Vladimir Putin's Media Coup: A History of the President's Image-Making

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Declaration

I hereby declare that no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree, or qualification thereof, or for any other university or institute of learning.

I declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are cited and included.

I also hereby acknowledge that my thesis will be made publicly available pursuant to Section 47b of Act No. 552/2005 Coll. and AAU's internal regulations.

/ Karina Verigina

Acknowledgments

All my conscious life I have lived with Vladimir Putin as the president of my country, even though it wasn’t my choice. The result of his 17-year-rule that strikes the eye of a young Russian living abroad is how all Russians are identified with Putin’s regime and the Kremlin’s official stance on major world events. However, people should not be defined by the actions of their government, just as they shouldn't be defined by their nationality, race or gender.

With this work I want to show that not everything you hear about Russia and its citizens is true. Much of it is either PR generated, or is the result of a masterful government propaganda. The goal of the last chapter is also to demonstrate that the new generation of Russians, my generation, is ready to stand up and defend their rights.

I would like to thank everyone who helped me in writing this thesis: my adviser, my mother and my beloved aunt Lyudmila Vasilievna, my best friend Lisa, and all people who agreed to share their personal experiences and opinions with me.

Abstract

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Karina Verigina

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been in power since the turn of the century. However, he still is a mystery to most. Some see him as 'the greatest leader of our time' and Russia's last hope for the better future, while others consider Putin a ruthless dictator with no moral sense, who restricts basic human freedoms in the country. Whereas it's not my place to say which of these assertions are true, there is little doubt that both of them are media generated.

This article explores how Putin came to acquire his current public image, tracing its changes throughout his career. Taking into account that everyone in the media industry knows about Russian-state sponsored TV channel *RT* (Russia Today), widely discussed and controversial, I chose to examine the Kremlin's image-making tools that are less known in the West.

From an unknown FSB officer with no political support, Putin quickly rose up the ranks to become the leader of the country, and the Second Chechen War provided an excellent opportunity for his image-makers to show his best qualities off during the pre-election period in 2000. Once the president was enjoying public support in his country, the Kremlin's next move was to improve relations with NATO countries by hiring Western PR firms, Ketchum and GPlus – an attempt that failed with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Domestically, Putin's spin-doctors successfully utilise state television, internet trolls and mass celebrations, which have almost a ritualistic role, to impregnate Russian citizens with the Kremlin's ideas. However, the recent months' protests revealed a crack in the system: the Russian youth, who are immune to Putin's appeal and refuse to buy it anymore.

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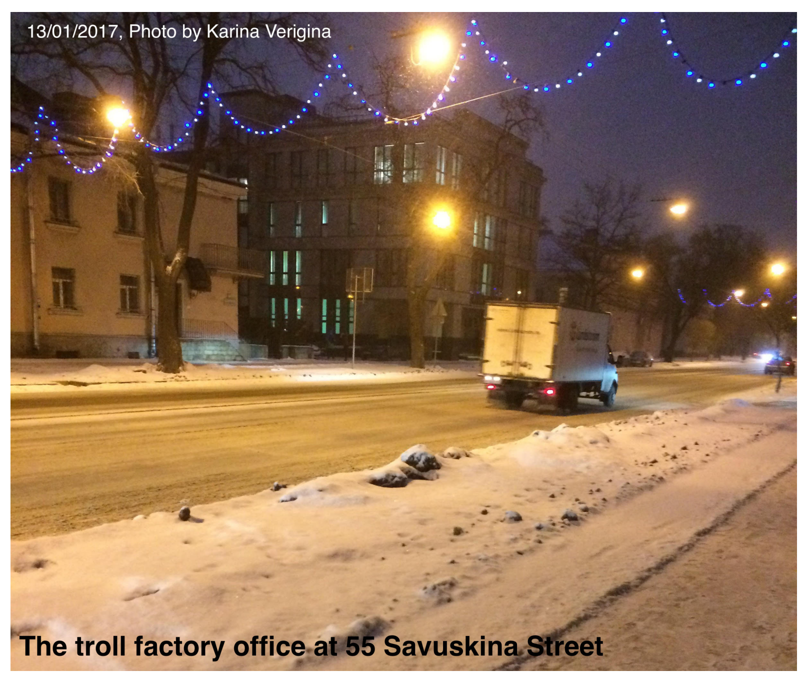
Chapter 1: The Troll Factory

The Game of Let's Pretend

On a cold winter morning in Saint Petersburg, Russia, "trolls" are strolling down the snow-covered street lit by Christmas lights to a grey boxlike four-story building, known as "the troll factory." However, they bear no features of a typical, Hollywood-inspired troll: thick, greenish skin, protruding jaw with two fangs, layers of fat and lack of intelligence. Instead, these are young, attractive people in warm yet fashionable clothes, arriving by tram and car, and noticeably speeding up to the "factory" as the clock approaches 9 a.m. – that's when their workday starts. One by one they enter the building through a glass door, greeted by a frowning security officer at a checkpoint, flip their personalised swipe cards and hurry to get another portion of tasks for the day.


13/01/2017, Photo by Karina Verigina
The troll factory office at 55 Savuskina Street

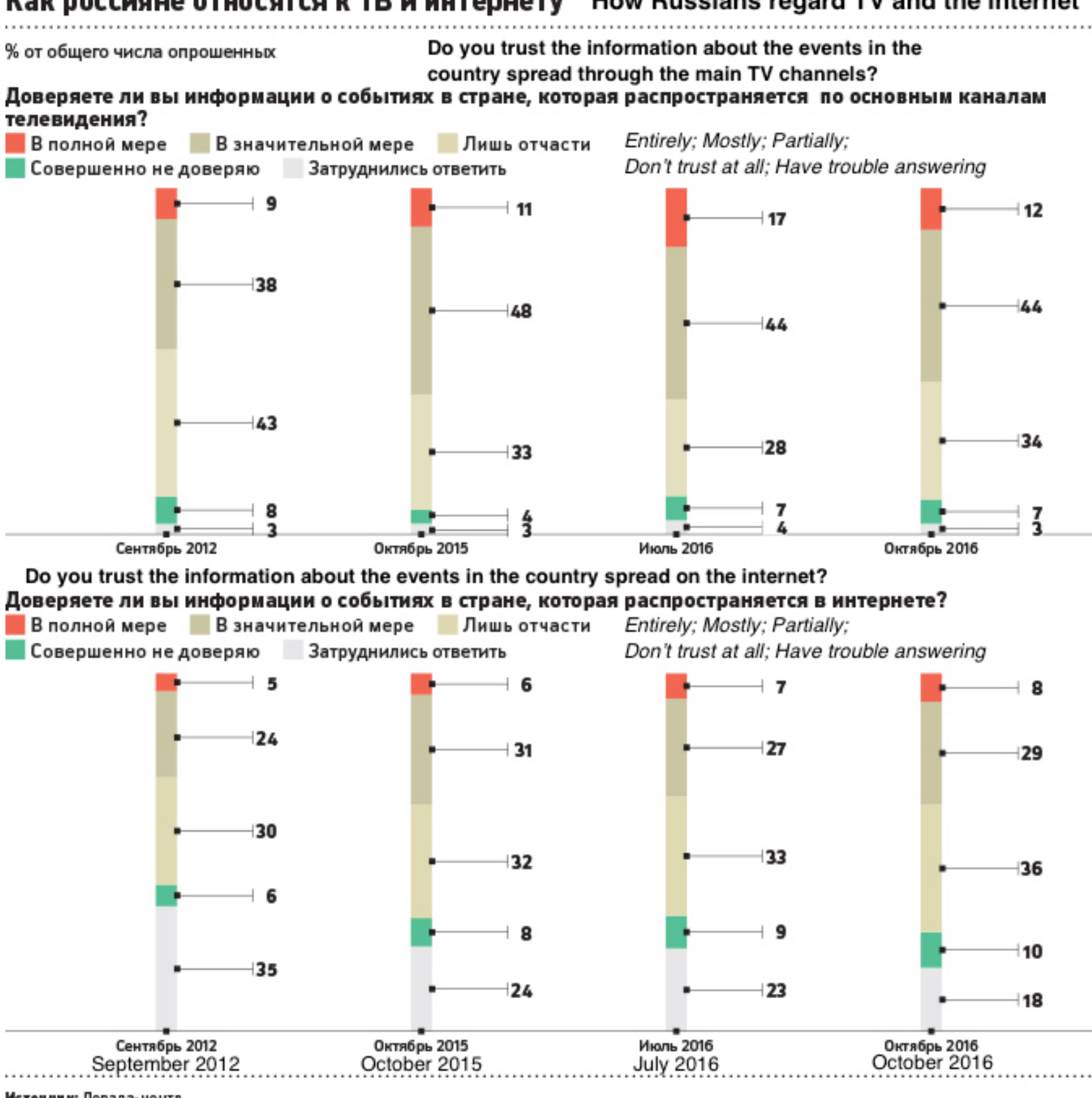
Their primary job consists of blogging and writing comments on social networking websites. Their assignments vary from day to day, but always have one thing in common: issues and people out of the Kremlin's favour are criticised, while Russian President Vladimir Putin's government and its actions are praised. Trolls have no weekends and holidays, working around the clock. Like a virus, they are all over the Russian internet, so-called Runet, reaching as many blogging platforms as possible and using fake identities to deliver pro-Kremlin ideas.

“All of them have their own legends and writing habits, but their brains work almost identically: they have identical turn of thoughts and very few arguments,” says Lyudmila Savchuk, investigative journalist and former troll factory employee.

Housewives, businessmen, students, stay-at-home mothers and even foreigners “practicing their Russian” – all with some interest in politics – are what trolls pretend to be on the internet. In reality, all of them are crammed into one building on 55 Savushkina Street; the majority have no political statement in mind, they only want to earn some money, said Savchuk.

“On the first floor work YouTube commenters; on the second is the department of control and some other administrative departments,” said Olga Maltseva, a former troll factory employee, in an interview with the BBC. “On the third floor are bloggers, social networks’ commenters and my former department of forums. On the fourth – departments, working with foreign languages, and those who fill in internet bots’ social media accounts.”

As the internet gains popularity in Russia, with the potential to rival television, the troll factory might become a vital part of the Kremlin’s persuasion machine. According to an October 2016 survey by the Levada-Center, Russia's leading independent polling agency, 90 percent of Russians to some extent trust information delivered by major TV channels: *Channel One*, *Rossiya One* and *NTV*. In 2015, it was 92 percent, and in 2012, before Russia’s involvement in Ukrainian crisis, 90 percent. Meanwhile, trust in information found on the internet is steadily growing among Russians. According to the same survey, in September 2016 labelled a "foreign agent" by the justice ministry, 73 percent of Russians find information spread on the internet trustworthy to some extent; 69 percent in 2015, and 59 percent in 2012.



The trolls effectively utilise the rising trust in the internet, blogging, writing comments on social media, and commenting under news stories by Russian and foreign media. In March 2015, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*'s Russian Service obtained an Excel document from December 2015, with a list of media outlets' websites, where trolls had to write comments. Among 40 entries was both state-funded and opposition media: *Echo Moskvy*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Russia Today*, *Radio Svoboda* and *RIA Novosti*.

