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Media Manipulation and Political Control in Russia

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SUMMARY POINTS

- In the early post-communist years Russia had competitive politics. Diverse and lively media encouraged and were an integral part of this pluralistic environment.
- By the late 1990s Russia was ready for a return of a more traditional political pattern: the dominance of the state over a weak and fragmented society, and an uncontested supreme ruler. Vladimir Putin fitted that pattern.
- The state relies on national television channels as an invaluable political resource. National TV effectively shapes public opinion by boosting, playing down or ignoring any figure or event.
- Russia has a number of smaller-audience media guided by professional skills and standards. But the existing free media remain irrelevant when the political process is tightly controlled.
- Since journalists operate by the grace of the government, self-censorship has become ubiquitous, though the degree of self-restriction may vary significantly.
- The current economic crisis creates the chance for a reverse swing: a rise of societal activism and political pluralism. This would enable the media to regain a political relevance and reassume the role of serving the public interest. But the chance of a further crackdown should not be underestimated

Introduction

In today's Russia the function of the media is strongly curtailed: it does not promote political competition or hold the government to account on the people's behalf. Instead the media are reduced to being a political tool of the state or marginalized to a point of making no difference in policy-making. This deficiency is caused by the lack of an enabling environment. Political pluralism, the separation of powers and the rule of law are missing; the government pays little respect to rights and freedoms; and the public shows low demand for political participation or civil liberties, media liberty in particular. In the 21st century Russia has resumed its traditional pattern: the overwhelming dominance of the state over the public and an aversion to Western liberalism.

The collapse of communism, the European choice and the Russian historical tradition

'The Berlin wall was breached in a single day, but many years will go by before East Europeans are accepted as citizens of the new Europe',¹ American journalist Michael Dobbs wrote in the mid-1990s. Two decades after the fall of the Wall, East Germany has long rejected its imposed statehood and become part of a Germany that is once again a major European nation. Several East European countries have joined NATO and the European Union. For many which have not, it is a matter of time. Even if Dobbs was right and they do not yet fully qualify as Europeans in the eyes of their western neighbours, their political attachment to Europe is beyond doubt. Some even chose to drop their East European status in favour of a higher, Central European one. Every country of Eastern Europe that had been held by force on the wrong side of the Cold War divide made strenuous efforts to overcome this legacy, reconnect with its pre-war European national statehood – or invent a new one. For these countries, their European identity is beyond doubt. For Russia it remains an existential dilemma.

Throughout Russia's history its rulers repeatedly undertook Westernizing reforms, seeking to catch up with the military and technological advances in Europe. But in the political sphere Westernization was not allowed: the rulers were anxious that the nature of the regime stay unchanged and their absolute

¹ Dobbs, Michael (1997), *Down With Big Brother: the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Alfred A Knopf), p. XVII.

power unchallenged. Because of this anxiety, Westernizing modernization swings were usually followed by conservative, anti-Western ones.

As a result, the political reforms – the emergence of constitutions and parliaments, the codification of rights and freedoms – that had gradually emancipated European society and turned subjects into citizens did not take place in Russia until the early 20th century, only to be soon swept away by the Bolshevik revolution and the following decades of mass terror.

Under monarchs and communist rulers alike, the oppressive Russian state held sway over a powerless people. Russian society never came to think of itself as a force that could make a difference; it never developed the skills of, or desire for social organization. Life in constant fear and submission nurtured a different mindset and characteristics: low expectations, distrust, apathy and adaptation to the adverse environment shaped by the will and whims of government authorities. Instead of forming social groups that pursued common interests, the Russian people remained highly atomized, each person standing alone *vis-à-vis* the state, supported only by family and close friends.

The rise and fall of democratization: disillusionment with Western models

Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika eased the grip of communist rule, allowing a degree of free expression, travel and assembly, and generating political pluralism. This reform was unprecedented because it was, above all, about ideas and values; but just like the earlier Westernizing reforms, it was initiated from above. Gorbachev opted for it out of sheer necessity: the communist system had exhausted its potential, and the USSR was facing imminent economic collapse. The Russian people, except for tiny dissident groups that had been fully defeated by the time of perestroika, did not fight for freedoms or even ask for them. For the most part they eagerly accepted the gift of freedom when it came, but it was not their own achievement.

