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War, the Authorities and the New Administrators

The media landscape in Russia has undergone some dramatic changes in the recent years. Dubin analyses the effects on viewers and readers and how these changes affect the political and sociological landscape.

Over the past two years, approximately – between the start of the second Chechen war in 1998 and the adoption of new state symbols at the turn of the 20th century – a new political and informational situation has *de facto* emerged in Russia. The general direction and meaning of these shifts, which were not planned, announced, or possibly even desired by anybody, are those of yet another attempt by the *nomenklatura* to hold back, limit or otherwise make controllable the ongoing processes of the dissolution of the political and economic institutions of late Soviet society. More precisely, we are talking about a transition from steering groups and other group-based forms of reformist social action, or claims for such action, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to the current practice of behind-the-scenes politics and anonymous media pressure. The defining features of the current political and informational situation include ¹:

– An evident impoverishment and fading of public space, and the systematic destruction of social diversity. This is most obvious in the sphere of politics, where a sort of negative "unnatural selection" has taken place. Those recruited into public politics are not leaders with political programmes, broad horizons and long-term objectives, but, firstly, bureaucrats, executors, products of the system selected according to principles of corporate solidarity, previous relations and personal loyalty; and, secondly, administrators in charge of society's main resources (of nature, property or communication) admitted or directly appointed by the government from among the second and third ranks of the former *nomenklatura* or, rarely, the younger "pragmatists" and "technologists"

– The absence, on the political stage, of any independent social forces, communities, or groups representing and defending their own interests. No alternative social movements (such as workers', youth, human rights or ecological movements) have appeared in Russia in the 1990s. Those that have seemed to emerge remain highly localised, wield little influence, and often turn into new *nomenklatura* organisations. The latest parliamentary and presidential elections and the ensuing political shuffles have shown that this has in effect led to the abolition of the Russian multi-party system. I should note that cases where (formally) democratic elections result in a strengthening of the conservative elements of society, a reduction of the complexity of social life, social stagnation and the like, are known to students of modernisation in the

countries of the so-called "Third World" (India may serve as an example). This may lead us to judge the level and perspectives of the so-called "democratisation" of contemporary post-Soviet society very differently.

– Correspondingly, all independent figures who stand for social innovation, as well as those spheres of public life linked to activism, freedom, wealth, independence and where such innovators are active, have been subject to an evident negative re-evaluation in public language, in the mass-media and in mass consciousness. I am talking about the very concepts of "reform" and "democrats" being discredited. The fact that these concepts are being washed out from public rhetoric and the figures that embodied them are disappearing from the political stage and the TV screens, i.e. that all perspective for change is being wound down and all elements of indeterminacy are being excluded from the life of society as a whole, is now seen as one of the positive marks of "stabilisation" and the growth of a "public consensus" both by the masses and by the authorities' retinue, their depot echelons and their service and support teams. Accordingly, we are now facing a consistent abasement of the generalised image of the "enterprising Other" in public consciousness; a growing public animosity towards potential agents of change; a growth of different sorts of collective phobias (the emergence of various imaginary "enemy" figures, first of all the so-called "persons of Caucasian nationality" – the second Chechen war played a crystallising role in these processes, which as it were allowed to channel Russians' anxieties and dissatisfactions and transfer them onto the negative image of the "uncivilised stranger", who, moreover, is non-Orthodox, of an "alien creed"); a growing, demonstrative anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism in Russian mass consciousness and the authorities' political rhetoric, which appeared ambivalently but quite visibly in mass evaluations and many Russian mass media programmes even after September's acts of terrorism in New York and Washington.

– A noticeable rubbing out of the discrepancies between the evaluations and reactions of educated and uneducated respondents, a confusion among those who used to claim the role of a social, cultural and informational "elite" and who today adopt the point of view of the least educated groups on the most fundamental, acute issues. (These latter groups' consciousness, of course, preserves the evaluative stereotypes of more distant eras, as a result of the influence of a long-gone school system, of mass propaganda etc.) The foreground is now being occupied by peripheral strata of society, their most routine ideas, the most simple types of social action – panic, habit, patience and other tactics of passive survival. At the same time, quite paradoxically, an awareness is developing among the masses of a growing and insurmountable divide between the "authorities" and the "people", between the centre (the capital) and the periphery ("the backwaters", "all of Russia"), between educated, enterprising, relatively successful and well-off young Russians and the rest of the population.