Despite the rise of internet popularity in Russia, experts consider separation of the two

problems – troll factory and TV propaganda – as dangerous. “It can only vanish with war propaganda, now constantly present in our lives,” says former troll factory employee Savchuk. “We can’t look at trolls separately from television. And if anything can be done about television [propaganda], then there is a way against the trolls, too. However, we can't do anything yet.”

Protecting Putin

On Jan. 2, 2015, Lyudmila Savchuk set her foot in the troll factory on 55 Savushkina Street for the first time. Invited by a friend for a “very important and classified job” she was not fully aware of the short career paths awaiting her there. Only inside the realisation hit her: she was in the “troll den.”

“They don't call themselves trolls and are serious about the non-disclosure agreement, even though in reality it doesn't matter much,” she told the *Mulbabar* project. “I realised they were ‘Kremlinbots,’and I had a unique chance to see their system from the inside.”

Lyudmila Savchuk with the troll factory swipe card

Being an experienced journalist and activist, Savchuk knew to delete all traces of protest activities from her social networks before her job interview. It worked, after a few questions about her thoughts and feelings on the Russian political situation and the fact that “Crimea was ours,” she was offered a job.

Savchuk was placed in an elite department, where only former journalists with good knowledge of Russian language worked.

She “inherited” a widely read blog on LiveJournal, popular in Russia social networking service, of a fictional young man from Kiev, who criticised the Ukrainian government and praised Russia. There were no fanatics in her department, and they could choose to write some truly positive news from Russia. Other departments contained "Hitlerjugend” [Hitler Youth], who liked to “wipe internet users off," she says.

“Trolls are a new, revolutionary phenomenon in our lives,” Savchuk says over the phone from Pushkin, town near Saint Petersburg, where she lives. “They spread false information, benefiting only one side, fuel hatred towards other nations and countries, and create a feeling of helplessness in our society. They implant this idea in our minds, ‘Everything is bad, but we can’t do anything about it.’”

Topics trolls cover, and the way they do so, are the same as of state-funded TV channels. “Our ‘enemies,’” Savchuk recounts, stressing the quotation marks over the last word, “the US, European Union, Ukraine, and any other country towards which Kremlin shows a negative attitude at the moment. Moreover, mud is constantly thrown at the citizens standing in opposition to the government.” The Russian military is another big topic. The Ministry of Defence is often admired for its successful operations abroad, in Syria and Ukraine, and Russian engineers for developing new breakthrough weaponry – not a far-cry from the Soviet propaganda. “When I was there, two people were praised on a daily basis: Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin [President of Russia] and Sergey Shoygu [Russian Minister of Defence]. They still are, but Donald Trump is a new addition,” Savchuk says. “There are ten long-standing topics they [trolls] work out everyday. However, force majeure happen, for example, the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, and they have to react.”

Boris Nemtsov, Russian opposition politician, was number one topic on the list of "technical tasks" for the period from Feb. 28 to March 7, 2015, acquired by *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*'s Russian Service. Some trolls were assigned to "lead [the public] to the conclusion that the assassination of the oppositioner [Boris] Nemtsov was not in any way beneficial to the government – it was a provocation." Others had to "implant an idea" of Ukrainian politicians' involvement in his death. In hundreds of posts and comments, the new believes disseminated on the internet. On Feb. 28, 2015, the LiveJournal user cotedo, whose troll status was proved in *Novaya Gazeta*'s investigation, echoed the first assignment in a post titled "Boris Nemtsov: Opposition Sacrifices One of Their Own?" All facts point towards a provocation, he wrote, ending his text with a list of tags – the exact copy of those given to the trolls in the assignment sheet earlier that day.

Ключевые слова:
Key words:
оппозиция
opposition
оппозиция в россии
opposition in Russia
политическая оппозиция
political opposition
борис немцов
Boris Nemtsov
убийство немцова
murder of Nemtsov
провокация
provocation

Tags: Оппозиция, борис немцов, оппозиция в россии, политическая оппозиция, провокация, убийство немцова

Tags: Opposition, Boris Nemtsov, opposition in Russia, political opposition, provocation, murder of Nemtsov

February 28th, 2015

Boris Nemtsov: Opposition Sacrifices One of Their Own?

БОРИС НЕМЦОВ: ОППОЗИЦИЯ ЖЕРТВУЕТ СВОИМИ?

Feb. 28th, 2015 at 11:44 AM

С утра сижу и читаю про обстоятельства убийства Немцова. И чем дальше, тем больше убеждаюсь: его банально принесли в жертву свои же. То, где он был убит Борис Немцов (у стен Кремля), с кем он в это время находился (модель из Киева Анна Дурицкая), способ убийства (не банальная авто- или даже авиакатастрофа, а огнестрельное ранение), а также то, что сама девушка, несмотря на множество выстрелов, не пострадала, говорит, что это была провокация. Провокация того, чтобы люди вышли на улицы и сотворили у нас в стране революцию (о том, чем бы это закончилось - отдельный разговор).

Говорят также, что изначально планировали убить Навального, но, поскольку он в это время находился в тюрьме, это его спасло.

В версию "убийство было совершено на фоне ревности к прекрасной киевлянке", а тем более "в Москве такие дикие нравы, оппозиционеров отстреливают как бродячих собак", уж простите, не верю.

А вы как считаете? Из-за чего произошла трагедия?

All assignment have a similar structure. Each based on a news article from one of state-funded media outlets such as *Ria Novosti* (Rossia Segodnia), *RT* (Russia Today), *Vzgliad* or *Komsomolskaya Pravda,* and has a one page description with supporting quotes, useful links and background story. The latter is of vital importance, since most trolls are not politically savvy.

“The day when Nemtsov was killed, the majority of people who worked there [at the troll factory] didn't know who he was,” Savchuk recalls. “They were given a name, which they had to put in a negative context, and they repeated it.” For that purpose, the main idea trolls have to deliver and the conclusion they have to make in their posts are clearly stated in a few coherent sentences.

Like JFK to Americans, VVP is an abbreviation familiar to every Russian, and in the “trolls’ assignment sheet” all tasks where Vladimir Putin must be praised stand under this title. Part of the factory employees’ job is to form a positive opinion of the Russian President. Whether it’s about his reaction to the assassination of Nemtsov – “Putin does everything to contribute to the investigation” – or him developing partnerships with countries in the Near East – “Putin strengthens international ties.”

On March 3, 2015, trolls had an extra task: referring to research from 2014 by Awara Group, a Finnish consulting company of pro-Russian businessman Jon Hellevig, they had to show off “the amazing results of Putin’s presidency.” The researchers looked at the Russian economy from 2000 to 2013, concluding that almost each sphere of the economy has considerably grown under Putin’s guidance in almost geometrical progression.

Not every trolls’ post is political, they are required to water the content down with notes on lighter topics: traveling, fashion, entertainment or local news. That’s the reason why

trolls often wish their readers a good day on LiveJournal, accompanying it with catchy pictures from photo banks, former troll factory employee Olga Maltseva told *BBC*.

The diversity of content attracts readers, making the views propagated by the trolls and doubled by state-funded TV channels, contagious. “I recently wrote in one of the local groups [on Vkontakte] about constant suburban trains’ delays that happen because of the governmental officials’ cortege,” recalls Savchuk. “It felt like there were two trolls on duty, though I soon found out that these were local residents, but they spoke the way trolls do: they instantly ‘came’ and started arguing that only thanks to Putin there are trains at all, and we have no right to complain.”

Savchuk worked at the troll factory for two months, that is the longest amount of time any journalist managed to spend there so far, she says. She secretly copied documents and assignments, anonymously sending them to several media outlets. On March 11, 2015, both local newspaper *Moi Raion* and Moscow-based *Novaya Gazeta* published articles based on the leaked materials. CCTV footage installed in the building on 55 Savushkina showed who did it, and Savchuk was forced to literally run away after a short talk with her employers.

In May 2015, Savchuk sued the troll factory, then the company was officially called “Internet-issledovaniya,” for not paying her February salary off. She also demanded compensation, equaling one Russian rouble [0,018 US Dollars as of April 18, 2017], for moral damage. Savchuk won the case and received 41 thousand roubles [733 US Dollars as of April 18, 2017] from the company, giving the sum up to charity. It wasn't money she wanted from the troll factory but publicity; the more people know about the trolls, she says, the better are the chances of stopping them.

Today, Savchuk, a 35-year-old mother of two boys, lives in Pushkin, a town near Saint Petersburg; her life is dedicated to activism: she regularly attends civil protests,

bringing her sons along, and goes out on pickets. Together with other activists she founded a civil movement called “Informational world,” aimed to fight the propaganda and trolls back. Savchuk considers it a major threat in modern Russia.

“When my mother told my story to her friend, she was surprised, ‘But it’s such a noble job to protect Putin on the internet!’” Savchuk told the *Mulbabar* project. That is not the point of view she shares: “Why does Putin have to be protected by fuelling hatred towards other nations, and even other Russian citizens? Why Putin at all, while there are millions of Russians in need of actual protection?”

Guess Who?

Officially, trolls are employees of “Teka” Ltd., a company that kept changing its names, locations and CEOs several times in the past years. Originally based in Olgino, a settlement near Saint Petersburg, under the name of “Internet Research Agency” with one Vladimir Kuhtin as CEO, in 2014 “the factory” moved to 55 Savushkina Street, while being registered at 17 Bolshaya Raznochinnaya, according to Kartoteka.ru research database. Renamed into “Internet Research,” it was owned by former interior minister of Saint Petersburg’s Moscovsky district Mikhail Bystrov, according to *Delovoy Peterburg* newspaper. When the company became “Teka” in 2015, on papers everything changed again, both CEO and official address, but not in reality – the factory remains at 55 Savushkina.

It is a costly business: in 2015, *Novaya Gazeta* calculated that monthly rent of the building was three million roubles [53,650 US Dollars as of April 18, 2017], and at least 16 million roubles [286,136 US Dollars as of April 18, 2017] would go for the salaries of the factory’s 400 employees. Most trolls were attracted by higher-than-average salary – 40 thousand roubles [715 US Dollars as of April 18, 2017] – while in other companies they were

offered from 25 to 30 thousand roubles [447 to 536 US Dollars as of April 18, 2017], Tatiana N., former troll factory employee, told *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

Who can financially support such an expensive venture? At the end of May 2014, the data-leaking group Anonymous International posted almost a gigabyte of leaked files, documents and private emails, claiming to uncover the “mastermind” behind the troll factory. The files are no longer available for download, but on May 29, 2014, Saint Petersburg internet-based newspaper *Fontanka* published a story based on them, revealing that all financial reports went to Concord, a company of Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Prigozhin is well-known in Russia, mostly as Putin’s friend and his personal chef. His biography is impressive, yet not unusual for a businessman from the nineties. In 1980s, Prigozhin spent nine years in prison. Upon release he opened “New Island,” St. Petersburg's most elite restaurant, and then received several multibillion-ruble state contracts for his Concord company group, supplying schools and military with food. However, in 2012, his name started to acquire a negative connotation to it among the Russian journalists.

