

Russia: Putin's 'Society Of The Spectacle'

Monday 2 October 2023, by [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#) (Date first published: 28 September 2023).

Ilya Budraitskis writes that in Putin's Russia, the mass media has completely gone from being a function of society to a form of power over it. In alliance with the authoritarian regime, it has made the country a real "society of the spectacle," the totality of which would horrify even the most radical critics of Western capitalism.

In his recent letter "[My Fear and Loathing](#)," Alexei Navalny opened a very important discussion about the direct link between today's regime in Russia and the 1990s. It was then, Navalny points out, that the foundations for uncontrolled personal power by the president were laid, and the power of institutions - e.g. an independent parliament, an independent court - was replaced by the arbitrariness of financial and political clans.

Instead of democracy, the country got rule by "democrats," which eventually mutated into authoritarian rule. Developing this idea from Navalny, we can say that the ruling elite in today's Russia, having formed mostly in the 1990s, from the very beginning viewed society as an obstacle on the path to "the market," understood as rule by the strong and successful over the weak and less fortunate. The idea of power as a naked force, sweeping away any limits to it and striving for complete "sovereignty," became decisive both for [the establishment of] dictatorship within the country and for its aggressive military expansionism.

The same energy of naked domination shaped the modern official media in Russia, whose contribution to preparing the country for the current war cannot be overestimated. It was with the advent of the market in the 1990s and the inclusion of mass media (primarily television) in the cycle of continual, daily consumption that it acquired power capable of not just raining down tons of propaganda on viewers, but constructing their everyday world, creating a new "common sense," transcending politics and permeating private life.

In this model, entertainment and advertising carried no less an ideological charge than news broadcasts or political talk shows. During the social crisis of the 90s, the intense experience of losing control over the circumstances of one's own life translated into a passive position by viewers. As the sociologist Boris Dubin astutely [noted](#), in the post-Soviet reality "we are dealing... with a society of spectacles and spectators, a twin of Guy Debord's 'society of the spectacle.'"

The emotional balance of post-Soviet people fluctuated between a sense of their own powerlessness, faith in the blind force of fate and a constant thirst for entertainment. The Russian mass media, having completely copied the forms of Western media and mastered their methods, asserted itself over an audience susceptible to manipulation. The relative limits on the media's power, stemming from competition and elements of democracy, were finally overcome in the early 2000s.

The 'society of spectators' at the beginning of the war

By the time of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Putin's media represented a complex system, with many forms built in to it, broadcasting uniform content - from television and radio to news aggregators and Telegram channels. Its strength is derived not only from its information monopoly and the

synchronization of political news, but also from its totality.

“The line between the picture created by the media and the real-world experience of its consumer becomes indistinguishable, and the image and reality fuse into a semblance of a whole.”

Emotional therapy here organically merges with hysteria and the preaching of a nuclear apocalypse, while blind faith in the leader of the nation is based on the cynical idea that the world is ruled only by private interests.

It is in its link with reality that the radical difference between Putin’s and Soviet state media lies. Soviet television took the position of an educator, trying to instill high moral ideals and constantly working on the “moral character” of its audience. This lofty position constantly exposed the gap between expectation and reality, and therefore inevitably looked imposed and fake.

Contrary to the well-known [thesis of Boris Groys](#) about the totality of the Soviet language, which completely subjugated reality, in late Soviet times there was a gap between them that in large part drove the general cynicism of Soviet citizens. The position of the “outsider” (*vnenakhodimost’*) that Alexei Yurchak [wrote](#) about – escaping from the framework of the official language, the meanings of which were constantly redefined within specific life situations – was a phenomenon of a non-market society that is irretrievably gone today. The Soviet language was not total because time itself was not total, not subject to the rationality of the market, leaving a lot of room for “unproductive” leisure.

The Soviet state retained its “moral” character until the very end, viewing society as material to be constantly improved. The desires of society itself – for personal comfort and more consumption – generated ambivalence on the part of the state, which, on the one hand, proclaimed the “rising well-being of workers” as its goal while, on the other, subjecting “excessive” interest in consumption to constant moral criticism.

This state spoke on behalf of high ideals and culture, and ordinary citizens were expected to rise to this level. In this sense, the late Soviet Union bore certain similarities to the Western welfare state, in which the individual was the object of care and control.

The era of neoliberalism that began in the West in the early 1980s left the individual to his own devices – now, following the changing conditions of the market, he had to endlessly reinvent himself. Post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s was the most radical manifestation of this trend.

The transition from the control-seeking state to the market was rapid, and the need for personal transformation turned into a matter of basic physical survival. Still, the hard law of necessity was accepted without much resistance, since at the same time it offered unlimited possibilities for desires to be realized. A key role in these changes was played by the new mass media, which, unlike the Soviet one, did not try to elevate the citizen to the tasks of the future, but, on the contrary, went down to the level of the present – the emotional experience of “here and now.”

An image of happiness that denies morality

The best example of the fundamentally new role of television is the show *Pole Chudes* (a Russian version of *Wheel of Fortune*) – the main and, one might say, formative program of post-Soviet media. Its constantly changing characters are random people from the crowd whose wishes can become reality thanks to an unknowable, magical sequence of circumstances. *Pole Chudes* gives a concrete material image of happiness – a mountain of money that can become yours – while simultaneously asserting the impossibility of any material algorithm for achieving it. Wealth and success are an

unrealistic end to which no means lead.