Boris Yeltsin went much further in political reform, introducing Western democratic institutions and principles, which were codified in the new constitution adopted in 1993. For a brief period the Russian people acted as a social force: they came together to assume responsibility for their own country, eagerly committing themselves to take Russia forward in the way they saw as right. A broadly accepted idea at that time was that Russia should become a 'normal country'; a broadly shared desire was to embrace the Western values of liberalism and democracy. If only we accept these

values, the belief went, we will become better off and our living standards will become 'like in the West'.

There was little concept of just how formidable the task of building democratic institutions would be. Unlike Eastern and Central European countries that claimed (or imagined) that they had a liberal past, Russia had little but centuries of tyranny behind it. While those countries could blame the Russian/Soviet occupier for the horrors of communism as well as post-communist hardships, the Russian people had nobody but themselves to blame, and self-condemnation is hardly a constructive way towards nation-building.

The end of communism was followed by the collapse of a familiar environment, economic troubles, confusion and insecurity, as well as a bruising political struggle and capitalism run wild. The Russian people felt disillusioned and deceived, and resented their own naïvety. Now the common perception was: we shouldn't have been gullible and trusted the Western models, for they only made our lives worse instead of better. The Russian people condemned the West and the Westernizers at home for the wrong path Russia had taken. They did not realize that success in the chosen path requires people's active and steady participation. They opted out of shaping their country's future, and slipped back into their habitual apathy and atomization.

Contrary to commonly shared expectations both inside and outside Russia, the collapse of Soviet communism did not become an irrevocable turn to the West and Europe. Instead it turned out to be yet another temporary westward swing in a perennial oscillation between a drive for Westernization and a resistance to change.

By the late 1990s Russia had made a decisive shift towards a market economy, but politically and socially it was ready for a return to the traditional political pattern: the dominance of the state and an uncontested supreme ruler concentrating power in his hands. When Vladimir Putin emerged as the new leader in 2000, he fitted this pattern.

Putin came with a resentful vision, shared by the majority of his nation, that the post-communist years were a period of weakness and humiliation for Russia that the West repeatedly took advantage of. He undertook to persuade the West to see Russia as a power to be reckoned with, but these attempts proved unsuccessful: from the war in Iraq to continued NATO expansion, Western foreign policy decisions were taken without regard to Russia's objections. Moreover, the West continuously criticized Russia for its

undemocratic politics and encroachment on rights and freedoms. Seeing the West show more lenience towards other post-communist countries, Putin regarded the Western focus on democracy and human rights as nothing more than a pretext to harm Russia and hamper its economic and geopolitical self-reassertion. His resentment, expressed in frequent ribald and sarcastic verbal barbs against western and Russian critics, resonated quite strongly with public sentiment, and as the Kremlin rhetoric grew increasingly anti-Western it was eagerly accepted by the people.

Meanwhile the oil price continued to rise, the economy was growing rapidly and so were incomes and purchasing power. Soon Moscow was reasserting itself on the world scene. Russia, a common line went, 'was rising from its knees' – this impressive rebound was achieved without listening to the teaching and preaching of the West. The West was no longer as attractive as during the previous decade. In a national poll conducted by the Levada Center in January 2008, 39 per cent of respondents said they would like Russia to evolve as a nation 'with a special political order and a special path', and 32 per cent had a vision of Russia as 'a nation similar to Western countries, with a democratic order and a market economy'. Ten years earlier these numbers were 18 and 47 per cent respectively.² This belief in Russia's special path is hard to express except in negative terms – as a reluctance to emulate Western models of development.

