

Vladimir Putin  
and the Russian Television «Family»

Floriana Fossato

LES CAHIERS RUSSIE

MARIE MENDRAS

THE RUSSIA PAPERS

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N. 1

2006

## *Les Cahiers Russie - The Russia Papers - 2006*

**Floriana Fossato**, *Vladimir Putin and The Russian Television "Family"*.  
N. 1, 2006

**Jean-Charles Lallemand**, *Biélorussie 2006. Manipulation électorale dans une dictature post-soviétique*.  
N. 2, 2006

**Alexandre Verkhovski**, *Religion et « idée nationale » dans la Russie de Poutine*.  
N. 3, 2006

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*Les Cahiers Russie* sont publiés par l'Observatoire de la Russie au CERI avec le concours du Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères à Paris. Le contenu de chaque Cahier n'engage que son auteur.

*The Russia Papers* are published by the *Observatoire de la Russie* at CERI with the support of the Policy Planning Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris. The content of each paper is the sole responsibility of its author.

On 27 November 2006 in the Moscow Kremlin Russian President Vladimir Putin celebrated the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Russian television with eight hundred journalists and top television managers. A very important occasion indeed. The Russian president sent messages of congratulations to a huge amount of organizations, but welcomed in person to the Kremlin only selected representatives of the most important ones, these days mainly the various branches of military and security organs. Television would seem an anomaly here, but it is not, since Russian officials and political advisers like to conceptualize television – so often used as a tool of manipulation- as “the Kremlin’s nuclear weapon.”

The short speech delivered by Putin is telling. “Today in this room are assembled representatives of different channels and of different professions linked with television. It is one family. And, as in every family, everything happens: you compete, quite fiercely lately. But the bond that joins all of you is your vocation and the dedication to your beloved profession, your belonging to the big “television family” and, of course, the appreciation of the special role and of the significance that your profession has in society.”<sup>1</sup>

The president, who obviously assumed the role of “father” of the Russian television family during the meeting, went on to underline the “vast possibilities” of television, in terms of influence on people’s lifestyle and understanding of the world. He particularly emphasized that these possibilities “entail a huge sense of responsibility” among television professionals. Putin identified the most important characteristics of Russian television: “technical innovation, creativity, respectful approach to viewers. Humanity, artistic taste, true Russian educational traditions – all this has become the calling card of our television in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

## SEEKING UNIFORMITY

Television emerged as a key culture medium in the 1970s and 1980s in the Soviet Union and, in the 1990s, became the close everyday companion to nine out of ten Russians, the main source of information about their country and the world. According to sociologist Daniil Dondurei, “during the last ten years a great virtual revolution has taken place. As a result of it, the empiric reality in which we move, act, exist, has merged with the television reality we see on our screens in its edited, constructed form. At the psychological level they have become interchangeable and to a large extent television reality dictates our reactions.”<sup>3</sup>

It is important to research the role and functioning of the television medium and of the television market in Russia as a whole, in order to understand how power is

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/11/27/2108\\_type63376type82634\\_114565.shtml](http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/11/27/2108_type63376type82634_114565.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Daniil Dondurei, “Tsensura realnosti,” *Isskustvo Kino*, May 2004

organized in a situation where the television screen has gradually become the only meaningful vehicle of socialization between rulers and ruled. This situation is the outcome of President Putin's determined weakening of all political institutions besides the presidency during his two terms in office.

An increasing number of observers have noticed how federal Russian television, particularly after Putin was reelected in 2004, is reminiscent of Soviet television of the 1970s, huge technological changes notwithstanding. The style and content of newscasts over the last few years has strikingly become uniform, and news anchors, who in many cases during the 1990s played the role of television gurus, have been replaced by bureaucrats delivering official state messages with various degrees of professionalism. This development undeniably illustrates how, in the 1990s, the inability of journalists and media managers to create strong self-regulating professional bodies - supporting ethical values such as integrity, independence and professionalism - reinforced a reactionary situation that allowed the state to re-assume control at the federal level after the year 2000, with the tacit agreement of most Russians.