In May 2012, DDOS-attacks were launched on several internet-based media-outlets from Saint Petersburg and Moscow, and *Fontanka* was among them. “Researching the accident, we were surprised to find [internet] traces of people connected with Yevgeny Prigozhin,” says Alexander Gorshkov, *Fontanka*’s editor-in-chief. He links the businessman’s extreme reaction with the fact that attacked media outlets, *Forbes Russia*, *Novaya Gazeta* and *Moskovski Komsomolets v Pitere* (like Fontanka, part of AZHUR media group), earlier gave voices to revolting parents displeased with the quality of food supplied by Concord to their children’s schools. However, this was not the end of Prigozhin’s vendetta.

Later that year, a young woman, Maria Kuprashevich, applied for an internship at the sales department of *Novaya Gazeta*, quickly finding a client, an unknown construction firm

ready to pay an enormous sum of money for an ad. Already suspicious of her, the newspaper didn't take long to discover that Kuprashevich was, in fact, a spy, working for the PR department at Concord. After a long talk, *Novaya Gazeta* let her leave without a scandal. The accident was shortly followed by several provocations at *Forbes Russia*, aimed to showcase that one "can buy off anybody in this country with enough money, especially the stupid journalists," as was written by the main provocateur, businessman Sergei Soloviev, in *Gazeta o Gazetakh*.

Fontanka, too, wasn't left without Prigozhin's revenge: "Masha Kuprashevich most unexpectedly was found in one of the outlets of our media group, *Moskovski Komsomolets v Pitere*, in the same position of the sales manager," says Gorshkov. However, journalists were not fooled: they contacted *Novaya Gazeta*, finding out the truth about Prigozhin's spy, and published an investigative article.

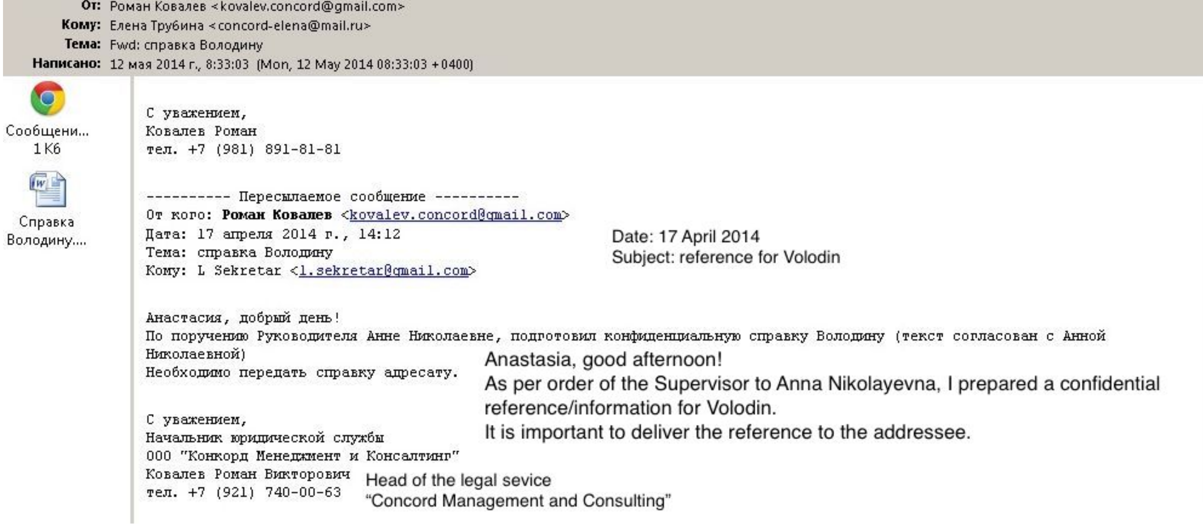
The timing of provocations coincided with the emergence of the so-called troll factory. "It [the factory] was a whole new level," says Gorshkov. "DDOS-attacks and other provocations are more of an amateur performance: a kinky boyar says 'Do something about that, think something up,' and his people do whatever and however they can, especially since his security service consists of former FSB-officers." But the troll factory, he says, requires more systematic and carefully planned approach.

"Either the idea was presented to someone from," Gorshkov pauses before carefully continuing, "political management and was approved, or it was an order from the political management addressed to someone with money to spare."

Gorshkov has no doubt about the efficiency of the troll factory. "Thousands of comments on a daily basis – 24/7 on 365 – are posted online, forming a certain public opinion

and affecting immature minds," he says. However, Gorshkov doesn't see the reason why Prigozhin, a businessman and not a political figure, would do that.

In the 2014 documents' leak, Anonymous International claimed to find traces of the Kremlin: while financial reports went to Prigozhin, reports on the factory's achievements went to a man with the last name Volodin. The group thinks that the addressee is Putin's "grey cardinal" Vyacheslav Volodin, a speaker of the State Duma.



От: Роман Ковалев <kovalev.concord@gmail.com>
Кому: Елена Трубина <concord-elena@mail.ru>
Тема: Fwd: справка Володину
Написано: 12 мая 2014 г., 8:33:03 (Mon, 12 May 2014 08:33:03 +0400)

Сообщени... 1 Кб
Справка Володину....

С уважением,
Ковалев Роман
тел. +7 (981) 891-81-81

---------- Пересылаемое сообщение ----------
От кого: **Роман Ковалев** <kovalev.concord@gmail.com>
Дата: 17 апреля 2014 г., 14:12
Тема: справка Володину
Кому: L Sekretar <l.sekretar@gmail.com>

Date: 17 April 2014
Subject: reference for Volodin

Анастасия, добрый день!
По поручению Руководителя Анне Николаевне, подготовил конфиденциальную справку Володину (текст согласован с Анной Николаевной)
Необходимо передать справку адресату.

Anastasia, good afternoon!
As per order of the Supervisor to Anna Nikolayevna, I prepared a confidential reference/information for Volodin.
It is important to deliver the reference to the addressee.

С уважением,
Начальник юридической службы
ООО "Конкорд Менеджмент и Консалтинг"
Ковалев Роман Викторович
тел. +7 (921) 740-00-63

Head of the legal sevice
"Concord Management and Consulting"

In December 2011, Volodin replaced Vladislav Surkov as the President's First Deputy Chief of Staff, a position commonly referred to by media experts as Vladimir Putin's "chief ideologist." "If there is Putin – there is Russia, if there is no Putin – there no Russia," proclaimed Volodin at a closed a meeting during the Valdai International Discussion Club on Oct. 22, 2014, Konstantin Kostin, head of the Civil Society Development Foundation, told *Izvestia*. Volodin's statement soon was in the middle of a controversy, compared on the internet with Rudolf Hess', Adolf Hitler's deputy in the Nazi Party, words: "The Party is Hitler! Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler!"

In December 2015, a thousand of Russian politicians received an unusual New Year gift from the Presidential Administration, a 400-page book of quotes by President Vladimir Putin entitled "Words That Change The World" – another of Volodin's ventures, according to

the business newspaper *RBC*. It should be any politician's table-book, said the "chief ideologist" after handing out the gifts at the meeting.

In October 2016, Volodin got a promotion: he was elected as the Chairman of the State Duma. It's unclear if he still performs duties of Putin's "chief ideologist," but he certainly cares about the president's image. At a meeting with Innopolis' students and faculty on Feb. 14, 2017, he agreed with one of the students that to "the information roll forwards felt in the press" the government should react with a law protecting the president's honour and dignity.

The government is Russia's media main financial sponsor. According to *Forbes Russia*, in the 2016 annual budget plan around 61 billion roubles [1 billion US Dollars as of April 18, 2017], 11 billions [196 millions US Dollars as of April 18, 2017] less than in the previous year, were set aside specifically for media support.

The Kremlin's media investment pays off, as the efficiency and extent of Russian state-sponsored propaganda, a major part of which is Vladimir Putin, is outstanding. January

2017 poll of government-owned Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) showed that Russia's public approval rating on Putin was as high as 85 percent. When he was appointed the Prime Minister of Russia in August 1999, only 31 percent of Russians approved his political decisions. In just a few months he would get an almost over-night popularity, which in the next 17 years would be fed in by the media.

Chapter 2: He Is There to Save Us All

Young, Loyal and Ambitious

In 1991, residents of Saint Petersburg watching local TV channel *Russian Video* saw the very first interview of one Vladimir Putin, a newly appointed Chairman of the Committee for International Relations at the St. Petersburg City Hall. A 39-year-old man in white dress shirt and grey trousers is relaxed on camera. Plopped down on a turned around chair with legs on either sides, and using the back of his chair as an armrest, Putin is talking to Igor Shadhan, Russian documentary films' director, in his new office. Here he confesses to being a former KGB employee.

"You are saying, 'I'm a clerk.' Do you want to rehabilitate the meaning of this word [in the USSR the word 'clerk' had a negative connotation among the general population]?" asks Shadhan. "No, Igor Abramovich," Putin replies, "I use this word to emphasise that I'm not a politician, do you understand? I'm an employee of an administrative apparatus, and I want for people working within the apparatus to do their job, not thinking about the political conjuncture."

Putin was the one who insisted on the interview, Shadhan told *24_DOC* TV channel in 2012. In 1991, he sought the director out to offer him to make a series of documentary films entitled "Authority" [Vlast'] about the administration of Saint Petersburg's new mayor Anatoly Sobchak.

A call from the mayor interrupts Putin's interview with Shadhan. Putin stands up to answer the phone, after a few quick replies getting back to his position in front of the camera: "Anatoly Aleksandrovich told me that 2,5 tons of sugar were prepared for shipping to Saint Petersburg from Ukraine," Putin explains.

During the dissolution of the USSR, the city, like the whole of Russia, found itself in a catastrophic situation: with all republics gradually seceding from the Union, and the Soviet government losing control over the country and its economic conditions, economic systems and food supplying collapsed, too. "Empty shelves – only juices in three-litre jars and some tinned goods; shortage of cigarettes – smokers gummed up traffic on Nevsky [prospect], since not far away from there was "Tobacco" shop; and most of the products – for example, sausages, eggs and vodka – were given in exchange for ration-cards," recalls Lev Frolov, Saint Petersburg based *TASS*-veteran, who interviewed both Sobchak and Putin several times. "According to the mayor [Sobchak], the hardest moment of his term was when Saint Petersburg was left with food supplies for three days only." At that point, the City Hall was forced to use the strategic reserves. Putin was the one solving this problem, quickly acquiring a romantic appeal in eyes of starving residents of Saint Petersburg, *NTV* reported in March 2007.

Nonetheless, contemporaries insist that at that time Putin was not commonly known among the general public. He stayed in the shadow of mayor Sobchak even after his appointment as Deputy Chairman of the St. Petersburg City Government. Not widely known, Putin had the most stable position in Sobchak's administration: there were no rumours about him, and he was not involved in any scandals, wrote Boris Vishnevsky, one of the leading members of the Russian United Democratic Party "Yabloko," in *Izvestia* newspaper on Aug. 12, 1999.

