

The Kremlin's bubble: disinformation,
censorship and propaganda
From war to war

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Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyzes the Kremlin's propaganda role in shaping Russian public opinion through mainstream media and the transformation of propaganda tactics, narrative construction and censorship in modern Russia.

The first chapter presents a historical overview of the Russian media model and its transformation into a political tool after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The roots for media's freedom, set under President of the Soviet Union Gorbachev, slowly deteriorated with the rise of the new charismatic 1991's President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin. Even if he was promising a democratic Russia, the October 1993 Moscow civil war and the adoption of the new constitution established the premises for a near-authoritarian system of governance. In the meantime, Russia's voucher-based privatization led to the enrichment of entrepreneurs that accumulated massive wealth and power through shady auctions and loans for shares scheme: the oligarchs. The oligarchs became key players in the media landscape and the major national networks became either controlled by the Kremlin or managed by businesses with strong ties to the government.

The second chapter of this research will analyze the Russian-Chechen wars and the propaganda tactics employed during the conflicts. While during the first war the Chechen revolution was granted legitimacy and faith, portraying Chechens as victims of Soviet persecution, the situation reversed a few years later. The second Chechen war, which began after the 1999 apartment bombings, empowered Putin, the then-recently chosen and unknown Prime minister, to immediately accuse the incident on Chechens, portrayed as fanatic terrorists of Islamic fundamentalist tendency. Putin was elected President in 2000 and started a robust anti-Chechen propaganda campaign to regain the nation's trust and honor. The 1990s gave birth to his hybrid politics that combined liberal economics with centralized control, which made the new President perceived as a democratic leader and nationalist hero, even if he was an autocrat. He awakened a feeling of collective belonging and euphoria while creating a vertical command structure, eradicating alternative sources of power and forging a bubble surrounding Russia's society. He founded the Federal Service Roskomnadzor in 2008, monitoring media, information systems and digital communications. Even if civic engagement through social platforms was on the rise during Medvedev's presidency, Putin's return to the Kremlin silenced the hopes for an authentic globalized Russia. After the demonstrations in 2011–12, the Kremlin realized Internet's danger to

Russia's stability and several legislations were enacted in the following years to restrict media's independence and citizen's freedom of expression. The 'Law on foreign agents', the 'Law on countering extremist activity', the 'Blacklist bill', the 'Law against retweets', the 'Blogger's law' and the 'Yarovaya bill' are just a few examples.

The third chapter will provide an overview of the Ukrainian conflict until Putin's declaration of war on the 24th of February 2022, mentioning Russia's occupation of Crimea, Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk's vote for independence and Zelenskyy's election as President of Ukraine. This research will then compare the propaganda strategies used in Chechnya and those adopted during the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Is Kyiv somehow comparable to Grozny? There are some analogies between the two conflicts: the myth of the speed victory, the dehumanization of the 'enemy without a national identity' and the labels of the wars: a special operation for denazification in Ukraine and a counterterrorism operation in Chechnya. While Russia aims to conquer the information monopoly and to securitize the RuNet, the war with Ukraine has been the most viral conflict ever. The war is conducted by land as much as by cyberspace, with both factions weaponizing social media. However, the battlefield is also within Russia itself: the country is sinking in governmental regulations and cyber phobia, while Russian Google Yandex, as well as Russian Facebook Vkontakte, is under scrutiny because of its ties with the Kremlin.

Finally, the fourth chapter will present two interviews, with Scholar Andrey Indukaev and Professor Camilla Pagani, to better understand the future implications of the current events and the actual significance of today's disinformation campaign. The argument is that, in Putin's Russia, 'security' is presented and accepted as an alternative to liberty with 'regulation' and 'control' as its keywords.

CHAPTER ONE - The Russian media model - An historical overview, after the collapse of the Soviet Union

The history of Russian media as a political tool dates back to 1917, the beginning of a period that lasted for over 70 years well known for its Tsarist censorship and propaganda on Bolsheviks-Soviet politics. Throughout these years, the Communist Party and other censorship organizations, such as the KGB, were in charge of monitoring the Soviet media. The Russian government ran the press, funded its budget and took care of distributing it centrally, transforming it into one of the most important means of state propaganda.

In 1990 Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev became the President of the Soviet Union and the situation started changing. He was facing criticism for what were considered Westernized ideals, breaking away from the Marxist–Leninist model. He is well-known for his *perestroika* (political and economic ‘restructuring’), which became a catchphrase for increasingly radical progressive reforms. He attempted to democratize the Soviet political system with his *glasnost* policy reform, which aimed at transforming governmental agencies into more open and transparent institutions. During his presidency, anti-communist views first appeared in the press and the roots for freedom of the media were created both in theory and in practice. The most important step towards the democratization of the media was the 1990 Press Law, which established the legal basis for freedom of expression. The media legislation prohibited censorship and stipulated that newspapers or broadcasting stations may only be shut down by court order and for certain specific reasons¹. The codification of such values, principles unknown in Russia’s past, was going to serve as one of the bases of the opposition to the coup a year later².

The USSR's collapse was sealed by the failed August coup against Gorbachev. On August 18, 1991, eminent representatives of the Soviet President's administration, as well as armed and police forces, staged a coup and forced Mikhail Gorbachev under house custody. Russian citizens were urged to protest and oppose the coup by Yeltsin and his supporters in the Russian parliament.

¹ David Wedgwood Benn, “The Russian Media in Post-Soviet Conditions,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 3 (1996).

² Frank Ellis, *From Glasnost to the Internet: Russia's New Infosphere* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

However, Gorbachev's rule was over when he was finally set free and returned to Moscow. He abolished the Communist Party, awarded autonomy to the Baltic nations then withdrew from the presidency in December 1991. Yeltsin, who benefited from his successful role during the coup, became the most influential person in Moscow and the head of the recently established Commonwealth of Independent States. On an overall view, the coup, which was orchestrated by radical Communists, weakened Gorbachev's authority and encouraged Yeltsin and the democratic forces to be the frontline of Soviet and Russian governance. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and during the early 1990s, Russian media obtained brief and unprecedented independence, undergoing major transformations. The Soviet Central Television, which throughout its existence had only from three to six national television channels, ceased to be the national broadcaster. In 1991 television became pluralized. The introduction of the second state-owned channel 'Russian Television', as the voice of the new Russian Republic and Boris Yeltsin, competing with the dominant all-USSR first channel known as 'Ostankino,' was the first expression of broadcasting pluralism³. At that moment in Russian history, a new generation was claiming economic and political liberties, feeling reawakened after Soviet rule. Boris Yeltsin was their charismatic leader, an inspirational figure, popular and successful. Reforming the media system was an implicit and fundamental step on the path toward the democratic Russia that he was promising. President Yeltsin signed the Russian Mass Media Law only two days after the Soviet Union's collapse in December. This law was the first attempt to establish a modern structure for communications policy, articulating the foundation for a pluralistic ownership system and attempting to outline the rights and responsibilities of the many components of mass media enterprises⁴.

However, despite Yeltsin's overall genuine commitment to the democratic process, those were difficult years, with the media system preconditioned by the country's political development and media freedom in imminent jeopardy⁵. The media were exposed to different challenges, including the market economy, the demise of the Communist Party's ideological control and the aspiration of the Western media model⁶. On one hand, the end of the Soviet regime led to a significant increase in the variety of newspapers. On the other, it also caused rising printing and distribution expenses.

³ Monroe Price and Peter Krug, "Russia," in *Media Ownership and Control in the Age of Convergence* (London: International Institute of Communications: International Institute of Communications, 1996).

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Olga Khvostunova, "A Brief History of the Russian Media (Part 1/2)," 2014.

⁶ Olga Khabarova, "Out of the Depths," *Index on Censorship* 27, no. 1 (1998).

The high costs, worsened by inflation and the weight of taxes, caused newspaper circulation to decline and led many journals to shut down. Due to financial difficulties, several journals were forced to rely on government funding. The Soviet press lost nearly one-third of its 1990 subscribers in 1991, and the decline persisted in 1992 and 1993⁷. Because of this, the relative importance of television grew and television programs rapidly became a major arena for political power confrontations.

The fight for the control of television was a crucial issue in the clash between the President and the Parliament in October 1993, the so-called 'Moscow civil war', that ended with the adoption of the new constitution⁸. The dispute, that occurred from 1991 to 1993, was born from a disagreement between the president and Parliament over economic policies. In fact, the president's economic reforms were blocked by Congress and the Supreme Soviet. At that time, according to Yeltsin and his supporters, the Russian parliament was headed by "red directors" and the Communist nomenklatura, while the Congress was the final legacy of the unlawful Soviet system, not a symbol of a fair parliamentary system and democracy⁹. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, a profound struggle between the leftists in parliament and the right-centrist, pro-free market reformist in Yeltsin's administration has troubled the nation. On September 21, Yeltsin announced the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet and Congress of People's Deputies by decree, in breach of the constitution, and called for new elections. Prior to the election of a new parliament and a referendum on a new constitution, Yeltsin stated his intention to rule by decree. Several parliamentarians who were encouraged by the vice president of Russia, General Rutskoi, and who refused to abide by the presidential order convened an emergency meeting in the White House and barricaded. There were organized protests around the city: Yeltsin backers met close to the Moscow Soviet, and sympathizers of the deputies rallied close to the White House. On October 4, the military shelled the parliament on the president's commands, and the rebel deputies and their loyalists were taken into custody. October 1993 marks a fundamental historical moment for Russia. It symbolizes a culmination, which has been variously interpreted in this case: is it the end of the Soviet regime or the end of democracy?¹⁰. Following his victory in the October conflict, Yeltsin introduced a new draft constitution to the citizens, which provided the president with

⁷ Konzhukov, Vitaly F. "Post-Communist Media in Russia." In *E-Political Socialization, the Press and Politics: The Media and Government in the USA, Europe and China*, edited by Christ'l De Landtsheer, Russell F. Farnen, Daniel B. German, Henk Dekker, Heinz Sünker, Yingfa Song, and Hongna Miao. Peter Lang AG, 2014.

