



How the Press Elected the President

By Nataliya Rostova

Translated by Arch Tait

March 2017

This article is published in English by The Henry Jackson Society by arrangement with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. The article reflects the views of the author and not necessarily those of The Henry Jackson Society or its staff.



¹ Boris Yeltsin won the 1996 presidential election in the second round after starting the campaign with an approval rating of 13 per cent

Almost twenty-one years ago, on 3 July 1996, the second round of the presidential election was held in Russia. How did Boris Yeltsin, seriously ill and having lost all his earlier popularity, manage to get elected for a second term? This investigation was conducted for Radio Liberty by Nataliya Rostova, senior correspondent at Slon.ru, with support from the Kennan Institute of the United States.

At the start of the race, the first presidential campaign in Russian history to be conducted using Western techniques and the advice of American political consultants, the position of the incumbent president appeared to give him no chance of winning. Boris Yeltsin, who in October 1995 had suffered a third heart attack and been out of sight even during the parliamentary election campaign, was extremely unpopular.

At the very beginning of the year, on 9 January 1996, 200 Chechen fighters led by Salman Raduyev had seized an infirmary and maternity hospital in Kizlyar, Dagestan. The federal government's counter operation was a failure, with the terrorists managing to escape and even to take hostages. In a television interview on 13 January, Boris Yeltsin had talked up the professionalism of their training and claimed that they included 38 snipers. This assertion came to be seen as a coded admission that the situation was beyond control by the Kremlin.

In addition to the Chechen problem, reasons why, in January 1996, only 5% of the citizens of the Russian Federation had confidence in the president, were chronic non-payment of salaries to public sector workers, a crime wave, and government weakness.

In the December Duma elections, the governing 'Our Home Is Russia' party obtained just 45 seats, or 10.13% of the vote, meaning that, with 99 seats held by members of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, who in votes could usually count on the support of the agrarians and the People's Power group, Parliament again had a communist majority. A Communist and former editor of *Pravda*, Gennadiy Seleznev, became Speaker of the Duma, and Yegor Stroyev, a former member of the Politburo, became head of the Federation Council. Earlier in the year, Yeltsin had fired Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais, blaming him for the pro-government party's low rating. Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev and the head of the Presidential Administration, Sergey Filatov, lost their jobs at the same time.

Yeltsin's closest advisers were aware of his unpopularity. These were the security officials Alexander Korzhakov, head of the presidential guard; First Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets, responsible for rebuilding the economy and public services in Chechnya; and FSB Director Mikhail Barsukov. They were all to be fired by Yeltsin six months later, after the scandal of a box of 'Xerox paper' which was found to be stuffed with dollar bills. At the climax of a confrontation between two factions in the president's inner circle, one, headed by Anatoly Chubais, used television presenter Yevgeny Kiselev to give viewers the impression that the security services were planning a coup. The idea was seriously considered of postponing or cancelling the election, because the inner circle did not believe they could get the president re-elected.

In February, five days after Yeltsin announced he would stand for re-election, the political analyst Alexander Tsipko published an article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* under the heading "The Russian presidential election should be cancelled because a "popularly elected" president is not a panacea but a calamity."² The election 'will only aggravate and reinforce, most probably with the use of

¹ This paper was written for the Russian Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty and published in two parts. The first part can be accessed at, Rostova, N. 'Kak pressa izbirala prezidenta', *svoboda.org*, 3 July 2016, available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/a/27835237.html>. The second part can be accessed at, Rostova, N. 'Pirрова pobeda', *svoboda.org*, 4 July 2016, available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/a/27835484.html>.

² Tsipko, Aleksandr, 'Prezidentskie vybory v Rossii nado otmennit'. Potomu chto "vsenarodno izbrannyi" - ne panatsiia, a beda,' *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 20 February 1995.

violence, the total fragmentation of Russia,' Tsipko wrote. 'It will deprive us of any prospect of national reconciliation and of overcoming the tragic consequences for Russia of the succession of coups and counter-coups of 1991-3. None of the politicians who, in the current political situation, have a realistic chance of becoming the popularly elected president, stand for the ideal of national reconciliation. The re-election, or supposed re-election, of Yeltsin for a second term, irrespective of what he himself may intend, will effectively perpetuate the October 1993 victory of radical democracy over the communist opposition and will provoke it to new battles in favour of its "just cause". Electing Zyuganov, the leader of the red opposition, to be president of Russia will again, irrespective of his own intentions, usher in a policy of retaliation and score settling which will sow panic and destabilize the country. An even worse alternative for Russia than the election of Yeltsin or Zyuganov would be election as president of such a political outsider as Grigoriy Yavlinsky.'

Despite this lack of faith in the possibility of winning, Oleg Soskovets secretly invited three American political consultants to Moscow: George Gorton, Joe Shumate and Richard Dresner. The president's ratings were soon improving. Sociologist Yury Levada said later, 'The electoral process during spring and summer 1996 was less a contest between rivals than a political mobilization.'⁹

Table 1: Fluctuations of the approval ratings of Yeltsin and Zyuganov in the first round of the election

Date	Boris Yeltsin	Gennadiy Zyuganov
1 March	13	19
31 March	19	21
7 April	21	25
13 April	23	24
20 April	23	23
27 April	27	25
4 May	25	25
11 May	28	24
18 May	34	33
25 May	34	21
1 June	36	20
8 June	38	20
11 June	36	19
14 June	35	20

Source: B.Z. Doktorov, A.A. Oslon, Ye.S. Petrenko, *The Yeltsin Era: The Opinions of Russians. Sociological Essays*, Moscow: Institute of the Public Opinion Foundation, 2002.

Levada further explained the result of the 1996 election and the 'making of the president': 'To a large extent this was due to subjecting the public to massive indoctrination, through television and the press, to persuade them this was a case of "better the devil you know than the devil you don't know".' Several approaches were adopted, more sophisticated for some, and less subtle for others. Levada added, however, 'there was also a readiness on the part of voters to go along with this.' That readiness was exploited, and 'in that there was undoubtedly an element of manipulation.'¹¹

The Oligarchs' Decision

The oligarchs' joint decision to support Yeltsin, which came to be known as the Davos Pact, was instigated at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland. The story has many times been told of how Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, who at that particular moment were at daggers

⁹ Levada, Yurii, *Ot mnenii k ponimaniyu. Sotsiologicheskie ocherki. 1993-2000*, M., 2000.

¹¹ Volkov, A.I., Pugacheva, M.G., Iarmoliuk, S.F., *Pressa v obshchestve (1939-2000). Otsenki zhurnalstov i sotsiologov. Dokumenty*, Izdatel'stvo Moskovskoi shkoly politicheskikh issledovaniy, 2000.

drawn, united in their resolve to support the incumbent president after hearing Zyuganov's speech at the forum, where the global business elite received it as the words of the future president of Russia.

According to journalist David E. Hoffman⁵, who wrote *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia*, in addition to Gusinsky, Berezovsky also negotiated there with Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir Vinogradov, Yury Luzhkov and George Soros. He asked Anatoly Chubais to find other oligarchs prepared to support Yeltsin. Following a meeting shortly afterwards between Yeltsin and leading business figures, Chubais became the official head of what came to be called the 'Analysis Group', which he managed jointly with presidential aide Viktor Ilyushin. Quite separate from, and competing against them, was another group in Yeltsin's entourage headed by Oleg Soskovets. Years later, Gusinsky told Hoffman that if it had not been for Berezovsky, Yeltsin would never have been re-elected and Russia's history would doubtless have been considerably different.

On 21 February President Yeltsin had a meeting in the Kremlin with the owners of the media, and categorically ruled out the possibility of postponing the election. 'I intend to act strictly in accordance with the constitution and adhere irreproachably to democratic procedures,' he said.

'Physical debility and increasing dependence on advisers made him a highly convenient candidate for the presidency,' political analyst Liliya Shevtsova wrote later.⁶ 'What they needed was to become his advisers, his political will and his means of exercising power. The major obstacles for the "oligarchs" were not only the Communists, but also the favourites at that time, Korzhakov and Co.' For their political ploy to succeed, the one component the Davos Seven lacked was a channel through which to exercise influence within Yeltsin's family. Here they had a stroke of luck: they managed to recruit Yeltsin's daughter, Tatiana Dyachenko, and she revealed a taste for behind-the-scenes politicking. Their project to get the ailing Yeltsin re-elected (and of course the bankers were apprised of the state of his health) could have far-reaching consequences for the whole of Russian society. In effect they were planning to establish a new regime, in which a symbolic leader would mask the rule of a closed, gang-like elite, embodying a complete fusion of government power and private property. Even if the Davos Seven failed to implement this preferred plan, their Plan B would not be too bad for them either, because in the course of the presidential campaign there was good money to be made. For supporting the president and winning, they could look forward to receiving a far from meagre commission. The oligarchs had had enough of sitting about waiting to be received by officials, paying for the lifestyle of the bureaucratic fraternity, and needing to curry favour with the likes of Korzhakov. They evidently decided they were now in a position to take centre stage themselves, using Yeltsin as their battering ram.'

The Davos Pact was publicly articulated a couple of months after the forum. On 27 April *Kommersant* published 'Let's Break the Deadlock!', an open letter signed by thirteen entrepreneurs.⁷ 'There is a serious political risk that, if the Communists win the presidential election, they will attempt to take ideological revenge,' the signatories warned. The letter was signed by the president of LogoVAZ, Boris Berezovsky; the chairman of the board of directors of the Siberian Oil Company, Viktor Gorodilov; the chairman of the board of directors of the Bridge ('*Mosť*') Group, Vladimir Gusinsky; the president of the Yakovlev Design Agency, Alexander Dundukov; the president of the Pennant ('*Vympeľ*') Interstate Aircraft Company, Nikolai Mikhailov; the president of Yukos oil company, Sergey Muravlenko; the president of Rosprom, Leonid Nevzlin; the president and CEO of AvtoVAZ, Alexey Nikolaev; the chairman of the board of directors of Revival ('*Vozrozhdenie*') Bank, Dmitry Orlov; the president of Oneksimbank, Vladimir Potanin; the president of the Metropolitan Savings Bank ('*Stolichny bank sberezheniy*'), Alexander Smolensky; the chairman of the board of directors of the Alpha Group Consortium,

⁵ Hoffman, David E., *The Oligarchs: Wealth And Power in the New Russia*. NY: PublicAffairs, 2001.

