



Putin, Maria Ivanovna from Ivanovo and Ukrainians on the Telly

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¹ **From the Communist Party to Putin: the road to the New Censorship and new “media reality” in Russia.**

In winter 1987, I moved from *Moskovsky Komsomolets* to work for *Nedelya* (“*The Week*”), a weekend supplement to *Izvestiya*. At 22, I was admitted to the temple of Soviet journalism, and on my third day at work was brought an application form for my business cards, and instructions on how to obtain them.

Among the necessary steps, I was to “submit the form signed by the head of department and secretary of the editorial office to Room 601 for coordination”. I filled in the form, collected the requisite endorsements, and knocked at the door of Room 601, which was located in a passage between the new and old buildings of *Izvestiya*. I was admitted, and found a stern-looking man and woman reading galley proofs. The woman took my form and indicated with a nod that I should sit in a chair upholstered in light green leatherette.

Approximately one minute later she returned my form. Stamped beneath the business card layout were now the words “Printing permitted”. The censor of the Committee for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press deemed it permissible for 500 copies of my business card to appear in print.

Twenty-eight years later, the stern-countenanced men and women are back, blocking the websites of political opponents of the regime in Russia. There are overt and covert restrictions on the employment of particular journalists and editors, blacklists of undesirable experts and news analysts.

After a brief interval of freedom, Russia’s media seem back at a place they escaped from in the late 1980s: the doorway of a censor whose permission to publish is mandatory. The only difference is that now the “New Censorship” is no longer a purely external means of controlling the media. In Russia it has become part of their very nature, having swallowed up all sign of value and vitality in what never was a particularly healthy organism.

How it started all over again

Today, we talk constantly about “censorship” of the Russian media, particularly the state-

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owned media, but the current state of journalism and the state’s techniques for controlling it are only indirectly descended from Soviet censorship. Glavlit, the Main Literature Committee of the USSR Council of Ministers, was primarily a tool for preliminary censorship, charged with preventing the appearance of exceptionable content in newspapers or on television. At least officially, its main function was to “safeguard state secrets in the press”. Many Soviet journalists will remember the grey volumes of the *Register of organisations and enterprises mentionable in the open press*, as well as the little military censorship window (which in Moscow was on Kropotkin Street) to which all printed matter mentioning the army, interior troops, or even the fire brigade, had to be taken.

The liberation of Russian (more precisely, still Soviet) media from censorship occurred in August 1990, when printing presses stopped insisting on being shown the imprimatur of Glavlit. There followed a brief period during which the press had just as much freedom as it chose to take.

When in 1991-2 the old “Soviet” newspapers collided with the economic difficulties of the time, they rushed for assistance to the very president and government they so relentlessly criticised. *Izvestiya*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Trud*, *Argumenty i Fakty* and other publications which regarded themselves as “the foremen on Perestroika’s building site” pointed to the “duty of the State to promote freedom of speech”, and demanded they should be paid for providing support during the turbulent events of those years. Boris Yeltsin’s Administration decided to oblige and, for example, awarded the editors, many of whom were members of parliament, premises on a “gratuitous use” basis. For some media enterprises, these facilities were not only a lifesaver during the economic turmoil of the early 1990s, but became a nice little earner in later times, as well as making them attractive investments for oligarchs.

The foundations for future adverse changes were thereby laid, in the form, on the one hand, of politically motivated privileges and, on the other, of a deliberate intermixing of journalists with the political and economic elite. Government subsidising of the media began very early, and was to become one of the cornerstones of the New Censorship.

Friday planning meetings

Winter 1995 was a difficult time for the Russian political elite. The main problem was that President Yeltsin was physically decrepit and had abysmal approval ratings among the electorate. Totally free political debate in the media was not to the advantage of Yeltsin and his government: the newspapers and television channels criticised them from the left and the right,

sometimes with good reason, sometimes without.

The First Chechen War gave the first intimation of a changing attitude to free speech and media freedom in Russia. The war began with almost complete press freedom. As someone involved in reporting the assault on Grozny in the winter of 1994-5 and many other events of those years, the only problems I remember concerned getting camera crews to where the fighting was taking place, and the real risk to the lives of cameramen and journalists. Already by autumn 1995, however, the army command, and especially the FSK / FSB officers seconded to the area, began actively working against independent reporting in Chechnya and the surrounding region. Russian TV channels were divided into those who were “allowed to ride on the armour” (mainly the reporters of RTR and, to a lesser extent, Channel One / ORT), and those who preferred to work without being beholden to the army: NTV, TV-6 and others.

