

Vadym Denysenko & Vitaliy Pyrovych

AFTER PUTIN

*The Russia We'll Have to Live with
for the Next 50 Years*



Ukrainian Voices, vol. 111

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Vadym Denysenko & Vitaliy Pyrovych

After Putin

The Russia We'll Have to Live with for the Next 50 Years

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Verlag 

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: ID 58667012 © Palinchak | Dreamstime.com

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2113-7

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8113-1

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30457 Hannover
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Printed in the EU unless stated otherwise on last page.

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Foreword

This book attempts to look into a not-so-distant future, when Russia is governed by someone other than Vladimir Putin. However, in order to look into this future, one needs to take a realistic look at the myths that have surrounded the cult of Vladimir Putin, including those that most researchers treat as *faits accomplis*.

The first and most important of these myths is this — Russia is the land of the Federal Security Service (FSB).¹ In this book we will show that this assertion held true only during the first years of Putin's reign, whereas after 2011 (large-scale protests at Bolotnaya Square) the FSB turned into a very important but not the only element of Russia's political system. This book addresses the transformation of this system and the issue of how it will function after Putin.

An equally enduring myth (especially among Russia's liberal opposition) is that of Putin's mafia-like state. In fact, there is no mafia-like state, and it would be a huge mistake to try to apply the mafia's structure to the management system deployed by Putin's Russia.

We will take a separate look at the ideologemes and values of Putinism. In this regard, we have to state the fact that there is no coherent, evaluative, or ideological system. In Putin's system there are only two values, namely his own life and the service rendered to the state in its most primitive sense (death that occurs at the moment most convenient for Putin). All other things form a construction set from which one can assemble various toys, depending on what the master now needs or likes.

Strange as it may sound, despite their deep fear, Putin's entourage has already begun preparing for the transfer of power. Under these circumstances, post-Putin Russia will live in the myths

¹ Federal Security Service — the principal security agency of Russia and the main successor agency to the Soviet Union's KGB. Throughout the text the usual Russian acronym *FSB* will be used.

cultivated by Putin, and most importantly, the political system established by him will try to survive under a new leader. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand how this system functions and where its weaknesses lie. However, it goes without saying that in any personalistic system, the autocrat is its biggest problem. It is worth bearing in mind that an appeal to the dead autocrat will be one of the most important instruments for the survival of post-Putin elites.

1 Hidden Meanings of Long-Known Facts

It is an open secret that the foundations of authoritarianism in Russia were laid back in Boris Yeltsin's times. Russian history in the 1990s could have followed alternative paths, though. However, with the rise of Putin in the high echelons of Russian government, the path to what is referred to as Putinism began inadvertently evolving from a theoretical realm into the practical one, from which there is no easy escape. With each year of Putin at Russia's helm, movement down this path grew steadier as he imposed his own internal logic and chronology, which ran alongside—though did not fully coincide with—the defining events of modern Russian history.

In this chapter, we would like to briefly define and describe the events that were not always noticeable triggers for Putin's evolution and Putinism, and that defined the logic of his actions. Had the events that we will present in our internal chronology not occurred, Russian history might have taken a different path. For example, the event that made Putin and Russia as we know them today was his appointment as head of the FSB. There is no doubt that this appointment did not secure him the position of Yeltsin's successor, although it did help him enter the circle of likely candidates. However, after a year as the head of the FSB, Putin discovered his latent penchants and gained practical experience that he used to build *his own Russia*. Had Putin not been head of the FSB, which lent him support and became the model of the state, Russia would be different. At the same time, his appointment appeared less predictable and more unexpected—almost random—than his victory in the contest to become Yeltsin's successor.

At the final stage of Putin's evolution, the so-called march of justice by Yevgeny Prigozhin and the elimination of the head of the *Wagner* paramilitary group had at least as great an impact on the rise of totalitarianism as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The black Thursday of February 24, 2022, had been prepared long ago. The entire logic of Putin's actions had been leading up to it. All in all, this day was predictable (however, the results of the invasion

came as a bit of a surprise to Putin), while Prigozhin's uprising came unexpectedly and proved a strong trigger, if not a shock, for Putin. After that, Putin changed his contract with the elites drastically.