⁶ Shevtsova, Liliya. *Rezhim Borisa El'tsina*. Mosk. Tsentr Karnegi, M.: ROSSPEN, 1999.

⁷ Gorodilov, V. A.; Gusinskii, V. A.; Dundukov, A. N. et al., 'Vyiti iz tupika!', *Kommersant*, 27 April 2006.

Mikhail Fridman; and the chairman of the board of directors of Menatep Bank, Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Khodorkovsky wrote in his 2005 article ‘Left Turn’,⁸ when already in prison, ‘The idea behind the letter was very simple and, most importantly, we believed in it. Boris Yeltsin should remain the president of Russia as a guarantor of civil liberties and human rights. The prime minister, however, and undoubtedly with extended powers, should be the head of the Russian Communist Party. It was essential that economic and social policy should be a bit more “red”, since otherwise, as the letter explicitly warned, a post-election war was inevitable. We needed a turn to the left in order to reconcile freedom with justice, the few winners with the many who felt they had lost out as a result of the all-embracing liberalization.’

The Impact of the Campaign on the Mass Media

‘Berezovsky and Gusinsky were wealthy people,’ David Hoffman notes, ‘but the Davos Pact was not only about wealth. The two tycoons controlled two of Russia’s three major television channels and had the power to turn public opinion in Yeltsin’s favour. For him that was immensely valuable currency.’⁹

The third national channel, set up in 1991 by Yeltsin himself in the course of his power struggle with Mikhail Gorbachev, was the state-run RTR (Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting) company. Its founder, Oleg Poptsov, for many years a committed Yeltsinite, was accused of defaming the president because of the channel’s critical coverage of the war in Chechnya. Yeltsin himself once publicly asserted that RTR was ‘dishing dirt’. In February Poptsov was dismissed by Presidential Decree No. 203, and Presidential Decree No. 204 appointed Eduard Sagalav chairman of the All-Russian State Television and Radio Company (VGTRK). The television news commentator Nikolai Svanidze became director of the news analysis programmes studio.

Ivan Zassoursky in a book on the history of modern journalism notes, ‘Prior to the 1996 election, the owners of the mass media, in spite of their official or de facto control, were not able to direct their news outlets. Modern techniques for manipulating news were the hitherto missing link which, during the election period, made it possible to revive the mass media as a propaganda tool of the ruling party and win the election, or, as some observers claim, to provide sufficient cover to falsify its results.’¹⁰

Many of the mass media directors and staff who participated in the campaign to support Boris Yeltsin have been at pains to explain, on many occasions, why they did what they did. They could not allow the Communists and censorship to return, they said, and refused to call what took place a conspiracy with the oligarchs. Alexander Loktev, for example, then editor of *Kommersant* newspaper, told me in an interview about a ‘much written-about meeting held at LogoVAZ’s hospitality centre, which was owned at the time by Boris Berezovsky. Those present included Berezovsky himself, Vladimir Gusinsky, Alexander Smolensky, Vladimir Potanin, and Leonid Nevzlin representing Mikhail Khodorkovsky.’ ‘As I recall,’ Loktev said, ‘all the editors of the major publications were there, all the people responsible for news broadcasting on television: representatives of ORT, NTV, etc. There were 25 or 30 people. Then and there, at that meeting, they were told that, if they did not support Yeltsin, the country might go communist again. It was a situation in which we would all have to compromise some of our principles and come out in support of Yeltsin.’¹¹

⁸ Khodorkovskii, Mikhail, ‘Levyi povorot’, *Vedomosti*, No. 1420, 1 August 2005.

⁹ Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*.

¹⁰ Zassurskii, Ivan, *Mass-media Vtoroy respubliki*, M.: Izdatel'stvo MGU, 1999.

¹¹ Rostova, Natalia, ‘‘‘Ia vzhivuiu nablyudal, kak Khodorkovskii iz khishchnika prevrashchalsia v togo, kem on stal’’. Aleksandr Loktev’, *Slon.ru*, 8 December 2010. https://slon.ru/russia/va_vzhivuyu_nablyudal_kak_hodorkovskiy_iz_hishhmi-508974.xhtml

When I asked whether he had realized that the oligarchs were looking out for themselves and the size of their bank accounts, Loktev said he himself had been worried. 'I sensed that if Zyuganov came to power, the number of readers of *Kommersant* would be drastically reduced. Or there would be other problems.'

Another editor, Alexey Venediktov, related years later on Echo of Moscow that it was during the 1996 campaign, while he was still director of the radio station's news service, that he first 'bumped into' Berezovsky.¹² 'I got a phone call from our controlling majority shareholder, Vladimir Gusinsky, who told me, "Berezovsky is complaining about you." I asked, "And who might he be?" He said, "Come on over." When I got there he told me, "Our policy is that we should mainly help Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, because the Communists are coming back. Berezovsky is a very powerful force on our side." According to Venediktov, Gusinsky was expressing a general complaint from the business community that there were too many Communists on radio and television. Venediktov phoned to arrange a personal meeting with Berezovsky and, when he arrived, found him in the middle of having a meal. 'He started going on about the communist menace. As I listened to it all I was just feeling bad about wasting my time like this. [...] I said, "You know, Boris Abramovich, for as long as I am responsible for the news policy of our radio station, we will have people from both sides, odds and sods, the devil with his cloven hooves and the angel with a fiery sword." He said, "You are committing an error!" I replied, "Well, if I am, highly placed comrades will doubtless put me in my place," and left. I had no further contact with him until the April letter.' I was told by someone working at Russian State Television and Radio, on condition of anonymity, about another meeting, held at the Sofrino guesthouse. In January 1996 the company's journalists were taken and addressed by presidential adviser Georgiy Satarov who 'strongly urged everyone present to campaign for Yeltsin.'

The Pact Between the Regime and the Media

On 4 March, according to David Hoffman, President Yeltsin's daughter, Tatiana Dyachenko, and his son-in-law, Valentin Yumashev, invited Igor Malashenko, the president of NTV, to join the Yeltsin election campaign. He accepted the offer, but without giving up his leading role at NTV, which created a manifest conflict of interest. Vladimir Gusinsky, who owned NTV, later recalled that Malashenko had been far from keen to accept, being only too aware that he could be jeopardizing the reputation of a channel which, after its objective reporting of the war in Chechnya, was respected as a source of independent television coverage. In an interview with Hoffman, Gusinsky recalled saying, 'Igor, I beg you to agree to this work in the Kremlin. This is a command decision, a team effort: we are defending ourselves against the Communists.'¹³

Yevgeny Kiselev, television presenter and CEO of NTV until 2001, later wrote, defending the decision of his boss, that if Gusinsky had not decided to go along with other major business players in supporting Yeltsin, if Malashenko had refused to join Yeltsin's campaign team, if NTV had positioned itself as a dispassionate observer, 'the regime would afterwards have crushed us like a frog.'¹⁴ And Yeltsin would have won anyway, he believed. Malashenko himself, when asked by Yeltsin's biographer, Timothy J. Colton, why he had not resigned from NTV for the duration of the campaign, replied, 'I believe it would have been simple hypocrisy. People in Russia know this is not America: everyone knew my job at NTV would be waiting for me to come back to it.'¹⁵

Kiselev told me years later in an interview, 'Malashenko took a very active part in the election campaign. He was responsible for coordinating the media and, most importantly, he taught Yeltsin how to create photo opportunities.'¹⁶ 'Malashenko likes to speculate that the main reason for

¹² Zhuravleva, Ol'ga, 'Aleksi Venediktov o Borise Berezovskom', 'Svoimi glazami', Ekho Moskvy, broadcast 24 March 2013. <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/svoi-glaza/1038068-echo/>

¹³ Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*.

¹⁴ Kiselev, Evgenii, 'Istoriia NTV. Chast' 4', *Gazeta*, 10 October 2003.

¹⁵ Colton, Timothy J., *Yeltsin: A Life*, NY: Basic Books, 2008.

¹⁶ Rostova, Nataliia, 'Ne schitaiu, chto zhurnalistika nepremenno dolzhna byt' ob"ektivnoi', Evgenii Kiselev, Slon.ru, 30 November 2009.

Yeltsin's success in 1996 was the fact that he understood immediately what it was he needed to do in the campaign so that the media did not need to be coerced, but were delighted to tell everyone how he was doing. When Yeltsin came out with effective statements, or clever wordplay, or when he smashed a pot with a stick while blindfolded, or took the wooden spoons from someone in a band and started playing them himself, it promptly became the top story in the news. All that was needed was something that worked well both verbally and visually.'

Another tip came from photos of the president in Krasnodar, on one of his first campaign tours. Igor Malashenko and Anatoly Chubais dumped the photographs on a table for Yeltsin to see. They were thoroughly dreary and reminiscent of images of the travels of the Party's general secretaries in the past. He was surrounded by bodyguards and remote from the people. Next to those, they put a photo of him taken in 1991 when he was on the crest of a wave of popular adulation. The president saw the error of his ways and began interacting dynamically with the public. Vladimir Gusinsky bought him a teleprompter to improve his appearance when reading from a text.

'You cannot use the media like Soviet propaganda,' Malashenko advised at his first meeting with Yeltsin. Referring to American experience, he recommended conducting a genuine election campaign in the Western mould, travelling across Russia and creating news stories.

'He got the point straight away,' Malashenko told Colton. 'I had nothing to complain about. In spite of his poor health, he did incredible things. He manufactured news day after day.'¹⁷

Journalist Valeriy Panyushkin recalled the campaign years later. 'Anatoly Chubais, when he became head of Yeltsin's campaign headquarters, dreamed up events involving the president every day. In the Middle Ages this was the job of the seneschal or master of ceremonies. The mass media were expected to show the president dancing, or signing a suddenly possible peace treaty with Chechnya on the wing of an aircraft, or meeting the workers and peasants. They were expected to put it on air, even if the editorial staff were embarrassingly aware of the triviality and farcical nature of the latest event being served up. From then on and up until the present day, the Russian media are obliged to report every event concocted by the Kremlin, no matter how absurd, if it involves the president.'¹⁸

Besides Malashenko, several others in a position to influence public opinion joined the campaign team, like Sergey Zverev, head of the Bridge Group; or Alexander Oslon, sociologist and head of the Public Opinion Foundation. Sergey Blagovolin, CEO of Russian Public Television (ORT), was also a member of the team, and in 1995 Boris Berezovsky and Arkadiy Yevstafiev were appointed his deputies. The latter was the individual detained after the first round of the election with 'the box of Xerox paper', along with Sergey Lisovsky, who organized the 'Choose or Lose' campaign in imitation of Bill Clinton. On 29 June 1996 Blagovolin admitted to a reporter from *Izvestiya* that he was using undemocratic means to support democracy, and also that 'the present election campaign is not democratic.'