Addressing post-Soviet developments of Russian television, Putin and his speechwriters in November 2006 decided to limit praise for the role of television broadcasters strictly to the early 1990s: "The words of television journalists and their civil position played a huge role in the success of democratic transformations at the beginning of the 1990s. At that time every daring television program, every reportage, every bold piece of televised social and political journalism increased the extent of freedom, pulled down social barriers and dogmas."<sup>4</sup> How strikingly different from Putin's notorious characterization of the breakdown of the USSR in 1991 as "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of last century." Developments in Russian policies under President Putin leave little doubt about which of the two comments is closer to the president's genuine assessment of the beginning of the 1990s. It is evident that the main goal of the meeting was to celebrate the television family and the common "values". The mention of democratic transformation was a misleading display of politically correct talk.

Vladimir Putin's November 2006 speech, in this sense, was a clear example of what Moscow Carnegie Center's political scientist Lilia Shevtsova recently described: "Russia is perhaps the world's chief example of imitation multiparty democracy today, but it is not alone: Venezuela, Egypt and Iran are also imitation democracies, as was Ukraine before the Orange Revolution. Imitation democracy is now one among the major competitors, possibly the key competitor, of liberal democracy. Imitation democracies are in a transition to nowhere; their leaders know precisely where they are and what they are doing. In the Russian case we are dealing not with the "collapse" of democracy, as many think, but with the deliberate

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/11/27/2108\\_type63376type82634\\_114565.shtml](http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/11/27/2108_type63376type82634_114565.shtml)

use of democratic institutions as Potemkin villages in order to conceal traditional power arrangements.”<sup>5</sup>

Moving swiftly from 1991 to the present, Putin said that “today, too, the development of society and the state cannot be imagined without independent media and without the possibility to hear different points of view, without television.”<sup>6</sup> It is very appropriate that Putin mentioned here independent media and not independent television, because the latter is almost non-existent at the federal level in Russia. Meanwhile, media in general, particularly glossy magazines and internet publications, as well as some regional outlets, sporadically maintain a certain level of editorial independence.

#### THE LEADER AND HIS WORDS

Putin limited his comment on the role of television in today’s Russia but was lavish in conferring awards “for the contribution to the development of national television.” More than a hundred television professionals were awarded, in an unprecedented en masse event that mixed together the names and the very different contributions of those who worked for decades without much publicity -- like Anatoly Lysenko, the creator of a Russian (as opposed to Soviet) television channel and Irena Lesnevskaya (the founder of REN TV) – with last-minute entertainment stars like humorist Maxim Galkin and Kremlin propagandists like Mikhail Leontyev and the author of the “British stone spy story” of 2006, Arkady Mamontov.

With this ceremony it seems that the effect the Kremlin was clearly striving to reach was achieved: almost everything and almost everyone in Russian television history coming together in the eclectic television elite family presided by Puti. The fatherly figure of the President benevolently spent time with the television family, duly paying lip service to notions such as independent media and democratic transformations.

Vladimir Putin, virtually an unknown figure to the general Russian public until 1999, was elected President a year later with more than significant support of positive television coverage. Putin acquired the aura of the strong leader of the new Russia at the end of his first term in office, counting on overwhelming news coverage, as well as on the mythologization effort of state channels. A January 2004 broadcast on the First Channel of Russian television (reaching 98 percent of the country’s population) is particularly telling in this respect.