Early post-communist media: emulating the Western models

In 1990, shortly before the collapse of the USSR, when the West was still broadly regarded as a role model, a Russian journalist, Vitaly Tretyakov, launched a media project unheard of in the Soviet Union: an independent newspaper. He called it just that, *The Independent Newspaper (Nezavisimaya Gazeta)*, and described his ambition as creating 'the first Western-style, respectable, objective paper of the Soviet era'.³ He brought together a team of young people, many of them with very little, if any, journalistic experience. In their eyes this was an advantage: the new team was determined to break away from the Soviet legacy in which the media were nothing but instruments of the communist rulers, their mission reduced to state propaganda.

Young Russian journalists were teaching themselves the art of fast, trustworthy and objective reporting, but most of all they professed defiance of

² <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008012903.html>.

³ Remnick, David (1993), *Lenin's Tomb* (New York: Random House), p. 380.

state authority. One of their early professional feats was to get hold of a copy of a new, more liberal Communist Party programme drafted in high secrecy by Mikhail Gorbachev's aides. The authors of the programme were furious, but there was nothing they could do: their secret charter was divulged and broadly circulated by the audacious *Nezavisimaya* reporters.

Russia's first independent broadcasters also avidly emulated the best Western models. The best and the brightest of the first generation of Russia's post-Communist media professionals were inspired by a vision of Russia as a liberal democracy in which the media serve the public interest. If at times they deviated from this lofty ideal and were driven by political bias or served the interests of their owners, they were anything but obedient servants of the state.

The most influential among Russia's new media was NTV, the first privately owned television channel, launched in 1994 following approval by Yeltsin's presidential decree. In the words of Russian television sociologist Vsevolod Vilchek, NTV news reproduced 'a certain image of the country and the way it should be, perhaps sometime in the future. The image is of a richer, freer, more colourful, European Russia [...] NTV provides a picture of the world that keeps the viewer within the framework of democratic ideas'.⁴

Vilchek described NTV journalists as 'ironic and irreverent ... like people from a new and different world ... disconnected from the entire Soviet experience and culture'.⁵ Indeed, the new Russian journalists were vehicles of Western liberal values and political modernization. The problem, however, was that the Russian polity would not modernize or Westernize. The old state had collapsed, but the new one was weak and inefficient. The transition from communism proved to be difficult and messy. The promise of democracy created during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin had, by the end of his tenure, mostly faded away.

Putin's paternalism and the media

As soon as Putin ascended to presidential power, he moved to re-consolidate the authority of the state, which had been shaken during the years of Yeltsin's attempt at democratization. The new president capitalized on the public resentment of the hardship, social unfairness and general insecurity

⁴ Remnick, David (1997), *Resurrection: the Struggle for a New Russia* (New York: Random House), p. 245.

⁵ *Ibid.*

associated with Yeltsin's presidency; he projected a sense of yearned-for stability, while at the same time radically emasculating all the newly introduced institutions except for the presidency. Putin rightly judged that the people would not stand up for new institutions which they had not come to value, and in a matter of a few years the legally defined democratic architecture was reduced to a mere façade. Unwanted political parties were gradually marginalized; legislation was amended in order to reduce the authority of regional governors. As a result of these and other steps and with the help of massive wealth commandeered by the state, the parliament was turned into a rubber-stamp that readily enacted any bill the Kremlin needed. In particular, changes in electoral legislation made it possible to bar from the political scene any unwelcome figure or force and to manipulate the election process in order to ensure desired results. Court rulings in politically sensitive cases were routinely bent on the orders of the executive branch.

While the attempt to introduce Western political institutions undertaken after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 failed entirely, other things Western, such as mass culture and consumer standards, have been readily adopted. Elements of a market economy were successfully adjusted to Russia's specific business environment based on informal arrangements rather than the rule of law. As for the media, its industrial rise was fairly impressive: fast-expanding media holdings drawing on state-of-the-art Western business models merged broadcasting companies with film production and movie theatre chains, book publishing, printing plants, web resources and telecommunications. Highly skilled television professionals artfully adapted the most popular Western entertainment formats for the Russian audience. But the rise of the media industry was accompanied by a dramatic decline of the media as an autonomous public institution.

