians have closed them in Crimea.[145] Initially, conscious of its Euromaidan principles, Ukraine attempted to deal with Russia's propaganda war in legitimate ways, but as the fighting and killings have continued anti-Russian sentiment has taken harsher forms. The decommunisation law passed by the Ukrainian parliament in April 2015 is particularly damning in its 'history' clause, making it illegal to express 'contempt' for nationalist figures and organisations of Ukrainian independence in the last century. Censorship in this area, so fraught with controversy and lies between Russia and its neighbours, cries out for examination and closure. In the meantime, the EU has countered Russian disinformation with its own strategic communications plans publishing since September 2015 online newsletters *Disinformation Review* and *Disinformation Digest*, which analyse examples of pro-Kremlin propaganda and convey the EU and Nato positions. In a nine-month period

the newsletters identified 1,649 'disinfo-stories' in 18 languages but mainly in Russian (173 in English).[146]

Let it 'rain'

To prop up the mountain of lies, the regime pulled out all the stops on a number of fronts: assaults on the internet, further closures of traditional media, and a new spate of draconian laws. A few weeks after the Kyiv protests began, Putin announced that the huge state news agency RIA Novosti, which had started its life with the beginning of the Second World War in 1941, was to be liquidated. The director general since 2004, Svetlana Mironyuk, first heard of it from the media. Although a major state institution, Mironyuk had turned RIA into a reasonably trustworthy news outfit and had initiated other highly considered PR projects, such as the Valdai forum, where Putin meets with foreign guests. The old RIA team ended its reign with an impartial report on its own demise as 'the latest in a series of shifts in Russia's news landscape, which appear to point toward a tightening of state control in the already heavily regulated media sector'.

RIA has been replaced by a larger body called Rossiya Segodnya that incorporates RT and other outlets broadcasting to the outside world. Dmitry Kiselyov replaced the professional Mironyuk, but then talent was not the issue. RT's budget increased by 30 per cent for 2015 to $330 million, with plans to add French and German services to the already existing ones. Rossiya Segodnya's budget was almost tripled to $152 million, which would include the new Sputnik News (replacing Voice of Russia). Commentators have assumed that this expansion would be used not only for information wars with the West but as cover to increase espionage networks – a return to the large-scale use of the journalist-spy.

Hot on the heels of RIA's demise came the crackdown on Dozhd' TV. Because of Dozhd' TV's great success as a digital news channel, it began broadcasting on major cable and satellite networks and gained an audience of 12 million. Its troubles began when it conducted a survey on the anniversary of the Leningrad blockade in January 2014, asking viewers whether it would have been possible to save hundreds of thousands of lives if the city had surrendered to the Nazis. Such much-needed debate has always been attacked as desecrating the memory of those who died. On this occasion, it acted as a pretext for Duma deputies to ask prosecutors to examine whether an 'extremist' act had been committed. Although Roskomnadzor found no evidence of wrongdoing, most of the cable and satellite providers unanimously removed the channel from their packages, effectively ending its operations. Such coordinated action would not have happened without instructions from above, said the Dozhd' staff, who had been told privately that their even-handed coverage of the Kyiv protests had annoyed the Kremlin.

Dozhd' lost 80 per cent of its audience, it was unlawfully kicked out of its elegant office space in central Moscow and was forced to move several times, at

one point broadcasting from a flat. It was almost 25 years ago that *Vzglyad* had resorted to producing video tapes of their programmes out of a flat after being closed down during Gorbachev's turn to the right – and now it was happening again. Dozhd' limped on from month to month; its future looking particularly bleak after a law was adopted that would ban advertising on pay channels from January 2015, although this has since been softened. 'Let it rain', wrote journalist Aleksandr Minkin, among the channel's many staunch fans who organised a 'marathon' fundraising that has kept the channel afloat. Dozhd' is no longer broadcast on major networks, but it is surviving online through subscriptions. It is watched by about 4 million in Russia, and as neighbouring countries listen less to Russian television its audience has expanded to 20 million, taking into account Smart TV, cable to the Baltics and Eastern Europe, and the net.

Internet websites that had remained largely free from censorship were now targeted. This was hastened by a law adopted in March at the height of the Ukraine crisis, which allowed sites to be blocked by prosecutors without a court order. Alternative news sites – grani.ru, Kasparov.ru, EJ.ru and Aleksei Navalny's sites – were blocked for 'participation in unsanctioned mass action'. Another law, the so-called anti-bloggers law that came into effect on 1 August 2014, forced websites publishing posts or articles that receive more than 3,000 readers a day to register as a media outlet. This subjects them to the same stringent regulations and fines as it does the media if, say, they used foul language or unwittingly spread false information. By September 2014 Roskomnadzor had blocked access to more than 600 websites deemed by prosecutors to be 'extremist'.

In the same month of March 2014, the editor of one of the most flourishing news sites – lenta.ru – was sacked for allowing an interview with Ukrainian Right Sector's Dmytro Yarosh, who said: 'Sooner or later we are destined to fight against the Moscow empire'.[147] Sixty-nine of lenta.ru's journalists resigned saying: 'The problem is not that we have nowhere to work, but that it seems you have nothing to read'.[148] The highly respected editor, Galina Timchenko, connected her sacking with the growing popularity of the site during the Ukrainian events. 'When we passed three million users daily and 20 million hits … I realised that such a large audience was bound to attract the attention of the authorities or the oligarchs: it could not avoid being a matter of concern'.[149] Timchenko and her team have relocated to Latvia and started a new site (meduza.io).

Also hounded out of his company was the founder of the social networking site VKontakte, Russia's equivalent of Facebook, but at the time more popular than it with over 100 million users. Its young entrepreneur, Pavel Durov, named the most promising Northern European leader under the age of 30, saw himself as an anarcho-capitalist. In a manifesto of how Russia could become a twenty-first century leader, he said of free expression: 'Abolish taxes and limitations on everything connected with the information sphere. Russia must become the first major information offshore, which will attract all progressive people of the world'.[150] Inevitably, he was often in trouble, but the

tipping point came with Ukraine. In March 2014 he revealed that the FSB had tried to pressure him to disclose data about Ukrainian protest leaders and to shut down Aleksei Navalny's anti-corruption pages.[151] After riot police had descended on his office in Petersburg and the internet Mail.ru Group, owned by Putin acolyte Alisher Usmanov, secretly bought majority shares in VKontakte, Durov began to sell his own 12 per cent shares in the company. He resigned and left Russia. 'I'm out of here', he said, taking his latest ideas about mobile messaging apps with him to the Caribbean islands, where he has been granted citizenship.

The spate of new legislation that had started with the protest movement and continued at a rapid pace after the Ukraine crisis had media lawyers reeling. Galina Arapova of the Centre in Defence of Media Rights, based in Voronezh, said there had been nothing like it in the 18 years she has been in the field. 'I have the feeling that the state Duma is concerned with no other problem than regulating what the media write, for whom they write, and in what form', she said. Not only the media, but the whole system of distribution of information was under attack. She pointed out that to call for the return of Crimea you could get five years, to swear in the media is safe only if it's in a foreign language, if you distribute inaccurate or libellous information you could be ordered to withdraw the material from the site or to destroy the whole issue of a newspaper without any compensation, to deny or distort the essence of patriotism your site can be blocked.[152]

One of the most significant laws that came into force in January 2016 limited foreign ownership of media to 20 per cent. This law has targeted the country's glamour and lifestyle media industry. Since the 1990s western capital had been vital in developing this vast sector of non-political magazines and niche journals. Although an extra year's grace has been allowed, large publishing houses, such as the Swiss Edipress and the German media giant Axel Springer have already pulled out, declaring it is no longer profitable working in Russia in hostile conditions and a falling rouble. Axel Springer has also sold its Russian edition of the magazine *Forbes*, popular for its investigations of the elite and super-wealthy, one of the two business outlets with foreign owners that survived from the 1990s. The new owner is the glossy magazine publisher ArtComMedia run by Aleksandr Fedotov, whose first words were that the magazine would be 'depoliticised'. The other business venue, the daily *Vedomosti* was owned by the *Financial Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the Finnish magazine publisher Sanoma, each of which have now sold their shares to Demyan Kudryavtsev, a one-time Berezovsky ally and former head of the Kommersant publishing house. Sanoma has also sold him its English-language newspaper the *Moscow Times*, an independent paper for 22 years which has produced four Pulitzer Prize winners and could always be relied on to discuss news blocked by the Russian media. Although it has now been demoted into a weekly, it has hired liberal journalist Mikhail Fishman to be editor. Kudryavtsev says he intends to respect the editorial independence of these papers, but no one can tell at this stage how these new ownership

patterns will evolve. Previously, in 2012, foreign companies were prevented only from owning majority stakes. Now foreign owners, including Russian businessmen who hold dual citizenship, will have to decide which Russian legal entity they wish to sell to (and which will be approved by the authorities), or whether to exit the country.

By corralling the whole glossy glamour sector with its readers' unquenchable thirst for western fashion, luxury goods and lifestyles, Putin may be asking for trouble. This is what made money worthwhile in the Putin glamour years, and it is unclear whether people will be happy to give up *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* (or *Men's Health* and *National Geographic*) for the new church–state mantra of traditional Russian morality. While the Duma has gloated over the imminent return of its 'information sovereignty', the law may have serious repercussions on the country's already affected economy. In 2013 the fashion market was worth $53 billion.[153] In the balance between politics and economics in Putin's third term, it is the former that wins, although it was the latter that had initially made him popular. With the country's push towards isolationism, the Kremlin may feel it necessary to start taking steps in weaning its population off *haute couture* and tourist travel abroad. After all, what is the point of Crimea? And celebrity magazines like *Tatler* had become a nuisance, exposing the private lives and foibles of the powerful.

The franchised Russian-language versions of the glossy magazines have provided an escape route for women journalists wanting to practise their profession, but unwilling to make the political compromises necessary to work on news and current affairs. At present 80 per cent of students at Moscow State University's faculty of journalism are women, and many have this in mind. If the Kremlin's goal is to demonise western glamour as immoral and decadent, this will be another route cut off for them.

Truth or television reality?

Since Dozhd' TV's short incursion on cable ended, there has been no relief from the wall-to-wall television coverage of Ukraine, later Syria and Turkey, reflecting Kremlin-dominated reality. As Navalny puts it, the TV-viewing public has become 'zombified'. Normally, television reflects society, but if the blanket of lies on television is so overwhelming that it produces a seeming psychosis in its audience, reality begins to reflect television. Television becomes the big lie (*lozh'*), and through daily repetition the normal state of affairs. As we saw in Chapter 4, normalising lies was the Soviet state's standard method of resolving problems and suppressing discontent. By playing up Russia's humiliation at the hands of the West, the return of Crimea became a euphoric moment; what journalist Konstantin Von Eggert called a 'collective therapy session for the nation as a whole, which seemed to relish the chance to spit in the face of "ungrateful" Ukrainians, NATO "aggressors", "American imperialists" and even history itself'.[154]

The Putin regime: patrimonial media

As we have seen, Russia is quick to assume the position of victimhood, which Putin has encouraged by denying its 'humiliation' has anything to do with its own governance. The sense of victimhood may begin to explain the unbelievable, that Russians of all sorts accepted the crudest of lies about people they have regarded as quasi-brothers and sisters. Television has done nothing like this in Russia before. The lies of the Stalinist era, much of which Putin propagandists have utilised, came before the advent of television, conveyed by radio, film and the press. In Putin's third term television was used to demonise opponents, sentence Bolotnaya protestors, break up friendships over Ukraine, and damage relations with the West. It has caused havoc with minds and, as Russians say, 'powdered the brains', pushing people to behave in untypical ways. Reactions from well-known journalists has also caught people by surprise. Andrei Babitsky, called a 'traitor' by Putin in 2000, agreed 'absolutely' with his right to take the population of Crimea 'under protection'.[155] He was soon fired by Radio Liberty and departed to help the separatist 'republic' of Donetsk set up its own television station. Meanwhile, Aleksandr Nevzorov, with his predilection for 'hooray patriots', was outraged by Crimea's annexation, expostulating that 'you don't steal boots from a wounded man when he is lying unconscious'.[156]

Dehumanising the enemy is a well-researched psychological process of stirring intense hatred in people towards opponents, pushing them to behave in ways that in normal conditions they would not countenance. It is a well-known ploy for manipulating support for a war that would otherwise be regarded as unacceptable and murderous. It can lead to increased violence and human rights violations, and has led to genocide in the Holocaust, the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. By presenting Ukrainians as Nazis and fascists, Russian television made them less than human, evil and criminal, capable of such gross acts as burning people in Odessa or crucifying children. According to the philosopher Igor Chubais, three great post-Soviet myths have been punctured by the TV campaign against Ukraine. The belief that the tragedy of the Great Patriotic War was so devastating that war is impermissible. The myth of familial relations with Ukraine – that although Russians are capable of fighting anyone, including Chechens and Georgians, only, in Chubais's words, 'anti-Russian nonhumans' could fight Ukrainians. Third, the myth that people of Orthodox faith would never kill each other, or even renounce each other, as seen previously in the unshakeable support for Serbia, notwithstanding revelations of atrocities. These have been such fundamental principles of the Russian order of things that their destruction must inevitably have severe repercussions.

Hate speech in journalism is reprehensible, even criminal, but it was rewarded by Putin with prizes to 300 media personnel for their 'high professionalism and objectivity in covering events in the Republic of Crimea'. Leaked by the newspaper *Vedomosti*, the ceremony had been kept secret and the president's decree no. 269 did not appear in public records. Was it embarrassment? No, say critics, more likely fear of names being revealed to

Ukraine and the rest of the world. The leak, said an Ekho Moskvy blog, made it feel 'as if a mole had turned over a carefully set up network of agents to the enemy'.[157] The usual suspects, such as TV presenters Vladimir Solovyov and Arkady Mamontov were on the list. The biggest prize went to Vladimir Kulistikov, then director general of NTV (known now as 'Information Gestapo') 'For Services to the Fatherland, Grade Two'– a man regarded as the most 'crass cynic of them all'.[158] Such an exceptionally large number of awards must have been considered necessary to prevent any flagging of the propaganda machine. By comparison, President Medvedev had granted only 11 awards for coverage of the Russia–Georgia–South Ossetia war in 2008. The awards carry financial benefits and privileges, which Gleb Pavlovsky has said are necessary on all occasions: if you were doing the work out of principle it would be considered suspicious.

Television professionals responsible for disinformation cannot pretend to distance themselves from collaborating in a war that has resulted in more than 9,000 deaths in Ukraine and many deaths in Russia. Increasingly, liberal journalists have taken the position that propagandists whose coverage is responsible for deaths, prison sentences based on faked TV information and persecution should not be allowed to use the term 'journalist'. Nor should they get away with it in the USA because of the First Amendment. In April 2015 former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and journalist Vladimir Kara-Murza lobbied Congress to expand the Magnitsky Law, that bans travel to the USA and freezes assets, to include television personalities whose smear campaigns, they said, led to Boris Nemtsov's brazen assassination in full view of the Kremlin walls. They provided a document with examples from journalists (all Putin prizewinners) who 'month after month, vilified and denounced (Nemtsov) in government-controlled media outlets as a "traitor", the "fifth column" and an "enemy of Russia"', said Kara-Murza. 'This was not journalism or the exercise of freedom of speech. This was state-sponsored incitement to murder'.[159] Kara-Murza suffered a near-fatal collapse some months later from the effects of an unknown toxin, yet another political activist who has refused to be intimidated among the list of those who have died or been lucky enough to survive mysterious acts of poisoning allegedly committed by the FSB.

The collapse of ethical and professional standards can be witnessed in other spheres of information. The growing army of internet trolls, who can be found in their thousands all over Russia, is another sector of paid liars willing to reinvent reality. Their jobs are secret and their work anonymous. Like trolls everywhere, Russian trolls sow discord, post inflammatory and abusive messages, obstruct discussion and deface sites, but not for their private antisocial and delinquent purposes, although they may do that as well, but to sabotage Putin's critics. *Novaya gazeta* first exposed a troll factory in St Petersburg disguised as the Internet Research Centre, operating around the clock, with trolls working 12-hour shifts, two days on, two days off. Trolling has become a lucrative industry which now involves not only troll factories but, according

to Dozhd' TV's Ilya Klishin, numerous advertising agencies working for the Kremlin on secret contracts. 'It seems like a joke', he says:

> but thousands of hired bloggers 'go to work' every day, writing online about Vladimir Putin's greatness and the decay of the West. They're on Facebook, Twitter, news sites, and anywhere else where the Kremlin feels threatened and outnumbered. Fresh instructions arrive every day in emails, specifying what to say and where to post it, all with the aim of bolstering Putin's presidency amidst war and economic crisis. Sadly, it's working. People have trouble believing the scope of the Kremlin's Internet invasion, thinking it incredible that the government could be capable of such sophisticated, targeted manipulation. And yet that is exactly what Putin's social media team has achieved.[160]

With most of the alternative media suppressed, online news sites reduced and bloggers under threat, trolls are having a field day. An ex-troll, Lyudmila Savchuk, confirmed that the main messages were all much the same – 'Putin is great', 'Ukrainians are Fascists', 'Europe is decadent'. She juggled with three virtual identities as a housewife, student and athlete, leaving 100 comments on an average day.[161] The average pay is good, between $700 and $1,000 a month. In one factory employees worked in teams of three, one playing the role of Putin critic, the other two defending his honour.[162] Russian trolling has been exported abroad, especially during the height of the Crimea crisis. The UK's *Guardian* revealed what it believed to be an orchestrated pro-Kremlin campaign in its newspaper and elsewhere, denigrating in abusive terms any comment criticising Russia or Putin, despite the best efforts of its moderators at prevention.[163]

Russian/Soviet history is such fertile soil for lies, that the shutdown of critical faculties by the public to bursts of propaganda may be as much a symptom of fear as, in the case of Crimea, celebration. It is a knee-jerk response to the Kremlin's demands. Journalists and trolls who are complicit in creating the 'reality' of lies have helped to restore the Soviet mentality of parallel worlds, where people live between official lies and private lives. They have encouraged the detritus of Soviet oppression with the rise of public abuse, the vigilante mentality, informants, snitching, 'anonimki', and the disintegration of values. They have assisted in purveying imperialist fantasies, such as Putin's 'lost' territory of *Novorossiya* (New Russia), which does not exist – but then Soviet maps were never reliable and eliminated or included landmarks as politics dictated. The voice of television, stentorian, triumphalist or sneering has created its own reality to keep the incumbent elite in power.

A coherent picture of Putin's third term in office emerges when the Moscow and Kyiv protests are seen together. That is the way state media played it, linking traitors in the Moscow protests with Kyiv's treacherous behaviour,

wrapping a victimised Russia in a blanket of enemy mania. Tellingly, Putin displayed an almost childish rage at being thwarted by Kyiv; more generally, at failing to sell the Russian vision to many of his 'near abroad' neighbours, yet still clinging to denial politics of the brutal imperial legacy Russia and the Soviet Union bequeathed to their neighbours, and insisting on inflicting a corrupt 'authoritarian democracy' on them now. The combination of imperial aggression and historical amnesia makes the Putin regime delusional and dangerous, as it normalises a defensive system of lies that breeds its own logic. Hanging on to power by distracting the nation with more drama, the regime moves the theatre of war from Ukraine to Syria to Turkey, inventing new lies. It is not difficult after the Ukraine crisis to support another tyrant in Bashar al-Assad, even while he is accused of atrocities against his own people.

So far, Putin's cynical world has been propped up by mainstream media and a population enjoying higher living standards and enthralled by imperialist rhetoric. It is a moot point how long the Grand Inquisitor's trade-off of freedom for material prosperity can last when the nation has been boxed socially and economically into a corner. The rouble has fallen, the heavily dependent oil economy has seen prices plunging, trade agreements with Europe and Turkey have been disrupted. About 200 of Putin's top cronies are affected by US and EU sanctions and if they are anxious not to display disloyalty at present, the balance of forces behind the scenes will inevitably change. Not only is Russia burdened with the huge costs of military intervention, it must maintain its conquest of Crimea and the separatist zones of Eastern Ukraine. The question by the opposition has been posed as the TV set versus the fridge. Russians have endured hard times many times, and nationalist fervour may reanimate the intrepid spirit of wartime heroism, but this is not what created Putin's extraordinary popularity.

Russia can pretend to be victimised and distort its history only while it suppresses free speech. Without debate and catharsis, it can continue to indulge in wishful thinking and self-deception. As the regime works to ban all effective venues that allow free speech, the situation will become more tyrannical and oppressive. On the other hand, the regime could use the 2018 elections to ameliorate the problems of its own making, and Putin could choose to step aside and anoint a successor. Much will depend on how the population responds to the thrill of superpower adventures against increasing austerity and Russia's growing pariah status in the West.

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11 The move to capitalism and the alternatives[1]

In previous chapters I have outlined some of the constraints on the political leadership. I have shown how systemic changes in social structure led to new demands, and described the strains in the traditional state socialist forms of legitimation and organization of the economy, and outlined the reform strategies advocated and taken in various countries. I demonstrated how these strategies were perceived by the Soviet bloc's opponents abroad. Many factors precipitated the policies adopted by the Gorbachev leadership which dismantled the USSR. In this chapter, I summarize the impact of the various factors, both internal and external to the regime, and review the sequence of events. Finally, I consider what alternative policies were open to the leadership of the USSR and could have prevented its disintegration as a federal state as well as preserving the social formation of state socialism.

Mikhail Gorbachev's early policy was one of reform within the parameters of state socialism. He articulated the widespread calls for a movement away from the traditional form of centralized political and economic control to a more pluralist society and consumer-oriented economy set within the parameters of state socialism. In his book *Perestroika* (1987) he advocated 'more socialism' and 'more democracy'. Gorbachev's perestroika did not initially envisage a shift to a competitive electoral system based on free political parties. Neither did it foresee the substitution of a market system for economic planning, nor the break-up of the USSR. However, Gorbachev considered the USSR to be at a 'pre-crisis' stage,[2] which needed systemic reforms.