Putin was one constant in Sobchak's political life, who then was an extremely popular and influential politician in Russia. They first met in 1970, when Putin was a student of the law department at Leningrad State University, where Sobchak was a lecturer. Their mutual work started in 1990, when Putin returned to Leningrad from Germany and became assistant to the rector of Leningrad State University in charge of international relations, meeting his old professor and joining him in his political bid.

"Sobchak played a major role in Putin's becoming," says Vladimir Gel'man, Russian political scientist, over the phone. "He was the kind of mentor, who helps a person with no special qualifications and merits to rise up the ranks. If he [Putin] was not appointed [by Sobchak], first as Chairman of the Committee for International Relations and then as Deputy Chairman of the St. Petersburg City Government, then most likely his further career would be considerably different, and definitely not as outstanding."

One of Putin's personal traits that many experts and contemporaries note is loyalty: the former KGB officer stayed with Sobchak until his downfall. In 1996, Sobchak lost the Saint Petersburg mayoral election to his other deputy, Vladimir Yakovlev, whose campaign revolved mainly around criticism of his former boss, wrote *Expert* magazine on Jan. 20, 2000. In charge of Sobchak's election campaign, Putin once called Yakovlev "Judas," who stabbed Sobchak in the back, for his election narrative. With mayoral elections lost, Putin moved to Moscow, where he was offered the post of Deputy Chief of the Presidential Property Management Directorate. Anatoly Chubais, former Sobchak's deputy, and the new chief of the Russian Presidential Administration, helped Putin to get a job in the Kremlin, says Gel'man.

Rising up the ranks, Putin didn't forget about his former mentor: he helped Sobchak flee to Paris in 1997, when a criminal investigation started against him, and then made the

prosecutors drop the charges in 1999. Shortly after his return to Russia, Sobchak died in 2000, while travelling on Putin's presidential election campaign trip in Kaliningrad.

Now all that remains of their old friendship is Putin's confrontation with Sobchak's youngest daughter, Ksenia Sobchak, a political activist and an anchor at an independent TV channel *Dozhd*. The name and deeds of Anatoly Sobchak are forgotten by the majority of Russians, but everyone knows Ksenia, a household-name and a celebrity with considerable influence, especially among the younger generation. In her articles and TV shows, she often questions Putin's regime and legitimacy of his presidency. However, he doesn't seem to take her words and arguments seriously, no matter how hard she tries.

During Putin's annual press-conference in December 2014, Sobchak brought up Ramzan Kadyrov's, the Head of the Chechen Republic and Putin's close ally, initiative to destroy the houses of alleged terrorists' relatives. She questioned if the president considered it lawful, and whether he would defend the citizens of Chechnya. Instead of answering the question right away, Putin turned to his press-secretary Dmitry Peskov, mockingly asking, "Why did you let her speak?" Peskov replied with a smile: "Guilty."

The New Hope

At noon, twelve hours before it was anticipated, on Dec. 31, 1999, Boris Yeltsin appeared on TV screens all around Russia in a traditional New Year Address to the Nation. With swollen face, speaking with apparent difficulty – critics still speculate if these were the consequences of heart strokes or if he was drunk – Yeltsin announced his resignation as Russian president before the end of the term.

"Why hold on to power for another six months, when the country has a strong person,

fit to be president, with whom practically all Russians link their hopes for the future today? Why should I stand in his way? Why wait for another six months? No, this is not me, this is not in my character," Yeltsin, sitting against the backdrop of a traditional Russian New Year's tree, said, hinting at who Russians should choose in the next Presidential election.

"A new generation is taking my place, the generation of those who can do more and do it better. In accordance with the constitution, as I go into retirement, I have signed a decree entrusting the duties of the president of Russia to Prime Minister Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin," he said. "I have always had confidence in the amazing wisdom of Russian citizens. Therefore, I have no doubt what choice you will make at the end of March 2000."

Following the announcement, Yeltsin appointed Putin acting president of the Russian Federation, who would also remain prime minister until the election on March 26, with a personal blessing by Aleksy II, patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin also received the "nuclear briefcase" for controlling Russia's nuclear forces, an essential attribute of power.

At midnight the New Year Address of the newly appointed Acting President was broadcast everywhere in Russia, traditionally watched by the whole country. A complete opposite to Yeltsin – with confident posture, calm voice and piercing look – Putin assured distressed Russians that there would be "no vacuum of power" and promised that any attempts to act against the Russian law and the constitution would be cut short.

"The state will stand firm to protect the freedom of speech, the freedom of conscience, the freedom of the mass media, ownership rights, these fundamental elements of a civilised society," he said, his words sounding ironic in hindsight, as the next few years would see dozens of murders of journalists, politicians and businessmen. "The Armed Forces, the Federal Frontier Service and law-enforcement agencies are working in the usual regime. The state continues to uphold the safety of every Russian citizen."

Preceding the announcement, Yeltsin's ratings were gradually plummeting as a result of a wave of international corruption scandals. In September 1999, a Swiss investigation provided evidence that the Mabetex construction company received major Kremlin contracts, payed with tens of thousands of dollars coming from credit cards in the names of Yeltsin and his two daughters. With some outrage already coming from the society, Yeltsin's family, deeply involved in politics, had to protect itself, and Yeltsin had to pick a reliable and loyal successor, says David Satter, American journalist and an expert on Russia and the Soviet Union, who was expelled from Russia by the government in 2013.

"The [Yeltsin] administration chose Putin, because it was important for them to protect themselves, and they needed someone in the position of Prime Minister, who could succeed to the position of the presidency, and who could protect them and their ill-gotten wealth. And for whatever reason, they considered that Putin would do that, and he did do that," says Satter.

Many experts believed that Yeltsin would choose Boris Nemtsov, who in March 1997 was appointed First Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, as his heir. In 1994, Yeltsin took him to a meeting with Bill Clinton in Washington, telling the US President that Nemtsov, then Governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region, would be a worthy successor. In charge of the energy sector, and responsible for reforming the housing and social sectors, he was widely popular with the public. In the summer 1997, opinion polls gave Nemtsov over 50 percent support as a potential presidential candidate, according to *Deutschlandradio Kultur*.

Putin didn't enjoy such popularity in the beginning of his career in Moscow. When, on Aug. 9, 1999, he was appointed Prime Minister of the Russian Government, his approval

rating was only three percent, Aleksander Oslon, Russian sociologist and president of “Public Opinion” fund, told *Izvestia*.

“He [Putin] was completely colourless and had no experience in such a high office,” confirms Satter. “He was the former head of the FSB, and that was the most notable thing about him.”

Putin’s ratings skyrocketed as four apartment blocks in the Russian cities of Buynaksk, Moscow and Volgodonsk went up in a set of deadly explosions in September 1999.

A month prior to the apartment bombings, on Aug. 7, 1999, Chechnya-based Islamic International Brigade (IIB), an Islamist group, led by warlords Shamil Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab, invaded the neighbouring Russian republic of Dagestan. During the first two weeks of the war of Dagestan, local police was left one-on-one with the Islamists: not only the Russian army didn't try to interfere, but not long before the invasion Russian border guards were ordered to withdraw from the Chechen-Dagestani border. On August 22, the IIB returned to Chechnya with the minimal losses, which raised suspicion among Russians that the invasion was an artificially constructed provocation aimed to prepare the Russian society for the new war in Chechnya, since the First Chechen war fought from 1994 to 1996 resulted in Russia’s frustrating loss, wrote Satter in “How Putin Became President” (“Как Путин стал президентом”).

The situation escalated when on September 4, a car full of explosives detonated in Buynaksk, city near the border of Chechnya, destroying a five-storey apartment-building and killing 62 people; on September 9 and 13, explosions destroyed two nine-storey residential buildings in Moscow, with 98 and 118 people killed; on September 16, a truck bomb exploded outside a nine-story apartment complex in Volgodonsk, killing 17 people. A wave of

fear spread across the country: all attacks were carried out during the night hours, when all people were soundly asleep in their beds – a demonstration that no longer ‘my home is my fortress.’ The Russian government blamed the attacks on terrorists with Chechen links, with Basayev, Ibn Al-Khattab and Achemez Gochiyaev as key suspects.

On September 13, the day of the explosion that took the most lives and hit the closest to the centre of power, all Russian TV channels were full of on-the-spot reports alternating with videos of Yeltsin at the emergency meeting and Putin’s interviews. “As you’ve already noticed, the Prime Minister [Putin] wasn’t at the [emergency] meeting,” read from the teleprompter *RTR* (*Rossiya*) anchor that evening. “He was in Oakland at the Economic Forum. The president urgently called Putin over to Moscow after the reports of the explosion at Kashirskoye highway, and Putin is already on his way from the New Zealand.” The TV report cut to Putin’s interview: “It’s a vile crime, and that was obviously a terrorist attack. One can hardly call these men human beings, one can’t even call them animals. If they are animals, then these are wild animals,” he said, his weirdly detached way of saying the words not matching their meaning. “This is not a challenge to the government, this is a challenge to the people. That’s why we should react accordingly: our response should be extra-tough,” Putin said, calling for the Russian citizens to be careful.

On September 22, Aleksei Kartofelnikov, a resident of an apartment-building in Ryazan noticed two suspicious men carrying sacks into the basement from a car with a Moscow number plate. He called the police, but by the time they arrived, the vehicle was already gone. After the examination, a detonator, a timing device and three sacks of white powder, the military explosive used in all previous bombings, were found and disconnected. That was the last straw for the scared Russians: at the beginning of October, Putin announced that the Russian troops were ready to invade the northern part of Chechnya with the intention

of taking the whole region over, and the whole country welcomed the offensive, as opposed to the public's unwillingness to engage in another war just a few months back.

The public opinion was hardly affected by the innumerable controversies surrounding the Ryazan accident. At first, the FSB treated the attempted bombings as the real threat, commenting on the prevented terrorist attacks and praising citizens' vigilance, and a few days admitted that it was a fake bombing attempt that they did just as a 'training exercise.' All attacks were professionally coordinated: only the FSB had such level of training and only the Russian military had access to the explosives used in the bombings, wrote Satter, listing just a few arguments for the governmental involvement.

However, the majority of Russians were indifferent to these conspiracy theories, now receptive to Putin's promises "to kill terrorists in the toilets." In a matter of days, Putin's approval ratings upsurged: from three percent in August 1999, it went up to 19 percent in October, and 41 percent in December, the month Yeltsin resigned.

"He was suddenly a hero. Before, nobody knew who he was, he had no political experience: he was the former director of the FSB and had a popularity rating of two percent," says Satter. "Suddenly a war begins, he is put in charge of the war, and he is treated as kind of defender of the country. That raises his popularity right away, and makes him a kind of national hero."

Tired from the indecisiveness and ostentatious liberalism of the previous presidents, Yeltsin and Michael Gorbachev, Russians were craving for some brutality, toughness and fair-mindedness in their national leader. The Second Chechen War provided an excellent opportunity for Putin's image-makers to show these qualities off during the pre-election period in 2000.