It is Orthodox Christmas, the television cadre is that of a fairy tale: a small lovely church in the Russian winter countryside, covered with snow that is perfectly white,

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<sup>5</sup> Lilia Shevtsova, “Imitation Russia,” *The American Interest*, November-December 2006. Marie Mendras, ed., “La Russie de Poutine”, *Pouvoirs* (Paris, Le Seuil), 2005, 152 p.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/11/27/2108\\_type63376type82634\\_114565.shtml](http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2006/11/27/2108_type63376type82634_114565.shtml)

untouched. Artistically placed lights from the back, the side and from the top of tall trees near the church give the scene the perfect postcard touch. The scene is peaceful, no human trace disturbs it. Then, suddenly, a lonely figure with the shoulder movement peculiar to Vladimir Putin walks toward the church. The camera moves slowly, with this lone believer advancing in the snow eager to meet little newborn Jesus. A solemn Orthodox priest with a wonderful beard meets the President. As they walk together the last few meters toward the entrance one can almost feel the warmth inside, smell the aromatic candles, admire the serenity of the icons. Suddenly a small heretofore invisible crowd backstage joyfully welcomes the President. The light turns on the happy faces in the crowd. Putin turns, smiles, waves and disappears inside the church, symbolically leading his fellow believers.

This broadcast was in January 2004. Two months later Putin, who had rejected televised debates with his opponents throughout the presidential campaign, was overwhelmingly re-elected president of Russia. This particular broadcast was key to a certain “sacralization” of the figure of the president. The emotional power of this short reportage was incomparably more poignant than other broadcasts centered on religious events, like for instance the solemn Orthodox Easter celebrations at Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow, where Putin is regularly shown taking part in the ritualization and legitimization of power together with all major Russian government figures and obviously the Russian Orthodox Patriarch.

The ability of federal channels to take advantage of national and religious events and center them on President Putin, who plays a key role in shaping the new mythologies of the strong state, is obviously reflected in daily newscasts of the last years. Memo-98, a Slovak media monitoring organization, together with the Russian Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations, conducted monitoring of Russian television programs in March 2006. Using qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis they measured who was shown on five federal television channels (state-controlled First Channel, Rossiya and TV Center, gas giant Gazprom controlled NTV and private, but loyal Ren TV), how often and how long during the evening prime-time.

The study concluded that the coverage of President Putin was exclusively positive, or at best neutral in tone and that state-controlled broadcasters devoted a staggering cumulative 85 percent of their prime-time coverage to the activities of the President, the government and the Kremlin-loyal United Russia party. Meanwhile parties and individuals seen as inconsistent with presidential and government policies reached a cumulative 2 percent of mostly negative coverage over the 31-day period.<sup>7</sup>

Channel One allocated 91 percent of airtime in newscasts to reports on the authorities, of which 71 percent were positive and 28 percent neutral in tone. The second channel, Rossiya, allocated 88 percent of airtime to the coverage of the

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.memo98.sk/data/\\_media/Russia\\_first\\_report\\_eng.pdf](http://www.memo98.sk/data/_media/Russia_first_report_eng.pdf).

authorities – Putin 19 percent, government 53 percent, United Russia 14 percent, Kremlin administration 2 percent, similarly positive or neutral. The opposition received as little as 0.6 percent of coverage, mostly negative in tone. TV Center allocated 90 percent of airtime to coverage of the President, the government and United Russia. Unlike the first two channels, TV Center showed some 8 percent (out of 90 percent) of mildly negative coverage. NTV devoted 88 percent of its mostly positive or neutral news coverage to the authorities. Ren TV, privately owned by Russian business concerns loyal to the Kremlin with minority German participation, devoted less news coverage than the others --64 percent-- to the President, the government and United Russia while the opposition, including the communist party, was allocated 19 percent of coverage. Qualitative analysis showed that this broadcaster was also far more balanced in his tone than the others.<sup>8</sup>

Putin's televised projection has become immensely strong. The President, regularly on prime-time for two or three hours live, in the absence of other live television broadcasts, becomes the only reality that Russian citizens are invited to recognize. This exercise goes beyond federal state controlled channels. It has rapidly become endemic to regional broadcasters, usually more distant from the Kremlin. Until several years ago regional channels participating in television contests were keen to show local "heroes" who could, to an extent, serve as inspiration for civic action. Well-meaning nurses and doctors struggling to help patients in the absence of functioning medical facilities, or teachers engaging their students in civic local activities were often at the centre of regional broadcasts. More recently, Russian colleagues who closely monitor regional television have found that this positive trend has slowed down dramatically, possibly also because it highlighted the deficiencies of regional economies at a moment when the glorification of Russia's new economic might has become mainstream. As a result only one hero is left and routinely chosen by broadcasters: Vladimir Putin.