The policies pursued failed. The combination of systemic imbalances and the interplay of political interests led to policy choices that caused the economy to malfunction and the structure of the state to disintegrate. Perestroika under Gorbachev failed because the institutions devised to operate the traditional socialist system were subject to what Schumpeter has called 'creative destruction'. However, the outcome was destruction without creation. The institutions of state socialism were dismantled. Key elements of the planned economy were removed. The dominant institution of power, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was undermined. The Gorbachev leadership took apart the political system by allowing democratic centralism to be replaced by competitive political groups and parties; in the economy it replaced the planning system with a move to an unregulated market. The political leadership (either through default or design)

lost control of political and economic processes. Exchanges between the major societal systems (values, social integration, government and economy) broke down and consequently regime collapse followed.

There was a lack of sociological imagination in the policies of the radical reformers. They were unable (or unwilling) to devise a reform strategy that would ensure political and social stability concurrent with political and economic restructuring. A 'Western' world-view, developed under Gorbachev and fanned by Western interests, impacted on popular values: freedom became a symbol of liberation, community was replaced by market competition, and consumerism supplanted the values of labour. Philosophically, the reform leadership undermined the idea of a collective form of politics representing class interests and replaced it with competitive institutions based on ideas of possessive individualism and rights to private property. However, these values could not be imposed overnight. The dismantling of the Soviet system left an ideological and social vacuum. In the republics of the former USSR, to a greater or lesser extent, a consciousness of (Soviet) national self-identification shifted to one, engendered by strategic republican elites, of collective national liberation which became encased in a capitalist frame.

While the consequences of perestroika are currently viewed with disapproval or with a sceptical ambiguity by most of Gorbachev's former subjects in the Russian Federation, in the West, they are regarded as a successful move to democracy and markets. Archie Brown lists ten major achievements: freedom of speech and publication, release of dissidents from prison, freedom of religious observation, freedom of communication across frontiers, the introduction of competitive elections, the development of civil society, progress towards a rule of law, the replacement of Leninism by 'a commitment to pluralism', the independence of the Eastern European countries, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.[3]

As will be detailed in later chapters, these positive developments have not compensated for the other losses that have taken place – theft and looting of public property, widespread corruption and crime, the destruction of state welfare, the uprooting and dislocation of the population, and internal strife in many of the former republics. It also destroyed the values of the Soviet Union, which had united the peoples of the USSR and had given to Soviet citizens an historical identity. Many of the achievements (such as competitive elections) are more formal than real. Moreover, the triumphant voices of acclaim do not consider whether some of the achievements listed above could have been reached by other means concurrent with political and economic stability.

Politically, there was no widespread support either for the destruction of the USSR or for undermining the social order of state socialism. Before the initiation of perestroika, there were no significant nationalist movements in the republics (except the Baltics and, possibly, Georgia) seeking secession from the USSR. It was the collective decision, known as the Belovezha Accord, of Boris Yeltsin and the heads of the Soviet republics of Belorussia (now Belarus) and Ukraine – Stanislav Shushkevich and Leonid Kravchuk – that illegally dissolved the USSR on 8 December 1991.

What were the alternatives?

There are two alternative sets of assumptions underpinning the views of commentators on the fall of the socialist states. First, there are those who define their demise as an inevitable collapse consequent on the structural incompatibilities or contradictions in the state socialist societies, and consequently, state socialism could not have been reformed. Posing any 'alternative' to collapse is therefore not a question worth asking. Second, there are others who consider the policies of the economic and political leadership to have been at fault. From this point of view, the socialist system was not 'predetermined' to collapse; reform and development were possible. The approach taken by the present author is that there are no 'inevitable' consequences of history. Institutions, the legacies of the past, geographical location, geo-political interests, the will of leaders and the predispositions of the population all condition policies. There are choices that can be made. State socialism did not 'collapse' of its own accord and it was not fated to be dismantled.[4]

Could the leadership under Gorbachev have carried out reforms but still maintained state socialism and the political formation of the USSR? This question conflates a number of different issues. First, could the Soviet Union have been reformed concurrently with maintaining the USSR as a federative state? Second, could a set of policies have been devised to reform state socialism and maintain the geo-political space of the Soviet bloc (constituted by Comecon and the Warsaw Pact)? Third, could the Soviet Union have been reformed while concurrently maintaining the organizing principles of socialism?

The Gorbachev leadership appears to have believed that it could succeed concurrently in resolving all three. Perestroika was intended to maintain the USSR, the geo-political space of the Soviet bloc in a reconstituted form of socialism. The outcomes of perestroika led to the failure of all three, indicating a complete breakdown in leadership.

The predominant view among Western commentators and academics was, and still is, that the USSR was rent with systemic incompatibilities and could not be reformed (at least in the sense of 'reform' making things better). Discussion centres on the USSR as a state formation. Was it was doomed to collapse? Mark R. Beissinger answers in the affirmative: 'The USSR was not murdered by an individual or a cabal; rather, it expired … It could not be salvaged in usable form.'[5] This is an example of the historical determinist approach mentioned above. It is a one-sided judgement. Certainly there were systemic challenges, and it would be uncharitable to call the USSR's leaders 'murderers'. However, I would contend that the policies adopted by the Gorbachev leadership as well as their implementation were prime causes of the disintegration of the USSR. There were alternative strategies that could have been pursued at far less social and economic cost.

Political reform with stability

There are three complementary policies that would have enabled reform to take place while maintaining political stability: first, a more gradual pace of reform,

including a move to markets, which would have complemented the state socialist planning system; second, a measured introduction of policies promoting political pluralism; third, an economic reform designed to improve the system of planning. Such policies would have preserved the moral and institutional basis of the USSR, and its socialist values, and could have moved the socialist bloc closer to the world system.

A gradual course of action would have included a more pluralist political system, either with competing parties, or greater pluralism within the Communist Party, or a combination of both. An advantage of more than one party would be to open up the political leadership to criticism and to make it more responsive to popular demands. The single Communist Party was a product of a revolutionary struggle in conditions of Tsarist rule which had long passed away. Multiple competitive parties can operate under many types of social system and can take different forms. Currently, under capitalism in the UK and USA, for example, competition between the major parties does not undermine the capitalist values and norms of British and American society because the 'rules of the game' (and those who make the rules of the game) severely constrain what elected leaders can do, as well as determining who can become political leaders. The party system promotes a limited 'within system' set of choices. In the USA, electoral competition operates (as Gore Vidal has put it) between two right-wing branches – Democratic and Republican – of the Property Party. To advocate an alternative to the market system, electoral democracy and corporate power would be very anti-American, as the American Communist Party has found out. Moreover, under Western electoral democracy, the cost of running elections minimizes the chances of minority 'anti-systemic' parties having much success at the polls.

In the USSR, parties organized on a regional basis might have had a national or ethnic basis. Prior to perestroika, national self-awareness was contained within the Soviet framework of the *sblizhenie* (coming together) of nations.[6] The outputs of perestroika weakened the solidarity of the republican elites and created a disposition for a transformation that was taken over by nationalist movements.[7] National self-awareness was turned into a *collective* national identity. But national parties need not be destabilizing. In the USSR, destabilization was a consequence of the economic dislocation of the Union and the regionally divisive effects of perestroika. There were also class interests which underpinned the rise of national identity.

The USSR could have been maintained if competition of parties had been introduced under conditions in which the major actors had accepted the ideological parameters of 'the system' and acknowledged Soviet values. A pluralistic form of electoral competition could have been introduced if the political leadership had proscribed parties that were system-destructive. To forestall the rise of nationally based parties, registration of parties could have required a minimum number of electors in several republics. Such proscriptions would have satisfied neither liberally inclined citizens nor Western critics. The question here is not the policy appeal to the West but the maintenance of the USSR, the socialist system and keeping a reform leadership in place. But there are many examples in Western

democracies where communist, fascist and even religious parties (and those advocating communism, fascism and radical Islam) are banned, or they are effectively excluded from the mass media. Under such a system, the state apparatus would continue, but would be subject to renewal and change by the electorally successful party. This would operate in much the same way as successful parties work within the state apparatus in capitalist liberal-democratic states.

However, this scenario of competitive parties, if adopted in the central European socialist states, would have resulted in defeat for the communists and consequently a loss of geo-political space for the USSR. The Soviet leadership would have to have weighed up the costs and benefits of losing the European communist states. One possible solution would have been the formation of a neutral politically unaligned region, along the lines of the settlement for Austria after the Second World War.

Competitive electoral 'party politics' is only one form of democratic politics and is subject to many objections. While the introduction of party competition and multi-candidate constituencies (uncontrolled by the Party or the electoral commission) would have taken the steam out of some of the more vocal critics of the Communist Party, the resulting process would have been artificial, unless the parties had a clear social base and political platform. Otherwise, they would appear to be fakes and might degenerate into personality politics on the American pattern. Electoral democracy as a shell for a capitalist system does not ensure political rationality; electoral systems are subject to interests that have the money or administrative power to make their preferences stick. The ideological convergence of parties in the West and the shift to 'personality politics' have led to widespread public apathy, as indicated by electoral turn-out.

There are other ways in which political participation might have been enhanced. The leadership might have reformed the Soviet system of democratic centralism. Gorbachev could have maintained his original stance and furthered democratic reforms of the Communist Party, and ensured greater pluralism within the existing political framework: executive posts could have been made truly elective, rather than being controlled by the *nomenklatura*. There could have been more devolution to the republics. The experience of China would point to this as a way to ensure reform (though with limited electoral democracy) concurrent with political stability.

Reforming the economy

Maintaining and reforming a socialist economic system is a different question from that of keeping in place the federative state of the USSR. The communist leadership was advised by Western as well as domestic economic counsellors, many of whom did not want a successful socialist type of economic reform; they sought a transition to capitalism (usually defined in terms of strengthening democracy and markets). In this policy they were supported by the foreign policy of the USA-led Western countries that had the power to exert economic and political sanctions. As the Polish economist Grzegorz W. Kolodko has put it, the reformers

advocated 'the politics of "the worse, the better"'.[8] Acceding to these policies ensured the failure of a socialist type of reform. One can only speculate whether this was Gorbachev's real intent.

The model favoured by the 'reform' economists was predicated on a micro-level profit and loss calculus, rather than on an evaluation of the costs and benefits to the whole economy.[9] The effects of a 'hard budget' constraint economy in the post-socialist states (as we shall discover in later chapters) have led to the destruction of many previously flourishing industries. Remember that the socialist bloc had a significant manufacturing base and the USSR had an advanced nuclear and space industry.

The failure here was that the reform leadership did not recognize that the system of planning worked on a macro economic basis which considered social costs. While a free market system might well improve the efficiency of distribution, competition has its own transaction expenses, as well as the welfare costs of greater uncertainty and the waste caused by underemployment of capital and labour. Planned socialization of production, the advantages of economies of scale and the provision of goods and services free at the point of delivery all provide economic benefits. Most important of all, such socialization of production and distribution contributed to social (and consequently political) solidarity,[10] which was undermined by the reform programme.

Socialist critics would contend that the liberal reform strategy of Gorbachev led to capitalism, not the reform of socialism, and they consider that rather than the incorporation of market forces, the planning system had positive features that should have been developed. When Gorbachev came to power, the USSR had full employment and a stable labour force, positive economic growth, and low foreign debt.

Arguments that the planning system was 'unreformable' are often ideological in substance. Janos Kornai's socialist 'shortage economy', characterized by shops that are empty of goods and factories having unlimited sources of bank credit ensured by 'soft budget' constraints, is misleading. Market economies are also 'shortage' economies – the only commodity in short supply is money. One could parody Kornai by saying that the shops are oversupplied with goods that they cannot sell, despite the fact that people's needs are not met.

Even within the planning system, one obvious remedy would have been a reform of the price system (raising prices to equilibrium levels). 'Soft budget' constraints (essentially the state guaranteeing enterprises against bankruptcy) have some positive features; they enable employment and production to continue and avoid the massive disruption caused by plant closures and ensuing costs of welfare and immeasurable social distress. In this light, 'soft budget' constraints promote production and human well-being. If Kornai's 'hard budget' constraints were applied to the failed Western banks in the economic crisis that began in 2007, the economic system of the UK and USA (and other European countries) would have collapsed.

An alternative policy would have been to introduce market elements into the economy coexisting within a system of state planning. All economic systems have elements of state planning and market coordination. Even under Stalin, there was

a collective farm market. A gradual move to market socialism, or socialism with market features, would have been the most likely policy to achieve reform and maintain political stability. The 'cooperatives' and private financial services introduced under perestroika were poorly regulated and led to excessive profits, which in turn created distortions and destabilized the economy. Introducing private banks which created credit had harmful effects and was a mistake: they increased the money supply, leading to inflation, and bank credit privileged small traders (and later larger ones), which led to unjustifiable inequality and consequently vitiated social solidarity.

Allowing the privatization of small businesses gave improvement of consumer welfare and more efficient distribution. However, it proceeded too quickly and led to distortions. In abruptly disbanding the planning system and introducing unregulated market relationships, Gorbachev's economic policy was an economic *katastroika*. A more piecemeal and gradual process of reform, limited to the introduction of market relations for small business and retail trade and initially clearly defined but restricted political reforms, would have provided a better base for change. That within-system reform of the economy was possible (without political reform) is shown by the changes that had taken place in the German Democratic Republic and Hungary,[11] and, most important of all, in China.

I am not saying that a slower and more piecemeal strategy would be without problems; as noted earlier in Chapter 4, combining markets and planning involves inconsistencies. What I claim is that such a policy would have improved economic planning, preserving the structure of state socialism and the political form of the USSR. Pessimists would argue that it would only 'delay' the crash of state socialism; optimists would claim that it would have led to significant within-system reforms which would have prevented the disasters of transformation.

The Chinese example

Should the USSR have reformed the system of state economic control by moving to a corporatist type of state capitalism under Communist Party hegemony? The model here would be that of China, which was outlined in Chapter 5. This policy had considerable support among the political elites of the USSR. The economic history of China, even by the mid-1980s, illustrated that a Western type of individualistic private property, a free market and electoral democracy were not necessary conditions for successful development. It was simply incorrect to assert, as did Western policy advisers, that an economic reform could not be secured without significant political reform.

I am not suggesting that the USSR could or should have adopted Chinese institutions. The USSR had a more advanced economy and had a higher political and intellectual level than China, which leads one to believe that economic and political management could have been better than in China. What developments in China have shown is that the government could effectively control macroeconomic development through state banks and large state-owned corporations. The introduction of retail markets improved domestic distribution. China was

able to progress successfully without the neo-liberal ideological baggage of a free market economy based on private property, and without a pluralist competitive electoral political process (the Washington Consensus). It did lead to other problems (e.g. inequality, corruption), which need to be seriously addressed.

Had the European socialist states adopted such a statist policy, they would have kept many of the components of state socialism, though it must be conceded that elements of capitalism would also have arrived. From a socialist perspective much can be criticized as well as learned from in the Chinese development model.

Fundamentally, it would have kept the political system based on the hegemony of the Communist Party as well as state planning, but it would have increased the level of foreign investment and introduced market mechanisms at the micro level (e.g. in retail trade) and allowed privatization of small businesses. Perhaps more important, 'state capitalism', in the sense of state corporations producing exchange values for profit, might have weakened the Soviet planning process and endangered the development of socialism (as it has in China). The lesson here is that the market bird must not be allowed freedom to fly and should be kept in the cage of planning.

A Chinese type of reform would not have jeopardized the continuity of the USSR (as there would not have been pluralistic political reform). It would not have weakened the European Soviet bloc. It would have been a useful model for the reform of the Soviet economic mechanism. It is doubtful, however, whether it would have contributed much to the development of socialism in the USSR.

A reform of state socialism?

Turning to the problem of the Soviet Union's position in the world order, when Gorbachev came to power, the economic and political position was not critical. Politically none of the European socialist states, including the USSR, was faced with any notable dissident or secessionist movement. While there was public dissatisfaction, absent was the aggregation of demands into an alternative political and economic strategy and, with the exception of Poland, there were no credible countervailing elites ready to take power. Even Gorbachev had conceded that the traditional Soviet system could have continued well into the twenty-first century.

The Warsaw Pact had well-equipped and loyal armed forces and was in possession of nuclear weapons, maybe not on a parity with the USA but sufficient to act as an effective deterrent. George Bush may have rattled his nuclear swords, but he would not have used them. The Star Wars programme would certainly have escalated the need for further defence spending, but the USSR had been faced in the past with external threats. There is no reason to suppose that the Soviet bloc could not have contained such hazards. Though economic growth rates were falling, they were still positive. The capitalist system had its own problems and Western Europe also had low growth rates in the 1980s. As will be pointed out in the next chapter, to catch up with the advanced capitalist states the socialist societies would have required exceptional and unrealistic growth rates.

Rather than trying to emulate the West, the socialist states could have emphasized the equity of the socialist system and projected a 'soft power' image of its

Function	**Traditional State Socialist**	**Reformed State Socialist**
Economy	State Planning	Planning Mixed Economy with Planning Hegemonic
Ideology	Marxist Leninist	Marxist Leninist – Revisionist
Politics	Hegemony of Communist Party	Pseudo Pluralism with Hegemony of Communist Party
Integration	Socialist collectivism	Socialist community
Gratification	Work	Work\Consumption
External World	Coexistence	Separate worlds

Figure 11.1 Value axes of state socialism and reformed state socialism.

social and economic benefits in terms of culture, science, education, sport, health and the absence of crime. To take a European example, France and Italy are below the standards of living of the USA and Germany, but they don't profess a wish, let alone pursue a policy, to 'catch up' with America or to adopt an American type of political system.

A reformed type of state socialism, contrasted to the traditional state socialist model, could have looked something like the third column in Figure 11.1.

The Soviet Union could have kept the basic institutions of the social system: notably, the hegemony of the Communist Party and the command economy based on planning and state property. Significant changes, however, could have been made in the ways in which the economy operated; but there would have been no privatization – land and state productive assets would remain public property; assets could have been rented to users in small businesses or in agriculture.

A socialist framework could have been maintained only if the ideology that had captured the reformers (based on individualistic maximization of interests through private property and the market) had been rejected. The political system could have been made more open and Marxist ideology would have been retained as the 'official doctrine' but modified in relation to a more differentiated social structure and changes in world politics. Policies of economic and political détente with the West could have continued but within the framework of a 'separate worlds' policy'.

Whereas within-system policies had failed in the past, one might suppose that had the leadership of Gorbachev backed such policies they might have succeeded and led to a real *uskorenie* (acceleration) in the economy. All the charisma possessed by Gorbachev as a leader could equally have been used to reform rather than to dismantle the Soviet Union, and to further rather than to jeopardize the

socialist cause. It is quite illogical to assume that Gorbachev could introduce the sweeping transformation that he did but was unable to introduce adjustments of a more limited 'within-system' kind. Gorbachev, however, sought transformation rather than reform.

Earlier proposals to improve the economic mechanism and the planning process (the utilization of 'net output' measures), a reform of the price system to eliminate repressed inflation (Kornai's 'shortage economy'), 'counter-planning' by enterprises, longer plans for enterprises, greater decentralization of use of profits and state bank loans, greater use of collective brigades to improve labour productivity could have been developed.[12] In agriculture, rather than relying on a reversion to private property and the market, collective farms could have been merged with state farms on the model of state-run agri-business. The regime could also have moved in the direction of widening the welfare state with the provision of more 'free goods'. While the market may improve the efficiency of distribution, at the macro level, state planning is effective in procuring economic development. It also has the great advantage over market systems in promoting a full-employment economy.

In the field of ideology, all value systems are subject to change and development. Christianity has changed considerably over time and has many conflicting interpretations. The same can be said for social-democracy, liberalism and conservatism. 'Western democracy' is also subject to different interpretations and meanings – it has a parliamentary and a presidential form; there is neo-liberal democracy and welfare-state democracy; the socialist countries could have developed a planned-economy democracy. Marxism-Leninism could have been maintained as the official ideology and continued to mutate. 'More socialism' and 'more democracy' (Gorbachev's terms) were desirable and achievable. Essential components, however, need to be preserved; at the core of Marxism are a class analysis of society and the socialization of the economy. Reform of Christianity cannot dispense with a belief in God and Christ's teachings; and capitalism cannot continue if production for profit derived from the private ownership of property is abolished.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union could have revitalized Marxism-Leninism. An ideological critique of 'market society' was very weak in the social sciences and not informed by any significant knowledge of the effects of a market society and consumer culture. There was a failure in the social sciences in the socialist states to understand the dynamics and effects of market societies: many believed their own propaganda and others adopted Western text-book paradigms extolling the virtues of the free market and electoral democracy. It has taken some 20 years for many predisposed to the transformation of socialism to learn that the free market does not automatically promote public welfare and that electoral choice does not ensure the public's choice.

In foreign affairs, the reform leadership had many options and it could have sustained its hegemony in a more relaxed way over the states of the Warsaw Pact. By unexpectedly withdrawing political support from the Eastern European states, Gorbachev and his advisers allowed them not only to move into the Western sphere of influence but also to become a sounding board for unregulated reform in

the USSR. If one were to make an analogy with the West, in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007 onwards, suppose that a communist capture of state power were likely in Greece. Would NATO and the EU leave the incumbent government with only Russia and China to rely on? However, a move to greater pluralism in an electoral sense in the central European socialist states would probably have led to the defeat of the communists (as in Poland). They (plus the Baltic republics) could have been allowed to vote with their feet. However, the USSR could have negotiated conditions on which capitalism would have been introduced. In foreign affairs, a neutralized bloc could have been assured.

The political elites in the USSR were divided. As future events would confirm, some were degenerate. To have maintained the political formation of the USSR, a socialist reform leadership could have formed a bloc with reformist groups in the political class and the traditional supporters of state socialism. When confronted with the advocates of radical transformation (such as Yeltsin), a reform leadership could have appealed to those likely to lose from a movement to the market – the armed forces, employees in what in the West is called 'the public sector' (those in health, culture, education, lower-level public employees) and pensioners.