Between Putin's appointment as head of the FSB and Prigozhin's uprising, there were a number of other events in history without which Russia would not have reached its Putin-induced *end of history*. To understand how this came about, it is our intention to lead our reader through these milestones.

1998:

A New Andropov, or How Putin Brought the FSB under His Complete Control Only to Lower Its Status

On July 25, 1998, the first deputy head of the Presidential Administration, Vladimir Putin, was appointed head of the FSB. This personnel decision made by the Boris Yeltsin family marked the trajectory of the USSR's restoration. The appointment had a twofold significance. First, Putin as head of the FSB may not have become Yeltsin's successor, but the appointment catapulted him into the highest levels of government, from which a new successor was being selected. It is by holding this position that Putin managed to prove his effectiveness and complete loyalty to *the Yeltsin family*.

Second, Putin gained control of an institution he had long dreamed of and, it would be no exaggeration to say, set about building *KGB 2.0*. He held the position for over a year and it was at that time that he built the backbone of his team, making the FSB his main power base. Even now, Putin is sentimental about his brainchild — one might say his firstborn — the FSB. Although he has since fathered other institutions, they resemble the FSB in one way or another.

In his book *How to Reestablish Russia? Essays on the Revolution That Has Gone Astray*,² Russian political analyst Vladimir Pastukhov proposed an idea that in many ways explains the formation of

² V. Pastukhov, *How to Reestablish Russia? Essays on the Revolution That Has Gone Astray* (Gonzo, 2023).

Putinism. In simplified and generalized terms, this idea comes down to the following: at the end of the 1990s, Russia was teetering on the brink of an abyss, while the state was collapsing. Pastukhov is of the opinion that for several centuries Russia has existed in two hypostases – internal and external. The external state is a cohort of privileged bureaucracy, a white bone that leads the bureaucracy of the external state. This privileged class has had different names, from *oprichniki* to the party nomenclature in the USSR. Normally, this class was united by a certain ideology and personal loyalty to the leader, whatever title he bore – tsar, emperor, general secretary. By this logic, once ideological connections and loyalty to the leader grew weaker, the Russian state as a whole faced the need either to be reborn or to die.

In the Soviet Union, the nomenclature of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) belonged to the internal state that guided its external counterpart, or all Soviet authorities. At the turn of the 1980s and '90s, along with the CPSU, the internal state was also destroyed, while the external shell of the government was privatized (piece by piece, i.e., separate institutions or their departments, provinces and republics, etc.), by oligarchs of different caliber. These were representatives of the business sector, Soviet nomenclature, a new democratic political class, and the criminal world who managed to inherit economic bonuses from the USSR. Thanks to this prowess they were able to buy the state power.

According to Pastukhov, privatization of state power at the end of the 1990s could have led to a catastrophe – *Russian history could have ended*. However, it was Putin who became the emergency cord that restored the internal state, by nationalizing state power and preserving the state, albeit in a form that was ugly to the Western world but traditional for Russia.

One can take issue with whether Russia really was nearing its collapse as a state, had Putin not become Yeltsin's successor. It is equally difficult to say whether other alternatives would have opened up at that point. For example, if Yevgeny Primakov had run for president and won the election to be one of Yeltsin's successors, there is no doubt that his program would also include the restoration of the USSR. The problem of the Russia of the 1990s was that

neither the elites nor society knew any other examples of order in their state, apart from the Soviet one. Putin materialized the public demand for restoration.

The return to the USSR was the easiest way for any pragmatic politician after Yeltsin to win the love of the people. Nevertheless, it is far from certain whether anyone else could have taken this path to the very end.