In such a situation, every word pronounced by the President has a huge resonance. On several occasions Putin's words have stirred up hysteric reactions in the media, as well as among bureaucrats, with dangerous consequences. We have witnessed this after Ukraine's Orange revolution and more recently during the crisis between Russia and Georgia. On 4 October 2006, for example, Putin told leaders of State Duma factions that the government should control the flow of immigrants into the country and defend Russian citizens' interests in the labor market. He said that "Russian citizens should not feel infringed upon in the labor market and other areas." The chain-reaction started immediately. Federal Migration Service Deputy Director Mikhail Tyurkin told NTV television that Russia was toughening its visa regime for Georgian citizens. The Migration Service announced that it would also try to persuade Belarus to enact visa formalities for Georgia.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



The same day State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, speaking after the meeting of the Duma's faction leaders with Putin, said that it was "unacceptable that a huge majority of the people who come to Russia to find work from the CIS countries, including Georgia, do not register as workers." Gryzlov said migration issues should be regulated more carefully, to make sure that local workers in Russia's regions, as well as legal immigrants, have priority, including in trading at local vegetable and fruit markets. Meanwhile, on 4 October, the Duma passed by a vote of 418-1 a resolution declaring that restrictive measures taken by Russia against Georgian citizens and Georgian imports were justified and that, if Georgia would "do anything to jeopardize regional stability, other, more severe measures would be acceptable," according to Russian news agencies.

The next day Putin reiterated his demand that the government regulate the flow of migrants and the labor market. At a cabinet meeting, he ordered Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov to take steps mirroring those proposed earlier by the Federal Migration Service. The President's proposals included setting quotas for migrants that would depend, in part, on their country of origin. Putin set a 15 November deadline for the government to take action. He appeared to target Georgians in particular, saying groups with mafia ties and an "ethnic hue" should be barred from outdoor markets. The president said that these groups "are the bosses at markets. That rightly evokes resentment among citizens." *The Moscow Times* daily noted that Putin's remark about questionable groups with an "ethnic hue" -- reported by Interfax news agency-- was replaced by "semi-criminal groups" -- without any specified ethnicity -- in the version of the speech posted later on the Kremlin website.

All these statements were disseminated and positively commented upon at great length by all federal television channels. At the peak of the anti-Georgian campaign Radio *Ekho Moskvy* and the daily *Kommersant* reported that Moscow police intended to trace illegal immigrants from Georgia with the help of lists of children studying in the capital. The reports said several schools in Moscow had received requests from security authorities to inform on the presence of students of Georgian origin.

One can only agree with Galina Kozhevnikova, deputy head of the Sova Center, which monitors hate crimes, who in a concerned comment said that "the state is legitimizing xenophobia and discrimination." In this respect, Putin's words and attitude were absolutely key for the hate campaign and to an extent it was shocking to read that Putin, in his speech to television professionals on 27 November, dared say that the vast possibilities of television should "entail a huge sense of responsibility."

## AN IDEOLOGY-BUILDING EXERCISE

Direct control is not the paramount goal of the current authorities. Although reminiscent of the so-called “stagnation” period of the Brezhnev era, today’s rules create different conventions. Loyalty to the President, the pragmatic ability to engage in self-censorship, and the shared wish to re-establish the might of Russia and Russian national television production vis-à-vis the perceived “American colonization” of broadcasts are essential pre-conditions. Having demonstrated their willingness to accept and play by these rules, federal media managers are routinely invited to cooperate with the Kremlin on television policy and to participate in the televised creation of the new ideology of Putin’s Russia. This is the main goal of the Kremlin’s current engagement with television in recent years and the November Kremlin event only marked one of the most visible manifestations of this policy.