'Reform' means to make an improvement; one of the objectives of this book (detailed in Part II) is to show that the transformation did not lead to an overall improvement for the people as a whole. The abolition of the traditional system in the move to markets and private property made no reference to the loss of values through market exchange – collective goods, health and old age provision, security of employment, patriotism, love, fraternity, community and collective interests in general.

The political leadership could have relied on the experience of China as an example of successful Communist Party-led development. This was widely expected in the West,[13] and – as noted above – such a policy had considerable support within the Soviet political elite. Perhaps most important of all, the Gorbachev leadership could have set and enforced limits to the political reform process. Within the Soviet Union, demands were made to define the boundaries of glasnost (openness) and the limits of reform.[14] That Gorbachev did not do so must be explained in terms of the greater salience of the other forces (particularly foreign ones) and by his own willingness to adopt policies which led to the break-up not only of the USSR but of the socialist system.

To return to Beissinger's point: it was not 'murder'. The reform strategy of Gorbachev might be described as 'suicide', as the leader went down with the ship; or possibly 'manslaughter', as the leader might not have premeditated the downfall, though he was responsible for it happening. The destruction of the planned economy as well as the undermining of the role and structure of the Communist Party led to the disintegration of the Soviet system and the dismantling of the USSR. Consequently, a capitalist counter-revolution occurred, orchestrated by the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin.

Despite the continued presence of communist-type governments in Cuba, Vietnam and China (we can safely exclude North Korea from the list), the era born in October 1917 in Russia ended on 25 December 1991. Gorbachev's

perestroika had not reformed but destroyed the Soviet model of socialism and broke up the USSR as a state. 'Radical reformers' led by Yeltsin took command. They challenged the idea of what Richard Sakwa has called 'Enlightenment revolutionism'[15] – the idea that rational human intervention could form a coherent society fashioned by man. They rejected collectivist statist ideas and in their place regressed to a form of competitive individualism expressed through the market and competitive democracy. Post-communist governments moved to conduct a 'transition'. To parody Marx in the Communist Manifesto, 'a spectre was haunting Eastern Europe': the spectre of capitalism. In Part II, we turn to consider what capitalism has delivered.

Notes

1 My thanks to Ovsey Shkaratan, R. W. Davies, John Barber and Heiko Pleines for comments and P. O'Donald and S. Rowley for other help.
2 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, London: Collins, 1987, p. 24.
3 Archie Brown, *Seven Years that Changed the World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 329.
4 On alternatives see also Stephen F. Cohen, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
5 Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 390.
6 A public referendum on the union resulted in a majority of 73 per cent of the voters in favour of keeping the union. See Matthew Wyman, *Public Opinion in Post-communist Russia*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1997, p. 159. The vote in favour of the maintenance of the USSR was overwhelmingly supported by Russians. There were big majorities in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and the Asian republics. The republics in the Baltic and Caucasus did not participate in the referendum.
7 Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993; Roman Szporluk (ed.), *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1944.
8 Grzegorz W. Kolodko, *From Shock to Therapy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 28.
9 For a more detailed critique of Kornai, see Dic Lo, *Alternatives to Neoliberal Globalization*, London: Palgrave, 2012, pp. 135–7.
10 Commentators like Linda Cook, for example, point to the success and integrative effects of the provision for workers of full and secure employment, rising real incomes and socialized human services; see Linda J. Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why it Failed*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 1.
11 See the description of these reforms in chs 6 and 7 of Jean-Charles Asselain, *Planning and Profits in Socialist Economies*, London: Routledge, 1981.
12 See David Lane, *Soviet Economy and Society*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, pp. 68–72.
13 Richard Pipes, Director of East European and Security Affairs for the US National Security Council in 1981–82, writing in 1984, expected this to be the most likely outcome. See his *Communism: The Vanished Specter*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 37.
14 I discuss these in David Lane, *Soviet Society Under Perestroika*, revised edn, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 121.
15 Richard Sakwa, *Postcommunism*, Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999, p. 87.

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Identity in Transformation: Russian-speakers in Post-Soviet Ukraine

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Abstract

This essay examines the transformation of identity of Russian-speakers in independent Ukraine. Based on survey, focus groups and public discourse data, it explores the hierarchy of identities of those people who use predominantly Russian in their everyday lives and the meaning they attach to their perceived belonging to the Ukrainian nation. Although many scholars argued after the breakup of the USSR that Ukraine's Russian-speakers would form into a community distinguished by its preferred language, the present analysis shows that they have instead been transformed from Soviet people into Ukrainians—and that without drastic changes in their language practice.

IN THE FIRST DECADE AFTER THE BREAKUP OF THE USSR, ENTITIES REFERRED to as Russians and Russian-speakers in the newly independent states became the subject of numerous scholarly analyses inquiring about their potential to endanger social stability or even territorial integrity (see the discussion in the following section). Even in countries such as Ukraine where the Russians were perceived to be culturally close to the titulars who, in turn, had become heavily Russified linguistically, most authors did not consider it likely that the minority could put up with nationalising policies allegedly pursued by the majority-dominated state. The Russians' inevitable resistance seemed to be grounded in a distinct ethnocultural identity and a strong interest to preserve it. While some analyses assumed the virtually unchangeable nature of ethnic identity and, accordingly, a stable configuration of major groups in the post-Soviet societies, others accepted that identities and groups are social constructs crucially affected by state policies, elite discourses and everyday practices. Nevertheless, such constructivist authors did not envisage a large-scale assimilation of ethnic Russians into the titular core. In the most sophisticated study of ethnic processes of the first post-Soviet years, David Laitin (1998) counted Ukraine among those countries where the Russians were likely instead

The 2006 survey and focus group discussions were conducted within the framework of a collaborative project supported by the International Association for the promotion of cooperation with scientists from the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union (INTAS). The 2012 survey was funded by a grant awarded to me by the Shevchenko Scientific Society in the US from the Natalia Danylchenko Endowment Fund. The 2014 survey and 2015 focus groups were made possible by a grant awarded by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, the University of Alberta, from the Stasiuk Family Endowment Fund. I am grateful to all these institutions for their generous support. I would also like to thank the editors of this special issue and the anonymous referees for their comments on earlier drafts of the text.

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to ally with the Russian-speaking titulars and other minorities in opposing nationalising attempts of the state instigated by the titular nationalist elites. The title of his book—*Identity in Formation*—implied a trajectory whereby these groups would eventually merge into a distinctly Russian-speaking community.

Two decades after those analyses, it becomes clear that, far from successfully mobilising in defence of their perceived group interests, Ukraine's Russian-speakers have actually lost much of their distinct ethnocultural identity which should have informed such mobilisation. To the extent they did mobilise, it was no less in defence of socioeconomic interests than ethnocultural ones, although the Russian-speaking elites tried to merge the two in order to maximise their appeal. Moreover, both socioeconomic and ethnocultural interests were increasingly perceived in regional terms and thus separated not the members of the two main linguistic (let alone ethnic) groups but rather the predominantly Russian-speaking East and South of the country from the mostly Ukrainian-speaking West and Centre. As the popular response to the Russian aggression of 2014 made clear, even the regional division did not really threaten national unity: at the time of the ordeal, most of the east-southern residents speaking primarily Russian allied with their fellow citizens rather than their linguistic 'brethren' across the border.[1] While many people, in those uncertain days, pondered their true loyalties and appropriate behaviours, the Russian-speakers' conspicuous choice in favour of Ukraine was based on inconspicuous changes in their ethnonational identity in the previous years. Rather than forming into a community distinguished primarily by its preferred language, they had gradually been transformed from Soviet people into Ukrainians—and that without drastic changes in their language practice. In other words, most of them remained primarily Russian-speaking, but that is not how they would define themselves.

The present essay seeks to demonstrate and explain this remarkable transformation. It begins with a discussion of the published studies of the 'Russians' and 'Russian-speakers' in post-Soviet Ukraine, their insights and omissions in examining these people's identities and attitudes and predicting their evolution in the years to come. Next, I draw on mass survey, focus group and public discourse data to show how people predominantly relying on Russian in their everyday lives perceived their relationship to the Ukrainian and Russian nations, states and languages, and how these perceptions differed by region and changed with time. Finally, I examine demographic and political factors accounting for these perceptions and their evolution during the decades of independence.

Making sense of people speaking Russian

In many publications of the early post-Soviet years, ethnic Russians in Ukraine and other former republics were viewed as clear-cut groups with a strong ethnic identity, or even parts of one dispersed group which was often referred to as the 'new Russian diaspora' (Shlapentokh *et al*. 1994). People who had been registered as Russians by 'nationality' in the last Soviet

[1]On the responses of residents of the eastern and southern regions to the Russian intervention in Ukraine in the spring of 2014, see 'Mneniia i vzgliady zhitelei Iugo-Vostoka Ukrainy: Aprel' 2014', 18 April 2014, available at: http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhiteley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598_.html, accessed 20 April 2014. In the Donbas, a considerable share of the population was strongly opposed to the post-Euromaidan government in Kyiv and thus supportive of autonomist or even separatist ideas, but the transformation of that support into military action under separatist slogans only became possible due to intervention of the Russian Federation (Wilson 2016).

census of 1989 were assumed to constitute a real social collectivity rather than merely an analytical category. They were also linked to their perceived homeland, from which the new borders cut them off and to which they supposedly remained strongly attached. Such perceptions arose from essentialist thinking of the time, with its reification of ethnic categories, but also from the political reality of the early 1990s when the generally peaceful transformation of the USSR into 15 independent states was accompanied by large-scale, sometimes violent, protests by Russians who refused to be downgraded to an ethnic minority. Accordingly, the studies of the Russian diaspora focused on the potential for destabilising protests against the states of their residence which was believed to be related to the size, territorial distribution, demographic characteristics and the degree of political organisation of the group as well as to its treatment by the 'host' state and the 'ethnic homeland' (Kolstoe & Edemsky 1995; Melvin 1995; King & Melvin 1998). This conflict-centred approach to the post-Soviet ethnopolitical processes soon received a boost in Rogers Brubaker's influential conceptualisation of these processes as a triadic relationship between a particular 'nationalising' state, the Russian minority on its territory and the Russian state supporting its ethnic 'kin' across the border. While arguing that the elements of the triad were 'not fixed entities, but variably configurated and continuously contested *political fields*' (Brubaker 1996, p. 60), Brubaker perceived these fields as narrow enough to exclude those actors who prioritise identities and interests other than ethnonational, which made the relations within the triad inherently conflictual (Kulyk 2001). In other words, the Russians seemed more likely to rebel or emigrate than accept their minority status, let alone assimilate.

Later, scholars came to recognise the inadequacy of treating the post-Soviet Russians as a diaspora, even if they did not necessarily reject the term itself:

> particularly at this moment of social flux, we are likely to find a certain plasticity of identities as members of the diaspora reassess their sense of self in relation to new and markedly different situational contexts …. Above all, we need to be sensitive to heterogeneity: to talk of say 'Russians in Ukraine' is to risk overstating a collective label which denies at least the possibility that diasporic identities might be multiple and fragmented and not necessarily neatly coterminous with a community of either resistance or passivity. (Smith & Wilson 1997, p. 845)

In a number of individual and collective works, Andrew Wilson sought to apply this insight to the study of Ukraine, a society remarkable precisely for the fluidity of intergroup boundaries and the contested nature of identities. Rather than examining sociodemographic and political characteristics of the supposedly bounded groups, he proposed 'concentrating on discourse as a constituting feature of emerging group identities', although he noted that it is 'characteristic of ethnopolitical discourse to ignore such fluidity and assert that rival groups are always and everywhere "other" and even alien' (Smith *et al*. 1998, p. 120). Unfortunately, Wilson partly undermined the value of his analysis by examining discourses of ethnopolitical actors within the major ethnolinguistic groups which thereby appeared to be already established. Moreover, by limiting his analysis of identity construction to discourse of political and cultural elites who were making assertions on behalf of certain groups, he seemed to assume that these assertions would eventually be accepted by masses identifying with the respective groups, although he did not specify why and how this would happen. Nevertheless, Wilson's work contributed to scholarly awareness that 'questions of national identity in Ukraine cannot be

understood *via* a crude contrast between "Ukrainians" as the eponymous state-bearing nation and "Russians" as a diaspora group of the Russian Federation' (Smith *et al*. 1998, p. 121).

Apart from the anti-essentialist sensitivity of the few, the rejection of the majority–minority contrast was facilitated by the growing awareness of many more scholars dealing with Ukraine that in this post-imperial society, 'nationality' is not necessarily the most politically relevant of all ethnocultural characteristics. As a result of the Soviet regime's ambiguous nationalities policies, millions of people embraced Russian as their main language but most of them retained their ethnic self-designation as Ukrainians. Accordingly, there was a large discrepancy between ethnicity and language, meaning that the ethnic and linguistic boundaries between the two main groups did not coincide. Dominique Arel and Valeri Khmelko (1996) argued that post-Soviet Ukrainian society was better described as consisting not of two but of three groups: the Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, the Russian-speaking Ukrainians and the (overwhelmingly Russian-speaking) Russians. Moreover, they demonstrated that the census data on 'native language' greatly underestimated the discrepancy between ethnicity and language since many people had arguably interpreted that question as pertaining to ethnonational background or loyalty rather than actual linguistic practice. Therefore, these authors proposed a new measure of the practice, the so-called 'language of convenience' or 'preferred language', defined as the one the person chooses in communication with a supposedly bilingual and accommodating interviewer. It is this characteristic that they found to be highly correlated with the decisive vote in the presidential election of 1994: most Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians rejected the incumbent Leonid Kravchuk, seen as responsible for the post-Soviet policy of Ukrainianisation, while Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians overwhelmingly supported him (Arel & Khmelko 1996, pp. 81–2). Moreover, as emphasised in particular by Paul Pirie, any categorisation including an unambiguous designation of 'nationality' (as the sole criterion or in addition to some other) is inadequate in a society where 'inter-ethnic marriage, language usage and urbanisation are all factors which contribute to mixed self-identification' (Pirie 1996, p. 1079). Therefore, many people identify with both ethnic groups, most frequently the Ukrainian and Russian ones or do not have a stable identification with any of them, which often leads to the preference for some pan-ethnic identity (in the 1990s usually Soviet). Such ambiguous and unstable identifications were particularly widespread in eastern and southern Ukraine with its high level of urbanisation, mixed marriages and the predominant use of the Russian language by people of all 'nationalities'.

The realisation of ambiguous lines between the two main groups and a tremendous regional variation in their relationship with each other led the scholars to reconsider likely ethnopolitical consequences of the presence of large numbers of Russians and Russian-speakers in post-Soviet Ukraine. First and foremost, a mismatch between ethnicity and language meant that key ethnopolitical actors were not always sure what group they should seek to mobilise and represent. Simply put, Russophone Ukrainians could be seen as a 'vital swing group' (Smith *et al*. 1998, p. 119) that the Russian-speaking entrepreneurs did not want to lose to the Ukrainian nationalist parties which sought to win them over as fellow Ukrainians but assumed, rather falsely, that they would respond to the discourse of 'national revival' as positively as would Ukrainian-speakers. For the Russian-speaking elites of the East and South, downplaying ethnicity in favour of language or some other unifying characteristic would mean a huge increase in the size of 'their' group. Moreover, given strong local and/or regional identities in certain parts of the country and particular economic interests of the regional elites, it was no

wonder that 'local political parties use[d] pan-ethnic boundary markers in order to maximise their potential appeal' and that the 'imagined community' that their discourse implied and (re) produced was regionally specific rather than country-wide (Smith & Wilson 1997, p. 855).

This was particularly the case in the Donbas, an ethnically mixed but heavily Russified industrial region in the southeast of Ukraine whose residents strongly believed that 'a special community has been created in the Donbas, linked equally with both Ukraine and Russia', and who expected this situation to continue (Smith *et al*. 1998, p. 134). Defying the official ethnic categorisation, the Donbasites were, in the early years of independence, more inclined to consider themselves Soviet people than Ukrainians or Russians, but first and foremost they thought of themselves as residents of their region and/or particular city (Pirie 1996, p. 1087; Smith & Wilson 1997, p. 854; Hrytsak 2007, p. 50). It is only in Crimea (and, to a lesser extent, in western Ukraine) that Russians seemed to prefer an ethnic self-perception as reflected in the prominence of markedly Russian organisations (Melvin 1995, pp. 86–8). In addition, the Russian elites in Crimea were institutionally equipped to mobilise their constituency, as they possessed a degree of autonomy lacking in any other part of Ukraine. Unlike the Donbasites who sought to enhance their regional power and preserve political and cultural commonality between Ukraine and Russia, the Crimeans preferred an irredentist agenda and only abandoned it under a strong pressure from Kyiv, having no significant support from their 'kin state' (Meyer 1996; Kulyk 2002). In any event, as Melvin formulated it already in the mid-1990s:

> ethnicity is the central strand that runs through almost all the issues in contemporary Ukraine, but the particular configuration of linguistic, hereditary, cultural and economic elements that constitute ethnicity in different forms across the country serves to reinforce diverse geographical identities more than genealogically defined ethnic ones. Regional competition rather than ethnic polarization forms the substructure of Ukrainian politics. (Melvin 1995, p. 80)

While most of the early studies of Ukraine's Russians and Russian-speakers focused on their political response to the post-Soviet reality, in the following years scholars became increasingly interested in these people's cultural response, particularly their language attitudes and behaviours that were arguably related to identity formation (Janmaat 2000, p. 28). David Laitin (1998) in the above-mentioned study of the Russian-speakers in Ukraine and three other post-Soviet states sought to assess their readiness to assimilate into the newly dominant culture and/or adjust their ethnolinguistic identities. He concluded that in Ukraine (similarly to Kazakhstan and in contrast to Latvia and Estonia), Russian-speakers expected no significant gains—whether in terms of social mobility or interpersonal relations—from linguistic assimilation which, therefore, could not reach such a scale in society as to become irreversible. He argued that ethnic Russians and those titulars who had been assimilated into the Russian language under the USSR soon after its disintegration came 'to see themselves—in conglomerate terms—as a "Russian-speaking population"' (Laitin 1998, p. 33). In a modification of Albert Hirschman's (1970) typology of individuals' choices of adaptation to a new social environment, Laitin believed that 'the construction of a conglomerate identity is clearly an alternative strategy to that of assimilation (to the titular nationality), voice (to protect the rights and preserve the privileges of Russians), violent confrontation, and exit (to return to one's putative homeland)' (Laitin 1998, p. 298). Although Laitin's analysis was informed by a nuanced understanding of identity and based on rich empirical data, it failed to admit that Russian-speakers might seek to retain their accustomed language without making

it a cornerstone of their identity or that they might change their language behaviour in some aspects without 'tipping' into full-fledged assimilation. In an oversight similar to Wilson's, he took frequent references to Russian-speaking identity in the elite discourse (the press) as a sign of its popularity with the masses. Moreover, as his analysis focused on the comparison between different post-Soviet countries, he downplayed different dynamics in different regions within a certain country or different preferences of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking titulars within his alleged conglomerate.

An impressive regional differentiation had by then been demonstrated by Ian Bremmer (1994) in a survey-based study of the political and cultural preferences of 'Russians'—juxtaposed in a rather essentialist way with 'Ukrainians'—in three Ukrainian cities. Against the background of the generally low distance between the two ethnic groups, the varying degrees of Russians' attachments to their country and region of residence were reflected in their dissimilar views of the newly independent state and their place therein. In Kyiv and, to a lesser extent, in Lviv most Russians seemed to opt for integration into the titular-dominated society as demonstrated in particular by their declared willingness to send their children to Ukrainian-language schools and have them be fluent in that language. However, in Simferopol, the capital of the Russian-dominated Crimean autonomy, Russians overwhelmingly sought to retain their accustomed linguistic environment and thus preferred political conditions that would ensure it, including closer integration with Russia and the status of Russian as an official language within Ukraine. At the same time, it is in Simferopol that the 'voice'-oriented Russians differed most from the more 'loyal' Ukrainians, even though the latter were predominantly Russian-speaking and supportive of the continuous prevalence of Russian. Jan Janmaat (2000) found similar differences in his study of Russian-speaking schoolchildren in Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa and Donetsk, which focused on the cultural response to the Ukrainianisation policies in education. In addition to a regional differentiation between the patterns of integration in the first two cities and retention in the latter two, he also detected a remarkable contrast between preferences of mixed couples and 'purely' ethnic Russian families in the predominantly Ukrainian and Ukrainian-speaking Lviv, with the former increasingly opting for assimilation and the latter preferring retention. Moreover, he noticed different preferences for different communicative practices which blurred the boundaries between certain individual strategies; for example, most Kyivan parents willingly sent their children to Ukrainian-language schools but continued to speak with them in Russian at home.

In the following decade, many authors revealed considerable regional and domain differentiation of Russian-speakers' behaviour in both micro- and macro-analyses of language and identity processes. In particular, some micro-level studies found that Russian-speakers in different parts of Ukraine had come to feel Ukrainian based on their country of residence and citizenship (it is Ukraine, not Russia that they called homeland), even if many of them also felt Russian based on their origin and/or accustomed language. Against the background of the traditional ethnolinguistic definition of Ukrainian identity in the overwhelmingly Ukrainian-speaking Lviv, such 'new Ukrainians' saw the Ukrainian nation 'rather as a civic community of compatriots, based on common feelings of belonging to the nation, land and loyalty to the state' (Polese & Wylegala 2008, p. 798). In the more cosmopolitan but predominantly Russian-speaking Odesa, the increased salience of civic Ukrainian identity paradoxically led to its widespread projection onto the established ethnic categorisation of 'nationality', so that people considered themselves Ukrainian in both senses. This contributed to the blurring

of the very categories of 'Ukrainian' and 'Russian' which people nevertheless considered meaningful: 'informants were unable to identify the border between "us" and "them" while defending the existence of Ukrainian and Russian boundaries' (Polese & Wylegala 2008, p. 802). At the same time, this Ukrainian identity did not necessarily involve assimilation into the Ukrainian language or even addition thereof to one's active repertoire; often more important was a positive attitude to the perceived national language. This attitude was also demonstrated in references to Ukrainian as one's 'native language', an appropriation of the official discourse which people sought to reconcile with their complex linguistic practice and loyalty (Friedman 2016). Actual use depended on the region and the communicative domain. While in Lviv young Russian-speakers felt the need to speak Ukrainian outside of their minority circle, to their peers in Kharkiv such adaptation seemed unwarranted and artificial (Søvik 2007; Wylegala 2010). According to a study of language patterns of young Kyivans, the embrace of Ukrainian began during communication with strangers on the one hand and the consumption of various media on the other, while the interaction with family and friends remained almost exclusively Russian-speaking (Marshall 2002).