– Such forms of mass opinion as neo-traditionalism and isolationism are gathering strength. The symbolism of Russia's "special way" is taking hold in the country along with expectations of "firm order"; symbols of an "iron hand" are becoming more attractive; there is a growing nostalgia for the Brezhnev era, a growing taste for the contemplation of melodramatic images of pre-revolutionary life in costume TV series, etc.

– Structures of negative identification are becoming more significant among ordinary Russians, while at the same time all idealistic landmarks, criteria and measures are noticeably diminishing in their consciousness. The public sphere

and the everyday language of the mass media routinely display a prevalent image of universal corruption and brutality, as well as nihilistic evaluations of the majority of social institutions; there is a predominant use of a low-level, obscene vocabulary, of cynical irony – which are just as routinely neighbored by demonstrations of mass allegiance to the symbols of Orthodoxy, clichés about one's "spirituality" etc.

The Chechen war emerges as the key event of the past years; in contrast to the military campaign of 1994–1996, this one has been approved of and supported by the majority of the country's population and almost all political forces, including the liberal leaders of the "right"² In this context, the significance of the war for Russian society as a whole in the late 90s is defined by its use as a means for the negative mobilisation of the Russian population. This is a mobilisation "by contrast" or "by opposition" – first and foremost a mobilisation of mass fears and of the general feeling of an absence of perspective. Such a war, firstly, channels the negative moods that have been piling up with the majority of the population over the 90s; secondly, it helps people lower their demands and reduce their actions to a minimum, to salutary habit; thirdly, it makes Russians enter a special regime of existence, preparing them for extraordinary events and special measures.³

It should be noted that both the despondent mood of most Russians and their expectations for something extraordinary have become extremely routinised in mass consciousness, they are, as it were, spilled across the whole surface of everyday existence. But under conditions where, according to most people's feeling, their life, as it were, "doesn't belong to them", where, as they admit, they lack the opportunity to influence the course of their life, to change and improve it or even just adapt to what is happening, all these diffuse tensions, these vague moods of dissatisfaction, these feelings of universal corruption, crime and decay, as well as the preparedness for extraordinary measures, can be quite easily localised and activated. The acts of terror perpetrated in 1998 in Moscow and some other Russian towns, no matter who organised them and carried them out (it's much more important to see which forces have managed to make use of their public effect), and then the second Chechen war and the situation during the electoral campaign – for the Duma and especially the presidential election – have shown that such a state-of-urgency mobilisation of negative experience, such a short-term return to the previous "mobilised society" are quite possible. Within certain narrow boundaries, in the pragmatic calculations of some faction of those in power or those aspiring to it they may even bring about the desired results. (It's another matter that such "easy solutions" do not open up any real perspective for society or for the authorities.)

Over the second half of the Nineties, and especially over the past two years, the functional structure of the mass media has changed at its very root.⁴ . Compared to the late 1980s and early 1990s, the role of the press has noticeably waned, as have its print runs. Today the audience of the Russian press amounts to about one tenth of what it was in the early Nineties. The structure of printed mass media that was characteristic of the Perestroika years already fell apart by the mid-90s. In Russia today there is no nation-wide newspaper (or newspapers, least of all the "thick" quality newspapers that are widespread in the developed countries and which feature multiple thematic supplements and topical discussions of issues that are acutely important to society, drawn out over several months). Journals have lost their place as mouthpieces of the opinions and values of enterprising groups or as organs of inter-group communication, since the group level of public life is extremely

weak in Russia today, as has already been pointed out. A number of new publications have come to occupy individual, relatively modest niches in readers' attention; they no longer have nation-wide ambitions (the average print run of journals and magazines has gone down by 8–10 times by the end of the 90s, that of newspapers has fallen by over a third).