In Putin's Russia, the media which provide coverage of political and public affairs may be roughly divided into two categories. The first is the largest mass-audience media, especially national TV channels, which reach almost 100 per cent of Russian households. The three major national channels are used as tools of state propaganda in a way that is increasingly reminiscent of the Soviet days. The second category includes a variety of smaller-audience outlets – print, radio, websites and smaller TV stations. This category is of less interest for the ruling elite as a political resource, but all the Russian media operate on the understanding that loyalty to the state is the order of the day. A few ignore this understanding and exercise a degree of editorial independence. Even fewer are openly defiant. In Moscow media circles 'irreverent and ironic' journalists are not uncommon, and some even dare

investigate abuses of state authority, but in the controlled political environment the existing elements of free media are essentially irrelevant for policy-making.

National television as an element of controlled politics

Putin was not the first Russian leader to use television for political purposes. Television was instrumental in Yeltsin's 1996 election victory over a popular communist challenger, Gennady Zyuganov; it played an equally crucial role four years later, when the incumbent elites put up Putin himself as a *status quo* candidate against their political rivals.

There is a major difference, however, between the political landscape under Yeltsin and under Putin. Under the former, the political environment was fiercely competitive. The Russian media, too, offered a diverse and lively picture. The tycoons who owned or controlled the mass-audience broadcasting media had different, often conflicting interests, and this produced a pluralistic media environment.

Just as he undertook to eliminate political competition, Putin, very early in his presidency, also moved to get rid of pluralism on television. Both projects proved to be equally – and highly – effective. In cleansing the political scene of any challengers to the supreme ruler, the Kremlin mostly refrained from repressive actions, drawing instead on subtle, manipulative methods. The same applied to the media realm. The Kremlin would not shut down the outlets or harass journalists. Instead it attacked media tycoons, who were an easier target for at least two reasons. First, private property rights in general were questionable because of the fast and largely uncharted redistribution of Soviet state property to the new market owners. Besides, all big fortunes in post-communist Russia were, at least in part, the product of special relations with the ruling powers, which made big business dependent on the benevolence of the government authorities. Second, the new wealthy were broadly regarded as 'fat cats' enriching themselves at people's expense, so the public was only too happy to see a tycoon in trouble. The campaign against NTV and its owner Vladimir Gusinsky, Russia's first and biggest media mogul, was disguised as commercial litigation. The eventual takeover of his media company by the state-controlled gas monopoly Gazprom was portrayed as a legal resolution of a business dispute. In a poll taken by the Public Opinion Foundation at the time of the takeover (April 2001), a plurality (24 per cent) accepted this interpretation, while only a small minority (about 4 per cent) regarded the takeover of a private national channel by a

government surrogate as encroachment by the authorities on the freedom of the press.⁶

Of the three major national TV channels, only one was controlled by the government at the outset of Putin's presidency. Three years later all three were under the tight control of the state. Soon after, the government constraints were further tightened: live political talk shows were closed; political satire shows disappeared; several popular hosts were barred from television.

After his re-election as president in 2004, Putin stood unchallenged, with no political competition, virtually no checks or balances, and few concerns about accountability.

The national television channels are an indispensable element of this political order. They can effectively shape public opinion by boosting, playing down or ignoring any figure or event. They are perfect for manipulating the election process. When Putin declared Dmitry Medvedev his desired successor for the presidency, all three major national channels instantly turned Medvedev into their chief newsmaker and gave him blanket coverage. Soon afterwards he won the presidential election with 70 per cent of the vote. Throughout his own presidency Putin was assured of ample – and invariably positive – television coverage; it did not matter whether what he did was newsworthy. After transferring his formal authority to Medvedev in May 2008, Putin, in his new capacity as prime minister, remained the most powerful person in the country. Since the Putin-Medvedev tandem took shape, the two men have shared the privilege of dominating the TV news.

At various times national television has effectively shaped anti-Ukrainian, anti-Georgian, anti-Estonian and anti-American sentiments; all channels spoke with one voice as they vilified Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest man-turned-political-prisoner, or Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, or portrayed foreign-funded NGOs as spies.