The summer of 1998, when Putin was appointed head of the FSB, was a period of deep social, economic, and political crisis. The prospects of a controlled transfer of power were hazy. Yeltsin came under enormous pressure from his political opponents: the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), then foreign minister and future prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, and the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov. They received strong support from Prosecutor General Yuri Skuratov, who after the financial crisis in August 1998 launched an investigation into possible misuse of the government short-term bonds. Later Skuratov said that among the defendants in the case were top government officials such as Anatoly Chubais and both of Yeltsin's daughters. Most importantly, in October 1998, at the suggestion of the Swiss police, Skuratov initiated a criminal case concerning alleged fraud by the Office of the President in the signing of contracts for the reconstruction of the Moscow Kremlin. It was said that the companies *Mabetex* and *Mercata* paid millions of American dollars as bribes to secure lucrative contracts. This case also featured people close to Yeltsin, which greatly tarnished his image.³

While at the helm of the FSB, Putin became one of the main figures in a special operation against Skuratov that led to his ouster. On the night of March 18, 1999, the national television channel RTR aired compromising footage of Skuratov. In the video, a man resembling the prosecutor general was having sexual intercourse with two prostitutes. Yeltsin immediately established a Temporary Inter-agency Commission under the Security Council of Russia, whose

³ "На мелкие расходы президенту России" [in Russian], *Kommersant*, October 14, 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6254050>.

co-chairs were Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin,⁴ and the lesser-known head of the FSB, Vladimir Putin. On the same day Yeltsin issued a decree that suspended Skuratov from his duties for the duration of the investigation. Later the Russian newspaper *Kommer-sant* wrote that Stepashin and Putin announced that the examination had confirmed the footage's authenticity. Moreover, according to these two officials, the women who spent time with Yuri Skuratov themselves contacted the Ministry of the Interior and the FSB. They said they *were being threatened, and asked for protection*.⁵ According to some reports, the examination was conducted by the Institute of Forensics under the Center for Special Equipment at the FSB.

On April 7, 1999, in yet another talk on TV, Putin said that the preliminary assessment of experts from the FSB and Ministry of the Interior found the footage of Skuratov's sexual encounter to be authentic. Putin also suggested that Skuratov should submit a voluntary resignation. This story attracted much attention in the media, having destroyed Skuratov's image, at the same time placing him in limbo. In their book *Corporation: Russia and the KGB in the Times of President Putin*, Yuri Felshtinsky and Vladimir Pribylovsky claim that it was Putin who arranged the video shooting.⁶

One way or another, Skuratov's case helped Putin prove his loyalty to *the Yeltsin family*. Most importantly, he succeeded in turning the FSB into an effective tool for countering Yeltsin's opponents. According to Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky, Putin's predecessor in the capacity of head of the FSB, Nikolai Kovalyov, was an ally of Primakov and Luzhkov. Furthermore, he used the economic counterintelligence of the FSB for his own purposes.⁷ It is hard to ascertain the extent to which these assertions hold true but one thing is

⁴ Sergei Stepashin was the head of the Federal Counterintelligence and FSB in 1994–1995. In 1997–1998 he was the Minister of Justice, holding the post of Prime Minister from May to August 1999. He was close to Yeltsin.

⁵ "Последнее дело" [in Russian], *Kommersant*, April 3, 1999, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/216188>.

⁶ Yuri Felshtinsky and Vladimir Pribylovsky, *Corporation: Russia and the KGB in the Times of President Putin* (Samizdat, 2010), 97.

⁷ Yuri Felshtinsky and Vladimir Pribylovsky, *Corporation: Russia and the KGB in the Times of President Putin*, 92–93, PDF, http://www.belousenko.com/books/kgb/felsht_putin.pdf. Here and throughout this work, citations refer to the

clear — Kovalyov never showed eagerness in fighting Yeltsin's enemies, with economic departments of the FSB enjoying too much autonomy. One can assume that they cooperated with the criminal world and oligarchs independently.

Putin differed from Kovalyov in ways convenient for the Yeltsin family. A myth has it that members of Yeltsin's circles found out that Russian society had a demand for a kind of Stierlitz,⁸ whose profile Putin fit perfectly. Certainly, catering to Russian society was the last thing Yeltsin's entourage cared about. Also, there was no evidence that society wanted to see a Stierlitz. Apparently, this myth appeared later to legitimize Putin through popular affection for a truly well-built and handsome Soviet spy. The gray Putin does not bear any resemblance whatsoever to the flamboyant Stierlitz. The reasons why the choice fell on Putin were quite banal.

On the one hand, Putin showed servility and energy; on the other, he seemed small, isolated, and weak to the leading figures in the Yeltsin family — a perfect candidate for a puppet official.