⁸ David Wedgwood Benn, "The Russian Media in Post-Soviet Conditions," *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 3 (1996).

⁹ Vladimir Kara-Murza, "The 'Shelling of Parliament': Myths and Reality of October 1993," 2013.

¹⁰ Myriam Desert, "Russia, October 1993. Twenty Years Later, Evaluating the Crisis," 2014.

near-authoritarian leadership. The Supreme Soviet was substituted with a smaller council, the State Duma, which would have almost no authority over the executive branch. If 1991 provided Russia with a range of possibilities, including a way toward a rule-of-law state and an open society, 1993 effectively eliminated all but one. This alternative was a new system of individual authority with no checks and balances, no counterbalance to the Kremlin's residents¹¹.

One of the reasons of the October events was privatization. Since Yeltsin's administration was forced to handle the massive state enterprise sector left by the Soviet economy, the Congress obliged the government to pursue a voucher-based privatization process, rather than a monetary one. The privatization process started in October 1992. Vouchers were evenly distributed and each Russian citizen, including children, obtained a 10-thousand-ruble state privatization cheque. Each voucher was said to reflect a citizen's part of the country's national wealth. Enterprises were transformed into joint-stock corporations and Russians were encouraged to trade their coupons for shares in any company. Between 1992 and 1994, 98 % of the population participated in the distribution of ownership vouchers. However, because the majority of individuals were either unaware of the program's significance or extremely impoverished, they were ready to sell their vouchers in exchange for cash. Therefore, vouchers were sold for very little money.

With the surge in poverty, crimes started rising and Russia entered a period that was described as 'gangster capitalism' or 'wild west capitalism'. While under communism the absence of personal wealth meant that there were few targets for violent criminals, organized crime groups started preying on the new rich of the capitalist era. During this period Moscow became the murder capital of Europe. The voucher-based stratagem also represented the first phase of privatization of the media market¹². Because of the financial crisis, state funding of the media was subject to drastic cuts. The outcome was the creation of numerous private media companies, driven by the forces of the free market. Many old media outlets were privatized, reformatted and re-purposed¹³.

Within the economic chaos and the political instability, President Yeltsin's 'polycentric' political paradigm constituted a balance of numerous influence centers: industrial-financial organizations, regional state organizations and the oligarchs¹⁴.

¹¹ Lilia Shevtsova, "1993: Russia's 'Small' Civil War," 2013.

¹² Olga Khvostunova, "A Brief History of the Russian Media (Part 1/2)," 2014.

¹³ Olga Khvostunova, "A Complete Guide to Who Controls the Russian News Media," 2013.

¹⁴ Olga Khabarova, "Out of the Depths," *Index on Censorship* 27, no. 1 (1998).

It is impossible to analyze this historical period without mentioning the rise of the influential entrepreneurs that accumulated massive wealth and power: the oligarchs. Most of them held prominent trading enterprises, banks and investment funds in 1992, when price liberalization and privatization started. As a result, when industrial businesses were privatized, they had the resources to acquire ownership in a privatization auction¹⁵. The oligarchs became the most influential people in Russia, ultimately reaching control of 50% of the whole Russian economy. By the end of 1994, privatization for cash was introduced and substituted voucher privatization. Only a small group of powerful individuals could take part in it. Five oligarchs arose from voucher privatization: Mikhail Fridman, the director of the Alfa Group; Oleg Deripaska, with his shares in the Sayanogorsk aluminum smelter; Vladimir Bogdanov, the manager of Surgutneftegas; Kakha Bendukidze, director general of Uralmash; and Vladimir Potanin, with his company Microdin. Others became billionaires thanks to their fraudulent friendships. Among those were Mikhail Khodorkovsky (financial operations), Boris Berezovsky (transportations), Vladimir Gusinsky (realty), and Alexander Smolensky (banking).

The Russian government stopped printing money in late 1994, in response to the World Bank's demands to lower inflation. It started the "loans for shares" scheme to pay its obligations. The program, in principle, enabled competition. In reality, the shares were distributed to big banks with "unofficial" governmental ties¹⁶.

The loans-for shares auctions scheme was designed to consolidate the bankers' support for Yeltsin's reelection campaign in 1996. In fact, on the verge of collapse, Yeltsin's government desperately needed cash to pay salaries and pensions. The oligarchs agreed to funnel money to the state by making a series of loans that the government could not afford to repay. When the loans did default, the oligarchs got the right to buy Russia's biggest state enterprises in sham auctions run by the oligarchs themselves. The oligarchs had cut inside deals to pay incredibly low prices for Russia's most valuable assets. This is considered the one "big scam" of the oligarchs: the 'scam of Russian capitalism' which was possible only until there was a political system that protected private property and individual rights. Communism was bad for the business of the oligarchs, and they would have done anything to prevent it.

Oligarchs were key figures not only within these particular years but throughout Russian history.

¹⁵ Sergei Guriev and Andrei Rachinsky, "The Role of Oligarchs in Russian Capitalism," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 1 (2005).

¹⁶ David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

They had a huge influence on the transformation of Russian media. For instance, in 1992, The Moscow Times, one of the most well know independent newspapers, had as a shareholder one of the rising oligarchs: Khodorkovsky. While Gusinsky and Berezovsky placed big bets on the future of television. At that time television in Russia was extremely popular, and 'thanks' to the Soviets, almost everyone in Russia had a TV set. Berezovsky bought a national network called Channel 1, thinking that he would make profits by turning a Soviet propaganda vehicle, television, into something more. Gusinsky started a new network, called NTV. The original concept of NTV was a TV channel that was not controlled by the government. Gusinsky spent hundreds of millions of dollars on this new project buying movies, launching game shows and building an independent news division. NTV was the first independent TV channel and it was seen as one of the most unbiased and highly professional television networks from 1994-to 96¹⁷. At the time, NTV was a part of MediaMost media holding¹⁸. During Yeltsin's rule, Russian media industrialists rose to power, but they weren't always supporters of an independent and free press. Instead, they had dubious corporate practices and unethical political intentions and were profit-seekers. Because of this, media organizations were not objective, and the new tycoons would exploit them to further their own political and financial objectives. Nevertheless, the mere fact that they were managed or owned by non - governmental players gave those post-Soviet media enormous significance: after decades of strict ideological restraint by the communist state, they could provide different coverage that was unregulated by governmental objectives. Tycoons were also always in conflict with one another since they had disparate interests. So even while the 1990s media environment did not uphold the highest standards of democracy and ethics, it did ensure that many voices were represented and heard.¹⁹

What was not broadcast on television simply did not exist. The most influential component and weapon of the Russian media industry was this; still nowadays the major national networks are either directly controlled by the Kremlin or are managed by businesses with strong links to the government. Media at that time had relative freedom and independence from the state but it was used instrumentally to create supportive public opinion. Both political and business elites saw the media as a weapon to gain political capital: media companies had been trying to operate both as commercial enterprises and as institutions of the

¹⁷ Olga Khvostunova, "A Brief History of the Russian Media (Part 1/2)," 2014.

¹⁸ Olga Khvostunova, "A Complete Guide to Who Controls the Russian News Media," 2013.

¹⁹ Maria Lipman, "Putin and the Media," in *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain* (Rowman & Littlefield Pub, 2015).

community²⁰. This was visible in the election 'campaign' of 1996. Yeltsin was up for reelection but the country was in a tremendous state: salaries weren't being paid, neither were pensions and ordinary citizens were living in extreme poverty. It seemed that Zyugabkv, the communist leader, was going to beat Yeltsin, who only had a 3% approval rate. As previously mentioned, communism was bad for oligarch's businesses and for the preservation of their wealth. However, the oligarchs had the tools to encourage Yeltsin's victory: shaping the public opinion through the media they owned. First of all, a bad depiction of the President had to be removed and forgotten in the eyes of the public. One of the new programmes which NTV started airing was a puppet show, called "Kukly", a satirical show. In one of the shows Mr. Yeltsin was portrayed as Don Quixote and the head of his security was portrayed as his Sancho Panza²¹. In a statement released a few days after the episode, the prosecutor general's office condemned the program of "intentional and public humiliation of government officials' honor and dignity, expressed in an immoral way." Such a crime is punished by up to two years of "corrective labor," according to Article 131 of the Russian penal code. Secondly, the President's physical health had to be hidden. In fact, when Yeltsin began his second term as president in July 1996, parliament's power was diminished to the point that Yeltsin could govern on his own. Paradoxically, his health began to deteriorate at this time, rendering him incapable of controlling the power he had worked so hard to obtain²². Openly supporting Yeltsin, NTV hatched an elaborate plan to hide the President's ill health. Malashenko sent a crew to Yeltsin's country home, where he was secretly confined to bed rest after a major heart attack. They took some furniture from the Kremlin's office and reproduced the setting at his country house. At this set he was visited by Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, signing some papers and this was shown on TV²³. Furthermore, in order to prevent Zyuganov from gaining a majority in the first round, a strong third opponent was introduced to divide support between Yeltsin and Zyuganov. ORT did this by enhancing General Alexander Lebed's image and increasing his popularity by 10%. After his first round, Lebed urged his supporters to vote for Yeltsin²⁴.