The new ideology being built with the help of the television medium does not seem to be aiming at supporting a closed society and certainly does not intend to reject market principles in the media, as in Soviet times. In fact the economic element plays an important role in the involvement of pragmatic media operators, who are welcome to introduce new lucrative formats as long as they share patriotic goals aimed at boasting national identity and react to what is perceived by the authorities as the threat of globalization.

As Tehri Rantanen explains, “in post-communist Russia imported media contents did not eventually provide people with what they needed. The disparity between reality and pictures in the media became almost too poignant and unbearable. Globalization is not necessarily a promise of something better for the future, but a threat to the new life that people are trying to build. A saturation point was reached and there was growing criticism against globalization and a partial return to national values. In this situation, national media play an important role.”<sup>9</sup> Rantanen is right to say that “national media systems indigenize contents” and “provide a framework that is based on the ‘imagined community’ of a nation state”<sup>10</sup> This is the background of the definition of “virtual politics on federal television.”

From this starting point, the only meaningful Russian political player of the last years – the Kremlin – encourages television to inform the public of the new social norms, underlining the necessity to use, besides sanitized news, the whole range of

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<sup>9</sup> Tehri Rantanen, *The Global and the National –Media and Communications in Post-Communist Russia*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002, pp. 132-133.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. On the role of mass-media in the creation of rituals that sustain the existence of imagined communities, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso Publishers, 1983

other formats available to the television medium, from analytical programs commenting the news, to entertainment in its various forms, to sport. The goal is to help viewers understand the new rules of societal behavior and acquire a sense of unity and pride after the 1990s, usually presented, despite Putin's words in the November speech to broadcasters, as the chaotic period resulting from "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the last century:"<sup>11</sup> the breakdown of the USSR.

In this respect, Michael Billing's statement comfortably fits the television exercise we have watched developing on Russian television screens particularly since the year 2000: "the nation is to be imagined as a unique entity in terms of time and space. It is imagined as a community stretching through time, with its own past and future destiny: it is imagined across space, embracing the inhabitants of a particular territory"<sup>12</sup>

The Kremlin, feeling stronger after the turmoil of the 1990s, is seeking to lend a sense of legitimacy to its political, social and economic course, sustaining an image of stability that supports a new sense of national identity and creates an emotional link of continuity with the past, with Russia's imperial past as well as with the Soviet era, particularly with the 1970s. This is the period that Russian citizens in various opinion polls of the last years have described as the most stable and "democratic" in 20th century Russian history. To achieve this goal media managers of federal channels are engaged in an exercise aimed at reproducing firmly shared past national mythologies through a range of broadcasts in which emotional tones, particularly those leaning toward nationalist rhetoric, clearly outweigh the importance of information accuracy.

Svetlana Boym notes that nationalism in countries formerly dominated by the Soviet Union quite naturally takes the place of communist ideology, as its messages rely on familiar figures and themes. "The seduction of nationalism is the seduction of homecoming and total acceptance: one does not even have to join the party, one simply belongs. Nationalist ideology (...) offers a comforting collective biography instead of a flawed individual story full of estrangements and disappointments ; it promises to recover the blessed childhood of a nation, without the alienation and loss experienced in adult years."<sup>13</sup>

Boym's cultural annotations symptomatically coincide with psychological research emphasizing the importance of impressions gained in childhood and during early youth for the formation of identity and the storage of the most meaningful memories. This probably helps explain to scholars in media and social studies the widespread positive response (that some find disconcerting) of young

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<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Putin, *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*, [http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031\\_type70029type82912\\_87086.shtml](http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml)

<sup>12</sup> Michael Billing, "Banal Nationalism" 1995, quoted in Tehri Rantanen, *The Global and the National*, op. cit., 2002, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Svetlana Boym, "Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia, 1995", quoted in Theri Rantanen, *The Global and the National*, op. cit. 2002, p. 287.

Russian audiences to Soviet-time messages revisited and reinterpreted in today's broadcasts.