Yevgeny Kiselev later admitted that it had been 'a major mistake to remain on friendly terms with the Yeltsin family after the 1996 election.' 'When Malashenko returned as president to NTV, he could walk into any office in the Kremlin,' he told journalist Arkadiy Ostrovsky. 'Once a fortnight, Yeltsin's daughter, son-in-law and other friends like Roman Abramovich came together at Yeltsin's dacha. When we, like other media companies, tried to distance ourselves from the Kremlin, it was seen as an act of treachery.'¹⁹

He was not the only one to acknowledge this mistake. When the Kremlin's attacks on NTV were at their height, culminating in replacement of the management on 14 April 2001 and the departure

¹⁷ Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life*.

¹⁸ Panyushkin, Valerii, 'Mikhail Khodorkovskii. Uznik tishiny: Istoriia pro to, kak cheloveku v Rossii stat' svobodnym i chto emu za eto budet', Sekret firmy [Internet publication], 2006.

¹⁹ Ostrovskii, Arkadii, *The Invention of Russia: the Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War*, London: Atlantic Books, 2015.

of Yevgeny Kiselev's team from the channel, NTV journalist Boris Koltsov publicly disagreed with a remark by Marianna Maximovskaya on the NTV news programme *Outcomes* ('*Itogi*'), that persecution of the company had started in 1999. 'It all began not two years ago,' he said in the last edition of the programme on 3 April. 'It began in 1996 when, in journalistic language, we bent the knee, or, from a different viewpoint, correctly adopted the requisite official line. That was when, as has often been said, the regime thought it had discovered that we could be manipulated. What we are seeing now is a backlash. They have realized we are not prepared to be manipulated, so have decided we must be eliminated. But it all started back then, when we allowed them to think we would just roll over.'²⁰

A Less than Level Playing Field

The 1996 presidential election campaign did not afford the candidates a level playing field: coverage of how the campaign was developing was biased, and often openly propagandistic. One of its principal features was the absence of debate between the candidates. Boris Yeltsin it was who established the tradition that the main candidate for the presidency disdains to take part in debates. He signed up only once, in 1989; in 1996, as earlier in 1991, he refused.

As regards the journalistic confraternity, it was split, with a few exceptions like *Novaya Gazeta* and *Obshchaya Gazeta* who were rooting for Grigoriy Yavlinsky, into two camps, one of which urged voters to support Yeltsin, while the other endorsed Zyuganov.

The Campaign of the CPRF

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation and its general secretary, Gennadiy Zyuganov, had their own strengths when compared with Yeltsin. According to Yeltsin's biographer, Leon Aron, who studied Zyuganov's campaign closely, one of these was the print media, printed propaganda, and leaflets and brochures in general.²¹ The Communist Party did not have the financial resources to pay for television commercials. It eschewed paid advertising and made use only of free slots. Relying on print had helped them win the parliamentary elections in 1995; they had the support of 150 regional and 3 national newspapers: *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, *Rural Life* ('*Selskaya Zhizn*') and *Pravda*. The print run of the latter three totalled 9 million copies. Aron believes the newspaper *Tomorrow* ('*Zavtra*') also significantly boosted their propaganda campaign.

Aron considers that another of the Communist Party's strengths was its 530,000 strong membership, divided into 20,000 Party cells, all of whom could be called on to act as volunteer activists. In addition to their rank-and-file members, the Communists had strong representation in the Duma and among regional leaders. Two weeks before the election, Aron notes, only 49 of the 89 leaders of regions supported Yeltsin: the rest were for Zyuganov. Additionally, the leader of the Communist Party had effectively been campaigning for a full two years, touring 72 of the 89 Russian regions. 'Zyuganov acted along traditional lines,' Liliya Shevtsova writes. 'He was less frequently seen on television, which was no surprise as control over television was in the hands of the president, but he too ploughed his way across the expanses of Russia. He evolved visibly in the course of the election campaign: if a year earlier he had seemed very much on the left of politics, he seemed now to be becoming steadily more statesmanlike.'²²

Observers from the American International Republican Institute monitored the media over three weeks of the campaign to establish the degree of their impartiality. During this period *Pravda* published 56 items, none of which, they noted, contained any positive assessment of Yeltsin.

²⁰ Kiselev, Evgenii, 'Itogi', NTV, broadcast 3 April 2001. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzYChGmh_U

²¹ Aron, Leon, *Yeltsin: a Revolutionary Life*, NY: HarperCollins, 2001.

²² Shevtsova, Liliya, *Rezhim Borisa El'tsina*, Mosk. Tsentr Karnegi - M.: ROSSPEN, 1999.

Similarly, none of the 16 items published in the pro-reform *Izvestiya* made any attempt at objectivity in their assessment of Zyuganov.²³

Professional Peccadillo or Matter of Principle?

Michael Berger, who at that time headed the economics section of *Izvestiya*, admits he personally blocked some items which, in his view, might have greatly harmed Yeltsin. ‘At the time I would say, “Nothing wrong here, but come back after the election and we will print it,”’ he told me in an interview. ‘I was brought, for example, a report that the prime minister had had heart surgery in Germany at the expense of Gazprom. It might have been true and deserved to be checked out, but my reply was, “Come back after 4 July.” That was a professional peccadillo, but one which I do not for a moment regret. Not for a moment! Let me explain why yet again: I was fortunate enough to go on a tourist trip to Mongolia when I was already fairly grown up, and tasted enough of the delights of the communist regime to make me want to vomit.’²⁴

Many who were working in the media still claim, many years later, in justification of how the campaign was run, that Gennadiy Zyuganov did in fact have access to the airwaves. Oleg Dobrodeyev, for example, in 1999 while still CEO of NTV, said that in 1996 ‘the election was on the level of ideological reflex actions. The situation in the Russian election was verging on lunacy and it was difficult to keep control of something as unwieldy as NTV and its news services. We had shortcomings on the level of phraseology and intonation. I spent a long time afterwards analysing our coverage. As far as sticking to the rules is concerned, we did nothing wrong: we monitored with a stopwatch the airtime given to the various political forces and candidates. Nevertheless, I have to agree that intonation made it possible to tell where sympathies and antipathies lay.’²⁵ He also acknowledged in an interview with David Hoffmann that he instinctively backed President Yeltsin. ‘For people of my generation, that was a matter of principle.’²⁶

Independent specialist analysis shows, however, that the main television channels did not in fact give equal airtime to the candidates. The European Institute for the Media calculated that in the first round of the election about 53% of airtime was devoted to Yeltsin and was for the most part positive, while 18% was devoted to Zyuganov and was for the most part negative. None of the other candidates got more than 7% of the airtime.

American professor Sarah Oates analysed television coverage of the campaign in detail.²⁷ Out of 152 items aired on the evening *Time* (*Vremya*) programme on ORT during the first round, 25% of the news related in one way or another to the presidential election. Yeltsin was mentioned in 83 items (55%) and Zyuganov in 53 (35%). Additionally, Oates observes, 5% of the items included Russian citizens expressing support for Yeltsin. Although other candidates were shown in 26 of the 152 items (i.e. 17%), viewers not only learned nothing about their views, but could not even tell who they were: they were glimpsed only briefly in the clip, although sometimes with scraps of sound. In 4% of the items there was unsubstantiated allegation of a split in the Communist Party.

Oates also points to a qualitative difference in coverage of the main candidates. Yeltsin barely had to share the media spotlight with other contenders for the top job, she writes. The news extensively covered his visits to the regions, showing him meeting local residents and promising to solve all their problems. Yeltsin behaved like a governor in tsarist times, wrote David Remnik, an American journalist working in Moscow then, and now editor of the *New Yorker*: ‘He promised all kinds of support and sponsorship, from a Muslim cultural centre for Yaroslavl to a telephone for an old lady

²³ International Republican Institute, *Report of the International Republican Institute observers to the elections of the President of the Russian Federation, Russia, June 16, 1996. Second round: 3 July 1996*, 20 November 1996.

²⁴ Rostova, Nataliia, “‘Zhestokoe otnoshenie vlasti k ‘Media-Mostu’ pomoglo razvitiuu mediarynka.” Mikhail Berger’, Slon.ru, 8 December 2009. https://slon.ru/russia/zhestokoe_otnoshenie_vlasti_k_media_mostu_pomoglo-127813.shtml

²⁵ Afanasieva, Elena, ‘Informatsiia - eto imperiia bez chuvstv. General’nyi direktor NTV Oleg Dobrodeev: “U fakta ne dolzhno byt’ intonatsii”’, *Novaya gazeta*, 22 March 1999.

²⁶ Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*.

²⁷ Oates, Sarah, *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.

HOW THE PRESS ELECTED THE PRESIDENT

who had already been on a waiting list for eight years; from reducing the tax bill for outdated enterprises to payments of wage arrears amounting to billions of rubles to miners and workers.²⁸

Unlike *Time*, the *Today* (*Segodnya*) programme on NTV did, Oates says, give attention to other candidates, including Grigoriy Yavlinsky, Alexander Lebed, Mikhail Gorbachev, and even political outsider Vladimir Bryntsalov. Zyuganov too, compared with ORT, received more time. The ratio of inequality was nevertheless maintained: out of 153 items, Yeltsin was mentioned in 91 (i.e. 59%) and Zyuganov in 52 (34%). In many of these, the Communist Party leader was able to put forward his political views: for example, to complain about the amount of time the media were giving to the president, and to comment on Yeltsin's policy on Chechnya. *Today* carried comments by Zhirinovskiy and Zyuganov that the peace agreements on Chechnya were a pre-election trick on the part of Yeltsin. Oates comments that NTV continued to cover Chechnya's problems during the campaign, but softened its position noticeably. Thus, in one item the channel showed federal soldiers voting in Chechnya, and the reporter added that most of them were supporting Yeltsin.