Overall, within and outside Russia Yeltsin was hailed as a hero for his capacity to eradicate communism, but he rapidly revealed that he had little grasp of true democratic values or the separation and balance of powers. He wanted to build a system in Russia that would fulfill

²⁰ Olga Khvostunova, "A Brief History of the Russian Media (Part 1/2)," 2014.

²¹ *Citizen K* (Greenwich Entertainment, 2019).

²² David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

²³ *Citizen K* (Greenwich Entertainment, 2019).

²⁴ Birgit Beumers, *Pop Culture Russia! Media, Arts, and Lifestyle* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2005).

primarily his greed for authority. Repressive laws and police, as well as governmental and corporate interference, have impeded autonomous media throughout time. In this regard, physical attacks, detentions, legal proceedings, fines and access restrictions are now frequent; To safeguard themselves, several newspapers have opted to engage in self-censorship. Even though the progressive press regulations approved in the 1990s are still in effect and press freedom is specifically stipulated in the constitution, new restrictive legislations impeding press freedom have been implemented²⁵.

²⁵ Mattia Bernardo Bagnoli, *Modello Putin: Viaggio in Un Paese Che Faremmo Bene a Conoscere* (Gallarate: People, 2021).

CHAPTER TWO - The Russian-Chechen war: a propaganda war

a) Historical overview of the Russian-Chechen wars

a.1 The first Russian-Chechen war

Russia and Chechnya have had a long history of hostility which date back to the 19th century when the Imperial Russian Army attacked the territory as part of a colonial operation. The invasion quickly grew into a purposeful campaign that resulted in the incorporation of several "independent territories," including Chechnya, into the USSR.

One of the most horrendous and grave tactics of the Soviets against the Chechen community was called 'operation Lentil': the deportation of the Chechens and Ingush, which occurred on February 23rd 1944, that saw the forced relocation of the entire Vainakh community of the North Caucasus to Central Asia. However, the Chechens were able to rebuild their society after Stalin's tyranny. In an odd twist, the deportations enhanced the Sufi brotherhood's influence on the Chechen national identity and the revival of Islam faith and beliefs.

The importance and the role of the Sufi brotherhoods is critical, as they are the central source of religious leadership and one of the major drives to the mobilization of the Chechen people²⁶. While the other Caucasian communities have been subjugated and influenced by various empires, Chechnya has had a unique and exceptional history as a North Caucasian country, leading to the creation of its peculiar ethnic identity.

The Soviet Union's forced unification meant that all displays of nationalism were suppressed as a matter of state policy. Islam played a key role, it served the Chechens to differentiate themselves from the Russians, maintaining their identity, while also allowing the Russians to recognize their main Caucasus adversaries. Islam enabled the Chechens to feel part of a larger Caucasian battle for independence, supplying the moral justification for resistance against the non-believers and conquerors: the Russians.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991, ethnic Russians constituted more than 70% of the inhabitants of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic and significant ethnic and religious plurality in some regions posed a risk of

²⁶ Ben Fowkes, *Russia and Chechnia: The Permanent Crisis: Essays on Russo-Chechen Relations* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2001).

turmoil²⁷. Aspirations for independence became a major political issue in the early 1990s and when the Soviet Union began to disintegrate, the Chechens saw a chance to rebuild their cultural identity.

The phrase "Russia's war on Chechnya" might reveal the idea that Russia was fighting a foreign adversary. In reality, Russia's military interventions in Chechnya were the outcome of the country's desire to retain Chechnya in the Federation²⁸. Russia could not afford to lose command over Chechnya and since Chechnya had no prior experience as a strong and unified political entity, Russia was feeling allowed to dismiss its nationalist goals. Chechnya was regarded as a territory rather than a country. President Boris Yeltsin mentioned Chechen autonomy ambitions in his 1990 election campaign, claiming that resolving them was a top priority²⁹.

The "Chechen Revolution" is commonly referred to as the time between 1990 and 1991. On September 6, 1991, armed activists of the All-National Congress of the Chechen People (NCChP), a party and independence movement created by ex-Soviet Air Force commander Dzhokhar Dudayev, stormed a meeting of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR Supreme Soviet, claiming independence. In Grozny the militants killed the chairman of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, thereby dissolving the administration of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic of the Soviet Union. One month later, Dudayev overthrew the provisional central government-backed administration, backed with widespread popular support. He was elected president in October 1991. The Russian parliament eventually declared the elections invalid and Boris Yeltsin, as the first president of the Russian Federation, dismissed the Chechen National Congress' proclamation of independence. Boris Yeltsin's Russian Federation claimed that, unlike the Baltic, Central Asian, and other Caucasian territories, Chechnya was not an autonomous region within the Soviet Union, but rather a 'piece' of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, and therefore did not have the authority to declare independence under the Soviet constitution³⁰. Chechnya's secession represented a danger to Russian sovereignty, compromising Russia's geographic security and integrity, and therefore had to be avoided at all means³¹.

²⁷ "First Chechen War," New World Encyclopedia, 2017.

²⁸ Anja Westberg, "Media Portrayals of the Russian-Chechen Conflict, Representations of Political Violence and Identity- a Discourse Analysis" (2009).

²⁹ "First Chechen War," New World Encyclopedia, 2017.

³⁰ Chaim Shinar, "Chechens: Freedom Fighters or Terrorists?" *European Review* 27, no. 1 (2018).

³¹ Ibid

Between 1991 and 1994, many of non-Chechens, mostly Russians, left the Chechen republic because of reports of violence against the non-Chechen population³². In the meantime, supporters and opponents of Dudayev fought for power throughout the undeclared Chechen civil war, frequently in deadly fights with heavy armament.

The Russo-Chechen conflict of 1994 broke out when, in December, Russian forces entered Chechnya following an upsurge in tensions between the Russian government and Dudayev. Yeltsin refused to even meet Dudayev and dispatched the Russian army to Chechnya to "establish constitutional order".

Despite Russia's superior personnel, equipment, and airpower, Chechen counterinsurgency forced Russian federal troops to retreat after the disastrous Battle of Grozny and their attempt to control the mountainous region of Chechnya. The establishment of an economic blockade was another move taken by the Russian government and from late 1991 to September 1994, the FSK³³ carried out five covert operations aimed at disrupting the Chechen's leader administration. Russia's aim was to disrupt Dudayev's separatist rule, in order to replace it with the Provisional Council, a pro-Russian government. In 1995, a Russian missile assault killed President Dudayev.

However, in 1996, the Federal soldiers retreated, and the attack's failure was seen by most foreign observers as a strong indication of Russia's military weakness³⁴. Because of severe disempowerment among federal forces and strong public disagreement with the conflict, Boris Yeltsin's administration declared a truce with the Chechens and signed a peace deal in 1997 that declared the departure of Russian soldiers from Chechnya³⁵. Chechnya was politically autonomous after the war but was not internationally recognized as a sovereign nation. Parliamentary and presidential elections were conducted at the beginning of 1997 and Aslan Maskhadov was elected president of the renamed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria³⁶.

The era leading up to the declaration of Sharia law in 1999 may be considered a peculiar political period in Chechen history, owing to the lack of secular-legal institutions, which were entirely destroyed during the first conflict, and reliance on financial and moral assistance from the Islamic world.

³² "First Chechen War," New World Encyclopedia, 2017.

³³ The principal Russian security body was the Federal Counterintelligence Service of the Russian Federation, which was the successor of KGB and was functioning from 1993 to 1995.

³⁴ Anja Westberg, "Media Portrayals of the Russian-Chechen Conflict, Representations of Political Violence and Identity- a Discourse Analysis" (2009).

³⁵ Chaim Shinar, "Chechens: Freedom Fighters or Terrorists?" *European Review* 27, no. 1 (2018).

³⁶ Huseyn Aliyev and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, "Why Do de Facto States Fail?," 2017.

Russia considered the Caucasus its 'backyard' as it represents a territory with which is inextricably intertwined. The Caucasus has long been a territory in which Russia has exercised significant influence and authority. This is caused by a variety of factors, the most important of which are strategic military concerns, given the existence of two other powerful countries: Turkey and Iran. Furthermore, the Caucasus was the site of part of Russia's southerly colonial expansion, due to the value and worth of its oil, making it a politically and economically significant territory. Moreover, according to the Russians, Chechnya was a component of Russia's government and federation. In the post-Soviet setting, the future of Chechnya was primarily an issue of Russia's territorial integrity. The strong nationalism of the region was the biggest single threat and the most tenacious challenger authority to the Soviet state³⁷. The Russians and the Soviets did not want to annihilate the Chechens, but rather relocate and re-educate them³⁸. As a result, the Russians saw their operations in Chechnya as a problem of internal law and order.

a.2 The second Russian-Chechen war

In October 1999, a ground attack marked the start of Russia's second conflict with Chechnya. In the spring of 1999, Yeltsin's Russia was a country devastated by poverty and criminality and the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, had become Yeltsin's most dangerous political adversary. Yeltsin's leadership had to find a way to discredit his opponent and prove to the citizens that he had no control over the security of the capital.

On September 9, just after midnight, a bomb detonated in the basement of a residence at 19 Guryanova Street, in a working-class neighborhood in the capital's southeast district³⁹. Just four days later a nine-floor brick building was destroyed by an explosion at 6 Kashirskoye Highway in Moscow. On September 16, a truck bomb exploded in Volgodonsk, as the funerals for the Moscow victims were still taking place⁴⁰.