It is not that the Russian people are unaware of the manipulative nature of Russian politics, and national television in particular. The cynicism and double-think that shaped the public attitude in Brezhnev's USSR remain ubiquitous today. The Russian sociologist Yuri Levada, an insightful scholar of the Soviet and Russian mindset, called 'naïve' the idea 'about the trickery

⁶ http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/projects/finfo/finfo2001/158_10060/of011403.

of the public by the all-knowing and utterly cynical party political authorities'.⁷ He referred to the Soviet man as 'homo praevaricatus', who 'not only tolerates deception, but is willing to be deceived, and, what is more, constantly requires self-deception for the sake of his own self-preservation'.⁸ Following this pattern, Russians today stay reconciled to the Kremlin's policies; acceptance was made even easier by the fact that Putin's regime generously compensated them for compliance. The oil blessing enabled Putin to deliver to the Russian people better than any previous government. Moreover, people are grateful to Putin for reasserting Russia's interests on the world stage. Another reason why television propaganda worked so well is that television managers cleverly reinforced some of the perceptions that were part of the Russian public mindset anyway, such as post-imperial frustration and a deep distrust of the West and its Russian 'agents'.

Political TV broadcasting is managed by the joint effort of one or two Kremlin aides, including the head of the Kremlin press service and the directors of the three major TV channels. This is a cooperative and creative partnership — no coercion is involved. Jointly they shape the news agenda in weekly Friday meetings inside the Kremlin; then, during the week, the TV managers stay in touch with the Kremlin and fine-tune the coverage by phone. This system was honed during Putin's presidency and remained operative when he handed over the presidential office (as well as the head of the press service) to Medvedev.

While national TV channels do not compete in news coverage – the news is fairly bland and hardly differs from channel to channel – there is stiff competition for audiences and advertising income. Channels try to lure viewers with all kinds of highly professional entertainment. As a result viewers stay on the same channels for news, while the advertisers, attracted by large audiences, are keen to commit their budgets to state-controlled TV. In exchange for fulfilling this critically important political mission for the state, the top TV managers are rewarded with high incomes and lucrative business opportunities.

The national channels are mostly aimed at those Russians who constitute the reliable electoral base of Putin's regime: the more provincial, the elderly, the less educated. More progressive, entrepreneurial and successful Russians may be put off by the stilted, propaganda quality of the national TV news, but

⁷ Levada, Yury, 'Homo Praevaricatus: Russian Doublethink', in Brown, Archie (ed.) (2001) *Contemporary Russian Politics, a Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 312-22, p. 314.

⁸ *Ibid.*

unlike in the Soviet past, they have recourse to a variety of other sources of information.

The marginalized press

The management of TV news described above may be an illustration of the egregious government encroachment on media freedom, but it also demonstrates that the Kremlin does not seek to stifle every voice. The TV 'manual management' scheme was thoroughly reported in the summer of 2008 by *Russian Newsweek*, a smaller-audience outlet guided by professional skills and standards rather than loyalty to the government authorities.⁹ Putin and Medvedev are not regarded as indispensable newsmakers by these outlets. Instead, they provide ample coverage of the developments that national TV ignores or plays down. The picture of Russia which emerges from such reportage, analysis and opinion is entirely different from the image offered by national TV channels. But their capacity to shape public opinion is drastically limited compared to that of the national channels.

The Kremlin has good reason to tolerate these outlets: not only are they a safety valve for more critically minded Russians, they are also good for show. Putin has repeatedly responded to foreign criticism of state encroachment on media freedom by emphasizing that Russia has so many media outlets that the government cannot possibly control all of them. This may be true, but the limited number of independent media outlets is irrelevant as long as political authority is monopolized by the leadership and the public remains fragmented and apathetic. The experience of countries such as Yugoslavia under Slobodan Milosevic or Ukraine under Leonid Kuchma demonstrates that even a very limited number of defiant media can make a difference and effectively promote political competition, if the people are driven and organized. But in Russia even the advanced and educated audiences of alternative news sources accept the tacit pact with the government which keeps them sidelined from participation in national affairs.