However, if people in Yeltsin's circle had paid closer attention to Putin's work as head of the FSB, they would have seen that behind the image of a gray official, there was lurking a very ambitious person. Even in Skuratov's case Putin was taking care of his personal issues as the Prosecutor General's office was digging up dirt on his former boss, mayor of Saint Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak. Putin himself may have featured in the case.

Nevertheless, Skuratov's case was only an episode in the story of Putin's rise, which shows that at its initial stages he had no qualms about doing dirty work himself. More importantly, Yeltsin's entourage did not appreciate the way Putin was converting the FSB into his own element. For *the Yeltsin family*, the FSB was always an alien or even hostile organization, a sort of Soviet atavism. They treated the FSB with a degree of disgust. Their ultimate dream with regard to the FSB was to keep it on a short leash. They

electronic edition of the book, and page numbers are given according to that edition.

⁸ The lead character in a Russian book series written in the 1960s by Yulian Semyonov, and the hugely popular television adaptation *Seventeen Moments of Spring* as well as Soviet-era feature films.

farmed Putin out to do this job. Had the Yeltsin family striven for complete control over the FSB, they would have tasked a person to watch over Putin at the FSB. Instead, Putin was given *carte blanche* to build his own team in the FSB, which we will touch on later. Their thought process was — the FSB is now in our camp and that will do. Skuratov's case was interpreted by the *family* as a sign of loyalty. However, we should bear in mind that at that stage Putin was barely thinking about the possibility of him becoming a successor. He definitely was playing the game on the *family's* terms. The only thing he did understand was that he needed to build a true fortress out of the FSB that would make him an influential player in all of Russia. The fact that he had no supervisor sent by the *family* enabled him to create a structure that focused on him alone. He grabbed this chance and received solid support, at the same time maintaining the image of a gray mouse in the eyes of his bosses. This was the second mistake made by the *family* who underestimated not only Putin himself, but also missed the moment when Putin managed to rely on the FSB that he tailored (he did not reform it as many believe) to meet his needs. It was ironic that Putin finally became a dictator thanks to his image of a puppet official.

There is an opinion that the FSB as a successor to the KGB was already a power base for the restoration of the USSR at the end of the 1990s. Nothing could be further from the truth. The FSB, just like the KGB, is a militarized institution that first and foremost respects strength. Putin's year as its head was, on the one hand, a year of the demonstration of strength, and on the other hand, the time of clearly expressed (at times) allusions to the most eminent chekist, Yuri Andropov, who was still remembered by many among the rank and file of the FSB. In quite simplified terms, Andropov's image was imposed on Putin, who came close to being regarded as Andropov's reincarnation. Putin himself carried out harsh purges within the FSB's main departments. They not only allowed him to gain control over the institution but also gave him access to economic levers of influence on all the richest and most influential Russians.

Here is what Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky wrote: "*First of all, he showed senior officers at the FSB who the boss was and he did it in quite*

a treacherous fashion. He moved about two thousand FSB officers out of the workforce (or fired), including all employees from two economic departments as well as managing generals from the FSB Board.”⁹

Putin did away with the Directorate for Economic Counterintelligence and Directorate for Counterintelligence Provision of Strategic Objects. Instead of these, six new directorates were established under new managers. He then hired all the employees who had been removed from the workforce. In other words, Putin did not sack anyone. He simply reshuffled the cards, especially those in the upper echelons. For example, he created the Department of Economic Security (i.e., an authority controlling all sizable cash flows in the country) which was headed by the FSB’s deputy head, Nikolai Patrushev. The Directorate of Homeland Security (DHS), which controlled all FSB employees, was placed under Putin’s old acquaintance, Viktor Ivanov. The reorganization of economic directorates and an insider as the head of the DHS significantly weakened the influence of outside forces at the FSB.

Igor Sechin became Putin’s personal aide. Putin’s old friend from the KGB in Leningrad, Vladimir Pronichev, moved to Moscow to lead the Department for Combatting Terrorism. Putin’s other friends, among them Alexander Grigoryev, Viktor Cherkesov, and Sergei Ivanov from Saint Petersburg, began taking senior positions in the FSB. Ivanov was recruited by Putin from the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) to rebuild the FSB’s intelligence service, which it had lost during the transformation from the KGB.

Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky assert that Putin made service in the FSB more financially attractive. He secured regular funding for it directly from Yeltsin, bypassing the bureaucracy and obtaining salary increases for FSB employees who were granted the same status as their counterparts from the SVR and the Federal Agency for Government Communications. This boosted Putin’s authority among the lower and middle ranks of the FSB.

By the way, Putin headed the FSB with the rank of colonel. Yeltsin recalled offering Putin the rank of general, which he rejected, saying, “What for? I resigned from the KGB on August 20,

⁹ Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky, *Corporation*, 93.

1991. I am a civilian. It is of importance that a security service be headed by a civilian. If you allow me, I will remain a retired colonel.”¹⁰ In fact, he did the same thing as Andropov, who also declined the offer to become a general. Speaking of this, in 1999 Putin sanctioned a large FSB celebration timed to coincide with Andropov’s eighty-fifth birthday.

One of Putin’s most important principles at the helm of the FSB was to *never wash dirty linen in public*. In his opinion, any public actions by FSB employees that revealed the institution’s inner workings and ultimately compromised it were treason. Corporate interests were above the law. This consolidated his position within the FSB, since its officers understood that their senior management would always protect them from external forces. Later Putin would extend this principle to the entire state machinery.

The most striking example of Putin’s integrity in this regard was the story of an attempt on Boris Berezovsky at the end of the 1990s, which was purportedly hatched by the FSB. In March 1998, an employee of the Directorate for Development and Termination of Activities of Criminal Organizations (DDTACO), later known as a famous émigré Alexander Litvinenko, warned Berezovsky that he and a few other chekists had received an order from their bosses in late 1997 to kill the oligarch. Similar orders had been issued earlier. Litvinenko also filed a grievance at the military prosecutor’s office which opened a case. The DDTACO was dissolved and the FSB changed its head. Now, Putin was in charge. In late October 1998 the military prosecutor’s office closed the case.

The editor of the website *Putinism*, Artem Kruglov, in an interview for Radio Free Europe (July 28, 2018) expressed an opinion that the DDTACO “did any sort of criminal activity, they covered up heroin traffickers, killed by the order of their Motherland or for money. Could this ‘Directorate for murder’ have accepted the order to kill Berezovsky? It could. However, no one has ever answered the question of who the customer was. Could this have been a sort of an intrigue to frame someone and to solve political issues? Again,

¹⁰ Boris Yeltsin, President’s *Marathon* (2000), 309; electronic ed., Yeltsin Center, 271, <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/book/9201/>.

the answer is ‘yes.’”¹¹ In other words, this story shows the extent to which the FSB had got rotten without checks and control and the system Putin had to break. To be more precise: the system he put at his service.

Berezovsky chose to put a lid on this topic to put pressure on Putin. In November 1998 he wrote an open letter to him. In it Berezovsky once again recounted the attempt on his life and published the names of senior FSB officials who had issued an order to have him killed. He actually accused the FSB of criminal activity, adding, “Vladimir Vladimirovich, I am taken aback by the fact that following Your appointment there has been no proper assessment of the actions taken by the aforementioned top brass. . . Vladimir Vladimirovich, you have inherited a difficult legacy from your predecessors. Criminal elements and officials bribed by them at different levels, including Your institution, are dealing a blow to the people who refuse to be brought to heel.” The military prosecutor’s office reopened the case. Litvinenko and a number of his colleagues held a press conference to reiterate their accusations.

A few days later Putin issued a harsh reply to Berezovsky, also in the form of an open letter, saying, “. . . a number of recent publications require adequate response, including the open letter addressed to me by B. Berezovsky and published on November 13 in the *Kommersant* newspaper. In this letter I am called upon to take vigorous action to ‘bring constitutional order.’ I am also warned about a kind of ‘plot of party nomenclature’ at the FSB that covers up criminals, about some incipient reprisals against people who ‘refuse to be brought to heel.’ In this situation I cannot remain silent as the head of the FSB. First and foremost, because the new Russian security services protecting national interests are effectively likened to the extremist forces, almost to criminal organizations. We find such comparison offensive.”¹²

¹¹ Дмитрий Волчек, “Текстогеновые годы. Владимир Путин во главе ФСБ” [in Russian], *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29387767.html>.