After these horrible attacks, which became known as the 'September 1999 Russian apartment bombings', the country's recently chosen prime minister, the then-unknown Vladimir Putin, emphasized Russia's thirst for revenge. On September 24 Putin stated: "We will pursue the terrorists everywhere. If they are in an airport, then in an airport, and, forgive

³⁷ Anja Westberg, "Media Portrayals of the Russian-Chechen Conflict, Representations of Political Violence and Identity- a Discourse Analysis" (2009).

³⁸ John Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005).

³⁹ David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁴⁰ Ibid

me, if we catch them in the toilet, then we will rub them out in the toilet...The question is closed once and for all"⁴¹.

On December 31, Boris Yeltsin stepped down, leaving the office to the newcomer. Although the investigations had not given any clear results, Putin's government was quick to accuse the bombings on Chechen terrorists. However, the people responsible for the bombings of the residential buildings, which killed nearly 300 people were never caught. To the degree that proof exists, it leads to the Kremlin leadership and the FSB rather than Chechen militants. The utilized explosive was hexogen, solely produced by a single manufacturer, in the Perm region, which the FSB was responsible for guarding. The material, located in a warehouse in the Perm oblast, is heavily protected by the FSB. Every gram is carefully tracked. Furthermore, the bombs were placed in a workers' neighborhood rather than an aristocratic district in the city center. For Chechen militants, it would have been pointless to attack regular citizens if the goal was political⁴². Years later, on April 30, 2003, federal prosecutors claimed that none of the accused bombers were Chechen. At that time, Russia suspended all diplomatic relations with Chechnya and hence refused to recognize Maskhadov's administration as legitimate. Raising suspicion towards Chechen insurgents would allow the government to be justified for its second invasion of Chechnya.

Ethnic nationalism was the doctrine of the Chechen independence movement in the early 1990s. The National Congress of the Chechen People's stated goals were solving the issues the Chechen country was experiencing. In the first two years of his administration, Dudayev rejected any discussion of an Islamic state. After facing mounting internal resistance and the Russian attack in November 1994, he eventually began to invoke Islam as a justification for his actions. Dudayev learned that using Islamic phrases was a successful weapon to incite his supporters.

The first foreign Islamist militants entered Chechnya in 1995. Extremist politicians and warriors gathered together over time to form a resistance to the Maskhadov government, which had clearly lost authority over the extremists. Islam's tough ethical principles were ideal at a time of war when maintaining order and control was crucial. In Chechnya, self-sacrifice in

⁴¹ John Dunlop, Amy Knight, and Andreas Umland, *The Moscow Bombings of September 1999: Examinations of Russian Terrorist Attacks at the Onset of Vladimir Putin's Rule* (New York: Ibidem Verlag, 2015).

⁴² David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

times of battle was inextricably linked to religious fervor and in the Caucasian Wars in the nineteenth century, Islam performed a similar role⁴³.

The second reason for the start of the second Russian-Chechen war was territorial and few key commanders and officials that served a pivotal role in the interwar years and the second war were radicalized as a result of the first war. The 19th of August 1999, an army⁴⁴ headed by Basaev, the commander of the Chechen independence movement, and his "partner" Khattab, a Saudi-born Mujahid Emir, had infiltrated the nearby Russian region of Dagestan. This invasion was a failed effort to help Dagestan's Shura, which was seeking independence from Russia⁴⁵. Basaev's aims were far more ambitious than those of ordinary Chechens, who considered independence their main goal. Evidence of this was the nomination of moderate Maskhadov as the president of the unrecognized Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Basaev's ambitions for the construction of an Islamic state in the North Caucasus were pan-Caucasian in scope⁴⁶. His Riyad-us-Saliheyn movement's stated goal was to construct a unified Islamic republic of Chechnya and Dagestan and he was backed just by a few extremist Chechens. Their attack would not have been accomplished if the Russian authorities did not withdraw their internal army⁴⁷. The attackers seized land in the Botlikh region, and only local self-defense forces fought them. The attackers retreated on August 23, again without facing any opposition from the Kremlin's army. The invasion was denounced by the Chechen administration itself. During his rule Maskhadov tried but failed, to stop the spread of Wahhabism and other fundamentalist Muslim factions backed by Basaev. This resulted in a split in the Chechen separatist movement between Islamic fundamentalists and secular Chechen nationalists. Maskhadov implemented Islamic Sharia law in February 1999 as a compromise with extremist Islamists.

In the absence of efforts made by foreign Islamist fighters to take place in the Chechen struggle, extremist soldiers and officials in Chechnya would likely never have succeeded in taking such a strong position over the moderate forces in the region. These players first became interested in Chechnya as a result of the conflicts, and they subsequently sought to

⁴³ Julie Wilhelmsen, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Islamisation of the Chechen Separatist Movement," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 1 (2005): 35–59.

⁴⁴ An Islamic legion formed mainly by Chechen, Dagestani, international mujahideen and Arabs

⁴⁵ Anja Westberg, "Media Portrayals of the Russian-Chechen Conflict, Representations of Political Violence and Identity- a Discourse Analysis" (2009).

⁴⁶ Matthew Janeczko, "'Faced with Death, Even a Mouse Bites': Social and Religious Motivations behind Terrorism in Chechnya," 2012.

⁴⁷ David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

'own' this struggle. Missionaries, jihadi warriors, and funding have all been sent. The radical commanders' increasing power during the first and second world wars in Chechnya was not based on their sympathy with the local populace, but rather on their access to weapons and resources.⁴⁸

While the Basaev's invasion of Dagestan was going on, the apartments' bombings happened. The blasts were 'scheduled' to take place during combat in Dagestan, giving the idea that they were a reprisal for Russian military strikes on Islamic rebels in Dagestan⁴⁹. Although the invasion broke two peace accords negotiated in 1996 and 1997, the Federal government had already gained a large popular approval for a military response to the "Chechen problem".

Putin was elected president in March 2000, after notoriously declaring to "grease the terrorists even in the outhouse". For most Russians, the nation's degradation and embarrassment under Yeltsin were symbolized by its failure in the first Chechen conflict. The invasion of Chechnya in September 1999 allowed Putin to portray himself as the one who was regaining the nation's honor. State television was depicting Putin as a powerful leader revenging the atrocity that happened to innocent citizens. Putin won the elections by making the Chechens a national adversary and appealing to the Russian people's feeling of nationality. However, destroying the Chechen insurgency was critical to maintaining Putin's status as a victorious fighter and for this reason, the Second Chechen War was fought even more brutally than the first⁵⁰. Putin's immediate gesture, when elected president, was to secure Yeltsin's protection from trial by issuing a decree guaranteeing him amnesty. The order safeguarded Yeltsin's automobiles, phone conversations, records and communications, protecting him against investigations, incarceration and questioning.

Putin dispatched the Russian army to Chechnya in 1999, as did Yeltsin in 1994, to 'restore constitutional order.' However, the outcomes were exactly the contrary.

At that time, Chechnya had become a chaotic ghetto, rather than a country of constitutional order⁵¹. The Russian army traversed the Terek in December, encircled Grozny, and commenced a devastating bombardment that reduced the city to resembling Stalingrad. In February 2000, the Ichkerian administration in Grozny collapsed.

⁴⁸ Julie Wilhelmsen, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Islamisation of the Chechen Separatist Movement," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 1 (2005): 35–59.

⁴⁹ David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

⁵¹ Chaim Shinar, "Chechens: Freedom Fighters or Terrorists?" *European Review* 27, no. 1 (2018).

Outside of the bigger towns, combat between the Russian military and Chechen rebels intensified, but Putin insisted that he would never cooperate with either rebel commanders or President Maskhadov. Finally, Akhmad Kadyrov was named leader of the Chechen Republic's government by Russian President Vladimir Putin after Russian soldiers took control of Chechnya in June 2000⁵².

In 2002, the Theater on Dubrovka was seized during a performance of Nord-Ost, Russia's most renowned musical. On October 23, soon after 9 p.m., while the crowd was ready to enjoy the second act, forty highly armed men and female Chechen terrorists stormed the theatre and rushed down the aisles in the dark⁵³. However, during the attack the terrorists permitted the captives to use their mobile phones. The terrorists claimed that, if contacted by the authorities for a possible mediation, they would not detonate the bombs they had hidden in the building. When the victims called their loved ones, they prayed their families to persuade authorities to compromise with the terrorists rather than assault the theatre. On the evening of October 25 the authorities agreed to discuss with the attackers even if, at 5 a.m., the FSB personnel started pouring deadly gas into the theatre via the air vents. All forty terrorists were murdered in a matter of minutes. However, hundreds of captives have been exposed to this unidentified chemical as well. The eventual official death toll from the gas was 129 hostages. Maskhadov denounced the incident and asked for the problem to be resolved peacefully. But the attack, according to Russian media, was ordered by Maskhadov. "In the very near future, we will perform an operation that will alter the history of the Chechen conflict," Maskhadov declared in a recording released on Al Jazeera Television, according to Newsru.com. The FSB believed the evidence showed Maskhadov was responsible for the Nord-Ost attack, and a Putin spokeswoman declared the Chechen ruler had to be "wiped off"⁵⁴. However, the footage presented on Russian television was merely a part of the original. Proposals to conduct a government investigation into the attack were also dismissed.

In the meantime, the newly appointed Chechen president, Akhmad Kadyrov was a man who realized the irreversible ties between Russia and Chechnya and was prepared to assume a subordinate role to the Kremlin's administration. At the same time, he wanted to promote

⁵² Anja Westberg, "Media Portrayals of the Russian-Chechen Conflict, Representations of Political Violence and Identity- a Discourse Analysis" (2009).