On a macro-level, survey-based studies confirmed the observed reality of the unabated prevalence of Russian, which meant that most people who used to rely on it at the outset of independence continued to use it exclusively or predominantly and pass it on to their children, in flagrant discrepancy with their increasingly Ukrainian ethnolinguistic identity (Kulyk 2007, 2014; Vyshniak 2009). To the extent that there was an inter-generational change toward Ukrainian, it originated in the family but was largely blocked in the workplace and the media realm, two domains where individual choice was constrained by the environment and available supply (Kulyk 2015). Moreover, examinations of the factors determining Ukrainian citizens' political and cultural attitudes persuasively demonstrated that the region of residence was at least as strong a predictor as—in many cases, much stronger than—language use, native language and nationality. This pointed to an essential heterogeneity of the populations defined by these characteristics (Munro 2007; Barrington & Faranda 2009; Kulyk 2011a). In one study specifically designed to verify at the mass level Laitin's argument about the salience of Russian-speaking identity, Lowell Barrington (2001) found that among those people speaking Russian all or part of the time, the attachment to the self-designation as a 'Russian-speaker' was much weaker than to those defined by citizenship and ethnicity. At the same time, ethnic Russians and residents of the eastern and southern regions were greatly overrepresented among people thinking of themselves as Russian-speakers. Once again, this confirmed that ethnicity and region matter more than language in determining individual identities. In Barrington's conclusion: 'as a result, there appears to be no single, unifying label that the Russian-speakers have found and accepted. Their status as a unified "identity group" is, consequently, ambiguous at best' (Barrington 2001, p. 152). Twenty-five years into Ukraine's independence, it is this study that I primarily build on in examining identity preferences of people speaking mostly Russian, seeking to demonstrate that most of them have acquired a salient Ukrainian identity without abandoning their accustomed language.

Competing identifications of Russian-speakers

Starting with survey data on competing identifications of the Ukrainian population, I examine responses to two questions related to the salience of Ukrainian and Russian/Russian-speaking

identities. The first question inquired about primary self-designation ('Who do you consider yourself primarily?') and provided a list of alternatives related to territorial entities of varying scales. This question was asked repeatedly during the last decades and thus reveals diachronic changes in the relative salience of people's attachment to Ukraine *vis-à-vis* its competitors on both the sub- and supranational levels.[2] Table 1 presents data for the surveys of December 2006 (by the Kyiv-based sociological centre Hromadska Dumka), February 2012 and September 2014 (both by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology—KIIS). This juxtaposition makes it possible to assess the long-term evolution of identities and a transformation brought about by the Euromaidan protests of late 2013 and early 2014 and the Russian aggression against Ukraine immediately after that. Despite minor differences in the list of alternatives (in particular, the 2006 respondents were given a choice to identify with 'the Slavic unity', while latterly this option was replaced with 'the post-Soviet space'), the main categories remain the same in all three surveys. In each case, I examine the relative salience of various territorially defined identities for those respondents who said that they spoke only or predominantly Russian in their everyday lives[3]—against the background of the general population whose identities I have analysed elsewhere and found heavily affected by Euromaidan and the war (Kulyk 2016b). Moreover, the Russian-speakers' responses are presented not only for Ukraine as a whole but also for its two geographical 'halves', one encompassing the West and the Centre and the other the East and the South. Due to different shares of predominantly Russian-speaking people in the two halves (they constitute a clear minority in the former and a large majority in the latter) and different histories of their residence on the respective territories (lasting almost five centuries in the easternmost parts of Ukraine and just three quarters of a century in the westernmost ones), one could expect rather different dynamics of identities. Since the 2014 survey did not include Crimea which had been annexed by Russia earlier that year, Crimean respondents had to be excluded in the data of 2006 and 2012 as well in order to make the responses comparable.

The figures make it clear that while the general population becomes increasingly attached to their country of residence and thus inclined to identify themselves primarily in national terms, Russian-speakers remain divided between national, subnational and, to a lesser extent, supranational identifications. Not only are they less willing than their Ukrainian-speaking or 'symmetrically' bilingual compatriots to abandon their attachment to the remnants of Soviet unity but also in view of the inevitable erosion of that unity they increasingly identified with their respective localities and regions rather than Ukraine as a whole.[4] In particular, as

[2]The relative salience of a certain identity *vis-à-vis* other identities people may have can be conceptualised as one of the dimensions of identity, alongside its particular content and the degree of contestation within a community (Kulyk 2011b).

[3]The respondents could characterise their everyday use as being 'only' in Ukrainian/Russian, 'in most situations' in Ukrainian/Russian or 'equally' in the two languages (as well as in an unspecified 'other language', an option whose frequency turned out to be within the margin of error). People who said they were using only or predominantly one of the two main languages will henceforth be referred to as Ukrainian- or Russian-speakers, while those claiming equal use of the two will be called 'symmetrical' bilinguals.

[4]This nationwide trend corresponds to the findings of an earlier local-level study comparing the predominantly Ukrainian-speaking Lviv and the predominantly Russian-speaking Donetsk. In the early 1990s, Soviet identity was as salient for Donetsk residents as Ukrainian identity, even if not as important as the local one. Although the attachment to the bygone Soviet homeland drastically decreased over the following decade, this did not result in a greater salience of Ukrainian identity, strengthening instead the self-designation in local terms. For the Lviv population, in contrast, Ukrainian and local identities were equally strong and the Soviet one rather marginal already in the first years of independence (Hrytsak 2007, p. 50).

TABLE 1
RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY QUESTION: 'WHOM DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF PRIMARILY' (%)

	2006				*2012*				*2014*			
		Russian-speakers				*Russian-speakers*				*Russian-speakers*		
	All resp. (N = 1900)	*All (N = 714)*	*West and Centre (N = 147)*	*East and South (N = 567)*	*All resp. (N = 1920)*	*All (N = 681)*	*West and Centre (N = 113)*	*East and South (N = 568)*	*All resp. (N = 2035)*	*All (N = 811)*	*West and Centre (N = 166)*	*East and South (N = 645)*
Citizen of Ukraine	50.4	41.0	40.8	41.1	53.3	41.4	52.2	39.3	61.4	41.1	71.7	33.2
Resident of locality	24.7	24.5	33.3	22.2	27.8	28.5	21.2	29.9	20.7	30.1	12.0	34.8
Resident of region	9.7	12.5	7.5	13.8	9.1	14.4	6.2	16.0	8.8	14.5	5.4	16.9
Agent of Slavic unity	6.1	10.5	6.1	10.8	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Resident of the post-Soviet space	–	–	–	–	3.1	6.5	7.1	6.3	3.1	5.9	4.2	6.4
European	1.6	2.1	1.4	2.3	2.6	2.8	5.3	2.3	1.1	1.2	0.6	1.2
Citizen of the earth	6.4	8.7	9.5	8.5	3.0	5.3	8.0	4.8	4.2	6.3	3.6	7.0
Other	0.3	0.4	0.0	0.5	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Hard to say	1.2	1.1	1.4	0.9	1.2	1.2	0.0	1.4	0.8	0.9	2.4	0.5

Source: Hromadska Dumka, December 2006; Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, February 2012 and September 2014.

seen from the comparison of the 2012 and 2014 data, they failed to respond to the patriotic mobilisation of Euromaidan and defence of the country from external aggression by a stronger identification as citizens of Ukraine. At the same time, figures for the two halves of Ukraine confirm different dynamics in different regions. Although the small subsample of Russian-speakers from the West and Centre calls for caution in the assessment of differences, changes over the years are big enough to conclude that the Russian-speaking minorities of those regions increasingly ally with their Ukrainian-speaking majorities in prioritising national identity over all other territorial ones, particularly at a time of war. In contrast, the Russian-speaking majorities of the East and South grew increasingly attached to their localities and, to a lesser extent, regions, and in view of the Maidan and the war became not more but less attached to Ukraine as a whole, opting instead for its sub- or supranational competitors (remarkably, in 2012 'easterners' were less inclined than 'westerners' to prioritise global identity, and in 2014 the relation was reversed).[5] The widening gap between the two parts of the would-be Russian-speaking population vividly demonstrates the crucial importance of the regional dimension of identity processes in Ukraine.

The second question compared Ukrainian identity not only with other territorial identifications but also with widespread identifications of other kinds, including those defined by gender, religion, occupation, ideology, ethnicity and language. Unfortunately, this question was only asked in the 2014 survey, so we can analyse current priorities but not their evolution for the years of independence (see Table 2). When asked which of the listed 20 words best characterise them (and allowed to choose no more than three), the respondents indicated their identity as 'Ukrainians' more frequently than any other, even though 'man/woman' turned out to be virtually as popular, the difference being within the margin of error. Although the specific meaning of the word 'Ukrainian' for a particular respondent remains unclear, whether civic, ethnic or some combination thereof, the fact is that this self-perception is extremely salient in today's Ukraine. It is no wonder that people indicating their nationality as Russian were much less inclined to think of themselves as Ukrainians than those reporting Ukrainian nationality. More surprisingly, one in 12 of self-designated Russians also considered it important to identify as Ukrainian, implying that the latter identity was for them primarily civic and the former primarily ethnic. For all respondents using mainly Russian in their everyday life (that is, including both self-designated Russians and a considerable portion of those who declared themselves Ukrainian by nationality), their identity as Ukrainians turned out to be much more salient than that as Russian-speakers, in an obvious repudiation of Laitin's prediction. Although they were less inclined to identify as Ukrainians than those speaking predominantly Ukrainian or both languages equally, most Russian-speakers primarily identified themselves not in terms of language but rather in terms of gender, locality, religion or region.

At the same time, similarly to the previous question, the two halves of Ukraine differed considerably in the identification priorities of their residents, in particular those usually speaking Russian. In the West and Centre, Russian-speakers were much more inclined to

[5]The decreasing identification of south-eastern Russian-speakers with the Ukrainian state in 2014 was partly due to the Russian aggression in the Donbas which resulted in the establishment of two separatist 'republics' not recognising Ukrainian sovereignty over their respective territories. Although by September 2014 the Donbas was affected by an intense military conflict, the survey encompassed both Ukrainian- and separatist-controlled territories. Not surprisingly, it was on the separatist side of the frontline that the identification with the Ukrainian state turned out to be particularly low.

TABLE 2

RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY QUESTION: 'WHICH OF THE WORDS LISTED BELOW BEST CHARACTERISES YOU? IF IT IS HARD FOR YOU TO CHOOSE ONE, INDICATE A FEW BUT NOT MORE THAN THREE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS' (%)

	Ukraine			*West + Centre*		*East + South*	
	All (N = 2035)	*Russian nationality (N = 211)*	*Russian-speakers (N = 811)*	*Russian-speakers (N = 166)*	*Ukrainian-speakers (N = 780)*	*Russian-speakers (N = 645)*	*Ukrainian-speakers (N = 76)*
Orthodox	26.2	26.5	26.9	23.5	24.7	27.8	30.7
Man/woman	44.7	52.6	48.2	45.2	35.2	49.0	57.9
Worker	4.8	5.7	5.4	1.8	3.2	6.4	3.9
Soviet person	2.0	7.1	3.5	3.0	0.4	3.6	8.0
Student	1.7	0.9	2.3	4.2	1.8	1.9	0.0
Resident of my city/village	28.2	22.3	27.4	16.9	27.0	30.1	34.7
Peasant	1.7	0.5	0.1	0.0	2.7	0.2	5.3
Greek Catholic	2.4	0	0.2	1.2	5.8	0.0	0.0
Ukrainian	47.1	8.5	22.6	35.5	68.5	19.3	73.3
Intelligentsia	3.2	5.7	4.1	2.4	2.6	4.3	2.7
Entrepreneur	0.6	1.4	0.7	0.0	0.4	0.9	0.0
Nationalist	1.1	1.4	0.7	0.0	1.8	0.9	1.3
Russian	3.4	28.4	8.6	6.0	0.0	9.3	0.0
Resident of my region	16.1	20.4	20.5	7.8	13.5	23.8	6.7
Pensioner	11.4	14.2	9.5	7.8	10.4	9.9	25.3
European	1.6	2.4	1.5	0.6	1.4	1.7	0.0
Patriot	7.3	2.8	5.3	7.2	9.5	4.8	14.7
Unemployed	1.3	0.9	1.1	0.0	1.0	1.4	4.0
Russian-speaker	3.9	15.6	8.6	10.8	0.1	7.9	0.0
Non-believer	0.5	0.9	1.0	2.4	0.3	0.6	0.0
Other	1.1	3.8	1.5	1.2	0.4	1.7	3.9
Hard to say	1.1	1.9	0.7	0.6	1.8	0.8	0.0

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, September 2014.

identify as Ukrainians than in the East and South where, in contrast, local and regional identifications were much more prevalent. Not only were differences between the geographical halves commensurate with those between the two linguistic groups, but also inter-regional differentiation was more pronounced in the Russian-speaking group than the Ukrainian-speaking one. Perhaps most importantly for my analysis, even in the east-southern part people speaking predominantly Russian were more likely to think of themselves as Ukrainians than Russian-speakers or Russians, notwithstanding a strong emphasis by those regions' elites on the Russian language and culture as a crucial element of their distinct identity (Wolczuk 2007; Kulyk 2009).[6]

Qualitative data somewhat contradict the quantitative-based evaluation by implying a drastic increase in the salience of Ukrainian identity among Russian-speakers. Since Euromaidan and especially the outbreak of the war, one could regularly encounter assertions in various media of individuals' increased self-identification as Ukrainian, greater pride in being a citizen of the Ukrainian state, stronger attachment to symbols of nationhood, enhanced solidarity with compatriots, increased readiness to defend Ukraine and/or work for Ukraine. Most spoke of their own experiences or those of people around them, while some generalised individual changes and asserted a greater consolidation of the Ukrainian nation or even the 'birth' of a nation from the midst of people supposedly lacking in national consciousness. Featuring various elites and activists who are usually overrepresented in public discourse, such texts were often (perhaps more often than not) written in Russian which continues to be the main language of most urbanites, a stratum from which elites and activists are usually drawn (Kulyk 2007; Vyshniak 2009, sec. 1.2). Most of the authors did not present their reliance on Russian as a manifestation of Russian-speaking or Russian identity; in fact, they saw no need to explain their language choice at all, a fact reflecting the widespread perception of the use of Russian in the media and most other domains of Ukrainian society as perfectly normal.

Some argued that the national consolidation started during Euromaidan in a readiness to defend the common cause and support other people fighting for it, people who came to be perceived as Ukrainians rather than merely fellow protesters. However, most assertions of stronger Ukrainian identity attributed it to the defence of the country from Russian aggression, in particular to heroic resistance of Ukrainian fighters in the Donbas as in this post by Kyiv journalist Matvii Nikitin:

> I knew I was Ukrainian but I did not quite understand what that meant and what to do with it …. And it would have never occurred to me to clasp a Ukrainian flag to my bosom until I came upon that flag [which had belonged to one of the Ukrainian units defending the Donetsk airport] shot through by a dozen bullets.[7]

It is the realisation that they were or might be fighting people speaking the same language that made some Russian-speakers reflect on the previously unnecessary choice between an identity defined by language and one related to their country of residence which they now fully perceived as their homeland. As Oleksandr Babych, a self-designated 'Russian-speaking

[6]However, on the separatist-controlled territories in the Donbas Ukrainian identity was much less salient than Russian and Russian-speaking ones, another manifestation of their residents' unwillingness (perhaps partly because of fear) to identify with the state/country their 'republics' were breaking away from.

[7]Facebook, 6 October 2014, in Russian, available at: https://www.facebook.com/matvii.nikitin/posts/782164605179708, accessed 20 August 2017.

Ukrainian' from the predominantly Russian-speaking city of Odesa, wrote at the very beginning of Russian intervention in Crimea: 'I will defend my Fatherland and curse you in Russian! Because I will not have time to learn Ukrainian properly as a Russian soldier will kill me'.[8] In the face of a grave threat to their country, Babych and many other Russian-speakers not only thought of themselves as fully Ukrainian but also felt the need to master the newly valued national language which they had not bothered to learn before. The subsequent escalation of Russian aggression against Ukraine urged many Ukrainian citizens to renounce what they came to perceive as the language of an occupier, even if it used to be their own main language. At the same time, no less audible were those voices in public discourse arguing that in view of Russian-speakers' crucial contribution to the defence of the country, any discrimination against their language would be not just undemocratic but outright immoral (Kulyk 2016a). In any case, most discussants had no doubts that Russian-speakers were equal members of the Ukrainian nation, even if they disagreed about the implications of that membership.

Focus group discussions conducted in February and March 2015 in four cities in various parts of Ukraine[9] provided a more balanced picture showing both why the salience of national identity had generally increased and why this identification remained, or had become problematic for some people (Kulyk 2016b). As national identity can be related to both the nation and the state, those people who were discontented with the current policies of the state were less likely to develop or declare such identification than those who supported the authorities. As one participant put it: 'unfortunately, now I understand that my country treats me, a citizen of Ukraine, like a brute, excuse my expression …. Love should be mutual. If I am hated, why should I love?'.[10] Moreover, while the feeling of empowerment after the Maidan victory contributed to stronger national identity, the opposite feeling of powerlessness and helplessness at a time of severe economic crisis and ongoing war made it more problematic. At the same time, even some of those who bemoaned hardships and the state's indifference to citizens' needs expressed their love for the country and belief in changes for the better. Many participants tried to reconcile their dissatisfaction with current policies and their national sentiment by declaring the preference for their identity as Ukrainians to one as Ukraine's citizens.

Similarly to online network interaction, few participants in the focus group discussions which focused on the issues of Ukrainian national identity and nationalism manifested their identity as Russian-speakers. Even though Ukrainian was prompted by moderators who

[8]Facebook, 1 March 2014, in Russian, available at: https://www.facebook.com/aleksander.babich/posts/688714287834526, accessed 20 August 2017.

[9]Focus group discussions were conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in the capital of Kyiv and eastern metropolis of Kharkiv (February 2015) as well as in two medium-sized provincial capitals, Kropyvnytskyi (then called Kirovohrad) in the centre of the country and Chernivtsi in the south-west (March 2015). In each city, one group included people of 20–35 years who participated in the Maidan or supported it, and the other people of 35–50 years who reported a negative or rather negative attitude toward the Maidan. Separate groups for people with opposing positions on the Maidan were created to avoid overt confrontation and promote openness; the division by age was used to allow young people to speak freely and not feel uneasy in contradicting their older compatriots. This design seemed to work well as many participants expressed views contradicting those apparently shared by the majority of the group and such dissenting views were never attacked as aggressively as to intimidate their holders. However, as with all focus groups, one cannot exclude that some participants' limited contribution to the discussion at least partly resulted from a fear of expressing views with which others were likely to disagree.

[10]Respondent 2, in Russian, focus group Kharkiv 2, with participants of 35–50 years who viewed the Maidan critically, 22 February 2015.

wanted to assess levels of Ukrainian proficiency, a number of participants spoke Russian all or most of the time, either because of low proficiency in or dislike of Ukrainian. Such people tended to be particularly critical of the post-Euromaidan policies and ambivalent about their attitude towards the Ukrainian state and nation. This stance seemed to be most pronounced in Kharkiv, the most Russian-speaking and probably the most Russia-friendly of the four cities where the discussions were held. In an extreme case, a few people disapproved of the state's policies so much as to question their identity as Ukrainians, a stance exemplified by the following statement:

> Well, my attitude has become worse. Because while earlier I came to Russia and was called a khokhol [Ukrainian] and for me it was a badge of pride and I was really proud of this [being Ukrainian], I embroidered [traditional Ukrainian] shirts, we were happy to sing Ukrainian songs …. Today I love my country no less than earlier but I am ashamed of participating in this, well, unpleasant process that is going on today. In effect, Ukraine today looks like a fascist state that, roughly speaking, may be [controlled] by some [external] forces, and we here are like puppets provoking and fanning a third world war.[11]

For this and several other Kharkiv participants, a strong attachment to Russia and support for Russia-friendly policies of Ukraine virtually predetermined a negative attitude toward what they perceived as anti-Russian protests on the Maidan and anti-Russian policies of the post-Maidan authorities, which, in turn, led them to side with the Russian state in its confrontation with the Ukrainian one. However, such an attitude was clearly exceptional for participants in these focus groups where most participants perceived Russia as an aggressor and declared a recent change for the worse in their attitude toward the Russian state and, in many cases, the Russian people who were believed to overwhelmingly support their government. This change was in accordance with that reported by most respondents in the 2014 survey discussed above (Kulyk 2016b).