A lot changed, however, when it was decided to throw everything into ensuring that Boris Yeltsin won the June 1996 election. The support of the Seven Bankers, a group of seven (in reality, nine) major Russian financiers, meant Yeltsin’s election team enrolled in their service not only NTV, owned by Vladimir Gusinsky, and ORT, controlled by Boris Berezovsky, but also many print publications fed out of the hand of these and other oligarchs. Enabling Yeltsin to retain power turned from being a political project into a media campaign. It was decided that Russia must be induced to re-elect its first president by applying intense media pressure, generating a more positive news agenda, and biased reporting. Roughly from early summer 1996, “Friday media planning meetings” became part of the weekly routine of the Presidential Administration, before Anatoly Chubais was appointed its director, its members recall. The Administration’s first deputy director, Sergey Zverev, remembers that to begin with these were “political meetings at which the agenda for the coming week was discussed, and proposals developed about how the topic should be covered in the media, particularly on television.” Afterwards, either the director of the Administration or authorised deputies would inform those in charge of the main television channels of the government’s requirements. State PR advisers began actively intervening in how news programmes presented the news of the day’s events.

Gleb Pavlovsky claims that, already in summer 1996, the Foundation for Effective Politics proposed that the concept of media management should be, not a short-term emergency measure to get round the election problem, but a permanent policy of the Presidential Administration. More detailed proposals were made in 1997 when information wars between

the oligarchs’ media empires were at their height.

Lie back and enjoy it

In the 1990s and very early 2000s, the major Russian media outlets were controlled by a small number of industrial finance groups. Vladimir Gusinsky’s Media-Most, with NTV as the jewel in its crown, also owned a popular newspaper, magazines, publishing houses and film companies. Boris Berezovsky controlled not only Russian Public Television (ORT, Channel One) but, through a complex structure of ownership, also a whole clutch of newspapers, including *Nezavisimaya Gazeta (The Independent)* and, from 1999, *Kommersant*. Lukoil also had its media holdings and, a little later, so had Unified Energy System of Russia (RAO EES), Interros (owned by Vladimir Potanin) and Menatep (owned by Mikhail Khodorkovsky). After Boris Yeltsin’s mind-boggling victory in the second round of the July 1996 presidential election, it became apparent to the major economic and political players in Russia that constructing pseudo-reality delivered results. Whoever constructed it reaped the profits, whether commercial or political.

It was important for the owners that “their” publication or television channel did not adversely affect the interests of their business partners, including the state. Additionally, the owners wanted obliging and obedient managers in the editorial office they could rely on to resolve “issues” informally and promptly. It was during this period of oligarch ownership that editors first encountered the “implant”, a member of their team with powers deputed to them by the owner and able to some degree to control the editorial process. During the era of mud-slinging between oligarchs, when their media were used as holding tanks for sleaze, the main powers of the implants related to security concerns. Later, however, their functions became heavily politicised.

It is noteworthy that some of the “old” media which had a change of ownership at this time began showing a willingness to accede to censorship by the new owners and backers of their politics and news coverage. *Argumenty i Fakty*, for example, a flagship perestroika publication which owed its popularity and unprecedented circulation figures to promoting an ultra-liberal agenda, “re-adjusted” to the interests of its new owners when Vladislav Starkov, its founding editor, retired and sold a controlling stake to the Promsvyazkapital group. The brothers Alexey and Dmitry Ananiev were Russian Orthodox Christians who openly proclaimed their faith. Within a few months of the purchase, the editorial line of *AiF*, until then a robustly atheistic publication critical of the official church, had become not merely pro-Orthodox but also began publishing such authors, agreeable to the owners, as Father Tikhon Shevkunov.

The beginning of “glorious deeds”

Soviet censorship policy was an outward projection of party policy, and functioned by filtering individuals and appointments. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union selected and deployed its journalists, and intervened in literary, film and even musical life. Political loyalty of journalists was ensured by party control over editorial boards and ensuring the “eligibility” of those in charge of them, who very rarely had a purely professional background. In the last years of the USSR, newspaper editors were, almost without exception, ex-secretaries of regional or city party committees or directors of ideology departments. For example, Pavel Gusev in 1986 was given *Moskovsky Komsomolets* to manage, moving from the post of secretary of the Krasnaya Presnya District party committee. Alexander Potapov, editor-in-chief of *Trud* in 1990, had been deputy director of the ideology department of the party’s Central Committee, and responsible in particular for Glavlit. The “eligibility” of editors was determined through horizontal and vertical links within the CPSU establishment.