⁵³ David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁵⁴ Ibid

Chechen nationalism, the restoration of internal order and the rebirth of the economy⁵⁵. On May 9, 2004, Akhmad Kadyrov was assassinated during a commemoration of World War II victory. The attack was undoubtedly representative of many Chechens' discontent with Kadyrov's forced election as President of Chechnya. Ramzan Kadyrov, Akhmad Kadyrov's son, was chosen first deputy prime minister almost right after the attack.

On September 1, 2004, Chechen militants took control of a school in Beslan, North Ossetia. State television informed that the attackers were not making any requests, and despite more than a thousand people being taken hostage in the school, state television only mentioned 120. Tanks, grenade launchers, and flamethrowers were used to shell the school by Russian forces. The flaming ceiling collapsed in flames and fell on the captives.

Although the government blamed the attack solely on Chechen terrorists, and Putin stated in the aftermath that the attackers had Western help, evidence proved that the Beslan terrorist attack, like the Nord-Ost hostage siege, was the consequence of a Russian provocation. Basaev stated, on the separatist website Kavkazcenter.net, on August 31, 2005, in a letter named "We have a lot to tell about Beslan...", that the invasion of the school started when Russian security services incited Chechen rebels to capture the North Ossetian Parliament and state buildings⁵⁶. Maskhadov was once again accused by the Russians of the school takeover, and a reward was placed on his head. He was murdered in a gunfight in the Chechen village of Tolstoy-Yurt on March 8, 2005.

The hostage-takings in Nord-Ost and Beslan aided Putin's attempt to portray himself as a counter-terrorist and to justify the Chechen conflict in Russia and the West. In the meantime, the federal government was taking care of the reorganization of Chechen cities. Ramzan Kadyrov, the current pro-Moscow president, was nominated by Moscow in 2007⁵⁷.

Nowadays, Ramzan Kadyrov is still the Head of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, which has the facto independence but is de jure part of Russia.

Ramzan Kadyrov, a terrible tyrant, does what President Vladimir Putin permits him to do; he realizes that if Russian military backing is withdrawn, thousands of people whose family members and friends have been slaughtered would seek revenge. In 2009, Chechnya was

⁵⁵ Paolo Calzini, "Vladimir Putin and the Chechen War," *The International Spectator* 40, no. 2 (2005).

⁵⁶ David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁵⁷ Anja Westberg, "Media Portrayals of the Russian-Chechen Conflict, Representations of Political Violence and Identity- a Discourse Analysis" (2009).

added to the 'Worst of the Worst' list of the world's most oppressive regimes by the American organization Freedom House⁵⁸.

As the well-known Russian journalist and human rights activist Anna Politkovskaya once remarked: 'A little dragon has been raised by the Kremlin. Now they need to feed it. Otherwise, it will spit fire'⁵⁹. Kadyrov professes to be Putin's obedient 'militiaman' with the Russian federal treasury providing more than 80% of the Chechen revenue⁶⁰. It is critical to recognize the substantial debate about political responsibility for the Chechen conflicts. In return for stabilizing the condition of the republic, Kadyrov has obtained assurances that he will be able to stay in charge, collect periodic funds from the federal budget, and exercise complete control over Chechnya's administration. The Russian Federation's attitude toward Chechnya has been labeled 'Chechenisation,' and the destruction of the Chechen insurgency is considered a narration of Putin's political system's triumph. However, the wider issue of Chechnya, which is now regarded as a foreign enclave within Russia, continues to be a huge concern for Russia, one that might have a big impact on the state's union and internal safety in the future, as well as jeopardize its geographical integrity⁶¹.

The disputes have resulted in disagreements on the motives and interpretations of events, both inside and without Russia, in scholarly, political, and public discourse⁶².

b) The influence of the Russian-Chechen war-time media on the public's opinion

North Caucasus's burden is represented by the military conflict in Chechnya, which has been fought since the early 1990s and has repercussions that impact not only the region but also Russia as a whole. The Chechen wars represent a fight between the metropolis and the periphery seeking independence. It could be described as an 'anti-colonial' war that has burst from the horrendous events of the Tsarist and Soviet past. The Kremlin has always tried to legitimize its use of force in Chechnya by justifying its horrors in the context of the war against international terrorism. However, as explained in the previous chapter, the actual root

⁵⁸ Chaim Shinar, "Chechens: Freedom Fighters or Terrorists?" *European Review* 27, no. 1 (2018).

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Maciej Falkowski, "Ramzanistan, Russia's Chechen Problem," *Point of View, Centre for Eastern Studies* 54 (2015).

⁶² Anja Westberg, "Media Portrayals of the Russian-Chechen Conflict, Representations of Political Violence and Identity- a Discourse Analysis" (2009).

and fundamental cause of the conflict is mainly the Chechen separatist movement and its desire to split from the Russian Federation to form their nation.

Within the first two years of the de facto occupation of Chechnya, between 2000 and 2002, the authority was almost entirely in the hands of the federal army, which profited from the oil sector while persecuting the autochthonous. From 2002, the Kremlin began progressively, but non significantly, to limit the military's authority. This strategy was part of the so-called 'Chechenization program', whose stated purpose was to legalize pro-Russian Chechen administrations. However, the actual federal government's goal was to change the character of the conflict from Russian-Chechen to *interchechen*. The powers of the pro-Russian authorities in Grozny were progressively expanded: the main protagonist became Akhmad Kadyrov, chief of administration of the republic and, from October 2003, president of Chechnya.

These years were characterized by a widespread propaganda campaign, to convince the international community and the Russian population through the media that peace and order had been established in Chechnya. *Propaganda* is usually defined as a method of communication that intends to control or affect the attitudes of people to persuade them to support a specific objective or conviction. It is an effort to dominate collective attitudes via the use of symbolic manipulation. Propaganda is a conflict or controversy-inducing tool, aiming at finding emotive appeals, usually employing various techniques among which slogans and catchphrases. Over the twentieth century, the word "propaganda" gained negative significance and is still nowadays a method mainly employed by totalitarian governments. Generally, during a war between nations, soldiers and combatants are vulnerable both to propaganda from their own country as well as from the opposing country. In Russia, these techniques were present for the first time during the First World War. During the Soviet Union, propaganda became the government's discourse technique to encourage class struggle, promote ideology, popularize the Communist Party and the government's leadership itself. During the Civil War, propaganda was utilized by all factions to mobilize the public and win approval. Only Soviet propaganda exploited the position and capabilities of official state propaganda: it comprised regular supplies, tools and human resources. An example were craftsmen and authors who were working for the government, often under constraint. Bolshevik anti-war propaganda was founded on Lenin's theory, which he defined in his writings *The War and Russian Social-Democracy* (October 1914): "The conversion of the

present imperialist war into a civil war is the only correct proletarian slogan"⁶³. The motto grew in popularity as the war proceeded since it appeared to resolve impoverished background troops and sailors' ethical qualms. According to this slogan's reasoning, a person's refusal to murder or be assassinated in war does not constitute them a traitor, because class solidarity may trump state fidelity. This narrative that fed the crowds emphasized that a sacrifice for the Homeland was unnecessary because the country was led by a government that had forsaken its subjects by persecuting them⁶⁴. Propaganda served as the method through which censorship was going to be reached years later.

The belief that violent warfare is an inevitable effect of the demise of the Soviet empire is mirrored in the post-Soviet era's geopolitical trajectory, with the Chechen conflicts as its main symbol, often recognized as the bloodiest fighting in Europe since WWII. The two Russian-Chechen conflicts have resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Russian Federal troops, as well as the wounding of tens of thousands more. Moreover, Grozny, the biggest city in the North Caucasus, was completely destroyed during the two wars⁶⁵.

Throughout the Russian-Chechen wars, the impact of discourse on degrading the Chechens as a social group and generating a "we against them" mindset has been widely observed. This was mainly done through a weaponization of words and images in an attempt to shape the beliefs of both supporters and opponents of the fight.

During those years, it was widely believed that the most powerful 'mafia' was the Chechens': "the most successful were the Chechens and their hallmark was extreme violence"⁶⁶.

Chechens have been represented both as "rebels" and "victims", mostly depicted as an ethnic community that has been historically and culturally distinct from the rest of Russia's citizenry⁶⁷. However, during the first Russian-Chechen conflict, efforts by Yeltsin to classify the Chechen resistance as "bandits" or "terrorists," the government as "criminal," and the administration's leader Djokhar Dudayev as "mad" seemed empty oratory to a significant portion of the Russian citizens, with around 70% remaining contrary throughout the fights.

During the first Russian-Chechen war, pro-Chechen backing granted the Chechen revolution legitimacy and faith, portraying the Chechen community as a victim of Soviet persecution that

⁶³ Tony Cliff, *All Power to the Soviets: Lenin, 1914-1917*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2004), 13.

⁶⁴ Katya Rogatchevskaia, "Propaganda in the Russian Revolution," 2020.

⁶⁵ Brian Williams, "Caucasus Belli: New Perspectives on Russia's Quagmire," 2005.

⁶⁶ John Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 104.