Table 2: Coverage of presidential candidates in the first round (13 May-15 June) in the evening news programmes *Time* (ORT) and *Today* (NTV)

Candidate	Post	<i>Time</i> ('Vremya')		<i>Today</i> ('Segodnya')	
		Mentions	% of coverage	Mentions	% of coverage
B. Yeltsin	Incumbent president	83	55	91	59
G. Zyuganov	Leader of CPRF	53	35	52	34
G. Yavlinsky	Leader of Yabloko	29	19	33	22
A. Lebed	Retired general	27	18	38	25
V. Zhirinovskiy	Leader of LDPR	25	16	23	15
S. Fedorov	Eye surgeon	24	16	21	14
V. Bryntsalov	Businessman	23	15	5	3
M. Gorbachev	Former president of the USSR	13	9	6	4
M. Shakkum	Research fellow	12	8	2	1
Yu. Vlasov	Weightlifting champion	4	3	1	1
Total No. of items		152	100	153	100

Source: Sarah Oates. *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia*. Data, Sarah Oates; coding Laura Roselle (Elon College)

Observers noted that the mere presence on national television channels of the leader of the Communist Party did not contribute to balanced coverage of the campaign. 'During a 20-minute

²⁸ Rennik, David, 'Bitva za Kreml', Moscow: *Sovershenno sekretno*, 2 August 1996.

interview with Zyuganov in the weekly programme *Mirror* ('*Zerkalo*'), transmitted by state broadcaster RTR, questions were biased and niggling, the candidate's answers interrupted, and he was insulted,' the International Republican Institute reported. At the end of the programme, the presenter likened Zyuganov to the early Bolsheviks. There were frequent and ominous references to his alleged intention, if elected, to introduce hard-line Communists into his cabinet of ministers.' 'It is typical, when covering Yeltsin's travels around the country, for the television reporters to avoid showing his encounters with the inquisitive and protesting crowds which usually gather around him during stops,' the analysts add. 'The tone of broadcasts by the independent NTV television company, which is usually acerbic, was unusually soft when covering the president.'²⁹

When the Communists complained to the Central Electoral Commission that Candidate Yeltsin was dominating the news, the Commission's official response was that the news programmes were simply providing coverage of the activities of the president of Russia. When the Communists tried to buy airtime for their campaign immediately before the second round, ORT refused on the grounds that their request had come too late.

Ellen Mickiewicz, a specialist on the history of the Russian media, provides other examples of a lack of balance in the news coverage, such as the attention paid to and critical analysis of Gennadiy Zyuganov's pre-election promises, economic programme and intention of ending the war in Chechnya, in the absence of a comparable approach to Yeltsin. Mickiewicz notes that on the final day of campaigning, 14 June, NTV's *Today* news programme gave no coverage of Zyuganov at all, unlike its treatment of other candidates, and Alla Pugacheva, sitting on a balcony overlooking a lake in Switzerland, told viewers she would be flying home to vote for the current president and urged them to do the same.³⁰

Zyuganov's campaign committee protested to ORT when they refused to show a video the CPRF had offered, showing instead one in which their candidate was less critical of Yeltsin's government. 'ORT explained they had refused because Zyuganov had not paid for airtime,'³¹ the report of the International Republican Institute observes.

Black PR

It would be hard to deny that Russian television engaged in anti-communist propaganda during the campaign. David Remnick, whom we have already quoted, observed that 'in the last days before June 16th Yeltsin flooded the airwaves with the ultimate in negative campaign propaganda.'³² 'Television showed a series of films meant to fuel an anti-communist fever: there were documentaries about collectivization and the purges, and films like Nikita Mikhalkov's anti-Stalinist allegory *Burnt by the Sun*,' Remnick wrote. 'One short documentary showed black-and-white footage of Stalin voting at a Communist Party ballot box in the forties; in case anyone missed the point, the narrator asked whether Russians wanted to return to this sort of "democracy" in the near future.'

The editor of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* [*The Independent*], Vitaliy Tretiakov, noted that, as the election approached, Viktor Anpilov, who had no prospect of winning, was featured increasingly. Tretiakov believed this was a deliberate ploy. He wrote, 'dovetailing images of a calm Zyuganov, who might easily win, with the radical communist Anpilov, making great play of the latter's unusual facial features, the anti-communist media (which included all the television channels) made Zyuganov less attractive to floating voters who had no wish to vote for Yeltsin. The media scared voters with Anpilov, and they reduced the vote for Zyuganov.'³³ Tretiakov gives another example of manipulation, the showing on one of the national channels of a 'long (almost two hours) film whose

²⁹ Remnick, 'Bitva za Kreml'.

³⁰ Mickiewicz, Ellen Propper, *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.

³¹ International Republican Institute, *Report of the International Republican Institute observers to the elections of the President of the Russian Federation*.

³² Remnick, David, 'The War for the Kremlin', *New Yorker*, 22 July 1996.

³³ Tretiakov, V.T. *Kak stat' znamenitym zhurnalistom. Kurs leksii po teorii i praktike sovremennoi russkoi zhurnalistike*, SPb.: Ladomir, 2004.

plot consisted of just one thing: in the offices of the NKVD investigators interrogate people under arrest, immediately pass sentence on them, and they are then taken away and shot.' 'A couple of dozen of these absolutely identical episodes (the only change being the identity of the person being shot) were what made up the film,' he wrote. 'I never saw it shown on television again.'

In fact, *The Independent* itself had published a questionable article. Its 8 June issue contained an anonymous leading article titled 'New strategy and tactics in the Communists' struggle for power in the event of electoral defeat'. It was said to be based on 'information recently received through operational channels.'³⁴ The gist of the report was that the Communists would not accept defeat peacefully. 'In the event of election results unfavourable to the Communists attempts to artificially escalate the situation are probable, with denunciation of the official results of the poll and the shifting of political opposition outside the constitutional framework,' it was claimed. 'It appears there is also the prospect of a large-scale political crisis and a switch by an irreconcilable opposition to violent methods of fighting for power in the event of electoral defeat or an insufficiently clear election result.' 'These claims were urgently investigated by the courts and law enforcement agencies,' Liliya Shevtsova noted, 'but no evidence was found of proposed terrorist activity on the part of Zyuganov's supporters. Yeltsin's team were repeating the tactic tested in 1993 of fuelling the sense of a threat to the existing order so as themselves to have an excuse to react if the vote went against them.'³⁵ This leading article was made use of the following day. Boris Yeltsin was interviewed by Yevgeny Kiselev on NTV and, responding to a question from the presenter about the possibility of violence in the election, referred him to this article.

Russian media researcher Lauren Ballin found other examples of deceitful publications, under which heading she included an article in *Izvestiya* on 21 May, asserting that Zyuganov was deliberately trying to lose the election.³⁶ 'G. Zyuganov and his supporters (and according to our information his position is supported by G. Seleznev and A. Lukianov) are now trying to persuade their party comrades not to take risks, not to jeopardize everything that has been achieved by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation since 1993, and to adopt the tactic of a "stealth revolution",' the article claimed. 'Informed sources report that Zyuganov is in favour of a compromise with B. Yeltsin. The idea is that the Communists will deliberately lose the election campaign, in return for which the winner, Boris Yeltsin, will form a coalition government headed by G. Zyuganov. (This, of course, is their main stipulation.)'³⁷

When, on 26 June, Zyuganov complained that the media were stirring up social conflict, and accused the leaders of the three television channels, ORT, RTR and NTV, of 'inciting civil war,' they reacted in unison. 'In a brief statement, the heads of the television companies categorically reject all the accusations and consider them an attempt at "blatant, crude intimidation of the media on the eve of the second round of the election", *Kommersant (The Trader)* noted.³⁸ ORT's CEO Sergey Blagovolin did in the process admit that 'video of one candidate is broadcast more frequently,' but said that was purely a matter of 'the buying of advertising time.' He agreed with the reproach that Candidate Yeltsin was mentioned more frequently in news programmes than Zyuganov, but 'gave the standard response': 'What can we do if Yeltsin is both a presidential candidate and the incumbent president? If he performs functions on behalf of the state and his actions are naturally reflected in the news?'

International Republican Institute observers registered another violation of election campaign rules. Five days before it was legally permissible, anti-communist speeches were televised on the occasion of Victory Day.³⁹

³⁴ [Anon], 'O novoi strategii i taktike bor'by kommunistov za vlast' v sluchae porazheniia na vyborah', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 8 June 1996.

³⁵ Shevtsova, Liliya. *Rezhim Borisa El'tsina*, Mosk. Tsentr Karnegi, M.: ROSSPEN, 1999.

³⁶ Ballin, Lauren.

³⁷ Chugaev, Sergei, 'Dve taktiki KPRF v predvybornoi kampanii', *Izvestiia*, 21 May 1996.

³⁸ Krasova, Nataliia, 'Serdtsu khochetsia laskovoi pesni i khoroshei, bol'shoi lyubvi', *Kommersant*, 28 June 2006.

³⁹ International Republican Institute, *Report of the International Republican Institute observers to the elections of the President of the Russian Federation, Russia, June 16, 1996. Second round: 3 July 1996*, 20 November 1996.

God Forbid!

One of the most effective examples of black propaganda was the newspaper *Ne dai Bog!* (*God Forbid!*). This was produced by a group of *Kommersant* writers, headed by Vladimir Yakovlev and editor Leonid Miloslavsky.

The newspaper was published only nine times, between 20 April and 29 June 1996. It had a circulation of 10 million copies and was delivered free of charge to mailboxes across the Russian Federation. It was printed in colour at a time when the rest of the print media were still black and white, and was a high-quality product. According to journalist Arkadiy Ostrovsky its budget was around \$8 million,⁴⁰ and the funding is believed to have come through the Private Property Fund set up by Anatoly Chubais.

The journalists painted a picture of apocalypse if the Communists came back to power. A typical headline was ‘What will they do to us if they win the election?’⁴¹ In a feature titled ‘The Loony Bin’ journalist Sergey Mostovshchikov wrote of how ‘the insane are voting for Zyuganov.’⁴² An anonymous article titled “‘Be prepared to wage war for the Communist Party’s cause’”⁴³ described how, at the fifth congress of the Russian Communist Workers’ Party (which was not contesting the election), ‘in conditions of strict secrecy [...] preparations were discussed for combat operations on the territory of Russia.’ A piece signed by Boris Sergeyev, compared Gennadiy Zyuganov to Adolf Hitler.⁴⁴

In addition to letters from readers who supported Yeltsin, the newspaper published a series of interviews with celebrities who called on voters to oppose the Communists. Among them were Leonid Yakubovich, Rolan Bykov, Alexey Batalov, Lyudmila Zykina, Edita Piekha, Marina Vladi, Donatas Banionis, Oleg Tabakov and others. Each issue had a column of collages of Gennadiy Zyuganov.