The coming of Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin in summer 1999 required another media mobilisation. The individual chosen as Yeltsin’s heir was not a well-known politician. Indeed, his public profile was all but non-existent. Quite when Yeltsin would decide to step down nobody knew. They prepared to rally round at a moment’s notice. There were teams of officials, spin doctors and creative executives in the Presidential Administration and, crucially, around it, at the ready to solve the problem.

The nature of the Friday policy planning meetings changed at this time, and directors of the main television channels began being invited to attend. At first the meetings were chaired personally by Alexander Voloshin, director of the Presidential Administration, but the job later passed to Alexey Gromov who was first Putin’s press secretary, then deputy head of the Administration. From 2000 to 2008 there were also “Surkov planning meetings”, especially where the activities of the United Russia party or regional policy were concerned. If “Gromov meetings” were essentially coordination of the week’s agenda and the apportioning of responsibilities between the key information channels, “Surkov meetings” were, according to those present at them, effectively a dictating of required content.

The “Gromov meetings” created a new in-group of media managers linked by the fact of being allowed to attend them. After NTV was brought to heel, the channel’s new management were also invited to the Friday meetings, and in 2006 the conclave was extended to include Margarita Simonyan [of *Novosti* Press Agency] and the managers of REN TV and TVTsentr.

The media campaign to inculcate a shining image of the young St Petersburg spycatcher in the consciousness of the Russian population once again called for a concerted effort from a variety of, often rival, media companies, both public and private (i.e., oligarchic). Their cooperation was ensured by two principal architects of the New Censorship, Alexey Gromov and Mikhail Lesin (whose career began in the Russian State Television and Radio Company, VGTRK, became Minister of the Press, presidential adviser and, until recently, director of Gazprommedia).

Fundamental to the New Censorship was the post-communist personal loyalty of editors, key journalists and professional groups, and that was delivered by Gromov and Lesin.

In hoc signo vinces!

The rout of Vladimir Gusinsky’s Media-Most group was a landmark in the evolution of the New Censorship. Gusinsky’s fundamental differences with the government were both disputes between economic players but also, unquestionably, part of a struggle to set the news agenda independently. The attack on Media-Most also had the aim of excluding from the agenda topics and events, personal information and assessments contrary to the interests of those in the Kremlin.

Whether the organisers and perpetrators of the destruction of Media-Most’s “unique journalistic team” intended it or not, after 14 April 2001 they had a new weapon, a big stick, a method of intimidating those who were not “eligible”. The few who chose to resist and criticise provided the core of new blacklists of people who could not even be considered for employment as journalists, managers or front-of-camera roles in the state- or quasi-state-run media.

In late April 2000, at the height of the presidential election campaign, a document came into the possession of Veronika Kutsyllo, head of the political section of the magazine *Kommersant-Vlast’* (*Kommersant-Government*). The headline writers of “Ъ” Publishers promptly baptised it “Version 6”. Gleb Pavlovsky, at the time more than close to the Kremlin’s politics, responded to a request to reminisce about Version 6 with a mixed memoir. On the one hand, he said, he had doubts about the document’s provenance; a little later, however, he added he could remember that kind of language being used and the details, but could not put a name to the authors.

Version 6 hypothesises that the future administration of President Putin will live in a situation

where there needs to be a distinction between overt and covert policy. Overt policy will declare adherence to the norms of the Constitution, law, international obligations and political standards. The covert component will almost completely restore the ideological and organisational control of every element of civil society.

“The moral state of society,” its anonymous authors write, “currently rules out any *direct* statements or actions by the president of the Russian Federation and his Administration aimed at suppression of the opposition and its leaders, or gaining control of the media and communication of news. Accordingly, the designers of the present programme identify as a key tactic that the political department of the President of the Russian Federation should adopt a dual approach to accomplishing its tasks: one official and overt, the other covert.”

Among the covert tasks, Version 6 identifies gaining control of the media and journalists. It proposes, for example, under the auspices of the political department:

- “To influence the activity of the media ... by collecting and making use of special information on the conduct of each media outlet’s commercial and political activities, its personnel, those managing its organisations, its sources of finance, economic, material and technological resources, formal and informal contacts, financial partners, etc .;
- “To influence the work of journalists ... by collecting and making use of special information on the conduct of their professional journalistic, commercial and political activities, sources of financial support, place of work, formal and informal contacts, financial and personal partners and others.”