"Before, there was no Putin. He was cloned like sheep Dolly. They took a part of Yelsin's liver. Injected Berezovsky [Boris Berezovsky, Russian business oligarch and a member of the Yeltsin "family"] into his pancreas. Installed a laboratory flask in a box made of tiles under the shining screen of *ORT* [Channel One Russia]. Poured in a magical solution, which recipe was told by Gleb Pavlovsky's [Russian journalist and Soviet dissident] mother-in-law," wrote famous Russian writer and journalist Alexander Prokhanov in the extreme-right newspaper *Zavtra* in January 2000. "The solution consists of a pinch of hexogen [explosive used in 1999 Russian apartment bombings], a hair of a Wahhabi, Boyarsky's [Mikhail Boyarsky, Famous Russian actor] hat, Vasiliev's [Vladimir Vasiliev, Russian ballet dancer and choreographer] pointe shoes, Raikin's [Arkady Raikin, Russian actor and theatre director] dandruff, Karelin's [Aleksandr Karelin, Russian Greco-Roman wrestler] sweat, Ayatskov's [Dmitry Ayatskov, once popular Russian politician] saliva, Gurov's [Aleksandr Gurov, Russian politician and previously a Soviet police detective] handcuffs, Tuvan tambourine and Sobchak's night shoes, acquired by the Foreign Intelligence Service. The flask with the solution, like a teapot, was covered with Zykina's [Lyudmila Zykina, Russian folk singer] Orenburg shawl [Russian knitted lace textile]. Chubais' [Anatoly Chubais, influential member of Yeltsin's administration] divinations and the singing of Kobzon [Iosif Kobzon, Russian singer] made the solution boil. Just like pink and beautiful Aphrodite came out of the waves of the Ionian sea, Putin was born from the simmering, bubbly solution."

Taking the best traits from the most prominent and influential members of the Russian society, Putin's image was artificially constructed to appeal to people of all classes, backgrounds and even political views, be it Yeltsin's liberals or even communists, and to fit their expectations.

"Putin's phenomenon, no matter if it corresponds with any public ideological setting, is a response to the hopes and expectations," Oslon told *Channel One* in December 1999. "Millions of people saw on their TV screens a politician, who cares about the same things as they do. Moreover, he is energetic and determined. For the first time, people saw a sincere person, whose troubles are similar to theirs."

Putin's electoral program was based on general phrases meant for a wide range of the social classes and lots of claptrap, similarly sounding to some of Donald Trump's pre-election rhetoric. "If we are looking for a slogan for my pre-election campaign, then it's going to be a simple one: a worthy life," wrote Putin in an open letter to the voters on Feb. 25, 2000. "Worthy in a way most of the Russian citizens want and believe in; the way I, as Russian, see the life." Meanwhile, any specifics about the country's economy, politics and social sector were lacking from Putin's electoral program.

His physical appearance and personal traits were a big part of the campaign, successfully highlighted by Putin's spin doctors: he doesn't smoke, rarely drinks alcohol, practices sambo and judo, and flies a fighter jet into the war zone in Chechnya. Many women immediately saw in Putin an ideal of a husband.

"The whole point was to create an artificial construct that people would identify with, and that they wouldn't compare to reality. In the case of Putin, the PR consultants very carefully tried to craft an image that would appeal to Russians, especially in light of the loss of the Soviet Union, the loss of the Soviet Empire, and the fact that Russia was no longer a great power," says Satter. "All of this was redressed to some extent by portraying Putin as some kind of super-masculine hero, especially in comparison with Yeltsin, who was widely regarded in Russia as just an incurable alcoholic with an unstable personality."

When Putin won the 2000 presidential election with 53 percent of the vote, a majority

of Russians were beyond happy, laying their hopes on the young president. All the while, the reaction of the Western media varied greatly from country to country. Italian *La Repubblica* called Putin a young prodigy from Saint Petersburg, and predicted a significant transformation of the Russian government. French media noted Putin's appearance: he is a strong and mysterious, yet hardly noticeable man, just like the former head of the FSB should look like. In Germany, where he worked in the 1980s, Putin was compared to Joseph Stalin, and called a national hero and Russia's hope. The British, especially *The Independent*, doubted Putin would do what he promised in the electoral programme: revive Russian economy, defeat corruption, improve the quality of life in Russia and win the Second Chechen War. Similarly, many Western media noted that his program was very shadowy, with the concrete stance only on the war in Chechnya.

In subsequent years, one of Putin's main objectives would be aimed at resuming Russia's relations with NATO, frozen ever since the allied bombing of Yugoslavia in March 1999. Shortly after becoming acting president of Russia, he met with George Robertson, the new NATO chief and the first major Western politician to meet the new Russian president, who flew into Moscow in February 2000.

"He was less confident than he was eventually to be. He was very new to the job. He wasn't even in the job – he was still acting president," Robertson later told Angus Roxburgh, British journalist and author of "The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia."

Russia's image abroad would be one of Putin's major concerns, and in the next years the Kremlin would spend considerable sums of money on the PR in the West.

Chapter 3: Courting the West

On Sept. 11, 2013, the impossible happened: an op-ed, published under the name of none other than Vladimir V. Putin, appeared in *The New York Times*' Opinion Pages. For a person famous for keeping even Russian state-sponsored media at arm's length, restricted to scheduled press-conferences and well-controlled appearances, this was an event of an unusual scale.

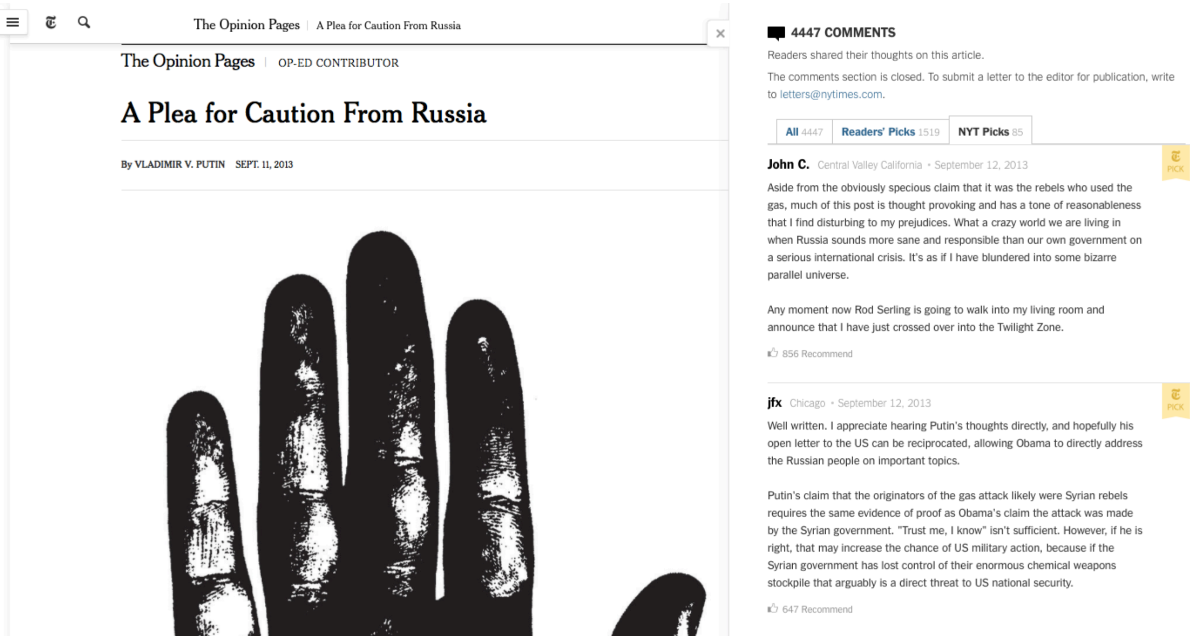
"A Plea for Caution From Russia," accompanied by a picture of an imprint of an open hand, in Spring 2017 instills a sense of deja-vu, as it talks about the August 21 chemical attack that killed more than 1,400 people in the al Ghouta suburb of Damascus, Syria. Both Human Rights Watch and United Nations investigations pointed to the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad regime as responsible, followed by President Barack Obama's decision to strike Syria in retaliation for the attack. Triggered by Obama's announcement, Putin's editorial argued that a military solution was not the answer in Syria.

"No one doubts that poison gas was used in Syria. But there is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons, who would be siding with the fundamentalists," wrote Putin in the most controversial part of the editorial, as by the time there was little doubt about the side responsible for the chemical attack.

The op-ed ended on a tricky for Russia note, considering where it was published, criticising American exceptionalism, and Obama's claim that the United State's policy is what makes America exceptional. "It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation," wrote Putin.

The op-ed triggered a massive response: not only the editorial was republished in many languages, but *The New York Times*' readers left 4447 comments on just the website.

Many of them were surprised to find themselves in agreement with Putin's suggestion to take military action off the table. "What a crazy world we are living in when Russia sounds more sane and responsible than our own government on a serious international crisis," wrote one of the NYT readers, John C., on Sept. 12, 2013. "It's as if I have blundered into some bizarre parallel universe."



The Opinion Pages | A Plea for Caution From Russia

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

A Plea for Caution From Russia

By VLADIMIR V. PUTIN SEPT. 11, 2013

4447 COMMENTS

Readers shared their thoughts on this article.

The comments section is closed. To submit a letter to the editor for publication, write to letters@nytimes.com.

All 4447 | Readers' Picks 1519 | NYT Picks 85

John C. Central Valley California • September 12, 2013

Aside from the obviously specious claim that it was the rebels who used the gas, much of this post is thought provoking and has a tone of reasonableness that I find disturbing to my prejudices. What a crazy world we are living in when Russia sounds more sane and responsible than our own government on a serious international crisis. It's as if I have blundered into some bizarre parallel universe.

Any moment now Rod Serling is going to walk into my living room and announce that I have just crossed over into the Twilight Zone.

856 Recommend

jfx Chicago • September 12, 2013

Well written. I appreciate hearing Putin's thoughts directly, and hopefully his open letter to the US can be reciprocated, allowing Obama to directly address the Russian people on important topics.

Putin's claim that the originators of the gas attack likely were Syrian rebels requires the same evidence of proof as Obama's claim the attack was made by the Syrian government. "Trust me, I know" isn't sufficient. However, if he is right, that may increase the chance of US military action, because if the Syrian government has lost control of their enormous chemical weapons stockpile that arguably is a direct threat to US national security.

647 Recommend

The controversial editorial was a brainchild of an American public relations firm Ketchum that offered the piece to *The New York Times*. "On the surface [it] would normally be seen as a great achievement for a PR firm, but which prompted some U.S. commentators to label the Omnicom firm unpatriotic – and which caused unease among some who worked within the agency," says Steve Barrett, editor-in-chief of *PRWeek*, a trade magazine for the public relations industry. "On the other hand, *The Times* is one of the foremost influencers in the media space, and possibly the most important newspaper in the world, so when the President of Russia featured in its opinion pages it was an extremely significant and noteworthy event." Barrett considers the op-ed one of the PR firm's biggest achievements of the nine-year long cooperation of Ketchum with the Kremlin.