¹² Vladimir Putin, “Путин: ФСБ — не меченая карта, чтобы ею козырять в политических интригах” [in Russian], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, November 18, 1998, <https://rg.ru/1998/11/18/putin.html>.

In December 1998, Litvinenko and his colleagues were sacked from the FSB, and in March 1999 the former was arrested and put behind bars at the FSB prison *Lefortovo*. He was charged with abuse of authority. In the end, with the help of Berezovsky he managed to escape to the UK. Nevertheless, Putin got him even there. In 2006 Litvinenko was poisoned.

Therefore, in August 1999, when Putin became prime minister and the main candidate for Yeltsin's successor, he already had the FSB as a power base with which he strongly identified. In December 1999, Prime Minister Putin cracked a joke at the FSB, while celebrating the Worker of Public Security Services' Day, saying, "*a group of FSB officers sent by you to work under cover in the government is doing fine after the first stage of completion of their tasks.*" A great roar of applause broke out.

According to Vladimir Pastukhov, on the basis of the FSB "*an intensive process of state regeneration was set in motion. This was more interesting than with the amphibians because it was not about a lizard regrowing its tail, but about the tail regrowing a lizard.*"¹³

Another important episode that is indicative of Putin's worldview back at the time when he was running for president was a series of explosions that took place in residential buildings in Buynaksk, Moscow, and Volgodonsk in September 1999. There is strong suspicion that the blasts were organized by the FSB to justify the beginning of the Second Chechen War and win voters. The situation was this—on August 7, 1999, militants from Chechnya invaded Dagestan. After about a month of fighting they retreated back to Chechnya, while Russia's leadership faced a dilemma—were they supposed to continue the fight now on the territory of Chechnya, which meant withdrawal from agreements? The bombings in Russia gave them the moral right to answer the question affirmatively. As Mikhail Zygar put it, "*Putin became the first Prime Minister who did not have to deal with economic problems and lose his opinion poll rating. He fought an external foe, which earned him points.*"¹⁴

¹³ Pastukhov, *How to Reestablish Russia?*

¹⁴ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (Folio, 2016), 17.

A few questions remain unanswered – would Russian society have supported a new war in Chechnya, had the bombings not taken place? Could Putin have won presidential elections without the Second Chechen War? Anyway, the blasts in Russia served as a safety net. That was their main mission – Putin and the FSB lived in a world where a grand goal justifies any human casualties. Truth be told, they could not be open about it back then, but it was these bombings that defined the trajectory of Russia’s development. And now, after Putin began his special military operation (SMO), he can openly speak about the necessity of casualties.

Some go as far as to suggest that Putin’s worldview has evolved from liberal views to totalitarianism. This is wrong. Putin has always been a supporter of totalitarianism, adapting himself to a current situation, always minding his language and methods of putting his views into practice. In 1996 Putin said in an interview, *“To my mind, a return to totalitarianism in our country is possible for some time [. . .] This risk lurks in our mentality, our people, our population. . . [. . .] We all believe. . . you cannot deny it – and I share this opinion – they say that if a steady hand straightened things out in Russia, everyone would be better off, more comfortable and safer. In fact. . . this coziness will soon pass as the steady hand will begin to strangle us shortly. . .”*¹⁵

Actually, Putin’s steady hand had its roots in the FSB. Without it, there would be no Putin and no Russia as we know it today. As mentioned above, Putin reorganized the FSB not to meet the needs of the Yeltsin family, but those of his own. Having spent a year as head of the FSB, Putin could have said, *“I am the FSB.”* In the first years of Putin’s presidency, it was officers from the FSB who formed his team which he would promote at all levels, from his administration and government to state corporations. It was the chekists who laid the foundations of Russia’s ideology today. And it is the FSB that became Putin’s main instrument in his fight for the nationalization of power. It was done solely for him so that he could say *“I am the state.”* Pastukhov wrote that the FSB is perceived in

¹⁵ Vadym Denysenko, *Putin vs. the World* (2023), 142.