Even more blatant is the authors’ proposal of two approaches to working with the media. The first should see the setting up of an agency (making use of the Administration’s resources) to investigate, accumulate and process information obtained and recycle it to the public “appropriately retouched”. The second approach would be to “induce a financial crisis in opposition media, or media sympathetic to the opposition, rescind their licences and certificates, and create conditions under which their operations became either manageable by the state or impossible.”

Only a few months later, following “investigations”, the Presidential Administration did in fact take firm control of NTV and, simultaneously, of Media-Most’s other assets, squeezed Boris

Berezovsky out of ORT, and advanced step by step towards the system advocated by the authors of Version 6.

Preparing a Restoration of the Soviet system

In 2002-2004, Russia was struck by a second wave of terrorism. Crushed by the military and police operations in Chechnya, the militants in their own way copied al-Qaeda by taking part of their war to the peaceful cities of the enemy. The tragedy of the Dubrovka theatre siege, and particularly the Beslan school siege, provided an excuse to lay one further foundation of the New Censorship: the notion of voluntary self-restraint on the part of news organisations.

During the events at Dubrovka and in Beslan, the terrorists made direct use of the media to communicate their demands, ideas and threats. Live broadcast cameras surrounded the locations of the tragedies. Assuredly, this was developing a topic previously announced to a whole busload of journalists in Budyonovsk [during the hostage-taking there]. But for that to be going on in the depths of the provinces with poor roads, transport and communications was one thing; for it to be going on in the centre of Moscow or a suburb of Vladikavkaz in the Caucasus was quite another. To isolate the scene of a major event of this kind and keep journalists out was impossible, but that did not mean the Kremlin did not aspire to do just that.

The main tool was to be legislative regulation, but also the willingness, for a variety of reasons, of the media to impose self-regulation and self-censorship on themselves on such occasions. Editors discussed a code of conduct for journalists in an emergency zone, and the State Duma added an amendment to Federal Law F3-114 (“Countering Extremist Activity”), that not only constrained media activity in such situations, but also introduced criminal liability for the “informational abetting of terrorists”.

During this period we see the beginning of a new staffing model for the mainstream media: the Russian State Television and Radio Company (VGTRK), Channel One, NTV, and news agencies. Almost everywhere key positions in news coverage are held by people of whose loyalty the Presidential Administration, or rather, Alexey Gromov personally, need be in no doubt. News broadcasting on Channel One in 2000-2004 is symbolically under the direction of Sergey Goryachev, who actually began his career in Glavlit. He is later succeeded by Andrey Pisarev, who combines his job on Channel One with directing the ideological department of the United Russia party. The “vertical” overseer of VGTRK is Oleg Dobrodeyev, who has direct access to the president.

The new system lacked just one component of the old system: ideology. Putin's first term was demonstratively pragmatic and free of ideology. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that this was no accident. Although Putin's think tank, the Gherman Gref Centre, developed long-term reform plans, there was no ideological component. It was all classical “institutional economics”, the creation of objective and universal conditions for growth and development. The country's *raison d'être*, an ideologically charged vision of the future, and other elements of a genuinely strategic plan were either absent or farmed off to Vladislav Surkov. In full conformity with the thinking of Version 6, the future eminence grise busied himself with youth organisations supporting Putin and consolidating the political spectrum (with simultaneous discrediting of anyone who might pose an electoral threat). An important role was played by Alexander Oslon's Public Opinion Foundation. During the implementation of “Project Putin”, the Public Opinion Foundation was brought in for sociological support in the really very difficult task of positioning the future president in the minds of the public and to monitor the effectiveness of the process. In 1997-2001, the Public Opinion Foundation was also engaged in elaborating “influence maps” of political and news organisations, personalities, and non-official bodies (codenamed “Project Communicators”).

Meanwhile, other participants in the development of the New Censorship were working slowly but irreversibly on building their system.

The right to a yellow telephone

In 2005, the practice of managing the media in Russia achieved a stable form that has survived almost unaltered until the present time. The model has proved effective, and even able to adapt to progressive (at least in technical terms) trends. And the system has been obliged to evolve: having felt its way to the levers of power in the field of news coverage, it went on to begin intervening in the news agenda. The system has also been forced to extend its reach from traditional media to the “new media”, from broadcasting and the press to the interactive sphere, from a domestic agenda to an international agenda.