The Russian government realised the importance of forming a positive image for both country and its leader in 2006, on the eve of the G8 summit in Saint Petersburg, which for the first time would be held in Russia. Highly advertised and talked about, the event was supposed to be flawless. However, the legitimacy of Russia to host the meeting was questioned, and even accompanied by the calls to boycott the Saint Petersburg summit, when Russia abruptly cut off gas supplies to Ukraine in a row over gas prices on Jan. 1, 2006, disrupting gas deliveries to some European countries. In that environment, with hopes to recover the Russian relations with the West, Kremlin decided to hire a Western public relations company.

There was no tender: through the personal connections the Kremlin found a leading New York firm Ketchum and Brussels-based GPlus, writes Angus Roxburgh, former *BBC* journalist hired by two PR agencies as chief Russia consultant, in his book "The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia."

"We saw our main task as Kremlin advisers as a rather simple one: to teach the Russians about how the Western media operate and try to persuade them to adopt the best practices of government press relations," writes Roxburgh. "We were advisers, not spokespeople."

According to reports maintained by the Justice Department, as US companies are obliged to declare fees received from foreign principals for "political activities," for its work performed during the G8 summit Ketchum alone received over $1,2 millions. In the attempts to avoid the need to get approval in the Russian state budget, all financial arrangements were not directly with Kremlin, but with a Russian bank. As the initial contract has been rolled over year by year, the fees were increasing, too. During the six-months period in 2009-2010, Ketchum received over $1,848 millions from the Russian Federation, according to the

Supplemental Statement. Overall, from 2006 to 2014, Ketchum reported $29,5 millions as received from the Russian Federation, writes *Forbes Russia*.

ATTACHMENT C
to
Ketchum Inc.
Supplemental Statement

Section 14: During this 6 month reporting period, have you received from any foreign principal named in Items 7, 8, and 9 of this statement, or from any other source, for or in the interests of any such foreign principal, any contributions, income or money either as compensation or otherwise?

Ketchum received from its United Kingdom affiliate, Ketchum Limited, $1,848,000.00 to cover fees and expenses for providing services for the benefit of The Russian Federation during the reporting period.

The money invested into the Western PR payed off, as Russia would very soon need to redeem its image in eyes of the foreign partners. The international community was shocked to learn about the assassination of an investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya on Oct. 1, 2006, followed by the murder of ex-Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko on Nov. 23, 2006, and the Russia-Georgian conflict in 2008. “[By the time] I began to wonder whether the very reason the Kremlin had decided to take on a Western PR agency was because they knew in advance that their image was about to nosedive,” writes Roxburgh.

Despite the controversies coming from Russia, with help of the Western PR agencies Putin was named Person of the Year by *Time* magazine in 2007. Later some would speculate that the Kremlin payed two million dollars for this achievement, writes *Forbes Russia*, however, there is no official proof of that. In the upcoming years, the head shot photograph

that went on the *Time* cover, taken by the internationally famous photographer Platon, would often be used at anti-Russian protests.

“We encouraged Peskov to be more open with the Western press because it is the only way to make sure the Kremlin’s own views are heard (as opposed to the views of dissidents),” Roxburgh says via email. The Western PR agencies advised the Kremlin to mix with foreign journalists by taking them for lunches and giving bits of information off-the-record as a sign of trust. At first, Dmitry Peskov, then Putin’s deputy press-secretary, followed the advice, holding a few dinners for Moscow journalists and significantly increasing the number of media appearances of the ministers and other government officials. However, after the murder of Politkovskaya, the Kremlin turned back to the old, detached and top-down ways of dealing with the press, too afraid of the questions that journalists might ask, writes Roxburgh. They would soon settle on ‘tele-briefings’ held with Putin every year for both Russian and international press, where all questions and answers would be carefully edited.

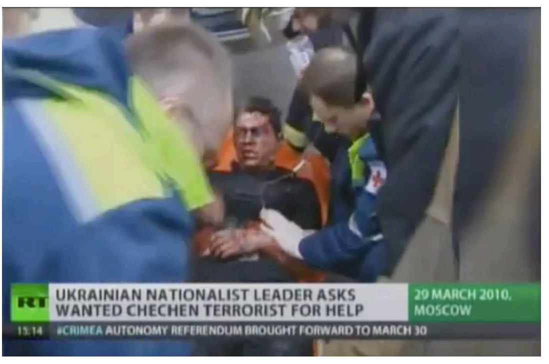
The Western PR agencies also advised Putin to get closer to the people. Thus, followed, perhaps, one of the most famous and bizarre Putin’s publicity-stunts, in Russia known as “The Kiss of Nikita by Putin,” shot by a local TV channel on June 28, 2006, and spread like a wildfire on major Russian and Western media. Few weeks prior to the Saint Petersburg G8 summit, it featured Putin kneeling in Moscow’s Red Square to kiss the tummy of a five-year-old boy, Nikita Konkin. Putin would later explain that he “wanted to stroke him [the boy] like a kitten and it came out in this gesture.” These picture and video

The Kiss of Nikita by Putin

would also be the basis of Alexander Litvinenko's accusations of Putin being a paedophile, four months before the ex-spy's murder.

Ketchum's methods were effective for the time, says *PRWeek* editor-in-chief Barret, noting that in 2006 the world geopolitical situation was very different. In November 2012, *ProPublica* revealed the Western PR agencies' tactics: pro-Russian op-eds were published in America's leading media outlets, such as *CNBC*'s website and the *Huffington Post*, written by seemingly independent professionals. Only Justice Department foreign agent registration filings by Ketchum show that columns written by businessmen and lawyers, and promoting Russia "as the most dynamic [economically] place on the continent," as written in one of the *CNBC* opinion pieces by an executive at a Moscow-based investment bank, were all sponsored by the Kremlin.

Another Kremlin propaganda tool is *Russia Today* (RT). Founded in 2005 by a state-owned news agency *RIA Novosti*, the 24-hour satellite television station originally aimed at giving a 'Russian take' on world events, serving as an alternative source of information to *BBC* and *CNN*. However, in 2008, during the Russia-Georgian war, *RT*'s relatively objective and non-biased reporting changed to openly propagandistic, coming up to the Kremlin's expectations. Ever since, it served that purpose, reaching the peak of its success in 2014, when the conflict with Ukraine escalated. *RT'*s headlines would scream that "West raves with



threats over Moscow move to protect Russians in Ukraine" and "Ukrainian nationalist leader asks Russian terrorist leader for help" – the latter denied by the Pravy Sector leader himself.

Occasionally, the Western PR agencies would be forced to cooperate with the state-owned media. "GPlus, for example, would be asked to set up a press briefing with the Russian envoy to Brussels, Yevgeny Chizhov," writes Roxburgh, "only to find that the ambassador was already working with *RIA Novosti* on the same project – except that *RIA*, with its enormous resources, was doing it in style, with a video link to Moscow."

With large sums of money coming from the Russian government, *RT* has all the resources to create content appealing to the Western audience. In 2016, it ranked among the top five most-viewed international news channels in Europe and the US, with the daily viewership of 35 million worldwide, writes *RT* quoting Ipsos survey.

Roxburgh believes that this is not enough, and despite enormous funding, the Kremlin still struggles to reach the West with its message. "I am rather surprised that he [Putin] is so passive towards the West. I don't think the West hears his arguments at all. Everything is filtered through a very hostile Western press," Roxburgh says via email. "Yet he never seems to think of making a big foreign policy speech, in which he would actually reach out to the West rather than constantly berating it for its 'domineering' attitudes."

American journalist David Satter disagrees, believing that the Kremlin-sponsored 'propaganda tools' have a hold over the Western audience, influencing even the American media. "The free press in our country [the United States] was also to some extent influenced by the steps that were taken to boost Putin's reputation in Russia itself," he says in a phone interview. "We hear many references to Putin as a strong leader, and also references to him as being a conservative leader and even a defender of Christian values. This is all the product of

the Russian propaganda machine, and the fact that Americans are not committed to digging up unpleasant facts about Putin and reacting on the basis of those facts."

"It's not necessarily that American media is in love with Putin – they aren't," Satter continues. "But there is a certain superficiality in the whole Western approach to Russia, and it is reflected in the lack of a desire seriously to investigate the crimes that the Russian regime is responsible for."

One of the crimes Satter implies is the annexation of Crimea by Russia and its involvement in the war in Donbass. Russia's actions in Ukraine drew an end to the cooperation of the Kremlin and the Western PR agencies, Ketchum and GPlus. The results of many years of hard work in image building vanished into thin air following Russia's military intervention in Ukraine in 2014, which led to the imposition of sanctions by the U.S. and European Union and a more negative attitude to Russia in the West. There was nothing Ketchum could do to improve Russia's image abroad, and in 2015 the PR agencies uncoupled from their client.

"As the geopolitical situation changed, and relations between Russia and the West became more fractured, it became more difficult for Ketchum to justify working with this controversial client," says Barrett. "Agencies receive numerous lucrative offers to pitch for business each year that they turn down for ethical reasons or because they don't feel those clients are compatible with the mission of their firm and, most importantly, people. And that last factor may have been the most important one in the long term. Sometimes it is better to terminate, or uncouple from, controversial accounts for the good of everyone involved, no matter how lucrative they are."

Officially, that was a decision made by the two parties: in the environment where the dislike of the Westerners, especially Americans, was not only growing, but encouraged, the fact that Western PR agencies worked for the Kremlin was not well accepted.

In subsequent years, Russia would suffer even more severe damage to its reputation resulting from continued stories about alleged hacks of the Democratic Party during the U.S. General Election, its deployment of advanced missile systems in Syria, continuing Western sanctions over the war in Donbass and the Olympic athlete doping scandal. Thus, in November 2016, *PRWeek* learned that the Russian government was again seeking to hire three or four leading Western PR agencies, with plans of making a contract by the end of the year. However, in April 2017, there was still no news of whether the Kremlin's attempts were successful. Barrett believes that in the current geopolitical situation finding a Western PR agency that would be ready to work on improving the image of the Russian government is much harder. "Even if they hired one, it would be some unknown PR agency," he says. "There definitely is a risk for Western PR companies in taking on Russia as a client."

Meanwhile, the Kremlin continues influencing its image in the West, employing more traditional hard propaganda tools. "The extent of Russian propaganda in the West can be seen in France and the Netherlands during elections, not to speak about what happened in the United States," says Marcel Van Herpen, security expert specialising in Russia and author of three books on Putin's Russia. "My prognosis is that propaganda will continue, as it is now one of the Kremlin's Trump cards in which much money has been invested."