Russians today prefer local publications to central ones. Usually they read weeklies that feature useful practical information about local life, advertisements for local companies, local news, information about entertainment etc.: in 1991 almost three fourths of the entire subscription print run in Russia was for central publications; now the same share goes to local ones. But most importantly, the people and groups who stand behind this or that periodical today have lost their feeling of being leaders; their social prestige has dropped, they have lost their pioneering role. The worldview, the system of values and the general tone of values in Russia today are defined by television, and first and foremost (especially since the de facto crushing of NTV in the spring of 2001) by its two main channels, ORT and RTR. The functional basis of today's television is an informational–sensationalist and entertainment "massage" of the public that is repeated every day. (To use Marshall MacLuhan's well-known expression and to trivialise his successful phrase, I would say that here, the "massage" constitutes the "message".)

According to a VTsIOM poll of October 2000 (2001 urban dwellers polled across the country), 91% of Russians watch television every day. For comparison: 24% read newspapers every day, and 4% read magazines. We can say that in Russia today, TV creates and sustains mass society, defines the standards of mass culture as first of all a viewer– and show–centred culture. We are facing something like a highly Russified version of Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle"⁵, and this is what I will be striving to analyse in what follows.

The Russian population's trust in the mass media (a trust which, short of being absolute, is still relatively high, though it is mixed with a feeling of one's own dependency on the TV screen) is a modified form of consumers' alienation from what is happening in political and civic life and an expression of their exclusively spectatorial participation in social reality. Another aspect of this "trust of the dependent" is the heightened suspiciousness towards the mass media on the part of the highest authorities, and especially the president. Let me remind you that Putin, who suddenly emerged out of a civilian non-existence, with no independent public authority or political weight, owes his renown (to be more precise, his renown as a figure standing "above party struggles", representing not so much the authorities as the "control over the authorities"⁶ that almost everyone is craving for) mostly to television in its current state. It is clear that in the case of a figure like Putin we can least of all talk about a pragmatic, instrumental logic, of a real establishment of order in any area etc., but only about the symbolic aspects of the role that he has taken upon himself, his public function "assigned" to him as yet another negative compensation for the overall "chaos". It is no accident that month after month, a majority of the population is dissatisfied with Putin's actions in virtually all areas of policy, except the "representative" field of foreign policy, though this fact hardly lowers mass trust in the president, which far exceeds trust in the government etc.

By its very manner of appealing to a mass of people prepared to see themselves as "like everyone else", television creates a social community and wholeness that would not exist outside this systematically repeated act of

communication. In this respect it flattens the existing social and cultural, status-linked and educational differences, melting different individuals into a monotone "society of spectators", of people who experience their community with others like them through the fact that they are all spectators. The constitution of such a society and its symbolic integration in real-time mode, through everyday family rituals of watching TV, is the main function of today's television in Russia.

But of course it's also important to see what people watch. If we take the most popular genres of TV programmes, we can say that the construction of a "TV reality" as a symbolic form of social interaction hinges on several inter-connected components of meaning:

- Reports on real "current events" that are more or less simultaneous with the events themselves, including instances of live transmission (either news about official politics or sensational crime news; together these make up the main axis of TV show time, they are what the majority of viewers, especially elderly ones, watch several times a day, on different channels);
- Imaginary stories acted out by fictional characters, actors, usually "stars" known to the viewer by name, face, other parts played, family ties and scandal stories from the ad and entertainment press surrounding the mass media; mostly these come with regular sequels (movies, TV series, televised plays);
- Game shows displaying competition and unity, achievement and victory, dispute and consensus, including symbolic rewards for the winners (this also includes the ironic, playful copying, inversion of, and self-distancing from such spectacles and their protagonists in shows like KVN*⁷ and comedy programmes). In this category, the broadcasting of sports competitions is a model more habitual to mid-age and elderly viewers, whereas younger viewers are more accustomed to quiz shows organised by a TV star and including appearances of other "stars" and interactive elements of viewers' symbolic participation and occasional appearance on the screen, etc.⁸
- Acts of emotional unity with the affective community of "everyone", which are especially important to young people though they are popular among all age groups in Russian society; these are symbolised by the figure of a "virtuoso of feeling", such as a fashionable singer, musician or band.