When the newspaper appeared there was a big scandal, because the first issue gave no publication details. It was only after questions were asked by deputies and the Prosecutor’s Office intervened that, from its second issue, the newspaper revealed who was publishing it. ‘What sort of newspaper is this? Why is it free? Who is financing it? Why is it anonymous? Why is the circulation not shown? Where is it being printed? Where is it being distributed? Are you for Yeltsin? Is Yeltsin publishing the newspaper himself?’ Such, according to the newspaper, were the questions in ‘almost all the readers’ letters, both favourable and unfavourable.’⁴⁵ In the fourth issue a letter was published explaining that the failure to provide publication data had been due to forgetfulness and haste. As to who was financing it, the response was: ‘It is true that publishing a free newspaper with no advertising is possible only if there is special funding. It is also true that there has never before been such a newspaper in Russia, never, in the entire history of the country. No one has ever published a free newspaper in colour with such a vast circulation and distributed it at their own expense throughout the land. [...] The newspaper’s financing has been organized by a group of prosperous Russian citizens who are far from indifferent to what will happen here after 16 June.’ Only in the seventh issue was the founder of the company identified: the Moscow Regional Fund for Support of the First President of the Russian Federation.

Later, when Yegor Yakovlev, editor of the perestroika-era *Moskovskie Novosti* (*Moscow News*) was recording an interview with his son Vladimir, he heard him say he had no interest in politics.⁴⁶ When Yakovlev senior pointed in amazement to his involvement in *Ne dai Bog!*, ‘the most political

⁴⁰ Ostrovsky, Arkady, *The Invention of Russia*.

⁴¹ Miloslavskii, Leonid, ‘Chto oni s nami sdelauiut esli pobediut na vyborakh’, *Ne dai Bog!*, 20 April 1996.

⁴² Mostovshchikov, Sergei, ‘Durdom’, *Ne dai Bog!*, 27 April 1996.

⁴³ [Anon], ‘K voine za delo kommunisticheskoi partii bud’te gotovy’, *Ne dai Bog!*, 4 May 1996.

⁴⁴ Sergeyev, Boris, ‘On nikogo ne tronet?’, *Ne dai Bog!*, 18 May 1996.

⁴⁵ Redkollegiia, ‘Eto chto za gazeta?’, *Ne dai Bog!*, 11 May 1996.

⁴⁶ Zasturskii, Ia., Golubev, E., Kovler, I., *Vlast’, zerkalo ili sluzhanka?’, entsiklopediia zhizni sovremennoi rossiiskoi zhurnalistiki*, Izd. Soiuza zhurnalistov Rossii, 1998.

newspaper I have seen in my entire life,' of which Yakovlev junior had been the publisher, Vladimir replied that he had published it because he did not like Zyuganov and did not like the Communists. 'I find their goals and objectives personally unacceptable,' he told his father. 'When the election was over I no longer saw any need for the paper, although I could probably have kept it going.' He said he had no sense of guilt over what he had done. 'I considered Zyuganov completely unsuitable to be president of Russia, and acted accordingly. [...] With your political views you saw Yavlinsky as the best president,' he countered his father. 'Well, I have no political opinions, but I just knew Yavlinsky was never going to get elected. The realistic choice was between Zyuganov and Yeltsin. Yeltsin suited me better, that's all. You approached the issue in terms of political concepts, but I had a pragmatic approach.'

On more than one occasion in the history of *Kommersant* Andrey Vasiliev, who became its editor, called *Ne dai Bog!* a 'sideline' of the newspaper. In Leonid Parfenov's film to mark the twentieth anniversary of the appearance of *Ne dai Bog!*, Vasiliev said he 'absolutely basked' in the ambience at the paper when he had to rewrite authors' pieces 'because they did not know how to write Sovietese.'¹⁷

One of the paper's journalists was Valeriy Panyushkin who 'contrived to write two notes against Zyuganov in the propaganda newspaper *Ne dai Bog!* and, as he explained years later in a book about Mikhail Khodorkovsky, it had 'permanently poisoned' him. 'No matter what I now do, since that time my words are assumed to be not journalism but propaganda.' 'You will not believe this book was not commissioned from me by Mikhail Khodorkovsky. I can swear I am not writing it at his behest, and that no politician and no oligarch commissioned me to write it, but, after the 1996 election campaign, you have every right not to believe me.'¹⁸

Not many people, however, shared Panyushkin's viewpoint. Another of the newspaper's contributors, Andrey Kolesnikov, who since Vladimir Putin came to power has belonged to his pool of journalists, told Parfenov in an interview for the same film, that 1996 was a time of 'fierce and furious propaganda' and 'the best time of my life.' 'It was an absolutely brilliant time for me as a propagandist,' he said, chuckling at the way Vasiliev had managed to come up with Soviet-style titles, which 'really infuriated Gennadiy Zyuganov.' One title which Vasiliev instanced with undisguised relish was 'The weaver women of Ivanovo are sewing communism for us.' (The original title was in fact: 'Ivanovo: Communism is being sewn for us', *Ne dai Bog!*, 4 May 1996.) 'What can you build on ruins?' Andrey Kolesnikov asked in a leading article. 'You can build nothing. Or you can create well-paid jobs for workers. Or you can never-endingly try to build Communism. The bosses in Ivanovo choose the first option; the women weavers of Ivanovo choose the second; and the Ivanovo Communists choose the third.'¹⁹

In the newspaper's final issue, immediately before the second round of the election, the contents were ascribed to the entire editorial board: Leonid Miloslavsky, Andrey Vasiliev, Vladimir Yakovlev, Nikita Golovanov, Sergey Mostovshchikov, Igor Svinarenko and Andrey Kolesnikov. 'All the words have been said,' they commented. 'We have no more arguments to put to you and can now only leave you in peace to think things over, wait for election day, and vote in favour of the person you choose. [...] So, how life works out in the coming years for every member of the editorial board depends on how you vote.'

Yeltsin's Heart

While the whole of the Russian Federation was being urged to vote with its heart, the heart of the front-running candidate failed. On 26 June, one week before the second round, Yeltsin suffered a

¹⁷ Parfenov, Leonid, 'S tverdym znakom na kontse', broadcast 30 November 2009, First Channel.

¹⁸ Panyushkin, Valerii, *Mikhail Khodorkovskii. Uznik tishiny: istoriia pro to, kak cheloveku v Rossii stat' svobodnym i chto emu za eto budet*, Internet: Sekret firmy, 2006.

¹⁹ Kolesnikov, Andrei, 'Ivanovo: Nam sh'iut kommunizm', *Ne dai Bog!*, 4 May 1996.

fourth heart attack. The television people in his inner circle knew about it, but decided against reporting the issue to the voters. The press were informed that the president had a cold. ‘The president’s press officer talked of his “firm handshake,” Chubais spoke of his “voice full of energy,”’ Liliya Shevtsova recalls. ‘The expression “the president is working on his papers” came to mean that Yeltsin was in very bad shape.’⁵⁰

One of the journalistic ploys devised in connection with the president’s health during the campaign is described by Yevgeny Zhulebin and Igor Klochkov of *Kommersant*.⁵¹ ‘It was essential to come up immediately with a wheeze to give voters the illusion that the No. 1 candidate was present and busy at his workplace in the Kremlin,’ they wrote in 1999. ‘The head of a news agency came up with the brilliant and practical idea that the president should appear to give a major interview responding to all the issues of concern to the voters. Obviously there was no question of Yeltsin appearing on television. The ingenious solution was to make it a written interview. All night the agency staff wrote presidential answers to every conceivable question, from increasing pensions to the dispute with Japan over the Kuril islands. By the morning of 31 June [sic] an extensive interview was ready. Television and newspaper correspondents received excellent material for commentary, the information vacuum was filled, and Yeltsin’s absence during the hectic last days before the election went almost unnoticed. It would seem that to this day the president is completely unaware of that interview.’

The *Kommersant* journalists made a mistake with the date, and in fact the interview, under the heading ‘President Yeltsin answers questions from Interfax News Agency’ was released on tape on 30 June 1996 at 18:37 hrs.⁵² ‘Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin on the eve of a crucial vote in the second round of the election for Russia’s head of state answers questions from Interfax,’ the lead stated. The first question was:

Interfax: There are three days left before the election. The whole country is anxiously awaiting the results. Your rival is holding daily briefings and is constantly in evidence. You, however, have chosen not to be high profile in these last days before the election. Why is that? What are you working on during this time?’

The words put in Yeltsin’s mouth were: I am working every day with my election team, having consultations with our allies, negotiating on the composition and structure of the future government, monitoring the implementation of my decrees, meeting with the heads of regions and the prime minister, working a great deal with journalists (I have recorded several dozen regional television and radio interviews and am even losing my voice.) As regards my opponent, he has one approach and I have a different one. He gives press conferences every day and concentrates on furious anti-Yeltsin propaganda. I, though, am working on particular issues. I believe that for a politician who is presently carrying out the tasks of the presidency, actions speak louder than words.’

Two days later, on 2 July, an interview with Boris Yeltsin was recorded by the film director and television presenter, Eldar Ryazanov. (He had left television in 1988 because of the censorship, and returned at the end of 1991 to the newly formed company, Ren-TV.)⁵³ This was Ryazanov’s third interview of the president and was quite barbed, touching on the sensitive topic of Chechnya. The president said how painful it was to him that many soldiers’ mothers got their sons back in coffins. Ryazanov later recalled in an interview with Timothy Colton how appalled he was after this conversation: ‘My God,’ I thought, ‘if Yeltsin wins, whose hands will Russia be in?’⁵⁴ He did, nevertheless, vote for him in the election.

⁵⁰ Shevtsova, Liliya, *Rezhim Borisa El'tsina*.

⁵¹ Zhulebin, Evgenii and Klochkov, Igor, ‘Kto otvechaet za prezidenta’, *Kommersant-Vlast*, 13 June 1999.

⁵² [Anon], ‘Prezident El'tsin otvechaet na voprosy agentstva “Interfaks”’, *Interfaks*, Moscow, 30 June 1996.