The system is based on new principles. As the Soviet past receded, so the ideas of Lenin, Stalin and Zhdanov on matters of information and propaganda were replaced by less ideological and better quality concepts (at least in terms of results).

The system has to operate in an environment where, on paper, the laws ban the practice of censorship. The interests of the censorship system, however, coincide with the interests of the political establishment: to ensure maximum conservation and maximum survival of the existing

model, irrespective of what justifications may be put forward at a particular moment by its leader. These can be, as in 2000-2015, “countering terrorism”, “constructing a pyramid of power”, “innovational development”, and even “spiritual supports”. The mission of the New Censorship is to change the agenda in such a way that a substantial majority of the public support the accompanying ideas, regardless of their opinion yesterday or today in respect of their local, professional or social agenda.

After 2005, the first priority of this media management was to ensure “stability” in news coverage of Putin and his image. In all probability, meticulous study of the content and structuring of news programmes on different channels would reveal Kremlin intervention, most likely in terms of the structuring and order of presentation of news items. There can be no disputing the fact that Vladislav Surkov’s activities to consolidate various different groups around Putin and United Russia, such as the youth projects “Our Guys” (“Nashi”), “Young Guards”, and other forms of mass mobilisation, were given favourable coverage on the state channels and state-controlled private media. This was seen at the time as a kind of tribute, payable for being allowed to continue to broadcast and print everything else.

Nevertheless, 2005-2008 was precisely the period when the second phase of the New Censorship was being brought in. Mikhail Lesin, who in 2004 ceased to be Minister of the Press and Mass Media, became a presidential adviser and set about developing a system for setting the news agenda.

Svetlana Mironyuk, chief editor of the Novosti News Agency in 2003-2013, characterises the period: “There was and is no intimidation, not, at least, direct intimidation of editors and proprietors. As the nursery rhyme puts it, ‘I can do it all myself!’” The degrading of the relationship between the Russian authorities and the media took place a step at a time, incrementally, indirectly and with involvement of the personalities of the players. There were no existing rules in place, no “This is what you must do, and if you do things differently you are an enemy!” That is not the way it was. It built up quite differently. There never had been that “Chinese wall” you should find in any self-respecting media office between the government and the news media. From the outset of the 2000s, the authorities distinguished three broad categories: foes (*Vedomosti*, *Forbes*, *Gazeta.ru*, *Lenta.ru*, and a few others (most recently *Rain / Dozhd*)). There was no point in asking foes to do the Kremlin any favours, or to ask them to refrain from doing something. With them, as with the Western media, there was either a brisk, business-like relationship or no relationship at all. Then, there were friends: the state-owned media, although the warmth of the friendship varied greatly. Initially, for

instance, there was respect for Vitaliy Ignatenko at ITAR-TASS and he was not particularly pressured. Konstantin Ernst [at Channel One] always occupied a special niche. Friends included *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and its editor, Vladimir Sungorkin, who were outwardly independent. There was Interfax and Mikhail Komissar. Later, “friends through thick and thin” included Aram Gabrelyanov. In terms of his degree of intimacy with the Kremlin, Sungorkin was always a closer confidant than I was. It was all a matter of personal chemistry between Gromov and his group, and the editors, as well as a bit of horse-trading. “We’ll put an exclusive interview your way, and you can do us a favour in return.” Finally, the third category were the half-friends, or half-foes. Initially, that list included *Kommersant*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets* and *Echo of Moscow* radio; that is, people you might be able to do a deal with, but not always.

In addition, in 2004-2005 one further crucial element of governmental media management appeared. Mironyuk notes, “Some time around 2002, before I [was appointed to Novosti], Lesin wired up himself and all the editors-in-chief of state-owned media with a direct, dedicated cable. A line was laid specially from the Ministry of the Press in Moscow on Strastnoy Boulevard to all the editorial offices. That was done by Koryavov, who was deputy minister at the time. Then, in 2004-2005, for all the output of agencies and television a special cable was installed on the closed ATS-2 network. This was a one-way yellow telephone without a dial which could only receive calls. [At present] all these non-dialling telephones go straight back to Alexey Gromov’s office. This is now the main mechanism for managing the media. Incidentally, one of these phones has been monitoring the output of “independent” Interfax all these years.

“Creators” of the new reality

For the past five years, the existence of the New Censorship has been no secret, state or otherwise, or even something one ought not to mention. Although in 2008 - 2012 Dmitry Medvedev was keeping the president’s seat warm for him, little changed for media already controlled by the state or being brought under its control. Alexey Gromov remained their handler.