People are least of all looking for anything "new" on their TV screens. They even watch the news several times each morning and evening; among the other programmes, they look first of all for those they already know. Viewers – especially elderly ones – often prefer for their favourite programmes to be fixed at a particular time slot, etc. The act of repetition obviously lowers the programme's informational value while reinforcing its ritual and symbolic potential (this is the mechanism at work in parades, march music, refrains, and rhythm in general). Repetition, as it were, shuts up the action shown within itself, transforming it into a looking-glass construct, a symbol that refers to another, non-empirical reality – the reality of collective consciousness which it serves as a tool of "internal" organisation, ordering it as a whole and supporting and focussing this whole.⁹ What is repeated is thus withdrawn from the flow of video- and audio-images, "cut off" both from its own context of events and from the other programmes of the day, freed from the round-the-clock movement of time and breaking off with historical time. The existence of a hand-held remote control facilitates the search for the known and recognisable, while zapping "chops" time even more finely and, despite the external flashing of frames, practically paralyses any meaningful movement of time, turning it into something customary. Television, as it were, stops, crushes and crumbles time (I should stress that the remote control only provides a technical solution for a function that is much "older"), and in the

end atomises and scatters its problem structure, its historical duration and its wealth of meaning.

It seems that television as a tool of social communication doesn't have any means to create the visual illusion of epic and novelistic time which, as for example in the *Bildungsroman*, evolves in meaningful and interconnected stages from opening through culmination to *denouement*. Instead, the TV narrative breaks up into series, like the gripping serial adventure novels of a century and a half ago (note that the serial mode of organisation of meaning also excludes the genre of tragedy), or else it "mounts sideshows" in the manner of the comic films of erstwhile silent cinema. Television as a communicative device generally has trouble managing narrative. Usually it only "quotes" narratives, as well as tragedies, offering its channels (its technology) for the display of movies, theatrical performances etc. In this respect it is a product of the post-tragic and post-narrative era, with its feeling of "the end of tragedy", "the death of the author", "the death of the hero", "the impossibility of narrative" and similar phenomena. (Let me remind you that the all these painful topics were hotly debated in Western public space for the last time almost simultaneously with the discussions on "mass culture revisited", MacLuhan's book on the "end of the Gutenberg era", Dumazedier's on the "leisure society" etc.) In this sense, television is not just post-traditional (tragedy itself is already post-traditional and post-mythological), but also post-modern (post-historical). Let me add that mass society as such is of course itself post-modern: the mass media are simply technical systems servicing its communicational flows.

Mass culture in general tends towards serialisation and repetition, "turning off" time, as it were (if this is understood in the "modern" sense, as the time of conscious, meaningful and therefore irreversible change). It is important, however, that in Russia today there do not seem to be any other levels of the "communal", which symbolically unites people. We can say that this is a society of television viewers who expect the known and habitual, and it is a society only and precisely to the extent to which it includes people who contemplate life again and again through their TV screens and each time see "the same" there. The act of their ritual and symbolic solidarity as viewers, and their self-affirmation and self-understanding as members of a community of viewers would be impossible without this repetition¹⁰

This is why viewers (especially elderly, less educated ones living in the provinces) perceive what they see on TV as entertainment that doesn't grow dull in repetition. Quite to the contrary, it becomes even more replete with meaning, it gets emotionally closer. This is a matter not so much of keeping up with fresh information as of expecting a signal that everything is "still the same", that nothing extraordinary has happened. Characteristically, in addressing movies and TV series people display the same hidden structures of perception and stereotypes of expectation – a turn towards the habitual, the repetitive, the predictable.¹¹ Up to three fifths of urban dwellers in Russia today try to look for and watch long-known programmes, viewing new ones sceptically. This is why, according to over two thirds of our interviewees, it is so important that the same programme always be broadcast at the same time. Such repetition (a positive evaluation of what has already been seen and fitted into the habitual framework) is, for the viewer, both a signal of the constancy and habitualness of the image of the world broadcast by TV, and at the same time a reference to the significance, the importance of what is being shown. In the mass viewer's understanding, it is being repeated because it is significant, and it is significant because it is being repeated. Thus, the symbol functions by