One feeling is common to the older generation of viewers and those who were children or teenagers in the 1970s, even if most of them clearly do not remember the content of most newscasts of the time. The feeling is one of stability and togetherness, of "being one family," as recorded by opinion polls. It is extremely symptomatic in this respect that Putin, in his November speech, twice mentioned the "television family." As sociologist Boris Dubin explains, even when details of films and serials about the past show clear discrepancies with reality the presence of emotionally powerful figures as protagonists gains center-plan and ultimately supports the creation of constructed memories.<sup>14</sup> Rewriting reality, in this respect, sustains continuity.

The pragmatic involvement, and to a certain extent competition, of virtually all the most talented media managers of federal channels, the most vivid and patriotic interpretation of the past and current reality has succeeded in pleasing one main viewer, the Kremlin, and appealing to the feelings of the general public.

#### CULTURAL MYTHS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A VIRTUAL REALITY ON TELEVISION

Conventional wisdom among the Russian political and media elites has it that the mythicisation of public figures (be it politicians, as in the case of Vladimir Putin, or spies protecting the Motherland, as in the case of celebrated secret agent Shtirlits) can be constructed essentially through the tool of television.

Not everybody, however, shares this view. Making the link with the Soviet period, one of the most experienced scholars of Soviet and Russian media studies, Ellen Mickiewicz, speaks of the "Soviet belief in the extraordinary power television exercise over its viewers."<sup>15</sup> She calls this vision of television influence "pervasive" and "exaggerated," as it "undervalues" the ability of Soviet and then Russian audiences to read between the lines and maintain their own point of view, despite evident manipulation through television. Mickiewicz's reading, based on results of focus-group research, is obviously correct to an extent. Russian people, including the young generation that was only marginally subject to Soviet-era propaganda, are indeed extremely capable of detecting manipulation and lies in the mass media.

However, I would like to point out observations of Russian sociologists, in the first place of pioneer researcher Yuri Levada, on a subject that is directly linked to participation and response to focus groups. Basing his work on decades of opinion

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<sup>14</sup> Boris Dubin, "Postoronnie: massa i massmedia v segodnyashnei Rossii," (The aliens: masses and mass media in today's Russia), *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, N. 6, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Mickiewicz "The Election News Story on Russian television: A World Apart from Viewers", *Slavic Review*, 65, Spring 2006.

poll results, he draws attention to the ambivalence of attitudes -“doublethink,” as he puts it-<sup>16</sup> that most Russians show toward their past and present, including political developments since the Stalinist era.

Levada explains this ambivalence of attitudes, or self-deception, with the self-preservation instinct of the Soviet period. “The Soviet era,” Levada says, “ushered in a new system of norms and values, universal in significance and absolute in its sources, which was intended either to substitute for all existing systems, or subordinate them to itself. In fact, it merely changed around some of the signs and terms in a few normative fields and overlaid them with yet another formula. The formula ‘what is right is useful (in the rhetoric, useful ‘to the working people’, ‘the cause of Communism’ and so on; in reality ‘what suits the plans and orders from the high’) led directly to a utilitarian normative system.”<sup>17</sup> As demands placed upon them “were mostly impossible to fulfill”, people, for their psychological and physical sake, had to show various ways to formally adapt to the system, at the same time persistently seeking loopholes and creating informal networks of activity, that would allow them to get around the impossible demands.

Most importantly, unlike other scholars, who put the main emphasis on the all-powerful and vigilant state system of control of the population, Levada underlines that the system would not have been so successful had it relied only on mass coercion or mass deception. “It has now become clear just how naïve were the ideas circulating in the 1960s and even as late as the 1980s about the trickery of the public by the all-knowing and utterly cynical party-political authorities... The cunning man not only tolerates deception, but is willing to be deceived, and, what is more, constantly requires self-deception for the sake of his own self-preservation (including psychological) and for the sake of overcoming his own split personality and justifying his own cunning.”<sup>18</sup>