The government makes sure that the remaining independent media are kept marginal and present no challenge. First and foremost, these outlets are completely separated from the national TV channels. There is no such format as 'Meet the Press', in which print or web journalists would address and perhaps influence a broader national audience. Moreover, access to

⁹ Fishman, Mikhail and Gaaze, Konstantin (2008), *Russian Newsweek*, 4 August.

information is tightly restricted. Public briefings with top policy-makers do not exist. Throughout his presidency Putin never faced a single unfriendly question from a Russian reporter. Those who would raise unwelcome questions do not have the access; those who have the access are not inquisitive.

State leverage over those who choose to pursue independent editorial lines is virtually unlimited. Changing the ownership of media outlets, which proved so effective in the NTV takeover, has been repeatedly arranged since then, so that today nearly all Russian media covering political and public affairs are in loyal hands. And a loyal owner can be relied on to rein in his employees – if the Kremlin deems it necessary. Control over the legislature makes it possible to pass any law or amendment that would impose new constraints on the media. Such amendments commonly contain broad, vague wording which facilitates selective enforcement. Even if there are relatively few such cases, the authorities have the capacity to restrain, suspend or even shut down media outlets under a variety of pretexts, such as the use of illegal software or the alleged use of ‘extremist’ language. Levers of control also include government licensing of broadcasters and the ownership of printing plants (most are owned by national or local government).

At the discretion of the state

Since journalists operate by the grace of the government, self-censorship has become ubiquitous, though the degree of self-restriction may vary significantly. Reporters working for the prominent Moscow publications feel more secure because the overwhelming majority of their critically minded readership are concentrated in the capital, so they may count on some, if limited, public support. Also, the central government is still somewhat sensitive to negative publicity.

Regional governments are less squeamish or subtle. Local authorities frequently settle scores, in a heavy-handed way, with local media outlets and individual reporters who expose their unsavoury practices. Harassment and prosecution of journalists as well as closure of publications are not uncommon in the Russian provinces, though the situation varies significantly from region to region. For example, the Komi republic was ranked as ‘relatively unfree’ by the Russian veteran media rights organization Glasnost Defence Foundation.¹⁰ In 2008, a blogger was prosecuted in this region for

¹⁰ http://www.gdf.ru/content/2008/05/23052007_2.shtml.

posting unflattering remarks about local police. 'Non-free' (according to the same rating) Ingushetia has a horrendous record of harassment and murder of journalists, as well as unlawful closure of publications. In late 2007, members of a REN TV crew who came from Moscow to cover the public unrest in Ingushetia were abducted and beaten; so far nobody has been held to account for this unlawful use of force. In 2008, Ingushetia became the scene of a most brazen assassination of a journalist: the owner of an opposition website, www.ingushetia.ru, was shot dead shortly after he had been arrested and taken away in a police car.¹¹

But even in Moscow journalists may get into trouble with the government for political misconduct. In the summer of 2008, Ekho Moskvyy, a popular radio station with a daily audience of 800–900,000, provoked Putin's personal anger: the prime minister decided that the station's coverage of the war in Georgia was insufficiently patriotic. At a private meeting with the country's most prominent editors Putin dressed down the Ekho editor, Aleksey Venediktov, then graciously allowed the station to go on operating. He remarked, however, that Venediktov would be held personally responsible for everything broadcast on his airwaves. In a stark example of self-censorship, despite the presence of a big group of senior journalists at the meeting, no Russian outlet covered this episode until it was reported by foreign publications (*The New Yorker* and *The Washington Post* reported it in September).¹² The government was less kind to Natalia Morar, a young reporter for the Moscow weekly *The New Times* (*Novoye Vremya*). She had written a series of articles in 2007 in which she alleged that high-ranking government officials siphoned huge sums of money abroad via certain Moscow banks. The government found a subtle way to get rid of Morar (a Moldovan citizen), without it looking like a punishment for her reporting, by taking advantage of the fact that she is not a Russian national. In late 2007, as she was returning from a foreign business trip, she was stopped at the border and denied entry. She has been barred from entering Russia ever since.