Russia as the successor to the KGB, however, “in fact the FSB is rather a political legal successor to the CPSU. It is the security service that performs today the functions of ‘a universal superintendent,’ who supervise economy and politics and who were characteristic of the CPSU.”¹⁶

One may agree with this statement with only one caveat—it held true prior to the protests at Bolotnaya Square in 2011. At that point Putin had outgrown the need for the FSB as the only support base, one proving too fragile at that. Moreover, he began thinking that the special role of the FSB was dangerous, having extended his “*base of support*” at the expense of other security services and bureaucrats. Although the FSB in 2024 keeps playing a major role in Russia, it has ceased to be the only point of support for the regime. This constitutes one of the most dramatic changes that Putin’s regime has undergone in all the years of his reign.

2000:

The NTV Case or Why Putin’s Propaganda Machine Has Proven So Effective

The NTV case had been initiated a year before Putin took office as president. It was *de facto* brought to an end in 2003, almost two years after the TV channel became the property of Gazprom. Thousands of articles and tens of books have been dedicated to this topic, which is why it makes no sense to recount the chronology of events. The important thing about this story is that it was the first private TV channel that was wrestled by Putin away from the oppositional oligarch, Vladimir Gusinsky, who made things hard for Putin during the elections in 2000. At about the same time when the NTV case was unfolding, Boris Berezovsky, who had endorsed Putin at the elections and who said that Putin was indebted to him, was deprived of his influence on the Public Russian Television (PRT). However, the situation around the PRT was slightly different—51 percent of shares belonged to the government which went on to claim its rights. NTV was subject to a demonstrative show of force.

¹⁶ Pastukhov, *How to Reestablish Russia?*

In 1999 the NTV case was initiated only as a war of discrediting material. Pro-government media outlets started spreading information about the NTV having run up debts of over \$1 billion to state enterprises that it could not pay off. However, after Putin's election the tactics were drastically changed. In June 2000 Gusinsky was arrested. However, he spent a few days in the *Butyrka* prison only to leave for Spain. This sent a message for others — Putin was not planning to cozy up to media tycoons. He was intent on taking them head-on.

The full transition of NTV to state control was not easy. Its staff demonstrated publicly, there was pressure exerted on them. Attempts were made to bribe them. It all ended with a forcible takeover of the TV channel. Gusinsky referred to the NTV case as an encroachment on freedom of expression. However, in public consciousness the idea prevailed that the NTV was not about freedom of expression, it was rather a tool in the hands of an unbridled oligarch that was looting Russia.

More importantly, the NTV case is sort of a starting point and the first step toward establishing Putinism's propaganda machine. The history of the last century has seen hundreds of cases of various media outlets being destroyed, however, only a few cases were successful in terms of building effective new media empires on the ruins of those demolished. The NTV story is one of them. The TV channel became a kind of test range for the technology of subordination to the government in a way that this asset would not lose its value (in the NTV case, the value was its influence on the audience). This became a rule in a long and painstaking construction of the entire propaganda system.

To start with, this whole future information machine had no author (tens of people are credited with its birth, from Gleb Pavlovsky to Konstantin Ernst), however, it can be argued that there was no Goebbels who came up with all of this. The system, which is very important, crystallized not so much under administrative pressure as in the process of a complex competition between the groups of influence that acquired ownership of TV channels and influential media outlets (war for real ratings and influence on the population

were the main KPIs for TV channels). This is one of the most important things that differentiate the structure of a propaganda machine in Russia from many others. If one tries to schematize the system of management of the media in Russia (with it *de facto* remaining unchanged to this day), they will find out that it is based on three pillars:

- Fierce competition between the owners of TV channels who have to prove to the Kremlin that their media model is the most effective one (hence, strong professional teams and a great deal of attention to marketing research with the outreach to target audiences and the fight for ratings, etc.);
- Effectively unlimited funds (to remain in the spotlight is costly, however, no one spares expenses on it);
- Clear segmentation among all possible audiences of society, from intellectuals to conspiracy theorists who conveyed the message based on the needs of a particular audience (in essence, it was the same algorithm used by Cambridge Analytica but at the scale of the entire country). However, the government allowed the existence of liberal media even in the first months of the full-scale war in Ukraine. It is worth noting that all those years these media could only conditionally be called oppositional, with the end of their functioning being connected with their protests and open opposition to the war.
- The policy of *one voice* regardless of the form of ownership of a media outlet. The Kremlin works out main messages that are tailored by relevant media outlets to their audiences. Note that the same message is repeated an endless number of times according to the principle “the more the better,” which is one of the basic principles pursued by Russian propaganda.