The pervasive influence of television is probably not too exaggerated, as Mickiewicz sustains, because it allows for the ambivalence of attitudes mentioned by Levada to function. On the one hand, viewers feel they are participating in events they see on the screen, on the other hand they do not feel responsible for them. Discussing the rise and fall in popularity of different political figures in the 1990s, Levada underlines the influence of the mass media over the Russian public. The picture of reality proposed by Russian federal television channels in the 1990s, and in a more and more pervasive way since the coming to power of Vladimir Putin, has clearly had far more impact than information about political platforms and politicians’ activities. In this sense, Levada’s assessment that “what is not

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<sup>16</sup> Yuri Levada, *Ot mnenie k ponimaniu. Sotsiologicheskie ocherki. 1993-2000* (From opinion to understanding. Sociological Studies), Moskovskaya shkola politicheskikh issledovani, Moscow, 2000. See also <http://www.levada.ru/levadaocherki.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Yuri Levada, “Homo Praevaricatus: Russian Doublethink” in *Contemporary Russian Politics*, edited by Archie Brown, 2001, pp. 313-314

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 314

shown on the screen is effectively not shown to society” adds to the opinion of those sociologists, politicians and media experts who underline the power of television and the need to study the interaction between politics, media and the public in Russia.

According to Svetlana Boym, “mythologies are cultural common places, recurrent narratives that are perceived as natural in a given culture, but in fact were naturalized, and their historical, political or literary origins are forgotten or disguised. In Russia and the Soviet Union, where there is a long tradition of extreme political, administrative and cultural centralization, these mythologies played a particularly important role. Myths are discernible in a variety of literary and historical texts, as well as in everyday practices.”<sup>19</sup>

The loyalty-enforcing effect of myths increases when their emotional message is supported by repetition. For this reason it is important to acknowledge that virtual reality is constructed by Russian federal state-controlled channels through a web of different programs, drawing on a discourse aimed at re-writing the past. This discourse is replicated in newscasts, documentaries, analytical programs and mini-series. I believe that limiting the analysis to only one format would not show the full extent of the puzzle-effect that amplifies viewers’ exposures to key messages.

#### THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR, A CRUCIAL THEME IN THE “NATIONAL IDEA”

One successful example is the full year of media events that preceded the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War (WWII) celebrated in May 2005. Multi-faceted media coverage was unprecedented in its amplitude, including news, as well as a vast arrays of documentaries, films, talk-shows and serials celebrating patriotism, the Army and the war effort. The Kremlin’s effort to boost a sense of national unity built on the common memories of the war effort was evident. One of the obvious results of this successful media exercise was recorded in opinion polls. An overwhelming 86 percent of respondents to a Levada Center poll in 2005 said that the main event in Russian history had been the victory over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War.<sup>20</sup> Polls carried out by other institutes recorded similar figures. The war theme is worth mentioning because it has been revisited so frequently in post-Soviet federal broadcasts after 1999. I would single out three themes in particular, all reinforcing the concept of patriotism: the war, the binary view of a world divided between “us” and “them” (“nashi i chujie”) and the Stalinist theme of the Family of the Soviet people.

These themes are central in the Soviet-Russian culture of the 20th century and in the definition of national identity. Revisiting and maintaining the actuality of the

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<sup>19</sup> Svetlana Boym, art. cit., p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> See *Obshestvennoe Mnenie – Ezhegodnik 2005*, Levada Center, Moscow.

war theme, television elites have joined political elites in the attempt to boost a strong image of the country, based on the most emotional and glorious page of Soviet history.

Elena Prokhorova explains that “Soviet mythology was built around two major symbolic axes: the horizontal “us” (the Soviet people) versus “them” (world imperialism, the White guard, saboteurs) and the vertical – the hierarchically constructed “Great Family,” with Father Stalin as its head, watching over Mother Russia and his children people.”<sup>21</sup>

This kind of defense mythology forged the belief of a permanent threat to the Motherland and was aimed at consolidating patriotic feelings and shaping a national identity based on antagonism with those forces and countries that at a certain historical period were seen as the “enemy.” After the Great Patriotic War, this enemy was embodied by the Germans and, during the Cold War, the enemy clearly became the United States and NATO.