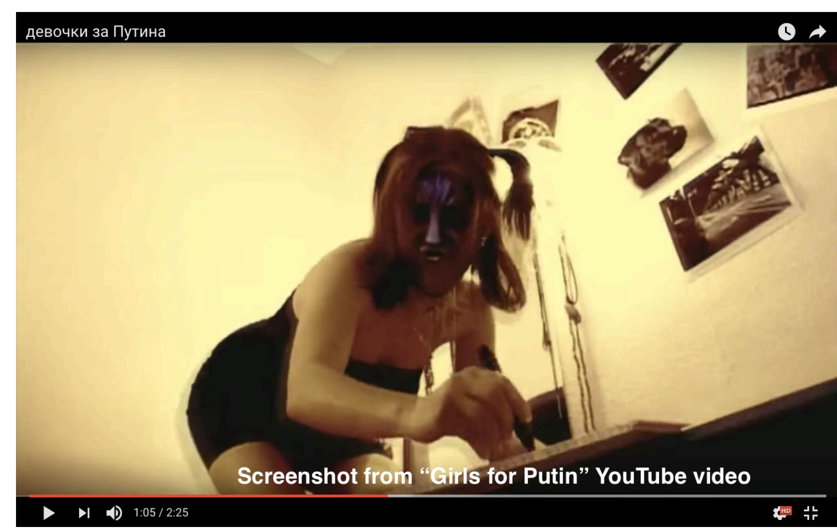
Just like Russian state symbol, the two-headed eagle with three imperial crowns, the Kremlin's media representations abroad and domestically, while based on the same themes, differ significantly from each other, and that can be clearly seen in the attitudes towards Putin. "They [Russian people] don't fear him [Putin] as much as the West, they don't think

that he is as in control as the West thinks he is," says Anna Arutunyan, Russian-American journalist and author of "The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult." "That's the key difference: Russians understand that 'Tsar is far, sky is high' [Paraphrased Russian saying 'God is high, Tsar is far away']. The West doesn't understand that, they think that everything is top down managed by Putin."

Chapter 4: In and Out of God's Shadow

The Cult of Personality

If Dr. Preobrazhensky's original intention was to turn the dog Sharik, the main character of the 1925 Russian novel "Heart of a Dog" by Mikhail Bulgakov, into a human being, almost a hundred years later, in July 2011, Ekaterina Obraztsova, a student from the Novgorod region, got on all fours, painted her face and on camera declared her wish to become a dog: not any dog, but Connie, the dog of Vladimir Putin.



Screenshot from "Girls for Putin" YouTube video

"I want to be your Connie, on the desk and on the balcony," sing four girls in the video, posted on *YouTube* with over a million views. They are part of a fan club called Girls for Putin, founded by Obraztsova, and former members of the Stal (Steel) youth group, one of the branches of the Kremlin-funded youth organisation Nashi. Making that video, they hoped to show their support for Putin and catch his attention, Obraztsova told in an interview with Anna Arutunyan, author of "The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult."

This comes as just one example of how Russians show their love for their leader: in 2011, Moscow State University female journalism students made an erotic calendar for his birthday, in 2014, Russian-owned Italian jewellery brand Caviar released gold and titanium iPhone 6 with the president's face engraved on it, and in 2015, the St. Petersburg Cossacks installed a sculpture of Putin portrayed as Julius Caesar.

In such environment, experts don't doubt the existence of a modern-age cult of personality in Russia. "It's clear how tremendous is propaganda on behalf of Putin that the cult of personality has emerged," says American journalist Satter. "We see it with Russian tourists in T-shirts with pictures of Putin on them, we saw it with the commemoration of the sinking of the submarine Kursk, where the children of those who died at the Kursk showed up wearing T-shirts with Putin's image on them."

However, media analysts disagree on the role of the Kremlin in the personality cult. "The media obviously played a role in it, but it's not like somebody ordered them to do this, it's just that media found itself in a natural environment," says Arutunyan. "A big part of it was depicting him as this macho strongman. It was like a game they played off of each other. He presented this image, they liked it, then he liked what he saw, ordered more of it, and pretty soon you've got this 21st century personality cult."

Putin has always been aware of the power of the media and information. In the first years of the presidency he was sure that television was merely a propaganda tool, and journalists would do whatever they are told to, getting frustrated every time someone would dare to disobey him.

Putin took it as a personal insult when the Russian state television criticised the falsehood of the official statements and the slow reaction of the Kremlin to the sinking of submarine "Kursk" in the Barents Sea on Aug. 12, 2000. Two explosions ripped apart the

ship, praised for being 'indestructible,' during the Russian naval exercise, killing all 118 personnel on board. Later reports would show that 23 crew members survived the explosions, staying in one of the compartments for more than six hours, until an oxygen cartridge contacted the oily sea water, triggering an explosion and flash fire that consumed the remaining oxygen. Wives and children of the sailors were waiting on the shore, witnessing as their loved ones died in the depth of the sea just a few kilometres away from them. Twelve hours after the ship sank Putin was notified of the disaster, yet the Russian authorities didn't rush to tell the world about it: the next day Northern Fleet commander Admiral Popov reported that the exercise was a success, with no mention of "Kursk." For the next few days the Kremlin and the Russian military officials would give conflicting reports, later deemed as lies, on the situation with the submarine. Eventually, the Russian Navy had to admit that it had no technical means of its own to save the personnel, and only on the fifth day Putin accepted British and Norwegian offers of assistance.

A few days after the explosion, *Channel One Russia* showed a mother of one of the sailors crying in despair, "For $50-70 they are shut down in a tin can! What did I raise him up for? Tell me! Do you have children? … What doesn't he [Putin] understand? He doesn't understand anything!" The video report angered Putin: he rushed to call the TV channel, says Sergey Dorenko, *Channel One Russia* evening news programme anchor, in the documentary film "Comrade President" (Товарищ Президент). "You deliberately hire a bunch of whores. You pay them $10 to discredit me," Dorenko recalls Putin's words, adding that he tried to convince the president that these were mothers and widows of the sailors; all in vain – Dorenko was immediately fired.

Similar reactions followed the "Nord Ost" Moscow theater hostage crisis in October 2001 and Beslan school siege in September 2004: Putin's official statements were issued with

a considerable delay, from 12 to 24 hours, and he would distance himself from the victims and their grieving relatives, always blaming journalists for encouraging hysteria and making money off people's tragedies. Only ten years later, once most major TV channels were under the state control, he would change this course of behaviour.

In the meantime, all natural media appearances were replaced with the government-generated artificial ones, compensating lack of sincerity from Putin with the modern-age rituals, aimed at unifying the nation. Putin continued the Soviet tradition of yearly mass celebrations, using each of them as a chance to show one of his 'human' sides to the public. Christmas and Easter masses from Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral are broadcast on all major TV channels, typically showing the government officials – most of them former communists – praying around the president, reflecting the leader's current political priorities, writes Anna Kachkayeva, Russian journalist and media analyst, for Levada-Center's *The Russian Public Opinion Herald*. The May 9 Victory day celebration has the same purpose: the Victory Parade broadcast on Russian state television, showcasing the Kremlin's elite surrounded by the World War II veterans, and

NTV channel Easter mass broadcast

Putin and Medvedev attending Victory Day Parade on May 9

patriotic films and educational programmes take all the air time during the four-day holiday. The list of patriotism enhancing state celebrations goes on, with a few recent additions: Crimea Annexation Anniversary, on March 16, complemented Russia Day, on June 12, and Unity Day, on November 4.

A special role in forming Putin's public image plays his annual Q&A show "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin." Once a year the state media, radio and television, interrupt their own broadcasts, stop all advertisement content and tune in to the live line with the Kremlin. In front of dozens of cameras, next to hundreds of phone operators and a bunch of invited star-struck commoners sits Putin, ready to answer the questions of ordinary Russians and make 'all their dreams come true.' He convinces a strict husband, former military officer, to allow his wife to buy a dog, invites one young girl for a tour of the Red Square, and assures another girl, who was told by her father that only "Putin can deal with *that* America," that women too can become presidents. From two to four hours he talks to widows, pensioners, peasants and students, answering pre-planned questions coming from all around Russia, and even in the most far away villages the phone or video connections are always flawless – nothing can interrupt an event of such scale.

"The direct line is made for the 'people of television.' They are used to this ritual, and see noting wrong with the fact that their questions are complimentary and innocent. They don't see anything wrong with memorising the question, given to them, and saying it out loud," says Russian journalist Andrei Arkhangelski. "Of course, this direct line doesn't follow the main rule of communication – there is no dialogue. There is only a solo of the main character, and the rest play a supporting role. The man, who came up with that, is not capable of a dialogue. He is not able to argue, listen to the arguments, and find a compromise," he

says. “The direct line has as much in common with the dialogue, as the plane made of clay has with the real airplane.”

While the Kremlin spin-doctors like showing Putin in organic environment, surrounded by children, war veterans and women, the president’s own private life is a big taboo for all state media. The only time Lyudmila Putina deserved major media attention from both state and opposition media was during her divorce from Vladimir Putin in 2014, while their daughters’ real names and occupations are still a mystery to many.

Putin is always guaranteed to get the desired coverages delivered to homes of millions of Russians, since the Kremlin has control over the largest mass media in Russia, television. National TV channels are managed either directly by the state, like *VGTRK* and *Channel One*, with 25 percent share of viewing in 2016, through government-owned corporations, like *NTV*, which is owned by Gazprom-Media, or through government-friendly companies, for example, *REN-TV*, owned by the National Media Group, which is controlled by Putin’s friend Yury Kovalchuk.

A major role in spreading state propaganda is played by pro-Kremlin talking heads, especially Dmitry Kiselev, TV host of one of the most popular Sunday news programmes and head of *Rossiya Segodnya* news agency, and Vladimir Solovyov, host of a famous debate show “Evening With Vladimir Solovyov.” Mocking and often offending criticism of the West, reaching the level of absurdity, and praise of Russian national leader are what the content of their TV shows typically consists of.

Many media experts believe that the Presidential Administration is not directly involved with the programmes’ content, with the media executives acting upon self-censorship based principle and personal bias.

“I don’t think he precisely represents Putin’s own views – this is an exaggerated form that is aimed at getting attention,” says British journalist Angus Roxburgh about Kiselev. “Kiselev serves the purpose of whipping up support for Putin in combatting the West’s alleged aggression.”

Russian journalist Arkhangelski, talking about Putin’s state media coverage, compares his image to that of a god. “Kiselev and Solovyov are two of his high priests. They are the interpreters. They saturate his image, giving it a mystical shine. They turn him into a demiurge. In their interpretation, Putin is the one who controls and rules the world, and he always wins,” says Arkhangelski. “Putin moves the world, setting the vector of development. He decides what it should be like. All other world leaders are just Putin’s ornament. Compared to him, they look pitiful, lacking his strength, manhood and determination. They are not worth him. The world depends on Vladimir Putin. These anchors set a very important tone: they put the equal sign between Putin, the state and us. A viewer thinks that there is his part in each of Putin’s decisions. He feels like he is a part of a big mechanism.”

“We Only Had One Ruler”

“So you think that life in this country got worse with the arrival of Putin and Medvedev?” a middle-aged headmistress, Kira Gribanovskaya, of a school outside Bryansk, about 380 kilometres southwest of Moscow, asks students.

“No, but they’ve stayed too long,” one student answers, trying to defend his point. “They’ve just been there [in power] for too long.”

“Did you live in some other era that I somehow missed? Under whom did you live well? And under Putin and Medvedev things got worse for you?” Gribanovskaya continues. “I’m asking you, specifically you: Under what ruler did you live well?”