self-justification: by isolating a fragment of reality, it heightens its significance and meaning so as to construct it into an autonomous whole, into a norm of wholeness. At the same time, this tautology of the broadcast presents the viewer with a guarantee of the documentary, "real" nature of the TV spectacle: it is repeated "like life itself".

Under these conditions, Russia's educated strata, the candidates for its "elite", who in many ways still cling on to the categories of past historical eras and call themselves "intelligentsia", have nevertheless more or less abandoned their main task – to reveal society's deficits of meaning and value, to take emerging points of view which have not yet fully formed and confront them critically in the field of open discussion, to shape them into new texts, visual practices and types of public discourse. It is no accident that, without prior arrangement, the manager or technologist became the leading public figure of the late 1990s, armed as he is with means of mass communication – including the PR expert as a new self-advertising hero of the political stage, a sort of "knave with a computer", a Khlestakov of the Internet age, one from among the Pleiad of self-appointed men that has been so characteristic of Russia in recent years. One gets the impression that the purely *nomenklatura*-based channels of advancement are already limited in the post-Soviet situation – maybe they are not sufficiently efficient or fast (which is important, because nowadays there are only short distance "races"); even more probably, they are not equally prestigious for everyone. At the same time, today there is no generalised, publicly articulated system of values and norms sanctioning significant achievements and shared by society and its leading groups; more than that, there are not even any guiding lines for such a system. Accordingly, self-appointment (not to be confused with the socially accepted ethic of individual achievement, with the references and tactics of the self-made man) is no longer marginal, deviant, exceptional, but becomes the leading principle and practice; suddenly, it is universally accepted in a variety of spheres. People may not personally or publicly accept or approve of self-appointment, but they will understand and use it – just like, in other cases and in a different sense, they will use bribery, string-pulling, open insolence or demonstrative rudeness, following the principle that "cheek is another form of luck". Such an arrogation of authority, or, more precisely, arrogation of its outer features in the hope that others will behave on the basis of these features, recalls the mechanism of bluffing and in its own way adds to the mechanisms, already studied by sociologists, of open mass trust, and their erosion, transformation and degeneration (pseudomorphosis) in contemporary Russian society¹².

The main problem of the "advanced" groups at the end of the Nineties was not the introduction of new ideas and symbols, but the achievement of immediate and extensive success – i.e. the development of mass models of a level only slightly higher than Soviet or translated ones, and the mastery of efficient marketing techniques for their rapid introduction onto the intellectual market. The professionalisation and consequently the specialisation etc. of the role of the "creator" down to the part of a producer of various, but always well-selling cultural goods is a stage in the coming of mass culture that is just as initial and inevitable as the "star" cult – tentative, inalienable from this type of culture, to provide this producer with at least some, albeit negative, features of the erstwhile creator. But generally speaking, this has always only been one component, albeit a powerful one, of the process in which other groups of producers of symbolic goods, targeting other, non-mass levels of culture, have also become consolidated and autonomous, and recognised their own position and interests. In Russia in the mid- and late 1990s, it seems that events of any notice to society have only taken place in mass culture or at its very borders –

independently of whether the "well-rehearsed snowstorm" was initiated by the new establishment, by yesterday's avant-garde or even by the underground. For these reasons, today's managers of culture are so attentive to the popularity ratings of the various candidates to "stardom"; hence also the attempts to create or "designate" a national best-seller, the search for a middle line between "intellectual" ("art") and mass ("genre") models. This is where we have to place, say, Nikita Mikhalkov's latest films, the movies "Brat" (Brother) and "Brat-2" that have made so much noise, Boris Akunin's decorative-historical crime novels, and experiments with the genres of "Russian fantasy", "alternative history" (Pavel Krusanov, Sergei Smirnov and others). I shall not discuss the ideologies and symbolism of these works, cited here just as examples, their key motifs, images of the world, their treatment of "national peculiarities" – just as they are hardly ever discussed by the arts community which, in demonstrative self-bliss, concentrates on questions of "language", "taste" and "style".