⁶⁷ Anja Westberg, "Media Portrayals of the Russian-Chechen Conflict, Representations of Political Violence and Identity- a Discourse Analysis" (2009).

merited to be liberated. However, the situation completely changed during the second war: Russian citizens' support shifted towards the federal troops. What was the catalyst for such a difference? Firstly, Russia started an anti-Chechen disinformation operation aimed at changing national and international opinions regarding the fighting in Chechnya, while transmitting a strong anti-Chechen sentiment. Secondly, the propaganda campaign, which mostly consisted of pictures or videos circulated through media channels, became extremely successful in discrediting the insurgency, particularly after 9/11. Chechens became labeled 'terrorists' and the war a 'counterterrorism operation'. The third factor was the spread of disinformation due to the one-sided report on the conflict. In fact, new regulations imposed did not allow any more journalists to report from Chechnya. Lastly, after years of economic, societal and military losses, Russian citizens were desperate for a win and the state narrative, or better Kremlin's propaganda, undermined the insurgency's credibility while strengthening Russia's image as a strong political power and security guarantor. This was possible because of Putin's rise and the acceptance of 'security' as an alternative to liberty.

b.1 Propaganda: The Homo Sovieticus and Anti-Chechen sentiment

*'I want to be a worker
On a Soviet modern plant
And make machines and lorries
For our Motherland.
I want to be a farmer
On a big collective farm;
We do like bread and butter
And to eat them gives no harm.
I want to be a spaceman
And journey to the moon;
In our Soviet rocket
We'll make this journey soon.
We all are strong and happy
And gay as well as you.'*⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Sergei Gogin, "Homo Sovieticus: 20 Years after the End of the Soviet Union" 109 (2012): 12.

This was a common poem, titled 'Wishes', that was taught to middle school students in 1967. Despite the geopolitical transformations that have occurred since the Soviet Union disintegrated more than 30 years ago, some of its cultural heritage has survived. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 provided a chance to realize Lenin's vision of an ideal society, perfect man and faultless communists. However, it was not until the 1930s, under Stalin, that internal and external circumstances allowed Soviet ideology to 'crystallize'. The phrase 'Soviet Man' or 'Homo Sovieticus' was coined in 1974 by Politizdat and used by Aleksandr Zinoviev as a satirical moniker for dutiful Soviet citizens. For decades, Russia's social order was rigorously paternalistic, guaranteeing a basic level of well-being to nearly all citizens in exchange for complete devotion to higher-ranking vertical entities. Communism was an ideal match for this social system, in which the Party took the position of the Tsar as the dominant greater hierarchical authority; this social structure was eventually enforced on all Soviet nations and satellites, regardless of their cultural and historical differences⁶⁹. Homo Sovieticus favored an authoritarian paternalistic administration that was extremely obedient and fearful of any individual ambitions that undermined existing group norms and hierarchies. The Iron Curtain separates the Homo Sovieticus from the rest of the world, and especially from Western civilization. Homo Sovieticus typically has a materialistic mindset and thinks that working to assist one's nation and people and create a better future is the purpose of life. Russians were hesitant about political liberties, dissatisfied with their diminished global prestige, and, above all, desirous of order. Homo Sovieticus was not only thriving but also multiplying.

The thriving of mythological Homo Sovieticus was one of the main reasons why Russian citizens were so susceptible to the need for a national order that promoted security and stability. Homo Sovieticus strongly believed the authority in power and this is why it was really susceptible to propaganda. Chechen fighters were nicknamed 'obezyany' (monkeys), 'cherniye' (blacks), 'chernozhopy' (black arses) or the initials LKN (litso kavkazskoi natsional'nosti), which stood for 'litso kavkazskoi natsional'nosti' (an individual of Caucasian origins)⁷⁰. A 'borz' (wolf), shown on the independent Chechnya - Ichkeria flags and mentioned in the first stanza of their national anthem, became the Chechens' national symbol and a famous Chechen soldier's epithet⁷¹. For example, Chechen leaders such as Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basayev were respectively given nicknames such as 'the wolf with a

⁶⁹ Evelina Tverdohle, "The Institutional Change in Action: Transitioning to Economic Man," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45, no. 3-4 (2012).

⁷⁰ John Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005).

⁷¹ Ibid

human face' and 'the lone wolf'. However, in the aftermath of the apartment building explosions in Moscow in September 1999, the daily *Izvestiya* titled one of their pieces 'Wolf track'. Later on the weekly *Argumenty I fakty* posted some rabid wolves on their home page under the caption 'The Chechen wolves have been driven back to their lair, but for how long?'⁷².

Moreover, the Operation on February 1, 2000, started by Russian government troops to clear Grozny of Chechen separatists was called 'Wolf Hunt'. During the second Chechen war, the horrific series of Chechen beheadings and tortures of Russian and foreign captives, which were captured on camera and widely publicized for propaganda intentions, increased anti-Chechen sentiment in Russia, triggering the Russian media to coin the term '*oborotni*' (werewolves) to describe the Chechen insurgents. The Chechen was seen as a worthy adversary for the Russians, but one that was wild and lethal enough to ultimately deserve annihilation. It represented an important shift in Russian perceptions of Chechens, seen at the beginning as wild strong animals to then become something much more sinister⁷³.

b.2 Propaganda: The war on terror post 9/11

During the second Russian-Chechen conflict, the adoption of a religious tone allowed Russia to launch a formidable anti-Islamic propaganda campaign. In 1999, Putin instructed all Russian press outlets to allude to the Chechen resistance and those who opposed his measures not only as 'bandits' but also as 'terrorists'. The operation was strengthened by an upsurge in terrorist incidents perpetrated by Chechen rebels, which were prominently documented by foreign media. Terrorism reports were essentially the only news coverage about Chechnya.

According to Russian popular perceptions of Chechens, the brave and fearless mountain men were firstly transformed into terrifying and vicious bandits, then into a crazy and fanatic terrorists of Islamic fundamentalist tendency⁷⁴. In response to the Chechen insurgents, Putin's government declared itself a guarantor of 'traditional' and 'authentic' Chechen heritage and amplified this anti-terrorist guideline by describing Russian combat militaries as counterterrorism operations aimed at protecting the Chechen people. Despite those years' belief that former Soviet Russians remained 'pure' Russians, while former Soviet Muslims

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Chaim Shinar, "Chechens: Freedom Fighters or Terrorists?" *European Review* 27, no. 1 (2018).

were *just* Muslims, thousands of Chechens who actually were Russian citizens were killed, and half a million others were displaced, as a result of the clashes.

The Caucasus transformed into a ghetto where Russian security forces and pro-Kremlin militias exploited the frightened population, where commanders sent to monitor human rights violations were executed by their own soldiers, where trafficking the remains of dead Chechen citizens to their mourning relatives became a Russian army occupation and where Chechen fanatics appear to cooperate with Russian Federal prosecutors. "In Chechnya, the marauding and racketeering routine, masked as searching for bandits, continues nonstop...All that has changed in the second war are those who commit the crimes. The activities that the antiterrorist operation sought to eradicate-violent hostage-taking, slavery, ransoms for "living" goods-are now being performed by the new masters, the (Federal) soldier"⁷⁵.

b.3 One-sided information

Differently from what was experienced in 1999, during the second Russian-Chechen conflict the Kremlin was in total control of the narrative. Only the government's authorized information and ambiguous descriptions of the conquering army's achievements were disseminated. It was a one-sided narration of the conflict, with no emotion in response to the deaths of innocent civilians.

Russian propaganda aimed at dehumanizing the Chechens, considered the 'enemy' to defeat. They were depicted as aggressive and violently hostile to Russian control and, according to Russian propaganda, only the arrival of a mythological 'Homo Sovieticus' could restore order and 'save' the nation⁷⁶. Due to the significant freedom of Russian media during the First Chechen War, the Russian state was unable to impose comprehensive news filtering. While headlines of the most frequently distributed Russian journals in 1994 demonstrated the press's autonomy: "The Chechen war was lost in Moscow" (*Izvestiya*) and "Russians may be facing a second Afghanistan in Chechnya" (*Literaturnaya Gazeta*), similar titles were never used during the Second Chechen conflict. The government was forced to develop new media guidelines during the interwar years. By prohibiting reporters from contacting the "terrorists", the Russian authorities attempted to shut off any independent

⁷⁵ Politkovskaia Anna, *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 55.

⁷⁶ John Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005).

sources of information regarding the situation in Chechnya⁷⁷. The Kremlin developed several obstacles for journalists reporting for the federal Russian media who were still commenting on the violence in Chechnya. Most correspondents were incapable to visit Chechnya when the Second Chechen War started due to a lack of authorization from federal government authorities. This was a key component of Moscow's new strategy of keeping free information out of the combat zone. Journalists who succeeded to travel to Chechnya were arrested, interrogated and expelled. Reporters of Chechen origin living in Moscow have also faced harassment from Grozny's pro-Russian Chechen leadership. Following Moscow's official narrative was the only safe way to report on the situation in Chechnya. Russia essentially shut down both Chechen and foreign media exposure in Chechnya after proclaiming the conflict concluded in 2000. Reporters' access to the internet, as well as access to Chechen news outlets, were severely limited.