“We’ve only ever had one ruler, actually,” the student points out.

The 9-minutes-long video of the impromptu lecture by the principle and a teacher was posted online on March 18, 2017, by the students chastised for their “lack of patriotism,” and was quickly spread on the social media. In the upcoming month it was followed by the massive influx of similar in content videos, where high school teachers and university professors would tell students: “All of you [liberal students] are servants of the Anglo-Saxons! … You are traitors, renegades and liberal-fascists!” “While you are at school, there is no freedom of speech” and “I always knew there was something rotten about you [student supporting an opposition leader]. … Go to the principal! Stand up! Do you like aggression?”

Such rhetoric, fully reflecting the state media agenda, now is a daily occurrence at Russian schools, according to students, but it wasn't until the protests on March 26 that the adults realised that the country’s youth, too, has a voice and is capable of the independent thinking. Most of the students featured in the videos, took to the streets to demonstrate against government corruption and demand the resignation of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Tens of thousands of Russians rallied across the country on March 26, despite most of the protests being unauthorised by the cities’ authorities, with thousands ending up arrested, among them many students and children. The demonstrations were immediately labeled “the protests of the youth” by everyone, except the state media that would only mention the rallies one week after they took place. Alexey Navalny, an opposition leader and a prominent critic of the Russian government, called for the protests after posting a documentary film “Don’t Call Him ‘Dimon’” accusing Medvedev of controlling properties far beyond what he could afford on his government salary, including mansions, yachts and vineyards.

"Corruption is a topic close to everyone," says Daniil Pilchen, third year composition student at the Moscow Conservatory, originally from Odessa, Ukraine. "All people care about the material goods, it's hard to argue with that. That's why everyone united under the banners of protecting them."

A video, featuring Pilchen, was posted on YouTube on March 17. It shows Russian Cultural Politics instructor Farida Kulmukhametova compelling the student to read in front of the class a lengthy text on the topic of the "fifth column," which included a list of figures for whom students were instructed never to vote. That list of "traitors" included Navalny, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and daughter of former St. Petersburg mayor Ksenia Sobchak among many other opposition activists. Pilchen, who on March 26 would take to the streets of Moscow, read the list sarcastically, mocking the text's content, for which Kulmukhametova threatened to expel him from the conservatory. Instead, the institution would fire her a week later, after the major opposition media picked up the story.

"Her lectures were relatively neutral: she would tell about the crisis of the traditional family, or would say that, God forbid, there would be same-sex marriages in Russia," says

Pilchen. No longer students buy this kind of propaganda, just like they don't buy the image of Putin and the Kremlin presented by the state media. “Everyone [youths] is on the internet nowadays, which enables to see the same information from different angles. This, in itself, is already the death of propaganda.”

Daniil Pilchen and Russian Cultural Politics instructor Farida Kulmukhametova, March 17

“The protests, and even videos with students and teachers, demonstrate how massive is the communication crisis in Russia,” says Russian journalist Andrei Arkhangelski. “Putin’s Russia, represented by the teachers, only speaks the language of dictatorship, the language of orders. In the 21st century this rhetoric is pointless and absurd. Students speak the language of communication and dialogue. They expect reasoning and equality in the arguments, not the threatening shouts. The abyss between one language, totalitarian, and another, that of communication, keeps increasing. Two generations have no common language for the communication.”

The Kremlin trolls, who are supposed to speak the language of the internet have no power either. “The Internet is the youths’ home, they grew up there. They sense what is fake

and what is real," says Arkhangelski. "So trolls have no influence over them. They are already 'old school'."

After the March 26 protests, the government tried to reintegrate the Kremlin's propagandist stance into the youths' minds. Supported by the school and university teachers, with more video evidences of unfair and aggressive treatment of students posted on the internet every day, the government officials decided to take action. On March 30, the governor of Samara region Nikolai Merkushkin forcibly gathered hundreds of students, pulling them from lessons to a large hall, for an improvised forum called "No Extremism." There he showed an educational film of the same name about the "bloody battle" that could take place in Russia if Navalny eventually comes to power. On April 4, State Duma deputies from several fractions prepared a bill on the patriotic upbringing in Russia. Similar state-sponsored militarised programmes exist in the country since December 2015, but, as March 26 protests showed, they don't give the results anticipated by the Kremlin.

"How can you control the natural desire to live fully and spontaneously, and be yourself?" questions Arkhangelski. "The Kremlin doesn't understand that. They think that they need to pressure more and give more money. The problem is that they don't consider a person a subject, they don't understand that one can have his or her own plans for the life."

While the Russian government is losing its positions with the young generation of voters, the support of Navalny, who in December 2016 announced that he will run for office at the next presidential election in 2018, is steadily growing. Following the March 26 protests, more than 300,000 people backed his bid, enough for him to be considered a legitimate candidate. At the end of April, "Don't Call Him 'Dimon'" documentary that brought him such success had over 20 million views on YouTube.

However, American journalist David Satter believes that this sudden fame wouldn't

bring Navalny the desired victory, and even a slight chance for one, in the next election. "The problem is that people in Russia take corruption for granted, and they also don't believe that the opposition is really sincere about fighting the corruption," he says. "The level of cynicism is very high, and people think that those opposing the corruption would, given the chance, be as corrupt themselves. For that reason, attacks on corruption alone are often not as effective as one would expect."

Considering the state Putin's regime is finding itself in today, endangered by the growing authority of Navalny, decreasing trust of the youth and the ageing president, it is hard to predict the outcome of the next few presidential elections.

"There are three ways this is going to end: in a revolutionary scenario, which is very unlikely, but very bloody and dangerous, in a quiet palace coup, or in an election, when Putin voluntarily decides to step down," says Russian-American journalist Anna Arutunyan. "I think what's actually going to happen is something between the second and the third variant."

"I'm afraid to think about the future," confesses Daniil Pilchen from his Moscow apartment via Skype, drawing in on a cigarette and taking a sip of red wine.

"I don't believe they would let Navalny go through with the election next year," he says. "I think the catastrophe is inevitable. It is unclear what kind of catastrophe it is going to be, and who would trigger it. Perhaps, that same people that took to the streets and protested on Manezhnaya Square [in 2011-13]. … Perhaps, Putin's own electorate, if they get frustrated with something. There are thousands of options, but the thought of the inevitability of the catastrophe is in the air."

"I'm curios to become a witness to the catastrophe," Pilchen concludes with a nervous laugh.

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1.1. Andrei Arkhangelski

1.1.1. Andrei Arkhangelski is a Russian journalist and culture editor of one of the oldest Russian magazines *Ogoniok*. He is a columnist for many leading media outlets in Russia, such as *Kommersant*, *Echo Moscvy* and *Dozdh,* writing about contemporary Russian culture, and its political connections, and the country's youth. Interview took place over email in Russian on April 18, 2017. Translation is mine.

1.2. Anna Arutunyan

1.2.1. Anna Arutunyan is a Russia-American journalist based in Moscow. Born in Moscow, she was raised and educated in the United States before returning to Russia as a journalist. As reporter and editor at *The Moscow News*, Russia's oldest English-language newspaper, in 2014 merged into the state sponsored news agency *Rossiya Sevodnya, s*he has covered over a decade of Russian politics and society. She is the author of three books on Russia, the latest of which is "The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult." Interview took place in Prague in English on Dec. 5, 2016.

1.3. Steve Barrett

1.3.1. Steve Barrett is the editor-in-chief of *PRWeek US*, a trade magazine for the public relations industry, and editorial director of PRWeek Global. *PRWeek US* extensively covered the collaboration of an American PR firm Ketchum with the Kremlin, from 2006 to 2015. Interview took place in English over the phone on Feb. 28, 2017, and over email on April 21, 2017.

1.4. Lev Frolov

1.4.1 Lev Frolov, Saint Petersburg based *TASS Russian News Agency* veteran, who extensively covered the period of Anatoly Sobchak's governorship. Interview took place over email in Russian on Feb. 22, 2017. Translation is mine.

1.5. Vladimir Gel'man

1.5.1 Vladimir Gel'man is a distinguished Russian political scientist, and author of many books on Russian politics. His academic interests lie within the areas of contemporary Russian and post-Soviet politics in theoretical and comparative perspectives. He served on the editorial boards of such journals as

Polis, *European Political Science*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, and *Journal of Eurasian Studies*. Interview took place in Russian over the phone on Feb. 13, 2017. Translation is mine.

1.6. Alexander Gorshkov

1.6.1. Alexander Gorshkov is Saint Petersburg based investigative journalist, editor-in-chief of *Fontanka*, lead regional media outlet, and general manager of "AZUR – media." In 2012, he investigated the connections of businessmen Yevgeny Prigozhin with the troll factories and internet attacks on Russian media. Interview took place in Russian over the phone on Jan. 21, 2017. Translation is mine.

1.7. Marcel Van Herpen

1.7. Marcel Van Herpen is a security expert specialising in Russia, Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet states, and author of three books on Putin's Russia. Interview took place over Twitter in English on April 5, 2017.

1.8. Daniil Pilchen

1.8.1. Daniil Pilchen is a third year composition student at the Moscow Conservatory, originally from Odessa, Ukraine. On March 17, a video featuring him, was posted on YouTube and shortly after went viral. It showed Pilchen, forced by Russian Cultural Politics instructor Farida Kulmukhametova, reading in front of the class a lengthy text on the topic of the "fifth column," which included a list of figures for whom students were instructed never to vote. For reading the list sarcastically and mocking the text's content Pilchen was threatened to be expelled from the conservatory. Interview took place in Russian over Skype on April 17, 2017. Translation is mine.

1.9. Angus Roxburgh

1.9.1. Angus Roxburgh is a British journalist, former *BBC*'s Moscow correspondent and former PR adviser to the Russian government, hired by Ketchum and GPlus. For *BBC* he produced two documentary TV series about Russia, "The Second Russian Revolution" and "Putin, Russia and the West," getting to meet and interview top Russian political figures. In 2011, he wrote a book based on his experiences in Russia, "The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia." Interview took place over email in English on Feb. 16, 2017.

1.10. David Satter

1.10. 1.David Satter is an American journalist and author of several books on Russia and fall of the Soviet Union. He investigated the 1999 Russian apartment bombings, and is famous for supporting the conspiracy theory that the Russian intelligence services were behind the explosions. Satter was expelled from Russia by the government in 2013. Interview took place in English over the phone on Feb. 11, 2017.

1.11. Lyudmila Savchuk

1.11.1. Lyudmila Savchuk is an investigative journalist and social activist, who in January and February 2015 worked at the Saint Petersburg 'troll factory,' leaking documents and lists of technical tasks to several local media outlets. After her employers found out that she was a whistleblower, Savchuk was forced to run away from the factory. In May 2015, Savchuk sued the troll factory for not paying her February salary off. Savchuk won the case and received 41 thousand roubles [733 US Dollars as of April 18, 2017] from the company, giving the sum up to charity. Interview took place in Russian over the phone on Jan. 16, 2017. Translation is mine.

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