This article is based on a paper given in June 2001 at a seminar organised by Birgit Menzel at Mainz University's Department of Applied Linguistics and Cultural Studies in Gernersheim (Germany). A previous, shorter version, called "The Expansion of the Habitual", has been published in Ukrainian by Andrei Mokrousov in the Kiev-based magazine "Kritika" (No. 6/2002).

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- 1 For greater detail see Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin, "Konec 90-h godov: Zatuhanie obrazcovy" [The End of the 1990s: The Waning of Role-Models], in *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya* [Monitoring Public Opinion], No. 1(51)/2001, p. 15–30.
 - 2 See Lev Gudkov's "Chechen" articles in NZ No. 5/2000 and No. 2/2001 and the other articles in the same section of the latter issue.
 - 3 See Boris Dubin, *O privychnom i chrezvychaynom* [On the Habitual and the Extraordinary], NZ No. 5/2000, p. 4–10.
 - 4 For more detail see Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin, "Obshchestvo telezriteley: massy i massovye kommunikacii v Rossii konca 90-h godov" [A Society of TV Viewers: The Masses and Mass Communication in Russia in the late 90s], *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya* [Monitoring Public Opinion], No. 2/2002, p. 31–45.
 - 5 Gi Debor [Guy Debord], *Obshchestvo spektaklya* [The Society of the Spectacle], Moscow, 2000
 - 6 Let me also remind you that this, among other, was the basis of the early Yeltsin's prestige, which made the Perestroika press raise the topic of political populism for what was probably the first time. In general, such populist figures constantly accompany modern Russian and Soviet history and are copiously represented in Russian literature and art (the whole spectrum of heroes from "people's defenders" such as Dubrovsky to Gogol's "government inspector", all of whom have their later parallels, say, in the works of Andrei Platonov or Panteleimon Romanov, Sergei Zayaitsky or Mikhail Zoshchenko).
 - 7 KVN = "Club of the Cheerful and Resourceful", a popular TV show and party fixture that involves amateur teams performing self-written comic sketches and parodies [translator's note]
 - 8 On this level there is scope for interpreting viewers' behaviour by comparing them to sports fans or tourists, studying how in each of these cases a symbolic distance is created between the viewer and the "object".
 - 9 Sociology is more interested in these functions of the symbol as a means of "internal" organisation of collective representations, than in empirical "reality". In the terminology of structural functionalism, this is what separates expressive symbols (or expressive aspects of symbols) from cognitive ones.
 - 10 On the construction of the act of viewing itself and its collective character (the character of the collective that is thereby constituted), see David Morley, "Television: Not so much a visual medium, more a visible object" in: *Visual Culture*, London/N.Y., 1995, p. 174–175; "From receiver to remote control: The TV set", N.Y., 1990; *The female gaze: Women as viewers of popular culture*, Seattle, 1989.
 - 11 For other groups – somewhat younger, more educated and more urbanised ones – a similar function of positive trivialisation, of reduction to the straightforward, the known and the predictable is nowadays performed by the different types of crosswords that have been

spreading so epidemically.

- ¹² On this see Yury Levada's articles: 1) "Faktory i fantomy obshchestvennogo doveriya" [The factors and phantoms of public trust], in: *Ekonomicheskie i social'nye peremeny: Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya* [Economic and Social Change: Monitoring Public Opinion], No. 5/1996, p. 7–12; 2) "Mekhanizmy i funkcii obshchestvennogo doveriya" [The Mechanisms and Functions of Public Trust], in: *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya* [Monitoring Public Opinion], No. 3/2002, p. 7–12.

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