Among the many reporters that were risking their lives, it is impossible not to mention Anna Politkovskaya, who became well-known for her exposés of Russian government violence and corruption, notably in the North Caucasus. In punishment for anti-Russian publications, Politkovskaya was discovered murdered on the staircase of her apartment building in October 2006. Overall, both the Chechens and the Russians have used the media to shift public opinion in their favor. In fact, also the resistance had managed to organize its own campaign, using social media and internet platforms to publish information and propaganda. Chechen militants started the website Kavkaz.org after Putin's declaration of victory in the Second Chechen War. Russia has yet to take down the site, permitting the Chechen resistance to help spread disinformation, recruit people and message throughout Chechnya and beyond. In different nations, including the United States, the site has been identified as a terrorist network and has been closed down. Since 2000, however, the website has also been frequently utilized by journalists, activists and policy analysts to understand events in Chechnya, as it is the sole non-Russian media outlet on developments in the region.

c) Behind the Second Chechen War: Putin's rise to power

c.1 The definition of Putin's rule

The 1990s gave birth to Vladimir Putin, who, later on, would unexpectedly appear on the political scene. When the Berlin Wall fell, he was working as a KGB officer in East Germany

⁷⁷ Ali Askerov, "The Chechen Wars, Media and Democracy in Russia," *Innovative Issues and Approaches in Social Sciences* 8, no. 2 (2015).

and suddenly found himself 'unemployed'. He was hired and afterward appointed to the position of deputy mayor by Anatoly Sobchak, that time's mayor of Leningrad. In 1996, when Putin's employer was unable to secure reelection, Putin moved to Moscow and began working for the Kremlin, holding six positions in three years. By 1999 he was named prime minister and Yeltsin's potential successor. However, Putin did not reach success on his own: the oligarchs were the driving force behind his ascent. Putin was granted that position to preserve Yeltsin's reign thanks to the support of four persons: Boris Berezovsky and Roman Abramovich, two of Yeltsin's loyal oligarchs, plus Yeltsin's daughter and her spouse. These individuals were desperately searching for a successor who would ensure their safety and help them preserve their riches. Boris Berezovsky promoted Putin's reputation as a possible strong leader by making fun of his political adversaries on his TV station. Following the Moscow apartment explosion, some believed that Putin himself could have been implicated in the tragedy that claimed hundreds of lives. However, news reports on television at the time emphasized Putin's severe reaction to the attacks, which he attributed to Chechen militants. On December 31, 1999, Yeltsin resigned from power and Putin was appointed as his replacement. In return, Putin committed to pardon Yeltsin for whatever transgressions or felonies he may have committed. A 'secret pact' was made and a few months later Putin comfortably won the elections. *Putinism* was seen as a means of reviving national pride, and the recently elected leader vowed to uphold Yeltsin's liberal policies and guide Russia in the direction of freedom and democracy. However, as it was later understood, Vladimir Putin's main objective after becoming president in 2000 was to reclaim the government's dominance. This entailed, first and foremost, reinstalling the powerful authority of the nation's leading member: himself⁷⁸.

As mentioned above, the Kremlin held an ambiguous and contradicting stance toward many external and internal components of the Chechen conflicts.

The conflict was initially seen as a threat to governmental bodies because of Chechen separatist fighters, permitting the Kremlin to assert its sole right as the governing authority to figure out a solution, in defiance of appeals for international mediation. With the commencement of the second operation in 1999 and in response to the Beslan disaster, the Kremlin opted to highlight the danger of an 'external adversary', explaining the war as a fight against terrorist forces. Following the Beslan catastrophe, Putin mentioned his nostalgia for the Soviet past, when Russia was, in his view, considered an amazing state and a major

⁷⁸ *Citizen K* (Greenwich Entertainment, 2019).

power⁷⁹. The director of the Andrei Sakharov Foundation⁸⁰, Elena Bonner, provided the following brief explanation of the internal political roots of the conflict in her November's 1999 statement to the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations: "The first war was needed in order to re-elect President Yeltsin. [and the second war] ... was needed to raise the standing in the polls of ... Vladimir Putin, whom President Yeltsin publicly endorsed as his chosen successor". She then added: "for the presidential administration, for government ministers, and for Duma politicians, the war [was] needed to resuscitate patriotic slogans and divert the public's attention from the corruption and financial scandals to the enemy –in this situation, the Chechens"⁸¹.

Overall, the prosecution of the Chechen conflicts together with a booming economy, that enabled Putin to settle wage and pension debts, were the two key elements that contributed to his rising popularity. Both of these features represented the state's *comeback*. Citizens wanted what was promised in the 1980s: freedom, security and wellness. The new President was able to satisfy them: when Putin won the electoral campaign he increased earnings, expanded access to consumer goods and enabled travel. Therefore, even though Mr. Putin was an autocrat, he was perceived as a democratic leader⁸². As time passed, more and more measures were taken to institute an executive vertical power structure. There was a reformation of the electoral system and the process for appointing governors of regions and republics changed.

Beginning with the revision of center and peripheral relations, which directly challenged the effectiveness of the federalist system, this proposal put forth in the Duma already indicated an authoritarian tendency. The inability of the heads of state of Ingushetia and Ossetia, Murat Zjazikov and Alexander Dzasoxov, to deal with the Beslan catastrophe, brought to light the defects of the Republican administrations. This was the perfect excuse to transfer their authority to the central power in Moscow. This also meant the revocation of presidential elections of the regions, substituted with direct nominees by the federal government. Since the start of Putin's administration, an absolute political authority has been consolidated at the apex of the executive branch and public access to policy decisions has been blocked. Over time, Putin has become Russia's undisputed and unquestioned ruler⁸³.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian citizens were found to be extremely

⁷⁹ Paolo Calzini, "Vladimir Putin and the Chechen War," *The International Spectator* 40, no. 2 (2005).

⁸⁰ Non-profit organization founded in 2021 to support the academic and scientific achievements of Dr. Andrei Sakharov, a well-known physicist, Nobel prize winner, and supporter of peace and human rights.

⁸¹ Chaim Shinar, "Chechens: Freedom Fighters or Terrorists?" *European Review* 27, no. 1 (2018).

⁸² The Economist, "The Long Life of Homo Sovieticus," 2011.

⁸³ Paolo Calzini, "Vladimir Putin and the Chechen War," *The International Spectator* 40, no. 2 (2005).

susceptible to manipulation. The common culture taught them to believe in Soviet exceptionalism and to adopt an "us vs. them" mindset that created psychological 'soft spots'. At that time, Russia was going through a phase of 'self-negation' while other nations in the former Soviet Union welcomed their national freedom and 'return to Europe'. With Putin's usage of a hybrid politics, that combined liberal economics with centralized control, Russians who felt they had lost out in the 1990s began to engage in identity politics. The guilt over the national greatness decline was transformed into a reinvigorating feeling of collective frame of belonging. Russian citizens praised Putin for his exceptional character traits, as well as for promoting Russia's position abroad and granting order. As outlined by social psychologist Alexander Haslam, Putin demonstrated all four of the feature of a determined leader. He was perceived as "one of us": an average young man who became unemployed with the collapse of the Soviet Union; He "does it for us", paying off Russia's debts to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) while increasing pension benefits and wages; He "crafts a sense of us" by expressing revived national pride; He "makes us matter" against the West⁸⁴. Vladimir Putin became a beloved celebrity also thanks to a strategic communications effort on state-run broadcasting. He was shown in advertisements hunting a Siberian tiger while diving in a river wearing a combat pilot's outfit. Under the new order established by the president, bureaucracy reported exclusively to him.

The establishment of the Putin-era regime was characterized by a vertical command structure and the eradication of alternative power sources, two features which reinforced one another. Before Russian citizens realized what had happened, a dictatorial system was established. Putin appointed in top positions those who had previously worked with him in the Leningrad KGB or the St. Petersburg municipal administration, with mutual assistance and secrecy as foundations of his leadership.

The system preserved some of the secret police hierarchies, rules and customs. Entities that may offer a counterbalance to unitary authority were gradually subjugated, commencing with the media.

Putin's regime became also well known for the 'mysterious' killings of several political opponents such as Alexander Litvinenko, an FSB and KGB officer, who became a journalist, writer and exponential critic of Putin's governance. Litvinenko's decision to fly to England and to start collaborating with the British and the Spanish intelligence services cost his life: he was poisoned and died shortly after.

Sergei Yushenkov was an elected politician of the Federal Assembly. He served as the vice

⁸⁴ Joy Neumeyer, "Burying the Homo Sovieticus," *New Left Review*, 2021.

administrator of the Sergei Kovalyov committee, which was established to inquire into the Russian apartment bombings. He also investigated the possible FSB participation in orchestrating the hostage crisis in the Moscow theater. Yushenkov claimed that FSB's accomplished coup d'état led to Putin's ascent to leadership. He was shot and murdered only hours after registering his Liberal Russia party to run in the parliamentary elections in December 2003⁸⁵.

Yuri Shchenkochikhin, Anna Politkovskaya's editor at Novaya Gazeta and investigative journalist, who died after a non-defined illness, while he was being treated at the Central Clinical Hospital, guarded by the FSB.

Natalia Estemirova, Chechen journalist and human rights activist, who was inquiring into hundreds of incidents of suspected abductions, torture, and arbitrary executions in Chechnya by Russian government forces, was abducted and found murdered.

It would take a long time to compile a list of everyone who perished under mysterious circumstances and whose demise would, in some manner, be positive for those in charge. Additionally, Russia has a constitution that is meant to protect the civil and political rights of all of its residents, which is clearly not respected.

Although the Kremlin's system required citizens' tacit acceptance of corrupted practices, many Russians saw this as a little concession that was more than made up for by the betterment of their wealth⁸⁶. For many years, those who opposed Vladimir Putin both within and outside Russia centered their arguments on one core issue: corruption. However, what Russians refer to as "corruption" is actually the glue that keeps the system together rather than the incentive to overthrow it. It is not quite accurate to describe such a regime as crooked: corruption requires deviating from the standard, but in Mr. Putin's Russia, administrators prospering on questionable resources is normal.

The structure of the system in Russia is highly unusual since it incorporates new tools for managing consensus while still preserving unmodified institutions that were emblematic of the Soviet model. The foundation of how the power and authority system operates, despite all the changes Russia has faced, has stayed unchanged. The judiciary, for instance, remains subject to the presidential administration, just as the police or public education sectors. With the rise of Putin, Stalin began to be viewed as the Second World War's greatest hero. The government's goal was to undermine liberal ideals and reforms to encourage a comeback to Russian conservatism and traditionalism. As a result, the propaganda has explicitly

⁸⁵ "The Creation of a Modern Tsar: How Vladimir Putin Established Political Domination in Russia," 2020.