Russia has an abominable record of physical assaults and assassinations of journalists. While there is no evidence that killers act on direct orders from the Kremlin, there is no doubt either that journalists such as Anna Politkovskaya

¹¹ http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lastnews/2008/08/31/n_1264784.shtml. The case is currently under investigation – see: http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/11/18_a_2887188.shtml.

¹² Remnick, David (2008), 'Echo in the Dark', *New Yorker*, 22 September; Pan, Philip P. (2008), 'In Wake of Georgian War, Russian Media Feel Heat', *Washington Post*, 15 September.

or Yury Shchekochikhin (both worked for *Novaya Gazeta*) – to mention just two cases out of too many – were slain because their disclosures harmed ‘sensitive’ interests. Contract killings in Russia are not limited to journalists. Conflicts, whether in politics, business or banking, are routinely resolved by contract murders. In the latest outrageous incident, Stanislav Markelov, a prominent human rights lawyer, and Anastasia Baburova, a young reporter who freelanced for *Novaya Gazeta*, were murdered in broad daylight on 19 January 2009 as they walked out of a press conference in downtown Moscow. The Russian government must bear responsibility for the lawless environment in which human life is cheap and murder contractors act with impunity. The profoundly compromised justice system is, in large part, the result of the manipulation of court rulings by the executive branch and bribery in the Russian courts.

Conclusion

The political system Putin has built rests on two pillars: the ‘resource blessing’ and traditional societal weakness. In late 2008, the former was seriously shaken: as the global economic crisis reduced the price of oil to less than one-third of its previous level, Putin’s carefully constructed system was suddenly tested by circumstances beyond his control. The robust growth and budget surplus of the past few years are over, and there is little doubt among economists that 2009 will be a year of recession and budget deficit. Production is down, the rouble is losing value, unemployment is up, and there is a rapidly rising sense of insecurity among the people. Meanwhile, economic crisis policies are made by a closed circle of top officials in the habitual, non-transparent way, raising suspicions of inefficient and corrupt distribution of government funds.

The mass-audience channels are playing down the gravity of the crisis; their coverage is, as usual, focused on Russia’s leaders, who are shown firmly in charge and taking good care of the people. So as not to arouse unwelcome public reaction, the mass protests that took place in the Russian Far East in December 2008 simply went unreported. But the government may be facing a serious dilemma: if the gap between life on the screen and hard everyday realities gets too broad, television may no longer prove an efficient tool in maintaining social and political stability. On the other hand, easing the government’s grip on coverage runs counter to the very nature of the current regime. The more independent media outlets are comprehensively reporting economic and social developments, and the picture they paint is increasingly disquieting. Hence another dilemma: the logic of Putin’s rule may push for still

tighter controls of the defiant media, but at a time of economic troubles such a move may backfire by fostering discontent.

If the crisis hits Putin's rock-solid approval rating (according to the Levada Center's survey conducted in January 2009, it was still over 80 per cent, despite the growing concerns related to the crisis)¹³ it may also shake the hitherto solid loyalty of the elites. Loyalty to the government paid off when the economy was booming, but recession may impel the elites to take the initiative and push for political change. According to *The New Times*, 'small and medium-sized businesses may finally understand that liberalization of the regime is their only chance to survive'.¹⁴ Business and other elites remain timid, but if they realize the urgency of the current economic crisis, they may press for such liberalization. This might then undermine the other pillar of the regime: paternalistic governance and the overwhelming dominance of the state over the society.

For the first time since Putin became president and moved to reconsolidate the state, there is a chance of a reverse swing: a rise of societal activity and political pluralism. This would enable the media to regain political relevance and reassume the role of serving the public interest. But a darker scenario is far from ruled out: in seeking to pre-empt or suppress public protests and political turmoil, the government may opt for a further crackdown and isolationist, anti-Western policies.

Maria Lipman is the editor of *Pro et Contra* and Co-Chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center Program *Civil Society and the Regions*.

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¹³ <http://www.levada.ru/press/2009012202.html>

¹⁴ Albats, Yevgenia (2009), *New Times*, 19 January.