“In this image of happiness, basically there is no social dimension – it is not a desired state of society, but always the lot of individuals who acquire happiness solely by virtue of the law of ‘large numbers’.”

This belief in the absolute power of fate is based on the idea of an insurmountable gap between means and ends, work and its result, intentions and their realization. It is hard to come up with something that would so directly deny any morality.

The philosophy of *Pole Chudes* has quickly turned into a dogma for all post-Soviet media. In a variety of formats, they contain the same equation: on the screen, the desire is not fulfilled but is constantly present as an unrealized promise. The effect is sublimation – a suppressed but constantly actualized desire that turns into the main mechanism for social suppression.

In fact, this is exactly how the philosopher Theodor Adorno [described](#) the main principle of the American “cultural industry” back in the 1940s. Its defining feature is illusory convergence of image and reality, which fuse into the semblance of a whole due to the continual process of consumption. Television – always on, from morning to evening, accompanying work and leisure, when eating and cleaning, when spending time with loved ones and all alone – has become one of the main phenomena of everyday post-Soviet life. It is worth recognizing that even the most inventive discoveries of Agitprop never managed to penetrate so deeply into the private lives of ordinary people.

The journalist as demiurge

However, the logic of the media is so powerful precisely because it fully reflects the position of the talking heads themselves. In his well-known book [Mass Media of the Second Republic](#), Ivan Zassoursky describes well this difference between Soviet and post-Soviet journalists. The former were cynics who well understood the limits of their role and were clearly aware that they were only professionally performing a function defined from above. Meanwhile, journalists of the new, near-state Russian media did not feel like hired workers but real creators of reality.

They perceived the ideology of the market as something completely organic; it completely coincided with their inner beliefs and turned them into real creators of the new, post-Soviet person. They no longer kept any [mental] distance from their role in the media or reflected – even extremely cynically – on their own structural position [in it]. Of course, amid the post-Soviet market reality, they unconditionally considered themselves the winners, the very top of the social pyramid.

The media turned into a space of complete freedom for self-realization. There were no lines that could not be crossed, no conventions that could not be broken. Tight control by the owner – first the “oligarchs” and then the presidential administration – remained in place only at the level of the content of political messages, while the form (the most important thing) remained in the purview of the media itself.

The final subordination of the media to Putin’s state in the 2000s actually eliminated the last barriers to this self-emancipation. All media that understood independence as a necessary condition of social responsibility were systematically destroyed. And vice versa: everyone who understood it as an opportunity for limitless career growth and endless pleasure from the stage, as well as a chance to work on creating illusions, received freedom that they did not have even in the 90s.

The Kremlin and its media as elements of a total system

It is in Putin's Russia that the psychopath TV presenter can develop - the producer of a stream of uncontrolled speech that fills the airwaves and has a hypnotic effect on the audience. Russian media of the last 20 years have presented a whole gallery of such demiurges of reality, getting a high each time from the feeling of their power over a submissive and disoriented society.

Take Vladimir Solovyov, [who imported](#) from the US [the figure of](#) the radio preacher, masterfully orchestrating the emotions of his flock. Inflaming their passions, awakening hidden aggression and resentment, the radio preacher also brings himself into an ecstatic state - after all, the wrath of God is erupting right through his person.

"In the case of Solovyov, who is not bound by any confessional tradition, it is not conservative Evangelicalism, but the purely cynical religion of the power of fate, where he himself occupies a place in the pantheon of living gods."

Another symptomatic character is Konstantin Ernst, who for many years has been reveling in his position as the director of a grandiose total performance in which the content of Channel One and the consciousness of its regular viewers become the semblance of one huge stage.

The non-stop political talk shows have become a version of *Pole Chudes*, where interchangeable "experts," often literally plucked from the crowd, use their 15 minutes of fame to broadcast the uniform content of "instructions" (*temnik*) handed down from above. Each of these "experts," even if only for a short time, is given a sense of belonging to power.

Importantly, Putin's media does not simply regurgitate the Kremlin's political messages, but complements and develops them, coauthoring, as it were, the ideology. They are constantly doubling down on the aggressive rhetoric of the authorities, thus suggesting new ideas and trains of thought to them. In this way, the Kremlin and its media are like a total system, within which hierarchies of subordination and dependence are blurred, and it is often not entirely clear whether the tail wags the dog or vice versa.

After the invasion of Ukraine began and the regime transformed into an open, repressive dictatorship, the media also took on a new role - rallying support for organized violence against a neighboring country and inside their own. Just like for the Kremlin, war has become the only possible mode of existence for the media machine. A real, unconditional end to the war can only result from this regime coming to an end, which would also be the end of the totalitarian power of the media over society. The media must be completely deprived of power so as to bring it back to its true purpose - being an institution of a democratic society in which the individual will finally regain the lost power over his own life.

Ilya Budraitskis Political and social theorist previously based in Moscow. Currently he is a Visiting Scholar with the Program in Critical Theory, UC Berkeley

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Russia.Post

<https://russiapost.info/politics/spectacle>