The 2008-2010 economic crisis hit the Russian media hard. Officially, a free media market continued to exist, but subsidies of one kind or another became increasingly important, mainly in the shape of contracts for “news servicing of regional territories”. This form of governors’ financial control of their local media has gradually spread even to the capital.

The main innovation during the latest period of the New Censorship has been a clampdown in the government-control media, especially television, on any generation of their own news agenda. Russia, as understood by the “collective Putin”, or as those who for the time being are his loyal lieutenants would like to see it, does not need real news. On the contrary, the only tool used for managing imperfect Russian society is a manufactured news agenda which is literally stamped into the minds of the public by the TV channels.

The New Censorship does not merely exclude real events from the news agenda: it replaces them with simulated communications whose purpose is to create in viewers a sense of dependency on the principal hero in the stories. Even during the Ukrainian crisis, the model has not been modified, except that the “pole” of the messages has been changed: at the centre they have placed the image of “fascistic supporters of Stepan Bandera” [the Ukrainian nationalist leader assassinated by the KGB in Munich in 1959]. These “fascists”, together with those who have “nurtured” them are all but ready to launch an attack on Russia (more precisely, Russia’s interests, but within the propaganda it can and must be claimed that the war has practically started). The manufacturing of the news agenda reached its apogee in early summer, when Russia’s television channels were gabbling frenetically about Igor Girkin (“Strelkov”) as the “saviour of Russians in the Donbas Region”.

We should not imagine that these distortions are improvised by a team in the Presidential Administration, seconded to manage the news on Channel One or Russian TV and Radio. Such secondment certainly goes on, and many of the texts read out on *Vesti* (News) or *Vremya* (Time) are aired, or appear on the websites of the channels, without any involvement of the channels’ editors. And indeed if, after all the filtering of staff that has gone on, editors were permitted to correct the artistic efforts of that faceless “creative team in the Administration”, things would only get worse. A distinguishing feature of the New Censorship is that it encourages journalists (the word should probably be in quotes) not only to serve up the news agenda they are handed by the Kremlin, but also to creatively embellish it themselves.

“The Crucified Boy from Slavyansk” is only the most obvious passing on of a monstrous lie. Far more important, and ultimately more dangerous, are the small, often barely perceptible, mutations taking place in previously unbiased programmes or journalists. The seeping into the programme, “Let them speak”, of the theme of “Ukrainian army atrocities in Donbas” transforms Konstantin Ernst’s simple-minded “Maria Ivanovna from Ivanovo” into a carrier of the required aggressive virus. This legendary woman in her early fifties, abandoned by her husband and bringing up her drug-addicted son who is on the verge of being conscripted into

the army, becomes not only a victim of manipulation, but a natural, convinced conduit of hatred. In the present instance her hatred is directed at “those Ukrainians you see on TV burning tyres”. This world has been manufactured for her. There are enemies in it, and there is Putin confronting them. Her venomous hatred of these enemies is a function of her love for Putin, and vice versa. The structure, comprehensiveness and constant repetition of the news agenda to which “Maria Ivanovna” has been exposed is such that she, a statistically average Russian woman, could only tell opinion pollsters that Putin is all that keeps her going in life.

To summarise

We could go on describing and giving examples of the New Censorship, showing it in action in yesterday’s television news or in the publications of the state-run media. A higher priority, however, is to focus on the principles that the system has applied and continues to apply.

Almost all of them are based on the “doublethink” proposed by the anonymous authors of Version 6 as the state’s underlying policy. These principles are nothing less than an outright rejection of democracy. Exploiting manipulation of the news media, powerful officials (and the president himself) “manage” audiences and voters, forcing them to accept a fake news agenda as genuine. Their control over public opinion research ensures they can report satisfactory outcomes to their “customer”, the Russian president.

The most damaging aspect of the tragedy of the Russian media is that, with very few exceptions, they in practice acquiesce in the conditions proposed for their existence. For some, their consent – corporate or personal – is nothing less than a condition of survival; but in fact not a few not only give their consent to the manipulator-state, but try to outbid it, offering creative elaboration of the concepts of official Putinism.

Relics from the past, preserved and developed, have helped create a system in which the wider public has access only to news stories fabricated in the Kremlin. The authentic, natural, real news agenda has not disappeared, it is just excluded from the “reality” communicated to Russia’s citizens.

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