Changing meaning of Ukrainianness

The reverse side of Russian-speakers' greater willingness to identify themselves as Ukrainians is a changed meaning of Ukrainianness, that is, a shift from an ethnic to a civic criterion for membership in the Ukrainian nation. Public discourse of the post-Maidan years provides ample evidence of programmatic statements about the criteria for membership in the Ukrainian nation, alongside personal perspectives of belonging, first and foremost among those people whose Russian ethnic origin and/or primary language had earlier led them to think otherwise. For example, Kharkiv blogger Roman Shraik flatly rejected the linguistic definition of nationhood which he considered as flagrantly inappropriate as the Russian leaderships' assumptions that Russian-speakers, let alone ethnic Russians living in Ukraine, should uncritically support Moscow (in other words, feel like part of the Russian diaspora). In his view, 'the Ukrainian nation [*narod*] encompasses people of various ethnic origin, people speaking various languages, people going (or not) to various churches …. We have one

[11]Respondent 3, in Russian, focus group Kharkiv 2, with participants of 35–50 years who viewed the Maidan critically, 22 February 2015.

nation—people who consider Ukraine their homeland'.[12] Oleksii Nikiforov, a former military man who was born in Russia and served in a Ukrainian army unit in Crimea at the time of annexation, presented his view of the political nation in distinction from that of ethnically defined 'nationality': 'A nation is when regardless of nationality, you feel belonging to a people [*narod*]. That is, I cannot speak Ukrainian nicely, I am Russian by nationality, but I am a Ukrainian' (Eminova 2015). While Nikiforov wanted to retain his distinct nationality, most other Russian-speakers expressing in various media their views of nationhood saw no need to belong to any ethnocultural collectivity that would stand between them and their nation of choice. Rather, as the Donbas businessman and politician Serhii Taruta (2016) put it, they considered it imperative for all citizens 'to become aware of one's Ukrainianness and unite for the defence of our home'.

Similar to the hierarchy of identities, survey data give an opportunity to check to what an extent this change in perception is present on the mass level. The 2014 survey asked the respondents about their views on who belongs to the Ukrainian nation, allowing them to choose from alternatives that articulated competing concepts one could encounter in public discourse (see Table 3). The most popular, albeit far from predominant perception turned out to be the civic one including all citizens of Ukraine regardless of their ethnic origin, language use and cultural practices, a finding demonstrating that the traditional ethnic perception of nationhood no longer predominates in Ukrainian society. The remaining respondents were rather evenly divided between perceptions that may be labelled local ethnic (Ukrainian citizens of Ukrainian origin), global ethnic (people of Ukrainian origin across the world) and local linguo-cultural (Ukrainian citizens speaking the Ukrainian language and adhering to Ukrainian cultural traditions). The distribution of preferences was very close to two surveys conducted by the Razumkov Centre in 2006 and 2007 respectively[13] (from which I copied the question and the alternative answers), thus indicating that these preferences were not significantly affected by recent developments. Remarkably, the civic perception of the Ukrainian nation was equally popular among the members of both Ukrainian and Russian ethnic/linguistic groups; that is, not only did the latter want to belong but also the former were willing to admit them. The only notable difference between their preferences was the greater popularity of the linguo-cultural perception among Ukrainian-speakers (and thus among all those calling themselves Ukrainian by nationality) who emphasised the value of their language and culture, in contrast to Russian-speakers who downplayed it in their striving to belong despite their continued reliance on Russian. This striving was particularly prominent in the south-eastern part of the country where the Russian-speaking majority strongly opposed limiting the titular nation to those of Ukrainian origin which would still exclude many people with Russian or other ethnic backgrounds. In the West and Centre, Russian-speakers were somewhat more willing than in the East and South to be left out based on their origin but no less strongly opposed to the exclusion by language. In other words, Russian-speakers by no means see their linguistic practice as incompatible with belonging to the Ukrainian nation.

Remarkably, the striving to belong to the inclusive Ukrainian nation manifests itself even in the self-designation by the traditionally exclusive category of nationality. Ukrainian

[12]Facebook, 28 March 2014, available at: https://www.facebook.com/roman.shrike/posts/773091879382260, accessed 20 August 2017.

[13]'Formuvannia spil'noï identychnosti hromadian Ukraïny: perspektyvy i vyklyky', *Natsional'na bezpeka i oborona*, 9, 2007, p. 8, available at: http://razumkov.org.ua/ukr/files/category_journal/NSD93_ukr.pdf, accessed 30 December 2016.

TABLE 3
RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY QUESTION: 'WHO DO YOU THINK BELONGS TO THE UKRAINIAN NATION?' (%)

The Ukrainian nation is:	*All resp. (N = 2033)*	*Ukrainian nationality (N = 620)*	*Russian nationality (N = 211)*	*Ukrainian-speakers (N = 855)*	*Russian-speakers*		
					All (N = 810)	*West and Centre (N = 166)*	*East and South (N = 644)*
All Ukrainian citizens regardless of their ethnic belonging, language they speak and cultural tradition to which they adhere and according to which they raise their children	43.3	43.8	46.0	41.1	44.8	39.5	46.1
Ukrainian citizens who are ethnic Ukrainians by their origin (have Ukrainians among their ancestors)	15.2	14.3	16.6	11.6	19.5	24.0	18.5
All ethnic Ukrainians regardless of their place of residence and citizenship	15.6	15.1	15.6	12.9	17.3	21.6	16.1
Ukrainian citizens (regardless of their ethnic belonging) who speak Ukrainian, adhere to Ukrainian national traditions and raise their children according to them	19.4	20.7	13.3	28.7	10.2	10.2	10.2
Other	0.4	0.2	1.4	0.2	0	0	0.9
Hard to say	6.1	5.9	7.1	5.6	4.8	4.8	8.1

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, September 2014.

TABLE 4
RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY QUESTION: 'WHO DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF BY NATIONALITY?' (%)

	2012				*2014*			
		Russian-speakers				*Russian-speakers*		
	All resp. (N = 1922)	*All (N = 681)*	*West and Centre (N = 111)*	*East and South (N = 570)*	*All resp. (N = 2027)*	*All (N = 809)*	*West and Centre (N = 166)*	*East and South (N = 643)*
Ukrainian	79.1	52.9	60.4	51.4	79.7	56.4	81.3	50.1
Both	4.4	7.9	10.8	7.4	8.3	17.2	5.4	20.2
Russian	14.4	35.5	26.1	37.4	10.4	23.2	12.0	26.0
Other	2.1	3.7	1.7	3.8	1.7	3.0	1.2	3.7

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, February 2012 and September 2014.

citizens (including those speaking primarily Russian in their everyday life) increasingly call themselves Ukrainian when responding to the census or survey question on nationality and, if asked about their underlying reasoning, frequently admit that they define nationality in civic rather than ethnic terms. The 2001 census, the only one conducted during Ukraine's 25 years of independence, revealed a massive re-identification into Ukrainians among people who (or whose parents) used to consider themselves Russians, so that the share of the former increased from 73% (in the last Soviet census of 1989) to 77% and that of the latter decreased from 22% to 17%.[14] The self-designation as Ukrainian turned out to be particularly widespread among young people who had been raised in independent Ukraine without an official registration of their nationality, a Soviet practice that the post-Soviet Ukrainian state discontinued at the very beginning of its existence. For example, in the Hromadska Dumka survey of 2006, 81% of respondents in the age category of 18–29 years called themselves Ukrainian by nationality, in contrast to 74% of those older than 60.

Moreover, when allowed to declare not only exclusive but also hybrid identities, some of the survey respondents who would otherwise designate themselves as Russian opted instead for the hybrid Ukrainian–Russian identification, thus bringing the share of Russians further down. In the KIIS survey of 2012, the figure was 14%, compared to 79% of Ukrainians and 4% of 'both Ukrainian and Russian' (see Table 4). With the outbreak of war and the ensuing alienation from the Russian state and, to a lesser extent, its people, more of those Ukrainian citizens who earlier felt exclusively Russian preferred to be partly Ukrainian, so that in the 2014 survey the former category shrank to 10% and the latter expanded to 8%. Among Russian-speakers, of course, the share of self-designated Russians was much higher than in the sample as a whole, but it amounted to just above one third in 2012 and dropped to below a quarter by 2014, with a commensurate increase in hybrid identity. In line with the general pattern of regional differentiation, re-identification of Russian-speakers was particularly sweeping in the West and Centre where their distribution by nationality in 2014 became virtually identical to that in the entire nationwide sample. But even in the east-southern part of Ukraine, only a quarter of Russian-speakers adhered to their exclusive identification as Russians, twice as few as those who chose to designate themselves exclusively as Ukrainians.

[14] 'All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001', no date, available at: http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/, accessed 12 October 2016.

TABLE 5
RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY QUESTION: 'DIFFERENT PEOPLE DEFINE THEIR NATIONAL BELONGING IN DIFFERENT WAYS. PLEASE TELL HOW EXACTLY YOU DEFINE YOUR NATIONALITY. GIVE ONE MOST IMPORTANT ANSWER' (%)

	2012				*2014*			
		Russian-speakers				*Russian-speakers*		
Define nationality by:	*All resp. (N = 1922)*	*All (N = 681)*	*West and Centre (N = 111)*	*East and South (N = 570)*	*All resp. (N = 2027)*	*All (N = 809)*	*West and Centre (N = 166)*	*East and South (N = 643)*
Nationality of my parents (or one of my parents)	75.3	70.3	76.8	69.1	63.9	63.2	57.3	64.8
Country I live in	16.4	15.5	21.4	14.2	24.4	20.3	31.1	17.5
Language I speak	4.5	9.0	0.9	10.5	6.0	10.9	4.9	12.4
My attitude toward this nationality	2.6	2.9	0.9	3.3	3.8	3.1	3.0	3.1
Other	0.1	0.1	0	0.2	0.1	0	0	0
Hard to say	1.2	2.2	0	2.6	1.7	2.5	0.7	2.2

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, February 2012 and September 2014.

To prove that this shift toward Ukrainian nationality reflects not only a changed perception of one's ethnic 'roots' but also a change in perceived importance of such roots in determining one's nationality, the 2012 and 2014 surveys included a follow-up question to that on self-designation by nationality. This question asked the respondents to explain how they define their nationality, that is, to choose among the suggested options that referred to hereditary, civic, linguistic and attitudinal criteria. As Table 5 demonstrates, a majority of respondents in both surveys preferred the hereditary criterion (referring to the nationality of one's parents), although this way may conceal the ethnocultural, civic or some other criterion as adopted from their parents. At the same time, this preference is gradually being eroded as people increasingly define nationality in civic terms, that is, by their country of residence. No wonder that this definition turned out to be more popular with those who indicated their nationality as Ukrainian: for them, living in Ukraine was another reason to consider themselves Ukrainian. In contrast, self-designated Russians more frequently chose nationality in accordance to the language they speak. Turning to the groups defined by the main language of everyday use, we notice that Ukrainian- and Russian-speakers differed radically in the likelihood of applying the linguistic criterion of nationality but the difference in the popularity of the civic definition was much smaller due to its appeal to many predominantly Russian-speaking respondents who, accordingly, declared themselves Ukrainian rather than Russian. The more abrupt re-identification away from Russians in response to the war was accompanied by a further shift away from the hereditary criterion of nationality; for Russian-speakers, however, it was somewhat smaller than for those mainly speaking Ukrainian. Once again, the west-central part of Ukraine was far ahead of the east-southern one where Russian-speakers were almost as likely to define nationality by the language they speak as by the country they live in. But for the Russian-speakers nationwide, the latter criterion was in 2014 twice as popular as the former, which gives an additional indication that this category of Ukrainian citizens was by no means on its way to becoming a distinct ethnocultural collectivity.

It should be noted, however, that the increasing Ukrainianness of the Russian-speaking part of Ukraine's population means that most of these people do not cease to be Russian-speaking when becoming (more) Ukrainian. Indeed, the share of those using predominantly Russian in their everyday life decreased only marginally for the years of independence, not least because young people, while knowing the Ukrainian language better due to its increased use in education, did not speak it more, or at least not much more than older generations who had been raised and schooled under the Soviet regime. While more Ukrainian appeared in certain domains such as education, public administration and family communication, in other practices the Soviet-induced predominance of Russian persisted or even increased, perhaps most importantly in the workplace and the media (Vyshniak 2009; Kulyk 2015). Euromaidan and the war, while stimulating attachment to Ukrainian as the perceived national language and alienation from Russian as the perceived language of the aggressor, did not urge a considerable part of Ukraine's population to radically change their language practice. Although many people who used to speak almost exclusively Russian seem to be more willing to use some Ukrainian, at least in certain practices, by no means does this change amount to a full-fledged switch from one language to the other, which would then be reflected in responses to the survey question on everyday language.[15] The KIIS survey of 2014 actually showed a somewhat higher percentage of respondents who I classified here as Russian-speakers (those who reported using Russian 'exclusively' or 'in most situations') than the 2012 survey, 39% compared to 35%. This was primarily at the expense of those who had earlier said that they were using both languages 'equally'. The focus group discussions from early 2015 confirmed that most people saw no need to abandon their accustomed language, which they justified by reducing it to merely a convenient means of communication or arguing that 'we do not associate it with Russia'.[16] Public discourse, in particular social network communication, provided numerous examples of both individual declarations of abandonment of the irreparably tainted language and objections of perceived infringements on one's right to use it. Between these two extremes, most Russian-speakers seem to continue to rely on their preferred language without commenting on this choice, thereby manifesting their perception thereof as perfectly normal (Kulyk 2016a).

Discussion and conclusion

In discussing factors that contributed to the low salience of Russian-speaking identity compared to the Ukrainian one, the first thing worth mentioning is a lack of clear boundaries between the Russian-speaking people and the rest of Ukraine's population. What seems unambiguous in survey data, using one of the more or less arbitrary criteria of defining 'Russian-speakers', turns out to be messy in real life where both language practice and ethnolinguistic identity are anything but clear-cut. Most people in today's Ukraine use both Ukrainian and Russian in their everyday lives, albeit to greatly varying degrees, and very

[15]At the same time, these responses reflect changing perceptions of appropriate behaviour in the respective practice which may lead the respondents to deviate from the true in favour of the appropriate. The fact that the share of Russian-speakers according to the 2014 survey did not decrease in comparison with the 2012 data indicates that most respondents did not feel an urge to hide their reliance on Russian, that is, they had not come to see it as inappropriate.

[16]Respondent 4, in Russian, focus group Kharkiv 1, with participants of 20–35 years who viewed the Maidan positively, 22 February 2015.

many (18% by self-designation in the 2014 survey) combine the two languages more or less equally. Moreover, even among those who speak predominantly Russian, very many consider Ukrainian their native language (in the 2014 survey, this share was 14%, while a further 25% claimed to have two native languages). Whether this choice is informed by ethnic origin, the idea of Ukrainian as the national language for all citizens or other considerations, people care about their perceived native language no less than the language they usually speak—as clearly demonstrated by their preferences regarding the language situation and language policy which a number of surveys have inquired about (Kulyk 2011a, 2013). Such a discrepancy between ethnolinguistic identity and language practice was produced by Soviet policies which promoted identification among Ukrainians with the Ukrainian nation and 'its' language, on the one hand, and the reliance on Russian as the main language of social mobility and inter-ethnic unity, on the other. Far from being eliminated, after the proclamation of independence, this discrepancy persisted and even increased as ever more people identified as Ukrainians without speaking much of the eponymous language (Kulyk 2011a, 2014). As this essay has demonstrated, the tendency became stronger after the Maidan and the outbreak of war, hence the discrepancy grew even greater.

For one particular aspect of ethnolinguistic diversity to become much more salient than others, the state or some other influential actors would have to emphasise it strongly in their policies and discourses. For 25 years of independence, the Ukrainian state has mostly refrained from such emphasis, even if it has prioritised the Ukrainian language and thus given some advantages to its speakers. The promotion of Ukrainian, usually far from aggressive, did not result in any systematic discrimination against the speakers of Russian, most of whom could still use their preferred language in the workplace, communication with public servants and other practices (Kulyk 2007). Even in education, where a shift toward Ukrainian was perhaps the most perceptible, most of those who wanted their children to be taught in Russian (and this by no means included all the people who spoke mainly Russian themselves) had no problems finding a school or class providing such services. To be sure, many Russian-speakers considered themselves, or people like them, to be discriminated against, and their share was higher than among those speaking mainly Ukrainian. However, this asymmetrical view of discrimination had much to do with the former group being accustomed to enjoying the full range of communicative practices in their preferred language, a custom that the latter group had not been given a chance to acquire either under the Soviet regime or in the post-Soviet years of lukewarm Ukrainianisation.[17] Yet even at the peak of the promotion of Ukrainian under President Viktor Yushchenko, 57% of Russian-speaking respondents in the Hromadska Dumka survey of 2006 said that they had never encountered manifestations of language-based discrimination against Russian-speakers and only 13% argued they had encountered such manifestations quite often (Kulyk 2013, p. 290).

Related to the lack of large-scale discrimination against Russian-speakers is a strong presence of political actors (seen as) representing the interests of this constituency. Having the

[17]This resentment of the perceived erosion of their accustomed linguistic environment was clearly demonstrated in focus group discussions conducted by the Hromadska Dumka centre in November 2006 in five Ukrainian cities in different parts of Ukraine, including the predominantly Russian-speaking Donetsk and Odesa. Many participants in these two cities complained not only about having to fill in various forms in the state language which they could not write well enough but also the school instruction of their children in Ukrainian and even the requirement to use that language as employees in state establishments. Many Russian-speakers seemed to consider any need to use that language a manifestation of discrimination (Kulyk 2013).

full scope of political rights, Russian-speaking citizens were able to elect to the local councils, national parliament and sometimes even the presidency those politicians who they hoped would protect their right to use their preferred language.[18] The best-known example of such a language-related vote was the victory of Leonid Kuchma in the presidential election of 1994 thanks to overwhelming support by Russian-speakers, which had much to do with his promise to initiate an elevation of the legal status of Russian (Arel & Khmelko 1996). Although, upon election, Kuchma refused to take steps to guarantee the uninhibited use of Russian in all social domains, Russian-speakers' votes repeatedly brought to the parliament enough Russian-friendly candidates who then managed to block the most radical Ukrainianisation measures during the presidencies of Kuchma and Yushchenko. Moreover, these votes eventually ensured the victory of Viktor Yanukovych who launched a counteroffensive against Ukrainianisation, culminating in a new language law of 2012 that did elevate the status of Russian, thereby legalising its actual prevalence in most social domains (Kulyk 2009; Charnysh 2013). This victory, as well as earlier successes of Yanukovych's party in the parliamentary elections of 2006 and 2007, resulted from a mobilisation of the eastern and southern constituencies by the anti-Orange elites who emphasised the proximity to Russia and the reliance on the Russian language as those regions' core values (Wolczuk 2007; Kulyk 2009). While obviously detrimental to identification with Ukraine as a whole, this mobilisation prioritised not linguistic identity but regional and local ones, thus contributing not only to their prevalence in the East and South but also to alienation of their residents from their compatriots in the West and Centre, which also meant disunity of the Russian-speaking population nationwide. Moreover, seeking power in Ukraine as a whole, rather than only its east-southern part, Yanukovych and his associates had to balance the support for the Russian language with the recognition of the value of Ukrainian, just as their opponents mostly refrained from explicit de-legitimisation of Russian and its speakers. None of the major parties presented itself as representing only one of the two main language groups or geographical halves of the country, even if some came to be seen as such by both their supporters and opponents. The lack of institutionalisation of ethnolinguistic differences was no less important for national unity than the representation of different groups in power bodies and their influence on policy-making (D'Anieri 2007).

While politicians kept the fragile balance between the interests of Ukrainian- and Russian-speakers, members of both alleged groups increasingly perceived themselves as Ukraine's citizens or simply Ukrainians due to their participation in a number of practices prioritising that identity, from education to travelling with a Ukrainian passport to watching Ukrainian sport teams compete with foreign ones. By the second decade of independence, this identity prevailed in both of the main language groups and in all macro-regions of Ukraine, even if the anti-Orange mobilisation somewhat undermined its strength among Russian-speakers of the East and South. The outbreak of war with Russia brought Ukrainian citizens a new experience of defending one's country and/or expecting an attack of a foreign army, an experience that was widely claimed to increase both identification with Ukraine and alienation from Russia. Although it certainly did work that way for thousands of Russian-speaking citizens who came to fight for Ukraine in the Donbas, organise popular aid to those on the frontline or pressure the

[18]In the words of Paul D'Anieri: 'the combination of the number of ethnic Russians and Russophone Ukrainians, their concentration, and the electoral law, guaranteed that there would be no legislative basis for repression of ethnic Russians' (2007, p. 19). Although D'Anieri focused on the role of ethnic Russians, his argument becomes even more valid if applied to the greater constituency of Russian-speakers.

authorities to implement political and economic reforms, the bulk of Russian-speakers in the East and South further retreated to identification with their respective localities. Nevertheless, even in these regions people predominantly speaking Russian by no means think of themselves primarily as Russian-speakers or Russians, two identifications whose combined popularity in the 2014 survey did not exceed that of the self-perception as Ukrainians, whatever the specific meaning of the latter. In the West and Centre, the prevalence of Ukrainian identification was much stronger. Both the great regional variation of Russian-speaking identity and its low salience compared to the Ukrainian one confirm Barrington's conclusion that rather than a unified Russian-speaking identity group, we have simply 'people outside of Russia who happen to speak Russian' (Barrington 2001, p. 152).

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The logic of competitive influence-seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the conflict in Donbas

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ABSTRACT

The crisis in Ukraine since late 2013 has seen four successive internationally mediated agreements that have been at best partially implemented. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and 42 key informant interviews sides, we explain this outcome with reference to the logic of competitive influence-seeking: Russia is currently unable to achieve a friendly and stable regime in Kyiv and thus hedges against the consolidation of an unfriendly pro-Western and stable regime by maintaining its control over parts of eastern Ukraine and solidifying the dependence of local regimes there on Russian support. This gives Russia the opportunity to maintain the current status quo or settle for re-integration terms through which Russia can sustain long-term influence over Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy. We conclude by reflecting on the consequences of competitive influence-seeking in the post-Soviet space: the likely persistence of low-intensity conflict in Ukraine; the further consolidation of territorial divisions in other post-Soviet conflicts; and the need for policy-makers in Russia and the West to prioritize the management of the consequent instability.