⁵³ Rostova, Nataliia, ‘Rozhdenie rossiiskikh SMI. Epokha Gorbacheva (1985-1991)’, <http://gorbvnmedia.com/post/01-22-25-1988>

⁵⁴ Colton, Timothy J., *Yeltsin: A Life*, NY: Basic Books, 2008.

Irena Lesnevskaya was present at the recording. The founder of Ren-TV, and Ryazanov's friend of many years, it fell to her to edit it for broadcast. In a later interview with Echo of Moscow, she described how much effort she put into editing the five-hour conversation 'to ensure that no one had the impression Yeltsin was ill or not speaking clearly.'⁵⁵ She did this with such technical skill that even those present at the recording were amazed. 'I was completely certain then, and still am, that I did the right thing,' she said. 'We were not prepared at that time for there to be a different regime, that is, the Communists who would start turning everything back. There would have been a war.' In another interview, with Ksenia Sobchak on Dozhd [Rain] TV, she said it had been a mistake. 'I realize it was a mistake, but I would do the same thing again, because I know only too well that if the Communists had come back there would have been nothing left. There would have been war.'⁵⁶

David Hoffman writes, 'On the weekend before the 3 July vote, Yeltsin taped a preelection address to the country. A camera crew came to Barvikha, the presidential rest home just outside Moscow. Then the tape was brought back to Video International for editing.' 'It was quite obvious that it was very difficult for Yeltsin to speak,' Mikhail Margelov, a key member of staff at the corporation told a reporter. 'He was sweating all the time. It was difficult even to pronounce words. Sometimes he couldn't finish the sentence. Sometimes it was difficult for him to even breathe.'⁵⁷ But here too the editing specialists got to work. 'It was serious work to make it look nice,' Margelov said. 'Not many people could see that something was wrong.' 'No, there were no moral scruples over whether we were deceiving anyone during the second round,' he added. 'Nobody wanted the Communists back.'

The president of NTV, Igor Malashenko, was also present during the editing of the video. 'What could I do?' he asked Hoffman. 'Yeltsin was very ill at that time, and the only thing I did to appease my conscience was not to say anything to my colleagues: I took the sin completely on my own conscience – the journalists knew nothing. I had a job to do in the election team and my position was straightforward. I have said this publicly more than once: I preferred a dead Yeltsin to a living Zyuganov. Unfortunately. That was the choice I made.'

Another machination associated with Yeltsin's illness is described by journalist Leonid Mlechin. 'Yeltsin's team had to campaign without a candidate,' he writes. 'Boris Nikolayevich literally could not get out of bed. When the president disappeared from the television screens, the country began to worry and a special shoot was organized. Wood panels, the same as in his Kremlin office, were made and installed in the room where he was lying. Yeltsin was sat up in bed, supported by pillows. They put a shirt, jacket and tie on him. Even this called for a huge effort from Boris Nikolayevich. It was only his indomitable will and determination to win that enabled him to overcome the pain and his weakness. The only people around the table were those closest to him, who were aware of the real state of affairs: Valentin Yumashev, Tatiana Dyachenko. The picture was shown on television. When they were preparing Yeltsin's appeal to the voters, all the TV crew were asked to leave the room so they would not see how the president had to be helped in. He had to make a great effort to say even a few words.'⁵⁸

Arkadiy Ostrovsky writes of the same episode in his book about the last thirty years of Russian journalism. He says the make-over of the room was ordered by Malashenko.⁵⁹ In conversation with Ostrovsky Malashenko recalled that Yeltsin had to concentrate all his energy just on sitting up straight. Viktor Chernomyrdin was next to him but Yeltsin did not see him. He spoke slowly, his speech sometimes slurred. There were words and sentences he could not finish. This entry too was much edited to make Yeltsin look less ill and wooden.

⁵⁵ Larina, Kseniia, 'Chto ostalos' ot svobody slova?', Ekho Moskvy, broadcast 25 May 2012. <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/year2012/891591-echo/>

⁵⁶ Sobchak, Kseniia, 'Irena Lesnevskaya o davlenii na SMP, izuzitstve Putina i tom, chto v mitingakh net nikakogo smysla', Dozhd' Television, broadcast 7 June 2013.

⁵⁷ Hoffman, David E., *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia*, NY: PublicAffaires, 2001, p. 357.

⁵⁸ Mlechin, Leonid, *Boris Yel'sin. Posleslovie*, M.: Tsentrpoligraf, 2007.

⁵⁹ Ostrovsky, Arkady, *The Invention of Russia*.

The political analyst Nikolai Svanidze, host of *Zerkalo (The Mirror)* on RTR television (in 1997 he became head of All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting) also knew about the state of the president's heart, but he too said nothing about it to his viewers. Twenty years later I asked him whether he now thinks his Russian audience, who were also voters, had a right to know about the illness of one of the main contenders for the top job in Russia.⁶⁰ Svanidze replied, 'This is a technical issue, whether they did or did not have a right to know. I was not interested in their rights in this instance. They had a right to very many things. At that time they also had a right to know what the return to power of the Communists would mean, and then we would have had to talk about that 24 hours a day, to engage in anti-communist propaganda 24 hours a day. Why would it have been right to talk to them about Yeltsin's heart attack but not about the historical significance of having Yeltsin in power? The question of rights is fair enough, but it draws in a lot of other issues after it.'

On 1 July, the last day of campaigning before the second round, media researcher Ellen Mickiewicz⁶¹ tells us the *Segodnya (Today)* programme on NTV began with Boris Yeltsin's meeting with Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. It was the first appearance of the president after four days of absence from television screens, and presenter Mikhail Osokin, Mickiewicz notes, informed viewers there was no reason not to believe Chernomyrdin's statement that the president had a cold. 'That is the conclusion of an investigation by this television company,' the expert witness declared. 'The deception continued on election day,' says David Hoffman. Yeltsin voted in Barvikha. The Kremlin video cameras showed him smiling, but this video too was edited. Two white-coated doctors standing next to him were cropped out of the picture.⁶² Mlechin notes, 'When on election day Yeltsin was shown dropping his voting slip in the ballot box, I was reminded of the last videos of Chernenko when he was already terminally ill.'⁶³

In Yeltsin's book *Presidential Marathon*, ghost-written by his son-in-law Valentin Yumashev, the episode is described as follows: 'Of course, I and my helpers were walking on a razor edge: was it permissible to conceal this information from the public? But I still believe that to have handed victory to Zyuganov or to have postponed the election would have been a many times worse evil. On Sunday, the day of the second round, I went with great difficulty to the polling station with Naina. The cameras of ORT, RTR and NTV, reporters and correspondents from the news agencies, in all some twenty people, were scrutinizing my every move. Summoning all my willpower, I smiled and said a few words, 'Listen, how many times have I answered all your questions?''⁶⁴

The newly elected president's health was so precarious that his inner circle curtailed the inauguration ceremony to the very minimum. It lasted just 16 minutes, of which taking the presidential oath used 45 seconds. 'The doctors did a great job. They literally put the president back on his feet,' says Liliya Shevtsova. 'But it was no longer possible to conceal the fact that he was seriously ill. Yeltsin slowly, with a vacant expression, dragging his feet, crossed the stage of the State Kremlin Palace to the microphone, giving the impression he was afraid he might fall. When he read the oath from the screen, a matter of several dozen words, his voice was trembling. Then, without paying any attention to anybody else, Yeltsin shambled like a sleepwalker into the wings. Many people realized at that moment that the president was so ill he was incapable of governing. However, as in previous periods of illness, he would not entrust his power to anyone else.'⁶⁵

Eight days after the inauguration, on 17 August, the German magazine *Bild* reported that the Russian president would be having an operation, and on 19 August that was followed by the American *Time*. The same day, the newly appointed presidential press officer, Sergey

⁶⁰ Rostova, Natalia, 'Televizydy: Nikolai Svanidze. Interv'iu byvshego rukovoditel'ia VGTRK', Meduza.io, 8 April 2016. <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/04/08/televizydy-nikolay-svanidze>

⁶¹ Mickiewicz, Ellen Propper, *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia*, Duke University Press, 1997.

⁶² Hoffman, David E., *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia*.

⁶³ Mlechin, Leonid, *Boris Yeltsin. Posleslovie*.

⁶⁴ El'tsin, B.N., 'Prezidentskii marafon: razmyshleniia, vospominaniia, vpechatleniia...! / s.v. 'Boris El'tsin', M.: Rossiiskaia politicheskaia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2008.

⁶⁵ Shevtsova, Liliia, *Rezhim Borisa El'tsina*.

Yastrzhembsky, at his first briefing, informed reporters that (I quote Yelena Rykovtseva's report in *Moskovskie Novosti*), 'I am acquainted with this information, although I haven't actually held the magazine in my hands. The report is typical of a succession of speculations and rumours about the state of the president's health. The reality is that he is located not far from Moscow and comes in to work in the Kremlin, where he resolves important issues over the telephone.'⁶⁶

'What is most disappointing is that even after having "chosen and won", Russia is still uncertain who will be the head of state tomorrow,' Natalia Timakova of *Moskovsky Komsomolets* wrote after the same briefing. (She was to become President Medvedev's press officer.) 'Of course, it is important for the president's heart to be vulnerable to what is happening in the country, but not to the extent of becoming pathological.'⁶⁷

On 19 August Echo of Moscow radio broadcast a report that Boris Yeltsin had been briefly in hospital at the Moscow Cardiological Centre, which was under the direction of Yevgeny Chazov. The magazine *Itogi* (*Outcomes*) was about to report that Yeltsin would be operated on at the end of August, but was dissuaded.

The Scoop That Never Was

If you examine the back issues during this period, it is clear that *Itogi*, which first appeared on 18 March 1996 and was part of the same media empire of Vladimir Gusinsky as NTV, did not conduct a propaganda campaign in favour of Yeltsin. It is, however, also clear that the publication was generally on Yeltsin's side. Journalist Masha Gessen, who at this time was working at *Itogi*, later criticized the journalistic community for making 'a monstrous mistake' by 'getting into bed with Yeltsin in 1996.'⁶⁸ Although, she added, this did not apply to *Itogi*, one of its issues did catch her eye. The cover, with its caption of 'One Country, Two Paths', on the choice between Yeltsin and Zyuganov 'reflected the opinion of a majority of members of the editorial board.' (The caption was in fact 'One Russia: Two Paths'.) 'As far as I know,' she told me in an interview years later, 'I was the only person on the editorial board who voted against all the candidates. Well, people held certain beliefs, and it is hard to condemn them because I had had the remarkable education of working and living in America. And the strange idea that you just could not vote for a person who had started the war in Chechnya, even if that might ultimately mean the Communists getting back in, could only have occurred to an irresponsible American citizen who passionately believed that democracy was just the best system there could be. I cannot blame my colleagues for not believing that: why would they? But in the longer term, their lack of, forgive the expression, consciousness, had a bad effect.' The magazine's editor Sergey Parkhomenko owned up to a cover issued during the campaign on which he personally drew a Hitler moustache on Gennadiy Zyuganov. After Yeltsin's successful re-election, Parkhomenko wrote an item giving a detailed description of the operation the president was facing. He was, however, denied his scoop.