In the end, a change of ownership of NTV and the majority of the media outlets did not imply full destruction of the so-called liberal segment of the media. As mentioned above, they kept working perfectly (often within the same holdings, running on the same funds as reactionary media). A striking example of it was that apart from

NTV, *Gazprom* owned the leading liberal radio station in Russia, *Echo of Moscow*.

One might, of course, be tempted to speak of how cleverly the system of audience-based media segmentation was constructed. However, in the process three factors played a tremendous role, two of which hardly ever merit a mention.

The first factor—an open secret—was the existence of a large social stratum that was ready to live according to the rules set by the government, though these people wanted to have an outlet for freedom in the form of minor criticism of some government decisions or even of individual officials. For many years liberal media have been playing the role of controlled valves that allowed society to blow off steam and, equally important, as a kind of drunk tank. To be more precise, they were a drunk tank for a part of society that was not ready to live in the paradigm of *Field of Dreams*¹⁷ or Petro-syan's¹⁸ jokes. The Russian liberal media, along with arrests, played an absolutely vital role in bringing part of society to heel following the protests at Bolotnaya Square.

The second, no less important, factor is personal. For example, in the Kremlin everyone knew perfectly well who the editor-in-chief of *Echo of Moscow*, Alexey Venediktov, was. They also knew he would never go beyond what is permitted. This personal factor cannot be underestimated, especially given Putin's character, as he has always tried to live by the principle "*I cannot lose people. Even after they are fired I need to keep them beside me.*"

Finally, the third factor, which the Kremlin found important up to a certain point—the international community. One could not rebuke Russia for anything as long as it had *Echo of Moscow*, with its editor-in-chief interviewing leaders of the Western world. The decision to shut down liberal media was made by the Kremlin only after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, the main reason

¹⁷ A Soviet, later Russian adaptation of the U.S. game show *Wheel of Fortune* (loosely based on the original format; the license wasn't bought from the distributor).

¹⁸ A popular Russian comedian of Armenian and Jewish descent loyal to the Russian government.

for it was not the war itself but the fact that, as Putin and his entourage saw it, some journalists had betrayed them by not supporting the war. It was not a problem to get rid of 100–200 journalists who openly spoke against the war. Their failure to back the war was deemed betrayal by the Kremlin.

In addition, within the new totalitarian paradigm, liberal media were vestiges of authoritarianism that dissipated completely in 2023–2024. This also concerns the opposition media, whose activities peaked exactly in 2022–2023 and which were the exact opposite of the liberal segment. These were ultrapatriotic media (almost 100 percent of them were Telegram channels), led by outlets connected in one way or another with Yevgeny Prigozhin, who died in a plane crash (widely believed to have been killed by Putin’s regime). Their truthful reports on the ineptitude of the Russian General Staff during the first two years of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine were a major irritant for the Russian government. In 2022–2023 there were several waves of closures of such *Telegram* channels, culminating not only in Prigozhin’s death but also in the complete purge of this media segment, with most other outlets starting to stick to the “one line” from the Kremlin.

However, let us rewind a bit. Another important aspect of the creation of the propaganda machine is that initiatives coming from the business sector and the people are not forbidden (there was no prohibition before the totalitarian twist of events in 2023–2024, and it is too early to say if such a ban will be implemented now). A few breakthrough non-government projects come to mind that were launched thanks to the open market and real competition (first and foremost, such platforms as *Vkontakte*, *Odnoklassniki*, *Yandex*, *Mail.ru*, and, of course, *Telegram*). The first four of the list moved successfully under the wing of state-owned or state-sanctioned corporations, having now become an integral part of the state propaganda machine not only in Russia but also beyond its borders.

Another aspect of the effectiveness of the Russian propaganda machine – which is underestimated by most observers – is worth a separate mention. The Kremlin has managed to impose a single – and, more important, uncontested – ideology on the overwhelming majority of society, including its liberal and ultranationalist strata,