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Introduction

The crisis in Ukraine since 2013 and its local, regional, and global ramifications indicates a return to the dynamics of violent state fragmentation prevalent in the early 1990s. More strategically now than then, Russia is using violent civil conflict in countries in its so-called Near Abroad as a means to extend its own influence in the post-Soviet space and simultaneously to reduce that of the West. The conflict in the Donbas area of Ukraine, from this perspective, potentially foreshadows a more fundamental transformation of Russia's strategic behavior and illustrates how Russia may use different tactics of societal destabilization and covert occupation as a part of its military and security doctrine to manage a regional security complex that is critical to both its identity and ability to retain great power status and the capability to act globally. The situation in Ukraine, and Russia's actions and reactions there, must, thus, also be seen in the broader context of a region where interactions between state and non-state actors are structured by actual and potential conflicts (e.g. the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova, the conflicts in the North and South Caucasus, and potentially the Baltic States and Central Asia). Russian policy towards Ukraine since late 2013 in this sense also indicates that actual and latent conflicts in

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Eastern Europe have entered a qualitatively new and more dangerous phase, frequently described as a new Cold War yet far from the hegemonic stability that then prevailed in this part of the world. Although largely shaped by Moscow, in some cases for more than two decades, these conflicts exist within a broader regional and global geopolitical context that is not always or entirely under Moscow's control. This external dimension has undergone far-reaching shifts with the consolidation and strengthening of Russia as a regional power with an ambition to play a dominant role in its Near Abroad and beyond, and increasingly with the military capabilities and political will to do so.

The emerging and re-emerging violent conflicts in what the EU and NATO consider their eastern neighborhood thus represent a major challenge to the West and its policies in the region. Approaches designed to promote stability and peace through comprehensive social, economic, and political transformation and a geopolitical re-orientation of the countries in this now severely contested space towards the EU and NATO, albeit without any clear membership perspective, face a resolute challenge in the form of Russia's promotion of its own version of influence-seeking qua supporting and establishing pro-Russian regimes and locking them into social, political, and economic dependencies through closer, Moscow-centered regional integration across much of the post-Soviet space.

Our focus in the following analysis is on understanding what drives Russian policy in eastern Ukraine. We start from the empirical observation that Ukraine (much like other countries in the region such as Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova) has been pushed and pulled in different directions—east towards Russia, and west towards the EU and NATO (Cadier 2014; Nováky 2015; Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa 2015; Samokhvalov 2015; Smith 2015). At the same time, Ukraine suffers from systemic social, political, and economic crises, institutional weaknesses, and internal divisions that are enabled by competing vectors of linkages between different parts of Ukrainian society and their respective eastern and western counterparts and exacerbated by the exercise of great power leverage.[1]

Drawing on the existing literature on Russian policy in the near abroad (e.g. Saivetz 2012; Saltzman 2012; Fedorov 2013; Orenstein 2015; Tolstrup 2015; Averre 2016) and the growing literature on the conflict in Ukraine (e.g. Tsygankov 2015; Yost 2015; Yurgens 2015; Strasheim 2016), complemented by data gained from interviews with members of the social, political, and economic elites in Kyiv and Donbas, as well as with Western and Russian experts and officials, we argue that Russia has instrumentally used societal destabilization as a set of tools in the framework of its military and security doctrine of managed escalation–de-escalation in order to avoid the consolidation of a stable, pro-Western regime in Kyiv as a second-best option short of achieving a stable pro-Russian regime. This has resulted in the creation of two new Russian-backed de facto states in the post-Soviet space that provide Russia with leverage over Ukraine and its Western partners and simultaneously serves as a "placeholder" before an opportunity may arise in the future for establishing a stable pro-Russian regime.

In the empirical part of our article, we analyze Russia's policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and Donbas and its broader context. We demonstrate that the set of destabilization policies pursued by Russia are tools directed both at elites and society and aimed at the temporary dispersion of power in order to facilitate the replacement of incumbent local elites in Donbas with new, pro-Russian elites relying on a support base of hitherto marginalized, but newly empowered social groups. This, in turn, has been implemented along with the gradual and strategic escalation of covert forms of occupation in eastern Ukraine—nomadic, creeping, and consolidating occupation—which have allowed Russia to establish a firm hold on parts of Donbas that it has used to prevent the establishment of a stable, legitimate, and pro-Western regime in Kyiv.

We proceed as follows. First, we develop a theoretical framework for understanding Russian strategy in the neighborhood and identify a suitable methodology for applying it to the single case study of the Ukrainian conflict. We then carry out our case study using a chronological approach tracing the processes that underpin the evolution and implementation of Russian strategy and its results on the ground. We conclude with a summary of our findings and offer some cautious reflections on policy implications.

Competitive influence-seeking: understanding Russia's neighborhood strategy

At present, two sets of explanations are prominent in the academic and think-tank discourses on Russia's strategy in Ukraine. According to the first, Russia has mostly improvised by opportunistically exploiting tactical openings at high costs (Freedman 2014). The second explanation, in contrast, considers Russia's policies in Ukraine as part and parcel of a new grand strategy that seeks to return Russia to its previous position as a global superpower (Allison 2014; Tsygankov 2015; Yost 2015).[2]

More consistent with this second kind of reasoning, a separate relevant literature is broadly concerned with the underlying logics of regime export or promotion, one of which is that of "political survival." Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner (2010) argue that authoritarian regional powers have an interest in being surrounded by other autocratic regimes. Yet, equally, autocratic (as well as democratic) regimes have an overarching interest in stability. Thus, while there is a clear causal link between the rise of authoritarian powers, such as Russia, and the slowing down of democratization (Puddington 2007; Diamond 2008; Kagan 2008; Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010), as long as a stable domestic environment prevails, high incentives exist for presumptive regional or global hegemons to favor the continuation of the status quo, regardless of the prevailing regime type. As Way (2016, 74) notes, "autocrats care less about destroying democracy than about maintaining geopolitical power." Instability, especially in a contested neighborhood, threatens this goal. Consequently, instability begets intervention that may be driven by a potential desire for change (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Bader and Kästner 2010).

In analogy to the global competition argument that the US and USSR

> viewed the colonial and postcolonial world as a field of battle in which the competition had all the characteristics of a zero-sum game, in which even the slightest gain in presence or influence for one side was seen as transforming immediately into a comparable loss of presence or influence for the other (Kanet 2006, 334),

Russian policies (the focus of our article) should, thus, prioritize influence over stability, i.e. seek the establishment, restoration, and/or maintenance of a regime in Ukraine that is aligned to Moscow, rather than the West.

Our argument, thus, is that Moscow prefers a stable and friendly neighborhood and seeks to avoid a stable but hostile pro-Western neighborhood (Braun 2012; Fedorov 2013).[3] Moscow's commitment to achieving such a friendly and stable neighborhood has been expressed repeatedly by a number of senior figures, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who noted explicitly early on in the crisis that Russia wishes "Ukraine to be a peaceful, stable, and friendly state."[4]

Such an assumption is underpinned by a broadly realist approach to understanding states' behavior in the international arena, and our argument, as it is more limited in scope to the case of Ukraine as a specific manifestation of Moscow's policy in the Near Abroad, is that Russia's perception of its neighborhood is generally best understood as a "tug-of-war situation,"[5] and the crisis in Ukraine as a situation in which the "peace process … is hostage to geopolitical aspirations."[6] In other words, the Kremlin vies with the West for influence, considering any loss of such influence ultimately as a threat to its role as a regional hegemon and its aspirations for global major-power status (Mearsheimer 2014; Götz 2015).[7]

Short of being able to rely on wholly dependent client regimes under its effective control (as it mostly could during the Cold War), further penetration by the West into an already shrunken zone of influence, from a Russian perspective, needs to be countered at all cost. The stability and "friendliness" Russia needs can be achieved either by "soft" or "hard" power, or a combination of both. Like other post-Soviet countries, Ukraine is an important part of the neighborhood for Russia. Thus, Russia is interested in a predictable, stable, and manageable Ukraine. This goal can be achieved through promoting the rise and stability of a friendly, i.e. pro-Russian political regime.

Yet, developments in Ukraine and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space (e.g. in Moldova or Georgia) have demonstrated that friendly stability is not always achievable. Alternative outcomes, from a Russian perspective can then be rank-ordered as follows: friendly and unstable; unfriendly and unstable; and unfriendly and stable. In line with our logic of competitive influence-seeking,[8] we expect Russia thus to prefer an unfriendly, unstable neighbor over an unfriendly and stable one, i.e. a neighbor over which it can retain some influence and hold out hope for future change towards greater "friendliness."

Russia's policy of destabilization in Ukraine over the past three years indicates that policy-makers in the Kremlin are aware of the difficulty of achieving friendly stability in Ukraine—a country that is deeply divided along several societal cleavages, including its relationships with its major foreign partners, and is characterized by systemically weak institutions unable, and often unwilling, to manage the resulting domestic challenges. In the face of a counter-project of Western integration[9] that has at least some traction among significant sections of the population and confronted with a fragile state, both of which rule out establishing and sustaining a stable and friendly regime in Kyiv, one would expect that Russia should employ various tools in order to destabilize the socioeconomic and political situation within Ukraine in order to avoid unfriendly stability (a stable pro-Western political regime). At the same time, we would expect a Russian approach aimed at creating a situation in which the sustainable realization of its interests remains a viable future option, for example through securing influence in and over Ukraine. The current situation in Ukraine would thus appear the logical outcome of a strategy that, while not immediately achieving the preferred outcome of a stable and friendly neighborhood, "settles" for a temporary second-best result of preventing the worst-case scenario of a stable and hostile pro-Western country in the neighborhood.

Approach

If the logic of competitive influence-seeking as outlined in the preceding section applies to our case study, what would we need to observe in our analysis of Russian strategy in Ukraine? This is a critical issue that connects our research question about the drivers of Russian policy in eastern Ukraine and our theory to our methodological approach, and thus ultimately determines the extent to which we can draw credible inferences from our analysis. Reflecting on these expected observations also enables us to determine likely observations that we would make if our hypothesized logic of competitive influence-seeking were not true. This, in turn, allows us to avoid confirmation bias (i.e. looking only for hypothesis-confirming information).

When determining our data requirements in line with observations that we can assume would confirm or disconfirm our hypothesized logic of competitive influence-seeking, we also need to consider the research context in which we gather our data. Existing research has highlighted the difficulties associated with working in environments characterized by the dynamics of conflict and authoritarianism and the challenges that arise for data gathering, including ethical and safety concerns for researchers and interlocutors, and the reliability of any information gained (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, loc. 1449).

We now consider these issues in turn as we specify our methodology and, in particular, justify our methods of data collection and analysis. To begin with our expected observations, we should, first, be able to identify key moments in the development of the crisis in Ukraine that created opportunities and need for Russian *responses* to what the Kremlin would have perceived as events and processes detrimental to its objectives.

At each of these key moments, we should be able to see a change in policies, in particular, as it became clear that the preferred goal of a stable and friendly regime in Kyiv became unattainable. Put differently, there should be an observable shift in policies towards achieving the second-best outcome of preventing a stable but unfriendly regime in Ukraine. Given the logic outlined above, Russian policies should have shifted more and more towards creating a situation in which Kyiv is denied full sovereignty over its territory, while strengthening Moscow's hold over separatist-controlled territories and/or simultaneously using the possibility of some form of partial conflict settlement as a means to destabilize the Ukrainian Government and further weaken and at times paralyze state institutions, while keeping alive the various divisions in Ukrainian politics and society that contribute to this institutional fragility. The practical implication of this is that the negotiation and subsequent non/implementation of the four political agreements in the Ukrainian crisis between February 2014 and February 2015 constitute the key moments at which policy change was possible (and necessary) and that, alongside an analysis of the actual agreements, official statements, participant observation, and key informant interviews

should provide a sound evidentiary basis to substantiate our claims that Russian policy was driven by the logic of competitive influence-seeking.

At the same time, the key moments frame distinct periods of comparatively more gradual developments in response the "outcome" of a key moment (negotiation and non-implementation of a political agreement). Here, our logic of competitive influence-seeking would lead us to expect observations that would demonstrate the increasing extent to which Moscow was prepared to defend what it perceived as its vital security interests, including the extension of effective political control over more territory, keeping real the possibility of escalating civil war, and even major armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Throughout this process, we should simultaneously be able to observe a Russian approach that would seek to achieve maximum possible influence in and over Ukraine, both directly and indirectly. Direct influence could, for example, be secured through the use of military and economic tools, and indirect influence might be sought through securing representation of Russian proxies in Ukrainian politics as part of negotiations on the settlement of the conflict.

By contrast, what would be the likely observations that would disconfirm the applicability of our logic of competitive influence-seeking? The most obvious disconfirmation of the way in which we have conceptualized our logic of competitive influence-seeking would be an absence of Russian policies that can be presumed to seek the prevention of a stable and unfriendly regime in Kyiv in the absence of any possibility to achieve stable and friendly neighbor. An indication of such an approach would be either the recognition or annexation of the contested areas of Donbas (thus eliminating the possibility of either destabilization through continuing low-intensity conflict and or influence over a future government in Kyiv following reintegration of Donbas on terms preferred by Moscow) or a policy of non-interference in the conflict, including any settlement negotiations (thus limiting the opportunities for Moscow to shape the terms of any settlement in its favor). Our hypothesis would also be disconfirmed if we see no change in Russian policy in relation to what is negotiated and/or implemented or change that is unrelated to any key moments in the evolution of the conflict (e.g. escalation or de-escalation policies driven by tactical opportunity and unrelated to and/or detrimental to strategic interest).[10]

What are the appropriate methods of data collection and analysis that would allow us to confirm or disconfirm our hypothesized logic of competitive influence-seeking? In line with established standards of good practice in case study research, we rely on the textual analysis of relevant documents[11], official statements,[12] and participant observation[13] and key informant interviews[14] as our primary sources for data collection, as these allow us to utilize co-variation and process tracing (George and Bennett 2005; Bennett and Checkel 2014) as our main methods of data analysis.[15] This enables us to establish a thick analytical narrative that maximizes data reliability through triangulation and minimizes risks to interlocutors. Using multiple sources also allowed us to compensate for limited access to policymakers in Donbas and in Russia, as did the use of experts in universities and think tanks elsewhere in Russia and Ukraine who have a particular familiarity with Russian policy and the evolving situation in Donbas. Thanks to long-standing (i.e. pre-conflict) networks and contacts across the political spectrum in and beyond Kyiv and Donetsk, we were also able to conduct a number of interviews with internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Donbas who were evacuated with local government institutions, universities, and other organizations formerly based in now rebel-controlled territories. We have not privileged any individual source or type of source in terms of weighing the evidence they provide, but rather use the mix of sources to which we have had access to offer a well-substantiated argument in which our claims are corroborated by more than one source and type of source in every instance.

This nuanced and reflective approach to data gathering and analysis gives us confidence that the inferences we draw from the evidence we present below are a credible demonstration of the relevance of the underlying logic that we argue connects Russian preferences regarding the political regime in Ukraine (i.e. a preference for unstable and unfriendly over stable and unfriendly) and the tactics used to destabilize the government in Kyiv (i.e. prevent the consolidation of an unfriendly regime). It also allows us to contribute to typological theorizing about Russian policy vis-à-vis the states of the former Soviet Union in the western CIS and the South Caucasus. Our explanation of the Ukrainian case

in the context of a general theory of competitive influence-seeking thus also acts as a limited test of this evolving theory. Given the significance of the Ukrainian case and of Russia-West relations in the contested neighborhood more generally, this is clearly of importance for policy-making in terms of developing scenarios for future developments in this region and in this relationship and in terms of offering policy recommendations.

Failed agreements as key moments in the destabilization process

The negotiation of the four agreements that have been concluded in the context of the Ukrainian crisis—the Kyiv Agreement of February 2014, the Geneva Agreement of April 2014, and the two Minsk Agreements of September 2014 and February 2015—are the key moments that we use to trace relevant developments, respectively, in the periods before, between, and after them to illustrate the evolution of Russian policy. As we demonstrate below, each agreement saw a marked increase in provisions that would have strengthened Russian influence in Ukraine, and each period following the signing and partial or non-implementation of the political agreements concluded was characterized by gradual escalation of Russian destabilization of Ukraine. The four agreements thus represent "snapshots" or milestones in the change of Russian policy from maintaining a pro-Moscow regime in Kyiv at the beginning of 2014 to securing a permanent foothold in Donbas from which to hold a pro-Western government in Kyiv ransom, while the periods in between take us from largely peaceful anti-Maidan protests in eastern Ukraine in the aftermath of the first agreement (February 2014) to active Russian support of, and arguably participation in, the civil war in Donbas by the time of the second Minsk Agreement (February 2015). As one of our interlocutors (Interview 32) put it, "Russia's strategic goal is to maintain control over its Near Abroad. The methods to do so may change over time, but the goal itself can and will not be changed."

We proceed in two steps. First we summarize the provisions in each agreement to substantiate our point that they represent an increasingly pro-Russian set of provisions extending the degree to which Russia would have been able to exert influence in Ukraine. This confirms in some empirical detail our *prima facie* observation of the existence of key moments in the evolution of the Ukraine crisis and the qualitative differences between them. It also offers evidence for our expected observations of gradually increasing demands in each agreement, illustrating Russia's determination to prevent the emergence of a future stable and unfriendly government (i.e. a stable government over which Russia would have little, if any, influence).

Second, we offer a more detailed analytical narrative that traces the escalation of Russian policies towards Ukraine in response to each failed agreement. This provides the detailed evidence of Russia's policy of destabilization, i.e. denying the government in Kyiv any opportunity to consolidate its power and authority. Our analytical narrative also illustrates how policy escalation and "improved" terms in each agreement go hand-in-hand. Russia's escalation tactics forced Kyiv to offer ever more concessions that were politically extremely controversial (e.g. constitutional reform and decentralization) and undermined the government's legitimacy—domestically as a result of the concessions made, and internationally due to its inability and unwillingness to implement them.

Kyiv to Minsk (I): from negotiated transition to entrenched control

The negotiations of four agreements serve as the key moments in our argument about competitive influence-seeking by Russia in Ukraine. The purpose of the following section is to establish, by way of a textual analysis, why we think that they each represent a distinct step in Russia's approach to the Ukrainian crisis and illustrate an increasingly more hard-line approach by Russia to securing its influence in Ukraine.

The Kyiv Agreement was concluded on 21 February 2014 between then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych and three leaders of the parliamentary opposition—Vitaliy Klichko, Oleh Tyahnibok, and Arsenij Yatseniuk—witnessed by foreign ministers of France, Poland, and Germany.[16] Although a special envoy of the Russian president had also participated in the negotiations, he did not sign the agreement

as a witness. The agreement establishes a period of transition until the end of 2014, encompassing a government of national unity formed by the signatory parties, constitutional reform aimed at a better balance of powers between parliament and president, and presidential elections following the adoption of a new constitution. This would have provided for a managed transition during which Russia's main ally at the time, President Yanukovych, would have shared power with the parliamentary opposition. The outcome of the transition, however, would have been open ended in terms of both the constitutional nature of Ukraine and its next president. Russia's limited enthusiasm for the agreement is, thus, not difficult to understand, but in the actual course of events, the fatal blow was dealt by the extra-parliamentary Maidan opposition who rejected the agreement. Having also lost the support of his own power base,[17] Yanukovych found himself in an unsustainable situation and fled to Russia.

This clearly represented a significant problem for Moscow, as it now was left without a major source of influence in Kyiv and with no clear pathway to regain any either, as the timeline initially envisaged would have kept open a path for Moscow to have at least some indirect influence over Ukrainian politics through securing favorable terms in a constitutional reform process whose conduct and outcome would have involved the participation of pro-Russian forces. A statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry consequently noted,

> [w]e are surprised that several European politicians have already sprung to support the announcement of presidential elections in Ukraine this May, although the agreement of 21 February envisages that these elections should take place only after the completion of the constitutional reform. It is clear that for this reform to succeed all the Ukrainian political forces and all regions of the country must become its part, but its results should be approved by a nationwide referendum.[18]

The policy escalation that followed (see below) in the period after the collapse of the Kyiv Agreement paved the way to the next agreement, the so-called Geneva Statement on Ukraine released by the US, EU, Ukraine, and Russia on 17 April 2014.[19] While vague in some respects, the Statement establishes a disarmament process and a broad amnesty, as well as, for the purposes of constitutional reform, "a broad national dialogue, with outreach to all of Ukraine's regions and political constituencies, and allow[s] for the consideration of public comments and proposed amendments." This latter provision constitutes a specification of the constitutional reform process not present in the Kyiv Agreement of February 2014, and arguably creates an additional opportunity for the representation of pro-Russian interests within it by specifically mentioning "regions and constituencies" and making reference to a "national dialogue." The latter is also a recurring theme in official statements when it comes to Russia pushing for direct negotiations between the government in Kyiv and the de facto authorities in Donbas. A statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry on 13 April, for example, emphasizes the need to "immediately start a true, national dialogue with equal participation of all the regions in the interests of the organization of swift and radical constitutional reform,"[20] while later on references abound drawing parallels to national dialog processes elsewhere, such as in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Mali, and South Sudan and argue that in Ukraine, too, the government should directly engage with opposition forces in Donbas.[21]

Similarly, the endorsement of a leading role for the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission and the committing of US, EU, and Russian monitors ensures a continuing "legal" Russian foothold in the crisis in Ukraine, while paving the way towards internationalized monitoring, and thus stabilization and entrenchment, of an emerging boundary line within Ukraine. Through the constraints that this placed on Ukraine's sovereignty, alongside the disarmament requirements for "all illegal armed groups" (thus including Ukrainian "volunteers" who had borne the brunt of the fighting until then), Russia laid the foundations for a potentially emerging de facto state in Donbas before this appeared as a seriously pursued option in the next stage of the conflict. With likely the same objective in mind, Russia kept pushing for some official status for representatives from Donbas, with Lavrov noting at his press conference immediately after the conclusion of the Geneva talks in April 2014 that it was necessary to secure "the immediate establishment of a broad national dialogue within the framework of the constitutional process, which should be inclusive, transparent, and accountable" and that the talks had "emphasized that all the Ukrainian regions and political forces should be involved in this dialogue."[22] Having "learned" from the failure of the Kyiv Agreement, Russia at least partially hedged against a similar fate with the Geneva

Statement, by bringing in the OSCE as an implementer, and thus implicitly an international guarantor, of the agreement, while further working towards securing a status for representatives from Donbas and the "region" itself.