According to Timothy Colton, at the end of August Yeltsin's daughter, Tatiana Dyachenko, had Parkhomenko's as yet unpublished text in her hands.⁶⁹ As Parkhomenko explained years later, in the morning of the day the issue containing the item was to be signed off for print he was 'phoned by a big boss in the Media-Most holding group, who warned me that a certain lady would be calling *Itogi* with a modest request in connection with a particular item due to appear in our next issue.'⁷⁰ The boss 'asked me to take this call seriously,' Parkhomenko explains the request. "Boris Nikolaevich does not want to have the operation," I was told by the woman in a very tired, slightly irritated tone. "He says it is not necessary, and that that is to be made clear to everybody. We are trying to talk him round and talk him round we shall, but if he is now informed that such an article

⁶⁶ Rykovtseva, Elena. 'V Shveitsarii El'tsin ne uedet', *Moskovskie novosti*, 20 August 1996.

⁶⁷ Timakova, Natalia. "My tak Vam verili, tovarishch El'tsin, kak, mozhet byt', ne verili sebe", *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 20 August 1996.

⁶⁸ Rostova, Natalia, 'Masha Gessen: "V otlichie ot bol'shinstva sograzhdan ia zhivu v Rossii v silu osoznannogo vybora"', *Slon.ru*, 19 January 2012. <https://slon.ru/russia/gessen-732049.xhtml>

⁶⁹ Colton, Timothy J., *Yeltsin: A Life*.

⁷⁰ Parkhomenko, Sergei, "Informatsiia prinadlezhalo vsem, no nikto ne dogadyvalsia ee vziat". Sergei Parkhomenko ob operatsii na serdtse Borisa El'tsina', *Kommersant*, 31 October 2014.

has appeared, and you can be sure that he will be informed, he will be furious and refuse once and for all. So we need to do things differently. We will take all this and show it to him, and tell him that the information is bound sooner or later to leak, and that various bastards are already writing about it and it will be impossible to block. So the best thing is to pre-empt it. It is better for him himself to announce that he considers the operation necessary, and retain the initiative. He will like that idea, and perhaps then he will agree. Apologies for calling you ‘bastards’.”

In return for leaving the item out of the issue, *Itogi* was promised an interview with the president. Parkhomenko passed the issue for print without the item. He was indeed sent written answers to questions he put, and they were published in the 10 September issue,⁷¹ together with the item that had been omitted.⁷² The cover, however, with its ‘Boris Yeltsin: an Operation. It’s official’ was no longer an exclusive. On 5 September an interview with Yeltsin was televised, and it was given to Mikhail Lesin, the founder of Video International who was working at that time for Novosti news agency. The president told the future minister of the press that he had consented to heart surgery. There was no mention of the heart attack he had suffered before the election. The video was shown on ORT’s news programme, *Vremya (Time)*.

In *Presidential Marathon* Valentin Yumashev puts his account of this episode in the mouth of Boris Yeltsin as,⁷³ ‘It seems to me that what had affected my health was not tiredness, not drugs – the doctors really kept me in good shape at all times – but something quite different: my mood, which was terrible. I had finally to unveil my ills in front of the country, in front of the world. For me that was one more ordeal. I supported a hard line very common in Soviet times: the less the people knew about the ailments of the head of state, the more secure they would feel. Life was tough enough already, and now there would be hysteria in the press with all the gory details. The president’s ills are a purely private matter. I never swore an oath to show everyone my X-rays.

‘Tanya was trying to persuade me: “Dad, it’s going to seem very odd if you disappear for such a while and no one knows where you are.” Tanya brought me a translation from English of the letter Reagan wrote to the nation when his Alzheimer’s disease was becoming seriously evident. Irreversible changes were happening in his brain. In effect, Ronald Reagan was saying goodbye to the Americans in that letter: he would never be the same again. They were simple words, very simple – like a note scribbled on a scrap of paper in a hospital ward. The kind of note you write to those closest to you.

‘I asked myself: could I, just as humanly and openly, absolutely frankly, talk to the people of my country?’

‘Those close to me assured me that, after I had conducted such a sincere, such a frank election campaign, it would be quite wrong to conceal my operation. “This is not a private matter for Boris Yeltsin and his family,” my new press officer, Sergey Yastrzhembsky, wrote to me. Tanya brought me the letter: my helpers were reluctant to use the usual presidential courier service. For the moment, nobody knew about the operation; the information was completely confidential.

‘Here, in Zavidovo, I took my final decision: yes, I would tell it like it was. I gave an interview to Mikhail Lesin, right here in the conservatory in Zavidovo, wearing a jumper. I remember, I faltered. It was difficult for me to say “heart operation”. When I watched the video on television, I just thought briefly, “Well, there we are. This is the beginning of a completely new life for me. What will it be like?”’

The political analyst Liliya Shevtsova linked the Lesin interview to the fact that ‘it was impossible to keep up the performance any longer, the more so because the chancellor (of Germany, Helmut

⁷¹ [Anon], ‘Boris El’tsin: “Nuzhna operatsiia. I tianut’ s nei ne budu’, *Itogi*, 10 September 1996.

⁷² Parkhomenko, Sergei, ‘V techenie trekh-piati nedel’ prezidentu budet sdelana operatsiia na serdtse’, *Itogi*, 10 September 1996.

⁷³ El’tsin, B.N., *Prezidentskii marafon*.

Kohl) was due in Moscow, and plainly wanted to know about the state of health of his “friend Boris”.⁷⁴ It was decided to tell the truth.’ ‘Yeltsin stated that the disease had been discovered unexpectedly during a check-up,’ Shevtsova writes. ‘He clearly did not want to say that he had had a heart attack before the second round of the election, since otherwise he would have had to admit he had misled society into electing a president incapable of carrying out his duties.’

In the autumn Lesin was appointed head of a presidential administration for public relations specially created for him, and gave his first interview as an official. *Moskovsky Komsomolets* commented, ‘The new presidential appointee evinced regret and bafflement over the way Russian journalists were reporting the president’s illness and his imminent heart surgery. Mikhail Lesin considers it inappropriate for the media to investigate in detail “what hurts where” on Boris Yeltsin, and even made a curious suggestion: “Let’s conduct an investigation into the health of that journalist and broadcast the results to everyone: would that be ethical?”⁷⁵ ‘Any fool can see that it would be,’ *Moskovsky Komsomolets* added on its own account, ‘if that journalist happened to be the popularly elected leader of his country.’

Two months later, on 5 November, the president went under the surgeon’s knife. ‘The operation was performed by 12 people, led by Renat Akchurin,’ Timothy Colton tells us. [The American surgeon Michael] DeBakey, four American and two German doctors watched the operation via CCTV in the next room, ready to intervene at any time if that should prove necessary.⁷⁶ After the surgery, Boris Yeltsin went on to live another eleven years.

Thanking the Election Campaigners

After his re-election, Boris Yeltsin gave recognition by presidential decree to a whole host of people working in the media and to oligarchs.

*** Text of a Decree of the President ***

25 July 1996 N 396-rp

Decree of the President of the Russian Federation ‘On recognition of active participants in the organization and conducting of the election campaign of the president of the Russian Federation in 1996.’

For active participation in the organization and conducting of the election campaign of the president of the Russian Federation in 1996, to express the appreciation of the President of the Russian Federation to:

Peter Olegovich Aven
Alexander Sergeyevich Bevz
Boris Abramovich Berezovsky
Sergey Yevgenievich Blagovolin
Andrey Petrovich Vavilov
Andrey Georgievich Vinogradov
Igor Nesterovich Golembiovsky
Alexey Vladimirovich Goldshteyn
Pavel Nikolayevich Gusev
Vladimir Alexandrovich Gusinsky
Lev Nikitovich Gushchin
Sergey Vyacheslavovich Davydov

⁷⁴ Shevtsova, Liliia, *Rezhim Borisa El'tsina*.

⁷⁵ Nikanorov, Vasilii, ‘Pesnia o Lesine. Novyi imidzhmeiker prezidenta: I skazal on, chto eto nekhorocho’, *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 21 September 1996.

⁷⁶ Colton, Timothy J., *Yeltsin: A Life*.

Arkadiy Vyacheslavovich Yevstafiev
Yury Mikhailovich Zapol
Boris Ivanovich Ivanishvili
Igor Alexandrovich Kamensky
Yury Alekseyevich Kosarev
German Serapionovich Kuznetsov
Valentin Valentinovich Lazutkin
Ivan Dmitrievich Laptev
Alexander Yevgenievich Lebedev
Vyacheslav Petrovich Leontiev
Mikhail Yurievich Lesin
Irena Stefanovna Lesnevskaya
Nikolai Gavrilovich Letnikov
Alexander Ivanovich Lisin
Sergey Fedorovich Lisovsky
Viktor Grigorievich Loshak
Vitaliy Borisovich Malkin
Vladimir Nikolaevich Markov
Leonid Mikhailovich Miloslavsky
Aigar Petrovich Misan
Shod Saidovich Muladzhanov
Leonid Borisovich Nevzlin
Elena Borisovna Okulova
Gleb Olegovich Pavlovsky
Yevgeny Vasilievich Pavlov
Vladimir Mitrofanovich Povolyaev
Yury Dmitrievich Poroykov
Vladimir Olegovich Potanin
Alexander Serafimovich Potapov
Sergey Sergeevich Rodionov
Oleg Konstantinovich Rudnov
Eldar Alexandrovich Ryazanov
Viktor Yegorovich Savchenko
Eduard Mikhailovich Sagalaev
Valeriy Petrovich Simonov
Alexander Pavlovich Skvortsov
Alexander Pavlovich Smolensky
Ivan Valentinovich Starikov
Vladislav Andreyevich Starkov
Alexander Mikhailovich Tagiltsev
Vitaliy Fedorovich Tishkin
Andrey Vladislavovich Trapeznikov
Vitaliy Tovievich Tretiakov
Petr Sergeevich Filippov
Svetlana Viktorovna Filonenko
Mikhail Maratovich Fridman
Mikhail Borisovich Khodorkovsky
Vladimir Filippovich Shumeyko
Valentin Borisovich Yumashev
Anatoly Petrovich Yurkov
Vladimir Yegorovich Yakovlev.