The most popular Russian federal television broadcasts after 2003 have drawn heavily on this mythology, based as they are on the principle that imagery affects loyalties. Events have been ritualized to sustain stereotypes. The historical past, “discredited” in the aftermath of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, is being rehabilitated and to an extent re-written, in some cases with the help of narratives subtly incorporating truths about the cynical attitude of the Stalinist regime toward its own people, as in the serials “Shtrafbat” and “Deti Arbata” for instance. The main patriotic discourse is reinforced by pre-revolutionary nationalist values sustained by the Orthodox Church.

The main message of “Shtrafbat” is that every Soviet citizen, independently of political status and religion, was willing to die for the Motherland and this unity in the face of an enemy deprived of soul was the only guarantee of salvation. The most emotionally rich scenes of the series, in the last episode, are built around the blessing that a strong and tolerant Orthodox priest administers before the final battle to all soldiers in the battalion. When a young soldier asks if Jews too can receive the blessing the priest answers: “God has got many children of different religious beliefs: Jews, Muslims, Christians. We are all united in one thing: we are conquering back Russia’s land from the enemy.” The battle scene that follows acquires a sacrificial function, underlined by the solemn religious music played in the background. Having participated in the battle, the priest, who is one of the only two survivors, has a mystical vision of the Mother of God high in the sky. He then wonders on the battlefield closing the eyes of the dead, saying “God, take with you the souls of the dead fighters who defended the Russian land.”

Broadcast by the second channel of Russian television in 2004, “Shtrafbat” enjoyed a huge success among the Russian public and, despite some offended

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<sup>21</sup> Elena Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies: Soviet TV Mini-Series of the 1970* 2003, p. 28, PhD dissertation, unpublished.

noises from the military brass, became a milestone of the television trend aimed at re-visiting the Great Patriotic War, thanks to the subtle techniques employed to underline the patriotic myth it carries.

Such serials serve a more ideological function, helping to remake a sense of history, reshape the memory of the past, and boost a sense of national identity. As some older viewers noticed, remembering their not-so-distant past, everything in the new serials is viewed through an understanding and nostalgic mirror, everything on screen looks “nicer.” However, as in the case of “*Shtrafbat*” the main message, the main emotional sensation, comes from the link with the “imagined community” that the serials aims at creating.

Federal broadcasts tend to disseminate a message that is promoting an image of stability, where everything is generally fine and under the vigilant control of state authorities. In this respect, the lack of comparative analysis and depth that television experts have noticed in most newscasts underlines the fact that the content of each distinct piece of information is considered unimportant. The paternalistic figure of President Putin is THE political reality.<sup>22</sup>

In June 2006, the deputy head of the presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, who is directly involved in the creation of a new ideology, told journalists that “a nation cannot exist without ideology,” adding that “building the vertical of power was and remains a necessity, but a bureaucratic creation cannot last long, if it is not substantiated by an ideology that all the nation will share.”<sup>23</sup> Television, as discussed earlier in this text, is widely recognized in Russia as the medium used by the authorities to socialize with the public and in this respect Surkov’s words are a clear call for the television elite. Putin’s appearance in front of the “television family” assembled in the Kremlin in November 2006 is certainly another step in the same direction.

Such premises do not bode well for Russian television. Even more than in 1996, television will be at the centre of the 2007-2008 elections. Federal television managers and journalists have made quite clear that the only viewers they are catering sit in the Kremlin. Viewers across Russia are generally considered as mere “rating units”. Putin’s statement in November 2006 that Russian television is well known internationally for its “respectful approach to viewers” is debatable to say the least. Therefore, it should be clear that, when the President said that the vast possibilities of television should “entail a huge sense of responsibility”, journalists and managers present were probably quick to interpret the message as a reminder that loyalty to Putin personally and engagement with his policies will be absolutely paramount in 2007 for all those who are part of the virtual family of Russian television.

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<sup>22</sup> For Putin’s press conferences, please see <http://www.kremlin.ru/sdocs/appears.shtml?type=63380>

<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.newsru.com/russia/28jun2006/surkov.html>.



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