With militias in the Donbas region refusing to disarm and to end their occupation of government facilities, there was no progress on constitutional reform, and the activities of the OSCE mission became the only element of real implementation. However, an attempt by the OSCE to have a roadmap for the implementation of the Geneva Declaration, agreed initially, failed (even though the Geneva Declaration was re-confirmed in the Normandy format in early July 2014).[23] Worse still, fighting soon escalated—in the form of Ukraine's so-called Anti-terrorist Operation and the increasingly muscular Russian response to it (see below).

This triggered a renewed international effort towards a settlement resulting in the first Minsk Agreement of 5 September 2014, concluded under the auspices of the so-called Trilateral Contact Group consisting of representatives of the OSCE, Russia, Ukraine, and, notably, the separatists. The marked qualitative change in Minsk I, compared to previous agreements, is the specific stipulation to "implement decentralization of power, including by means of enacting the 'Law of Ukraine with Respect to the Temporary Status of Local Self-Government in Certain Areas of the Donetsk and the Luhansk Regions" and to "ensure the holding of early local elections" in accordance with this law. If implemented, this so-called temporary status of the separatist-controlled areas and the political legitimation of separatist leaders through local elections would have fundamentally altered the situation in Ukraine and established a de facto state in all but name, albeit with yet unspecified local powers and influence at the center. This was again an indication of an approach aimed at strengthening the representation of pro-Russian interests, including in the "inclusive national dialogue" that the agreement reiterates. This long-standing Russian determination to have the de facto authorities in Donbas accepted as direct negotiation partners also becomes apparent when the Russian foreign minister points out that although originally established in the Geneva Agreement, "a national dialogue immediately with participation of all the Ukrainian regions" only began in September when "it [was] possible to convince the Ukrainian leadership to sit at the negotiation table with the militia."[24] In fact, a month later, Lavrov goes as far as confirming some success in the Russian strategy of both building a de facto state and legitimizing its authorities by noting that:

> [s]ome government bodies have already emerged there spontaneously. Not only have they been recognized as the leadership of the self-proclaimed republics—they have also become partners to the Minsk agreements and are taking part in the Contact Group alongside Kiev officials, enjoying the support of both Russia and the OSCE. Their representatives, Aleksandr Zakharchenko and Igor Plotnitsky, have signed a number of the Group's documents, and the Minsk agreements of 5 and 19 September. The elections to be held in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics will be very important in terms of legitimizing these authorities."[25]

Nonetheless, few, if any, of the provisions in the Minsk Agreement of September 2014 came even close to implementation, and both sides increasingly worked towards consolidating and expanding their gains. This, in turn, intensified tensions and eventually led to renewed major escalation of fighting (see below). Consequently, a renewed international effort to achieve a political solution commenced in Minsk, resulting in the so-called Minsk II agreement of 12 February 2015.[26] Here, in addition to re-committing to a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons from the frontline, etc., the sides agreed to carry out

> constitutional reform in Ukraine with a new constitution entering into force by the end of 2015 providing for decentralization as a key element (including a reference to the specificities of certain areas in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, agreed with the representatives of these areas), as well as adopting permanent legislation on the special status of certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in line with measures as set out in the footnote until the end of 2015.

The provisions in this footnote are significant in that they make concrete stipulations for future self-governance arrangements prior to any negotiations thereof, including the participation of local authorities in judicial appointments, the possibility of specific center-periphery agreements on economic, social, and cultural development, cross-border cooperation with regions in Russia, and locally controlled militia units—measures designed to strengthen and consolidate the status of Donbas as a "special" region

within Ukraine, thus legitimizing its existence and its representatives. Put differently, from a Russian perspective, "the February 12 Minsk Agreement, the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements and the declaration signed by our leaders in Minsk, set out exhaustively everything that needs to be done."[27]

While Minsk II remains unimplemented, its provisions clearly signal the extent to which Russia's position had shifted within a year—from a negotiated transition of uncertain outcome to a situation in which a fundamental territorial and political re-organization of the Ukrainian state, quasi-constitutionally empowering and entrenching a strongly pro-Russian entity within Ukraine, was agreed in an ad hoc international negotiation format. This confirms our initial assumption of the existence of these key moments and the qualitative differences between them, thus providing a plausible basis for further investigation of our theory of competitive influence-seeking.

Kyiv to Minsk (II): from peaceful protest to civil war

Much like with the changing terms of the political agreements concluded between February 2014 and February 2015, we see a marked escalation of Russian policies in response to each failed agreement.

As noted above, the Kyiv Agreement was dead in the water within three days of its conclusion. Thus, in this first period between February and April 2014, the agreement on a managed transition immediately failed and events on the ground were perceived as a significant challenge to Russia, which saw the disposal of Yanukovych as a major setback (Workshop A).

However, the pro-Western trajectory for which the Maidan partly stood was not universally popular in Ukraine (Workshop A). Rejected by significant parts of the population and political and economic elites, anti-Maidan protests started spontaneously in parts of Donbas (Malyarenko 2015). The anti-Western and anti-new regime sentiments that they expressed coincided with Russian security interests and Russia's interpretation of the Maidan as a coup d'etat. The mere fact of an overlap of interests in Donbas and Moscow, however, did not mean that local elites in Donbas were automatically pro-Russian (Workshop D). Rather as the former governor of Donetsk Oblast, Sergei Taruta, noted in a newspaper interview,

> Donbas did not agree with the Euromaidan and subsequent decisions by the newly appointed Ukrainian government. But this does not mean that Donbas was on the Kremlin's side. … Russia managed the public protests in the way they best served her own interests.[28]

The perceived threat of a potential "loss" of Ukraine, thus, led Moscow to more concerted efforts to keep the pressure up on Kyiv with further anti-Maidan protests in Donbas and other former strongholds of the previous regime, such as Kharkiv and Odessa (Interviews 15, 18, and 31). Yet, this counter-Maidan failed to get sufficient traction outside Donbas, and Russia escalated its tactics and began to start nomadic occupation in Donbas. This, in turn, "facilitated" the Geneva negotiations and the agreement achieved there in April.[29]

As noted above, the Joint Statement that resulted from these negotiations also proved to be impossible to implement. In response, the Ukrainian Government resumed its so-called anti-terrorist operation, which, over the coming weeks succeeded to a certain extent in rolling back territorial gains made by the rebels (Interview 27). This, in turn, prompted Russia to increase its support to the rebels, especially in terms of equipment. Over the following months, fighting between Russian-backed rebels and Ukrainian security forces and pro-Ukrainian militias continued and included the downing by rebel forces (Dutch Safety Board 2015) of a Malaysian Airlines passenger jet killing all people on board. Apart from a major "PR disaster," this tragedy also signaled the need to the Kremlin for more control over the rebel forces,[30] and soon after the invasion of so-called "vacationers" (Russian military personnel "on leave" from their regular service) began (Interview 17). During discussions in one of our workshops, one participant noted,

> Russia invaded in Donbas gradually, pushing as far as Ukraine allowed. The government in Kyiv was rather passive. On the one hand, Kyiv did not want to accept Russia's demand for federalization. However, Kyiv also failed to respond adequately by military means to the annexation of Crimea, to Strelkov's operations, and to the invasion of 'vacationers'. Ultimately, Kyiv's passivity encouraged Russia to increase the stakes" (Workshop L).

While there was some support in Donbas for Russia and Ukraine as one state (according to an opinion poll conducted in February 2014, 33.2% of residents in Donetsk and 24.1% in Luhansk favored such an option), an independent Ukraine was still the preference of an overwhelming majority of the population in these arguably most pro-Russian regions of Ukraine (Workshops D and F).[31] Russia's aim of gaining territorial control of Donbas, and thus the ability to either influence or destabilize any government in Kyiv, therefore, required the pursuit of three objectives: (1) physical removal from power of (actually or potentially) pro-Ukrainian social, political, and economic elites in Donbas; (2) deeper polarization of society in Donbas in order to (3) facilitate mobilization of hitherto marginalized groups from which to recruit local pro-Russian elites (Interviews 27, 39, 41, and 42).

These objectives were highly interdependent in their realization and Russia faced significant challenges in achieving them. The main reason for this was that local society in Donetsk and Luhansk was generally characterized by a high level of internal cohesiveness, dense social networks, significant social capital, a high level of public trust in local elites, and a well-developed regional (so-called "Donetsk") identity (Mikheieva and Victoria 2014).[32] Put differently, Donbas exhibited considerable potential for self-organization, resilience, and mobilization in the face of Russia's intervention (UkrlifeTV 2017). However, in the simultaneously ensuing turf battles among the major political-economic groups in Ukraine, local and Kyiv-based Donbas elites were not given an opportunity to re-align with the new regime in Kyiv. They, thus, had few incentives to mobilize local resources in support of the government in Kyiv, but this did not automatically turn them into supporters of Russian-backed creeping occupation, especially as this posed a potentially considerable threat to their own interests.

Rather, the widely prevailing anarchy triggered by the anti-Maidan protests in Donbas had led to the establishment of two other types of politico-territorial arrangements in eastern Ukraine. The first was informally coordinated by local Ukrainian oligarchs who challenged the new government in Kyiv for control at the local level, seeking the maintenance of the local elite's political power and access to economic resources after the flight of Yanukovych. Local oligarchs, such as Rinat Akhmetov, used the remaining structures of Ukrainian local authorities, which continued operating until mid-November 2014 (i.e. the Decree of the President of Ukraine on the Withdrawal of Ukrainian Institutions) to retain their influence in the large industrially developed cities where they owned and/or controlled significant assets, including critical transport and communication infrastructure. This was the case, for example, in Donetsk and Yenakievo before Strelkov's occupation in July 2014 and in Mariupol before the Ukrainian army retook the city in May 2014. These local Ukrainian elites ("Donetskie") were not interested in waging a real war against Kyiv, which would have resulted in the destruction of the very assets they were keen to control. Similar to Russian tactics at the time, but for very different reasons, these local elites encouraged and supported anti-Maidan protests in Donbas in order to strengthen their own negotiating position vis-à-vis the post-Euromaidan government in Kyiv (Interviews 4 and 27).

In the city of Mariupol, for example, associates of Rinat Akhmetov took control in the wake of these anti-Maidan protests and began bargaining with Kyiv directly, while local authorities were more cautious and generally reluctant to challenge the central government in this way. This bargaining process accelerated as soon as Aleksandr Borodai, the prime minister in the Russia-controlled wing of the DPR at the time, signaled his intention to expand territorial control towards Mariupol. Akhmetov and other Ukrainian Donetsk elites quickly reached an agreement with Kyiv, which allowed them to keep hold of their assets and the Ukrainian army, in the form of the paramilitary "Azov" battalion, to restore full Ukrainian government control over Mariupol despite the fact that local Ukrainian security forces were paralyzed.[33] These events in Mariupol illustrate some of the key dynamics in these early stages of the conflict, including the fluidity of alliances on the ground between various state and non-state actors (Kyiv, pro-Ukrainian paramilitaries, local elites) and their ability, at the time, to thwart the expansion of territorial control by Russian-backed forces.

Yet, local elites competing over control of economic assets in post-Yanukovych Donbas were not the only local "players," and the multitude of other actors seriously complicated the situation and contributed to Kyiv's eventual loss of control over significant parts of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. The critical factor in this process was the collapse of Ukrainian institutions across Donbas, which created

opportunities for a pre-existing criminal subculture to flourish. For example, after the initial relative stabilization in the DPR and LPR in 2014, "representatives" delegated by major local criminal clans occupied key positions in the economic structures of government of the self-declared republics, such as Aleksandr Timofeev, who became minister of incomes and taxes in DPR.[34] Small, economically and socially depressed cities built around coal-mining enterprises saw the rise of previously marginalized groups and organized criminals capture local political power, often in cooperation with local security forces, or what remained of them after the flight of Yanukovych and the at least partial withdrawal of pro-Kyiv/pro-Ukrainian elites. Operating like warlords, local groups, led, for example, by local criminals-turned-warlords such as Bednov, Dremov, and Mozgovoy, established a quasi-feudal system of rule in the territories they controlled, relying on the extortion of local entrepreneurs, kidnapping, illegal extraction of resources, and the use of slave labor (Interviews 28 and 38).[35] While the armed groups associated with these warlords did not participate in full-fledged battles against Ukrainian forces, they exhibited a much higher degree of violence against Ukrainian prisoners of war, pro-Ukrainian activists, and civilians (International Partnership for Human Rights 2015). The system of rule that they established was, thus, significantly different from what was going on in areas controlled by Kremlin-sponsored groups under the control of people like Aleksandr Zakharchenko or Igor Strelkov.

Thus, during the spring and summer of 2014, three different types of politico-territorial arrangements emerged in eastern Ukraine that reflected different dimensions of the conflict locally and in relation to the new government in Kyiv and exhibited different degrees of Russian control and influence. This anarchical situation bore several risks for Russia and its strategy to use the conflict in eastern Ukraine as leverage over the government in Kyiv. First, there was a danger that an agreement might be achieved between the "Donetskie" and Kyiv that would facilitate the consensual return of Donbas under the Ukrainian Government's control (as happened in one of Rinat Akhmetov's strongholds, Mariupol).[36] A second potential threat was declining local public support for any new arrangement and instead a popular preference to return to the status quo ante because of the lawlessness and criminality that the population of Donbas had to endure following the collapse of the Ukrainian state structures.[37]

As Russian destabilization tactics escalated from nomadic to creeping occupation in order to consolidate territorial control in Donbas, the first objective, thus, was the physical removal from power of the local elite, including public servants, representatives of the middle class, liberal intellectuals, urban professionals, and other local opinion leaders. This was achieved through the use of instrumental violence, including widely publicized intimidation, torture, and executions of local leaders. For example, the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights, an NGO founded in 1922 with now 184 membership organizations across 112 countries, issued a report in October 2015 based on extensive fieldwork conducted by one of its members, the Kyiv-based Center for Civil Liberties, in cooperation with Memorial, the International Partnership for Human Rights (see also below), and the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union (International Federation for Human Rights and Center for Civil Liberties 2015). The report highlighted "that certain categories of civilian are specifically targeted by separatist armed groups. National and local civil servants, journalists, local and international NGO representatives, businessmen and religious authorities are particularly subjected to threats and persecution at the hands of fighters" and that "crimes of murder, imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearance and persecution on political grounds" committed by separatist armed groups "may constitute crimes against humanity under Article 7 for the Rome Statute" and, because they appear to be part of "a policy to direct such attacks against the civilian population," may also be "consistent with the qualification of crimes against humanity" (International Federation for Human Rights and Center for Civil Liberties 2015, 5).

Similarly, the Brussels-based International Partnership for Human Rights, in a report issued in 2015, has documented

> a plethora of criminal conduct perpetrated by separatists against civilians in Eastern Ukraine, including 18 murders, 57 cases of illegal detention, 36 episodes of ill treatment amounting to torture, inhuman and/or degrading treatment, multiple cases of illegal destruction and appropriation of civilian property and other forms of persecution on political and religious grounds (International Partnership for Human Rights 2015, 28).[38]

According to the organization's researchers, there has been an

> identifiable targeted group whose members are actual or perceived opponents of the separatist movement. This group includes civilians identified as right-wingers (pravoseki), those accused of being part of the Euromaidan movement, and more generally civilians perceived as being pro-Ukrainian or anti-separatist (International Partnership for Human Rights 2015, 28)

This resulted in the intended exodus that critically undermined society's will and ability to resist Russian control (Interviews 39 and 42; Workshops B, C, and K).

Russia's second objective was to deepen social polarization along ethnic lines and between different social strata in Donbas, which was considered a prerequisite for achieving its third objective, namely to mobilize hitherto marginalized groups as a support base for, and recruitment pool of, new local pro-Russian elites that could eventually take over from Russian and Transnistrian "imports," thus allowing Russia to maintain the fiction of its non-involvement while simultaneously ensuring a higher level of control over Donbas elites than it had during the initial period of nomadic occupation (Workshops E and G). Capitalizing on pre-existing distrust towards the pro-Western elites in Kyiv and a significant degree of political exclusion and economic deprivation, Russia was able to create a perception of upward social mobility under a new regime for those who lacked any such prospects under successive Kyiv governments (Interviews 40 and 41, Workshop L). Empowering socially excluded groups in an ideational sense by giving them a future perspective and in a material sense by providing them with the means and at times leadership to pursue such promising new perspectives (Workshops D and F), in turn, also created the manpower necessary to achieve the first objective, the physical removal from power of local elites. Hence, a pool of willing "executioners" became readily available to escalate conflict locally, displace local elites, and prepare the ground for their replacement.[39]

By late August 2014, the fighting had further escalated, but had reached a stalemate on the ground with newly elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko unable to make decisive territorial gains or inflict significant losses on the increasingly well organized and equipped forces of the two self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and their institutionally better performing *hinterland*. Thus pressured, Kyiv agreed to a further round of negotiations in the Belarusian capital of Minsk, which resulted in the first of two Minsk Agreements on 5 September 2014, followed by an additional protocol two weeks later. Yet again, implementation was at best selective and eventually stalled completely. Subsequent parliamentary elections in Ukraine in October saw a strong showing of the pro-Western, anti-Russian bloc, but also exposed deep divisions and a high degree of apathy among the population, with a national turnout of just over half of eligible voters, and less than a third in Kyiv-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

It was only in this period after Minsk I that Moscow began to capitalize on the successful deployment of its earlier destabilization tactics during the periods of nomadic and creeping occupation. Realizing that a pro-Russian regime in Kyiv was unlikely to emerge in the near future, Russia shifted its approach from the managed destabilization tactics of nomadic and creeping occupation, which were focused on undermining Ukrainian efforts at consolidating the country's post-Maidan Western trajectory by creating a sufficient level of (violent) instability in Donbas, to an approach that pursued the institutional strengthening of the separatist regions to build them up into capable pro-Russian players in an otherwise hostile, pro-Western Ukraine (Workshops G and K). With the conditions for "state-building" put in place due to the success of societal destabilization in Donbas prior to the autumn of 2014, and with a partially positive track record of an earlier, albeit much more rudimentary Russian-sponsored and Russian-led state-building effort, the Russian-backed republican governments in Donetsk and Luhansk embarked on a much more comprehensive path to state-building, including the reorganization of uncoordinated forces into a "regular" army and police under centralized command, the delivery of public services by the republican authorities, and closer integration into the Russian economic and legal space (Interviews 22, 23, and 31; see also Gushchin et al. 2016; OTR Online 2017).

A conduit of this new phase of entrenching occupation was the gradually escalating violence on the ground: as a resolution of the crisis on Russian terms became more and more unlikely and as Moscow continued to establish a "proper" de facto state within the recognized international borders of Ukraine, the actual extent of Russian-controlled territory and its military and infrastructural viability acquired

higher priority for both sides, but simultaneously led to intensified efforts in the so-called Normandy format to rescue the first Minsk Agreement and its implementation protocol. These talks continued on and off throughout January and early February, but it was not before a 16 hours negotiation marathon on 11 and 12 February among the four countries' leaders that the second Minsk Agreement was concluded, almost a year to the date of the 2014 Kyiv Agreement. Unsurprisingly, some initial optimism on the sustainability of this agreement quickly evaporated—fighting continued around the strategic railway intersection of Debaltsevo, with both sides taking heavy losses and the Russia-backed rebels eventually taking the town a week after Minsk II. Again, the agreement was implemented selectively and slowly—enough to avoid, so far, a return to all-out war, but nowhere comprehensively enough to demonstrate either side's commitment to a peaceful settlement of the conflict (Interviews 8, 13, 16; Workshops I and J).

Each failed agreement implementation, thus, went hand-in-hand with an escalation of destabilization efforts. In the period between late February and mid-April 2014, Russia supported and funded anti-Maidan protests in mainland eastern Ukraine.[40] From mid-April 2014, Russia began supporting the rebels initially with money and weapons. This was the period of "nomadic" occupation. As a Ukrainian offensive gained momentum and ground in early summer 2014, Russia strengthened the rebels first through supplying more and more equipment, including heavier weapons, advisers, and eventually through a clandestine invasion of "vacationers" in mid-August. This led to a period of "creeping" occupation by the rebels, who began to regain territory they had lost in May and June. As a result, by August 2014, fighting had significantly intensified from the usage of small arms in the early clashes of April 2014 to using tanks, heavy artillery and multiple rocket systems, aircraft, and anti-aircraft defense systems (Interview 17; see also Malyarenko 2015). This major escalation of fighting and the losses suffered by the Ukrainian side facilitated a return to negotiations, producing the first Minsk Agreement on 5 September 2014. An immediate failure of this agreement was averted by an additional protocol two weeks later, but eventually the volatile ceasefire established broke down and fighting resumed. Following the parliamentary elections in Ukraine on 26 October 2014 with the strong performance of pro-Western, anti-Russian forces, any prospects of a pro-Russian government had clearly evaporated, and Russia now began to focus on consolidating the rebels' territorial gains. Thus, the period of "entrenching" occupation began, accompanied by more pronounced and comprehensive efforts at state-building in Donbas. A simultaneous escalation of fighting to create militarily and strategically more viable rebel territories pressured Ukraine into another round of negotiations that produced the second Minsk Agreement. Following the rebel capture of Debaltsevo, a more or less stable line of control was established between the sides that has remained in place despite sporadic clashes and very little progress on the implementation of the political provisions of Minsk II (Interviews 8, 15, and 23), indicating that, despite its volatility, the two sides have settled, at least temporarily, for the existing status quo.[41]

The logic of competitive influence-seeking: managing instability for long-term gains

The logic of competitive influence-seeking is predicated on the assumption that great powers seek stable and friendly neighborhoods, but are willing to settle for a second-best option of an unstable country in their neighborhood if they can manage and use instability to prevent the worst-case scenario of a stable and unfriendly regime. From a Russian geopolitical perspective, Ukraine is too strategically important a prize to allow the country to drift out of a self-proclaimed Russian zone of influence.[42] Ukraine, similar to other countries in the post-Soviet space such as Moldova and Georgia, thus became a new battleground on which Russia and the West (chiefly the EU) are locked in a competition for influence over that country's domestic and foreign policy orientation. Russia has used various tactics to assert and sustain its influence in and over Ukraine, gradually escalating its level of military engagement in combination with consolidating its diplomatic and political leverage (Workshop G).