President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin
25 July 1996

*** [ENDS] ***

Those who had participated in the campaign also received more substantial tokens of appreciation. NTV, for example, which at the beginning of the year had already, without competition, been granted preferential terms for signal transmission (in violation of the existing procedures), was now given the right to round-the-clock broadcasting on Channel Four. On 20 September, the president signed Decree No. 1386 'On consolidation of the operation and improvement of the quality of broadcasting of the Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company [RTR] and the NTV Television Company', in which, on RTR's recommendation, as formally the previous owner of the frequency and of NTV, and by agreement with the relevant federal agency (the Federal Television and Radio Broadcasting Service), the right to 24-hour broadcasting was confirmed. The Government was instructed to 'decide the matter of payment for the licences and carry out the necessary revision of the licences.' At the same time, note was taken of the joint decision of RTR and NTV, agreed with FTR, to 'retain the suite of educational and cultural programmes devised by the creative teams of RTR in the broadcasting schedule of the NTV television company.' In respect of this, RTR retained its budget allocations at the 1996 level and was reorganized as a state institution with the status of a cultural institution. The Government was also instructed to 'ensure implementation of previous decisions regarding consolidation of the operation of RTR, including timely financing of its operations and ensuring that the most highly qualified creative and technical specialists are attracted to work for RTR on a contractual basis in accordance with the Civil Code.'

Back in August, in an interview with *Itogi*, Igor Malashenko had explained the link between his work in Yeltsin's election campaign team and the possibility of gaining the frequency for NTV: 'I may have hoped that my work there would in some way dispel rumours that NTV was a noxious company undermining the foundations of society and the state, but there was no mention of the channel. I was invited to join the team by the president himself and, as you can imagine, any conversation along the lines of "I'll join your team if you give me the channel" was out of the question. I do not presently know whether we are going to be given the channel.'⁷⁷ Despite these anxieties, the company was able to begin full-scale broadcasting on 11 November.

After the [state seizure of NTV] in 2001, recalling the company's history, Yevgeny Kiselev justified the way the licence had been obtained. 'Well, suppose there had been a competition. What then? Could it in the circumstances of the time have been conducted democratically? Even today it would be ridiculous to claim that similar competitions are conducted democratically and fairly. And imagine the situation if the competition, with the involvement of lobbyists and exploiting all sorts of administrative pressures, had not been won by NTV but by somebody else. Or that after the competition it had been decided to split the channel between several of the candidates and turn it into a kind of hotchpotch? NTV simply would not have happened. Would that have been a good thing? To give a reply to that question is as difficult as deciding whether it would have been better or worse if, in autumn 1993, Yeltsin had not dissolved the parliament but continued to look for a compromise. History is not written in the subjunctive.'⁷⁸

By the time NTV was awarded the frequency, Gazprom had already become a co-owner of the channel, acquiring a 30% stake in April. MOST, as a result, got a great opportunity to develop satellite broadcasting. In June the Government approved a loan to the company of \$140 million. Additionally, in November the channel was awarded exemption from tax on imported equipment, and this indulgence was estimated to save it tens of thousands of dollars.

Other participants in the campaign were in line for bonuses. From January 1997 the television production company Ren-TV was awarded the 49 metre frequency in Moscow and began developing as a TV channel. Mikhail Margelov, who had edited the Yeltsin interview, became

⁷⁷ Pinzhurenko, Sergei, 'Igor' Malashenko, prezident telekompanii NTV: "To groziatsia vse otniat", to obeshchait vse otdat", *Itogi*, 27 August 1996.

⁷⁸ Kiselev, Evgenii, 'Istoriia NTV. Chast' 4', *Gazeta*, 10 October 2003.

deputy head of the newly established presidential administration for public relations, while the bureaucratic career of his chief, Lesin, progressed rapidly and, three years later, he became minister of the press, working then for the re-election of Vladimir Putin.

As for the oligarchs, after the 1996 election they were even awarded positions in the Government. In August Vladimir Potanin was appointed deputy prime minister and, in October, Boris Berezovsky became deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council (as did another signatory of the 'the letter of the thirteen', Vypfel president Nikolai Mikhailov). Mikhail Fridman, Alexander Smolensky and Vladimir Gusinsky were appointed members of the Government's Banking Council. Businessmen took ownership of major state assets, which were put up for loans-for-shares auctions. The truce between them broke down in 1997 in the struggle over privatization of Svyazinvest, the state telecommunications company. This was Russia's first news war, with the oligarchs making use of the mass media companies they owned.

In autumn 1996 Boris Berezovsky gave a frank interview to the *Financial Times*, in which he spoke of the seven businessmen controlling 50% of the country's economy and influencing decision-making on it. On 14 November *Obshchaya Gazeta [the General Newspaper]* published an article by Andrey Fadin titled 'The Reign of the Seven Bankers as the New Russian version of the Reign of the Seven Boyards.' 'They control access to the state budget and almost all investment opportunities in the Russian Federation,' he wrote. 'They have their hands on the huge news resource of the major television channels. They formulate the will of the president. Those who did not want to go along with them have been crushed or moved out of the circle. But in Russia, no victory is conclusive if it does not seem at least minimally fair in the eyes of the majority.'⁷⁹ The phenomenon had been given a name.

Consequences of the Campaign

Why would it be 'misleading to see just the fact of elections being held and the public participating in them as proof of their democratic nature?' To this question Liliya Shevtsova replied, 'Many people were soon regarding an election which led to the return of a sick person incapable of carrying out his duties as a profanation. An aversion to politics and politicians grew more marked. "If elections change nothing in our lives, why conduct them and spend all that money?" This opinion was frequently heard. As a result, the necessary decisive shift of public opinion in favour of democracy, when a majority both of the elite and of the public come to believe that it is the best, or indeed the only possible, form of government did not come about at the time of the presidential election. This was borne out by subsequent events, when the overwhelming majority of the population reacted with indifference to the fact that a ruling group began governing on behalf of Yeltsin. It did not give rise to unrest, or even openly expressed discontent. What matters is not just the fact that elections are held, but what they actually change, what hope they hold out to society. Sometimes, as happened in Russia, they can increase mistrust of democratic procedures among a section of the population.'⁸⁰ 'The election was not fully free and not fully equal,' she concludes, 'because Yeltsin had at his disposal all the resources of the state, which he exploited to his own advantage. In this instance, the procedures of democracy made it easier for the dominant faction of the ruling class to retain power, and that is why it supported the holding of the election.'

As for television, David Hoffman considers that the campaign showed television can destroy as well as create. After Zyuganov, 'their next victim was General Lebed, whom Yeltsin appointed to head the Security Council.' Having signed the Khasavyurt Agreement in August, he 'grew outspoken and insulting' in his criticism of the president. Lebed's popularity grew. As a result, 'having been built up as a serious candidate by ORT and NTV, Lebed was unceremoniously crushed by the same channels, which now broadcast unflattering stories about him. NTV aired videotape, some of it admittedly eighteen months old, showing an extreme nationalist and fascist group known as the

⁷⁹ Fadin, Andrei, 'Semibankirshchina kak novoruskii variant semiboarshchiniy', *Obshchaia gazeta*, 14 November 1996.

⁸⁰ Shevtsova, Liliya, *Rezhim Borisa El'tsina*.

Russian Legion marching in St. Petersburg and suggested that these were Lebed's forces. Lebed was fired by Yeltsin on October 17,⁸¹ just a few months after his appointment.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky was one of the few oligarchs to publicly review the history of 1996. He was still in prison when he wrote, "The compromise (and historically necessary) tandem of Yeltsin-Zyuganov did not, as everyone knows, happen. [...] A different strategy was chosen: the machinery of wholly unprincipled manipulation of public opinion and millions of dollars were deployed to secure Yeltsin's victory. It was an unambiguously authoritarian scenario. It was at this time that the values of the late 1990s developed, of which the most important was that the end justifies the means. If victory is what we want, we will allow the Communists no airtime on television, and discuss the ethics of that later. We will set up General Lebed to take away 15% of Zyuganov's vote and then, when he is no longer needed, dump him. That was when journalists began changing from being the architects of public opinion into becoming obsequious servants of the bosses, and independent public institutions became mouthpieces of those sponsoring them. After July 1996, we knew that 'Gold (and gold alone) triumphs over evil.'

Khodorkovsky also directly linked the 1996 election with the establishment of the Putin regime. 'In the summer of 1999, when Yeltsin's health was increasingly giving rise to questions and doubts, a new generation of Kremlin puppet-masters decided that a gigantic bluff was needed if the regime was to survive,' he wrote. "We need to pretend we have all the answers to the key questions on the political agenda, which has been hanging fire since 1995 [...], but in real life, where there is power, property and money, we will carry on doing everything the same as before." That bluff was what underlay the Putin-2000 project. It was an authoritarian project that was a direct logical continuation and consequence of the Yeltsin-1996 project.⁸²

⁸¹ Hoffman, David E., *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia*, p. 363.

⁸² Khodorkovskii, Mikhail, 'Levyi povorot', *Vedomosti*, No. 1420, 1 August 2005.



About The Henry Jackson Society

The Henry Jackson Society is a think tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free - working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.



About the Russia Studies Centre

The Russia Studies Centre is a research and advocacy unit operating within The Henry Jackson Society dedicated to analysing contemporary political developments and promoting human rights and political liberty in the Russian Federation.



About Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty

RFE/RL's mission is to promote democratic values and institutions by reporting the news in countries where a free press is banned by the government or not fully established. Our journalists provide what many people cannot get locally: uncensored news, responsible discussion, and open debate.



The Henry Jackson Society
Millbank Tower
21-24 Millbank, London, SW1P 4QP
Tel: 020 7340 4520

www.henryjacksonsociety.org
Charity Registration No. 1140489