As we have argued above, instability in Ukraine has increased over time between late 2013 (the beginning of the Maidan) and the end of February 2015 (the time when the ceasefire agreed as part of Minsk II had been consolidated following the Ukrainian army's defeat at Debaltsevo) as Russia escalated

its destabilization efforts in response to each agreement's collapse. This escalation served the dual purpose of pushing for renewed negotiations that could be conducted from an improved Russian/rebel bargaining position and achieving agreements that would secure Russian influence in Ukraine more strongly in case of actual agreement implementation (Interviews 13, 15, and 17). In the course of these negotiations, ever greater Russian demands were incorporated: from a managed transition in the February 2014 Kyiv Agreement, to the disarmament terms of the April 2014 Geneva Agreement, and to the increasingly detailed, yet simultaneously unattainable, terms of constitutional reform and territorial reorganization of the Ukrainian state in the two Minsk Agreements of September 2014 and February 2015,[43] the latter of which acquired international legal status through the unanimous endorsement it received in UN Security Council Resolution 2202 (United Nations Security Council 2015). The importance that Russia attaches to such international guarantees was stated clearly by Lavrov in response to a question after his speech at the Munich Security Conference on 7 February 2015, less than a week before the conclusion of Minsk II:

> As soon as the main participants of the Minsk process —the Ukrainian authorities and representatives of the proclaimed republics of the DPR and LPR— reach agreements on all the practical aspects of implementing each of the Minsk items, I am confident that Russia will be among those to ensure such guarantees, either in the OSCE, or in the UNSC. I am convinced that Germany, France, and other countries will also be ready to offer such guarantees.[44]

As Russian confidence in the willingness and ability of Ukraine to implement agreements diminished, it shifted its position towards including more implementation mechanisms and guarantees in each agreement with the aim of consolidating its own position and that of its proxies in an internationalized settlement process that would commit Russia and the West equally to abide by its outcome. With the simultaneous realization that a stable and friendly pro-Russian regime in Kyiv was unlikely to materialize in the near future, Russia pushed for, and achieved, more specific requirements for constitutional changes to secure long-term influence in Ukraine through its proxy regimes in Donbas. Yet, as these more elaborate agreements faced even greater obstacles to implementation, Russia, at the same time, consolidated its client regimes in Donbas. Taken together, this illustrates the Kremlin's gradual shift towards prioritizing Moscow-managed unfriendly instability as a second-best, interim goal, yet one that does not rule out the eventual achievement of a stable and friendly regime in Kyiv (its ultimately preferred, yet presently unobtainable outcome).

Our case study of Russian policies in the Ukraine crisis thus serves as an initial plausibility test of a typological theory of competitive influence-seeking. We have established Russian motivations for its policies and noted their outcomes in this specific case. Future research could take this as a starting point and re-examine Russian policy vis-à-vis Moldova (Transnistria) and Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), as well Armenia and Azerbaijan (Nagornyi Karabakh). Questions that such research could investigate would also include the limits of competitive influence-seeking (e.g. in the case of Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), effective Western counter-strategies and the conditions under which they can be employed (e.g. to prevent unilateral recognitions and achieve favorable terms of reintegration), while also testing the theories, assumptions, and predictions in other cases (Northern Cyprus, Western Sahara, Iraqi Kurdistan) and regions (Central Asia, Maghreb, Middle East).

Conclusion

Throughout the period from November 2013 to February 2015, Russia employed a spectrum of escalating destabilization tactics in order to shape the nature and outlook of the political regime in Ukraine, including diplomatic and economic pressure, propaganda campaigns, and low-intensity proxy warfare, including military occupation. These tactics were used in a sequential, but cumulative way; that is, Russia sought to use, expand, and consolidate its influence across all spheres of Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies, starting with non-violent methods in late 2013 and early 2014, and progressing towards more and more openly used violent tools while maintaining the pressure that non-violent methods deliver. Russia, thus, created multiple dependencies that it continues to use at will in order to

secure the best possible outcomes of its efforts to ensure a friendly and stable regime in Ukraine, while hedging against the possibility of an unfriendly and stable one. In other words, in line with the logic of competitive influence-seeking, Russia has sought to manage the level of instability in Ukraine in a way that does not preclude the emergence of an overall stable and friendly (that is, pro-Russian) regime in Kyiv, but that prevents the consolidation of a stable and unfriendly (that is, pro-Western) regime.

The evolution of Russia's tactics from nomadic, to creeping, to entrenching occupation, and ultimately to some limited form of state-building is consistent with our view that Russia's neighborhood strategy in Ukraine is driven by the logic of competitive influence-seeking. Russia is hedging against the consolidation of an unfriendly and stable, Western-supported regime in Kyiv by consolidating its control over parts of eastern Ukraine and solidifying the dependence of local regimes there on Russian support. This gives Russia the opportunity to either maintain the current status quo or settle for favorable re-integration terms that establish Moscow-controlled regions with special status (and hence special powers) within Ukraine through which Russia can assert and sustain its long-term influence over Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy orientation.

With these drivers of Russian policy in the so-called Near Abroad in mind, three more general conclusions can be offered about likely future developments. First, confrontation between Russia and the West in and over this area is unavoidable as the EU, NATO, and their respective member states similarly consider their eastern neighborhood as strategically important for their security.[44] Such confrontation need not necessarily involve direct military hostilities, but at a minimum it is likely that some form of low-intensity conflict in Ukraine will persist and that there is a possibility of escalation around other de facto states, such as Transnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. It is also conceivable that new "battlegrounds" might be opened up by Russia, such as in the Baltic states, especially in Estonia and Latvia both of which have significant Russian minorities.

Second, taking this logic of competitive influence-seeking through to its natural conclusion means accepting that, short of the "withdrawal" of one side or an agreed simultaneous withdrawal of both sides, there is little likelihood of restoring the full sovereignty and territorial integrity of the countries affected in the near future. We may thus be facing the continuation and further consolidation of territorial divisions in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which in turn will increase the social and political obstacles to any conflict settlement short of legalizing the current state of affairs. In this sense, Minsk II is the "endpoint" of competitive influence-seeking—its non-implementation will either lead to a protracted status quo situation (as in Transnistria) or, eventually, to a recognition (possibly followed by annexation) of the de facto states in Donbas by Russia (as in the case of Georgia). Recognition/annexation, however, is unlikely for as long as the continued existence of de facto states in eastern Ukraine gives Moscow leverage over Kyiv, either by ensuring continued instability that limits the domestic and foreign policy choices of the Ukrainian government or for as long as there is a reasonable prospect of their re-integration on terms favorable to long-term Russian influence in the country.

Third, in light of these difficult challenges locally, regionally, and globally, the management of stability and security in the contested neighborhood should remain a priority for policy-makers in Russia and the West. In the absence of other institutionalized forms of dialog, this means that there is a place and a role for the OSCE in this process. Not only is it an established and accepted actor in conflict settlement efforts in all but Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it remains the only transatlantic security actor that offers an established forum for negotiations for all parties to these conflicts. Given that this is, at present, perhaps not the most thrilling prospect for effective security management, it might be time to invest more resources in reinvigorating this organization so it can live up to its conflict management and settlement potential.

Notes

1. On linkage and leverage in general, see, for example, Levitsky and Way (2005, 2006). For a recent specific application to the post-Soviet region, see Beyer and Wolff (2016).
2. Both of these literatures convincingly reject the idea that Russian policy in Ukraine was significantly driven by ideational factors, a finding that we concur with in our analysis. This is not to argue that Russian foreign policy is entirely immune to such factors, but rather to emphasize that, as Hopf (2016, 228) has argued in the context

of Russia's annexation of Crimea, "discursive changes [in what it means to be Russia and Russian] made Russia's annexation of Crimea thinkable and possible, [but that] it was the contingent circumstances of that moment that made it a reality." We also acknowledge the existence of a growing critical geopolitical strand in the literature on Russia's foreign policy (Omelicheva 2016), but cannot engage with it in detail for reasons of space.

3. A similar point was made more than a decade ago by Buzan and Wæver (2003, 410), who stated that "if Russia is to remain a great power able to both defend itself and assert some influence globally, it needs to retain its sphere of influence in the CIS".
4. Interview by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, given to the program "Voskresnoye vremya," Moscow, 30 March 2014, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/68426.
5. This phrase was used by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to describe a "situation, in which Brussels told Ukraine to choose between the West and Russia." See the interview of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with ITAR-TASS," 10 September 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/671172. Western pressure exerted on Ukraine to choose is also noted by Zannier (2015, 48), stating that "When I met with EU officials, including the then-European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle, he was very firm in stating that the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement was not compatible with the Customs Union, and that Ukraine had to choose its own future course".
6. Russian Foreign Ministry statement on the implementation of the Minsk agreements on a settlement in Ukraine and elections in its southeastern regions, 29 October 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/-/asset_publisher/t2GCdmD8RNIr/content/id/742441.
7. This view of the neighborhood as a contested ground in which Russia and the West compete is not new, nor is it limited to Ukraine. For example, Russia's interpretation of the failed 2003 settlement for Transnistria is that "once the parties have agreed upon something, external support should gently keep them at the negotiating table rather than trying to throw in some provocation, as happened in the case of Transnistria settlement in 2003. At the time the settlement plan—every page of which had already been initialed by the head of Transnistria and the President of the Republic of Moldova—was not signed, because late in the evening before the signing, the European Union political structures demanded that the President of Moldova not sign the document." See remarks and responses to reporters' questions by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during a news conference following the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting, Basel, 5 December 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/812884.
8. We use the term "logic" in the same sense as Fearon (1995, 381): "general mechanisms, or causal logics, that operate in a variety of more specific international contexts".
9. We proceed from, without further interrogating, the assumption that the EU (the "West") is pursuing a policy of regional economic and political integration aimed at Ukraine that involves some aspiration of building stable, effective, law-based, and democratic institutions (primarily through the European Neighbourhood Policy/Eastern Partnership). See, for example, Dragneva-Lewers and Wolczuk (2015).
10. The absence of any key moments would also invalidate our theoretical propositions. While this is relevant for further tests of our theory in other cases in the future, it is clearly not relevant here as much of our theorizing is driven by us having *prima facie* established, through empirical observation, that the four political agreements concluded constitute such key moments.
11. We have collected all relevant agreements from official sources and collated them in a single online repository available at: http://stefanwolff.com/publications/the-logic-of-competitive-influence-seeking-russia-ukraine-and-the-conflict-in-donbas/.
12. We primarily rely on press releases, statements, and speeches released by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (http://www.mid.ru and as cited) to ensure the authenticity of the material used.
13. Since May 2014, we have individually or jointly participated in 12 workshops on different aspects of the evolving crisis in Ukraine conducted under the Chatham House Rule, five of which we co-organized (see the table on workshops in the Appendix). When using data from these workshops to substantiate our claims, we observe the conventions of the Chatham House Rule for doing so and reference workshops in the chronological order in which they occurred (e.g. Workshop A, Workshop B, etc.).
14. Given the sensitivity and volatility of the situation in Ukraine, we have followed a policy of strict anonymization of all 42 interviews, including in the very few cases in which interlocutors did not request this. In order to balance the protection of our interlocutors with the need to keep referenced information meaningful and credible for our analysis, we thus refer to an interlocutor's affiliation but not to his or her rank or the date or location of the interview. In addition, we have randomly assigned short references (e.g. Interview 1, Interview 2, etc.) in order to obscure dates (May 2014, July 2014; August 2015, November 2015, December 2015; January 2016, February 2016, April 2016; April 2017) and locations (Brussels, Chisinau, Kramatorsk, Kyiv, London, Mariupol, Vienna, Washington, DC, and online/email) of interviews, as well as dates (May 2014; February 2015, April 2015, August 2015, November 2015, December 2015; February 2016, April 2016; April 2017) and locations of workshops (Chisinau, Kyiv, Rome, Washington, DC) for the purposes of increasing anonymity. All interlocutors were informed of the research purpose of the interview, of our anonymization policy, and of their right to withdraw from the project prior to manuscript submission (see the table on interviews in the Appendix).

15. We are thus confident that we adhere closely to the three principles of data access and research transparency (DA-RT)—data access, production transparency, and analytic transparency—as elaborated in the Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science (American Political Science American Political Science Association 2012, 9–10) and further specified, among others, by Kapiszewski and Kirilova (2014) and Elman and Kapiszewski (2013).
16. "Agreement on the Settlement of Crisis in Ukraine," http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/671350/publicationFile/190051/140221-UKR_Erklaerung.pdf.
17. As Yanukovych realized that the Maidan movement did not accept the agreement, he went to Kharkov to a meeting of all deputies of local councils. Unable to obtain their support, he escaped to Russia.
18. Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the events in Ukraine, 24 February 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/73918.
19. "Geneva Statement on Ukraine"; https://geneva.usmission.gov/2014/04/18/text-of-the-geneva-statement-on-ukraine-released-by-the-us-eu-ukraine-and-russia/.
20. Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the aggravation of the situation in the southeastern regions of Ukraine, 13 April 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/-/asset_publisher/t2GCdmD8RNIr/content/id/65894.
21. See, for example, "Interview of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with ITAR-TASS," 10 September 2014 (http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/671172) and "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Delivers a Speech and Answers Questions during Debates at the 51st Munich Security Conference, Munich," 7 February 2015 (http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/949358).
22. Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his answers to questions from the mass media summarizing the meeting with EU, Russian, US, and Ukrainian representatives, Geneva, 17 April 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/64910.
23. For a more detailed exploration of OSCE activities during this period, see Zannier (2015).
24. Interview given by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to the "Russia Today" TV channel and "Vesti nedeli" on the "Rossiya" TV Channel, New York, 27 September 2013; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/668812.
25. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Life News television and *Izvestiya* daily, Moscow, 27 October 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/742828.
26. "Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements"; https://www.ft.com/content/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de?mhq5j=e3.
27. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comment for the media on the results of a Normandy format meeting, Paris, 24 February 2015; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/961334.
28. Authors' translation from www.gazeta.zn.ua/internal/sergey-taruta-dazhe-esli-shahterov-ispolzuyut-eto-ne-isklyuchaet-ih-realnyh-problem-nuzhen-dialog-a-ne-ultimatumy.html.
29. This view of the sequence of events is broadly shared among local and international observers (Interviews 8, 16, and 17; Workshop J).
30. In summer 2014, Russian nationals took over key positions in Donbas and a team of "officials" from Transnistria were drafted in to use their experience of (de facto) state-building (Malyarenko and Wolff 2014).
31. Dinamika stavlennya naselennya Ukraïni do Rosiï ta naselennya Rosiï do Ukraïni, yakih vidnosin z Rosieyu hotili b ukraïntsi [How Relations Between Ukraine and Russia Should Look Like? Public Opinion Polls' Results]. Public opinion poll was conducted in the period between February 8–18, 2014; 2032 respondents were interviewed. Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. 4.03.2014 http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=236&page=1
32. These findings were also confirmed separately by another of our interlocutors (Interview 19).
33. Interview with Gennadii Korban, 23 October 2015; http://gordonua.com/publications/korban-ahmetov-reshil-potorgovatsya-s-kievom-chtoby-sohranit-vliyanie-na-donbasse-no-pereblefoval-i-seychas-stradaet-103299.html.
34. See https://apostrophe.ua/news/society/accidents/2016-05-14/jurnalist-rasskazal-o-konflikte-zaharchenko-s-glavnyim-reyderom-dnr/58936.
35. See, for example, http://www.osce.org/uk/odihr/131776?download=true; http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/UAReport17th_UKR.pdf; and https://jfp.org.ua/coalition/novyny-koalicii/articles/osce-hdim.
36. Consequently, Akhmetov's economic and humanitarian networks and structures were forced out of the rebel-controlled parts of Donbas.
37. A particularly notorious example of this was the case of Vadim Pogodin, the commander of the "Kerch" battalion of the DPR. He is alleged to have killed a local teenager for expressing pro-Ukrainian sympathies in July 2014 in rebel-controlled Donetsk (Interviews 27 and 44; see also www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/07/28/73261-rasstrel).
38. As the report notes, "[d]ue to access and resource limitations, our findings are likely to represent only a fraction of the actual criminal conduct" (International Partnership for Human Rights 2015, 28). The widespread, prolonged, and systematic occurrence of human rights violations during this period has also been well documented by the United Nations (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014), by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch 2016), and by the US State Department

(US Department of State 2015, 2016). It is also important to bear in mind that such abuses have been committed by all sides in the conflict and have not stopped after the conclusion of Minsk II. See, for example, Human Rights Watch (2017); US Department of State (2017).

39. An illustrative example is the "Sparta" battalion of rebels in Donetsk. Led by Russian mercenary Arsen Pavlov (aka "Motorola"), himself a veteran of several Russian military campaigns who failed to reintegrate into civilian life in Russia, members of Sparta are infamous for their cruelty against Ukrainian troops on the battlefield and in captivity (Interview 39; see also Mikheieva 2015).
40. Simultaneously, Russia prepared and executed the annexation of Crimea. We do not cover this particular sequence of events in our analysis, as Russia here pursued a very distinct approach, solely focused on the annexation of the peninsula and driven by military-strategic and political considerations that were distinct from those underpinning the Russian approach in mainland eastern Ukraine and addressed a particularly critical Russian security concern, namely securing its naval base in Sevastopol.
41. Similar to the situation in Georgia in 2008, it is, however, also conceivable that Russia may eventually decide to consolidate its gains and either recognize the two entities or, like Crimea, annex them.
42. All our Russian interlocutors, when asked about this issue, confirmed this as Russia's position (e.g. Interviews, 23, 31, and 32).
43. By the time of writing (summer 2017), implementation of Minsk II had ground to a nearly complete halt. Analogous to the failed 2003 Kozak plan for Moldova, parliamentary and popular opposition in Ukraine, especially to granting "special status" to the Donbas, is very high (Interviews 9, 12, and 13; Workshop J). Simultaneously, there is almost no political, social, and economic capacity for the reintegration of Donbas (Interviews 10 and 11).
44. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov delivers a speech and answers questions during debates at the 51st Munich Security Conference, Munich, February 7, 2015; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/949358.
45. At this stage, we do not consider US disengagement from Ukraine very likely, and even if it were to happen, EU disengagement is even less likely.

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Appendix. List of interviews and workshops

Table A1. Interviews.

Anonymized interlocutor	Reference
Donetsk state regional administration official	Interview 1
Donetsk state regional administration official	Interview 2
Donetsk state regional administration official	Interview 3
Former member of "Dnepr-1" battalion, Ministry of Internal Affairs	Interview 4
Academic, Donetsk State University of Management	Interview 5
OSCE official	Interview 6
World Bank official	Interview 7
EU official	Interview 8
EU official	Interview 9
World Bank official	Interview 10
World Bank official	Interview 11
World Bank official	Interview 12
Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative	Interview 13
Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative	Interview 14
UNDP official	Interview 15
OSCE official	Interview 16
OSCE official	Interview 17
OSCE official	Interview 18
Academic, Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv	Interview 19
Former Ukrainian MP	Interview 20
Human rights activist	Interview 21
Advisor, Russian Council on International Affairs	Interview 22
Advisor, Russian Council on International Affairs	Interview 23
Academic, Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation	Interview 24
Academic, Perm' State University	Interview 25
ECMI Ukraine Representative	Interview 26
Ukrainian NGO activist	Interview 27
Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union official	Interview 28
Representative, Gorchakov Foundation	Interview 29
Representative, US-Russia Business Council, Eurasia Foundation	Interview 30
Representative, Carnegie Moscow Center	Interview 31
Academic, Southern Federal University	Interview 32
Academic, Southern Federal University	Interview 33
Academic, MGIMO	Interview 34
NGO, Institute for Peace	Interview 35
Colonel (ret.), Ukrainian Armed Forces	Interview 36
Major General (ret.), Ukrainian Armed Forces	Interview 37
UNDP, Kramatorsk-Donetsk	Interview 38
Academic, Boris Grinchenko University, IDP from Donetsk	Interview 39
Journalist	Interview 40
UNICEF, Kramatorsk	Interview 41
Academic, Boris Grinchenko University, IDP from Donetsk	Interview 42

Table A2. Workshops.

Workshop title	Anonymized participants	Reference
Enhancing Strategic Analytical Capabilities in NATO Partner Countries: Security Cooperation and the Management of Current and Future Threats in Europe's Strategic Orbit	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop A
Ukraine and Its Neighbourhood: How to Deal with Aggressive Russia	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop B
NATO and New Ways of Warfare: Defeating Hybrid Threats	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop C
Minorities and the Construction of an Inclusive Society: Ukraine, Moldova, and National Practice	Ukrainian and Moldovan government representatives, representatives of Ukrainian and Moldovan NGOs	Workshop D
US and European Russia Policy: Toward a Strategy	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop E
Minorities and the Construction of an Inclusive Society: Moldova, Ukraine and International Practice	Ukrainian and Moldovan government representatives, OSCE, EU officials, officials from local embassies, representatives of Ukrainian and Moldovan NGOs	Workshop F
Russia's Long War on Ukraine	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop G
NATO Transformation and Adaptation	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop H
Conflict in Ukraine and the Road Ahead: Impacts on Livelihoods and Development Prospects	Ukrainian government representatives, OSCE, EU, UN, and World Bank representatives, representatives from local embassies, representatives of Ukrainian NGOs	Workshop I
Strengthening Democratic Security Governance in the European Union's Neighbourhood	Experts, analysts from governmental, non-governmental, and academic institutions in Bulgaria, France, Italy, Latvia, Moldova, Poland UK, Ukraine, US	Workshop J
NATO's Future: Bigger and Better or Tired and Torn?	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop K
The EU's Comprehensive Approach to Security in the Eastern Neighbourhood	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, the EU, and the Ukrainian government	Workshop L