⁸⁶ David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

connected the 1990s recession to the democratic principles that were popular during the Yeltsin era. According to the Kremlin's narrative, fascism and Nazism would not have been destroyed without Stalin, and individual citizen rights cannot obstruct the country's geopolitical objectives⁸⁷.

c.2 Putin and his influence on the media

It is important to better investigate what role the media played in Putin's elections, before explaining which transformations they underwent during the consolidation of Putin's regime. Law No. 2124-1 "On Mass Media" of December 27, 1991, and the 1993's Constitution were the foundation of Russia's media legislation. The Mass Media Law, signed by President Boris Yeltsin, was the primary piece of legislation that directly regulated the media in Russia and contained guidelines controlling the interplay of mass media products. According to the Mass Media Law, a mass media product is defined as any kind of periodic broadcast of mass information, whether it be a written magazine, radio, tv, newsreel program or having another format. The law had three primary components: it abolished censorship, established private mass media and guaranteed reporters' rights. Assuring more freedom to journalists was a significant development: it granted Russians reporters the possibility to read government publications, conduct official interviews and maintain the confidentiality of their informants. However, the Mass Media Law framed not only a variety of fundamental freedoms but also primary responsibilities and restrictions on the rights that were just granted. Overall, thanks to the Law, Soviet media grew more diversified and polarized. When the 1993's Russian Constitution was officially adopted on December 25, the Soviet system of governance was terminated. The key directives mentioned by the Russian Constitution were: the protection of press independence, freedom of mass communication and the abolishment of censorship. Censorship was already defined by the Law on Mass Media as a "requirement, vis-à-vis media editors, officials, state bodies, organizations, institutions or public associations, to coordinate, prior to their distribution, the messages and documents to be broadcast as well as the obligation to prohibit, where appropriate, their broadcast in whole or in part"⁸⁸. Article 29 of the Russian Constitution defines 'The right to freedom of expression', claiming that "everyone shall be guaranteed the freedom of ideas and speech," and "everyone shall have the right to freely look for, receive, transmit, produce and distribute information by any legal

⁸⁷ Mattia Bernardo Bagnoli, *Modello Putin: Viaggio in Un Paese Che Faremmo Bene a Conoscere* (Gallarate: People, 2021).

⁸⁸ "Censorship in the Russian Federation," Wikipedia, 2022.

way...the freedom of mass communication shall be guaranteed. Censorship shall be banned”⁸⁹.The Constitution then mentions the restraints to principal freedoms to the “extent to which it is necessary for the protection of the fundamental principles of the constitutional system, morality, health, the rights and lawful interests of other people, for ensuring the defense of the country and security of the State”⁹⁰. This means that no legal right is limitless and that a person's liberties should always be weighed against the rights of others and the *greater good*.

When Putin was elected President, the situation started changing even if, at the very beginning of his regime, the transformation of media’s freedom and the creation of a ‘bubble’ surrounding Russia’s society was extremely subtle. Former KGB commanders were concerned with the Internet's development; they saw it as a danger to Russia's stability. They promised to turn it off.

In 1998, Vladislav Sherstyuk was named head of FAPSI, the intelligence agency branch in charge of monitoring communications from other countries and guarding the most private networks used by the state. The next year, Putin elevated Sherstyuk to the prestigious Security Council, where he oversaw the division in charge of information protection. The "Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation", Sherstyuk's team's blueprint for the development of the Russian Internet, was created in 2000. The KGB's philosophy was reflected in the principles it entailed: Russia's border security was at risk from the unrestricted transmission of data coming from the West. The challenges included "devaluing spiritual values", “reducing the intellectual, ethical, and creative capacity of the Russian citizens”, and "manipulating information (false news, deception, or exaggeration)”. Putin signed the agreement in 2000 and the Security Council subsequently rose to prominence as the driving force behind the emerging Sovereign Internet and the core efforts to restrict Russian Internet freedom⁹¹.

For the impending campaign cycle of 1999–2000, state-owned tv's operational and financial foundations were improved. However, unlike the 1996 presidential race, which saw the media oligarchs Gusinsky and Berezovsky uniting their TV capitals to support Yeltsin's reelection, this time they ended up supporting different candidates. Berezovsky pledged to support the Kremlin via his channel ORT and he emerged as Putin's powerbroker when he was elected.

⁸⁹ Elena A Kremyanskaya, Tamara O Kuznetsova, and Inna A. Rakitskaya, *Russian Constitutional Law* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, Uk: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 49.

⁹⁰ Igor Oleynik, *Russia: Country Study Guide*, vol. 1 (International Business Publications, 2004), 176.

⁹¹ Andrei Soldatov, “The New Iron Curtain,” 2020.

However, both the oligarchs and their media properties had similar endings. Soon after, both tycoons were forced into exile and lost the majority of their media holdings. In fact, one of Putin's main objectives was to increase state control over the media, and he started his fight against privately held national television immediately after taking office in May 2000.

Gusinsky was compelled to leave Russia in late 2000 and never came back. His media enterprise was acquired by the state-controlled colossus Gazprom in the spring of 2001. The largest privately held media organization in Russia, Media-Most, was destroyed. The editorial management of NTV was taken over and held tightly in conformity with the regime's political objectives. Moreover, the audience was kept in the dark about what happened to ORT. The narrative wasn't fully made public until a legal dispute between Berezovsky and Roman Abramovich in the High Court of London in 2011.

The entire transaction was kept hidden; Abramovich, the acquirer, had previously performed expensive and exclusive favors for Putin. He benefited from a guarantee of safety from unwanted investigations of his own business dealings⁹².

While during Yeltsin's presidency, the oligarchs had a huge political influence, Mr. Putin successfully made them puppets who could retain their property as he wished⁹³. The Kremlin gained the power to set the laws, supervise their application and use their enforcement to remove any undesirable political player. Putin planned to manage the resources so that the main media would either be controlled by the government or held by Kremlin's allies. This allocation of funding, purely a political *maneuver*, started in the early 2000s and intensified in the years that followed. The Kremlin allowed some freedom of expression, but it assured that non-government media outlets remained in the shadows. In Putin's Russia, independent public action had been completely sidelined, adversarial opposition abolished and the parliament had been transformed into an instrument of the presidency. The reason for Alexei Navalny's rise to public popularity as a campaigning attorney in early 2011 was his complaints about this crooked system, especially due to United Russia being 'a group of thieves'⁹⁴.

2002 was a year that was characterized by the government's firm commitment to putting an end to all separatist activities in the North Caucasus, as well as the terrorist attacks in Moscow and nearby cities. One of the most significant components of the Soviet's

⁹² Maria Lipman, "Putin and the Media," in *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain* (Rowman & Littlefield Pub, 2015).

⁹³ The Economist, "The Long Life of Homo Sovieticus," 2011.

⁹⁴ Stephen White, "From Soviet to 'Soviet' Elections," 2012.

imagination was the idea of Russia as a superpower surrounded by adversaries. Putin has used and promoted one of Stalinism's favorite narratives: 'Russia as an impenetrable fortress under siege'⁹⁵. The Kremlin took advantage of the 'war on terrorism' to adopt an ambiguous and unspecific anti-extremism law: the so-called 'Law on Counteracting the Extremist Activity'. The Law targeted communication, publications, groups and beliefs that were perceived as "extreme", a term that was vaguely defined and unilaterally construed by authorities. The limitations that the government placed intruded on other cultural spheres and types of communication such as social activity, literature, artwork and theater.

By the middle of his second office mandate, Putin's influence was huge. He was standing at the apex of a severely deinstitutionalized system of government, exempted from political rivalry or public scrutiny, while state TV networks successfully and consistently created the impression that he was the only option as a leader.

By the 2007–2008 campaign season there were only a few unaffiliated political organizations and activists. Putin had no rivals as the 2007–2008 presidential race drew near; No one even came close to matching his widespread popularity. However, the Russian Constitution forbade a candidate from standing for the presidency longer than two terms in a row, hence Putin was ineligible to run. The method Putin used to maintain power became known as a "tandem" rule. Before his formal resignation in the spring of 2008, Putin selected Dmitry Medvedev, one of his longstanding allies, as his heir. Putin was appointed prime minister by Medvedev right away and the balance of power in Russia never truly shifted: ninety-five percent of the roles in Medvedev's administration were held by Putin supporters. Putin remained the actual power source. Throughout his four years in office, Medvedev mainly changed one aspect of the Putin system: he extended the president's mandate from four to six years.

In 2008, the Federal Service for Supervision of Information Technologies and Communications ("Roskomnadzor") was founded. The establishment of the Agency as well as its corresponding statute played a significant role. The Roskomnadzor requires mass media items produced within Russian Federation territory to be registered: the applicant must submit a formal application together with specific mandatory information as outlined by the Order of the Ministry of Communications and Mass Media No/362⁹⁶. Under the Mass Media Law some productions, such as the ones established by governmental bodies, are excluded from registration. The legislation also gives a long list of possible reasons why a licensing

⁹⁵ The Economist, "The Long Life of Homo Sovieticus," 2011.

⁹⁶ Ministry of Communications and Mass Media of the Russian Federation, "Order No. 362," 2011.

application may be rejected. In rare circumstances, the application may be dismissed outright while other times the registration certificate may be ruled invalid. Roskomnadzor also has the authority to ban a website domain if the owner refuses to abide by one of its requests. Even if the Mass Media Law defined what 'censorship' is, it is important to remember that it also explained the circumstances under which a person's freedoms and liberties may be restricted. This could happen in situations allowed by Russian federal laws and to the degree required to safeguard the nation's reputation, the safety and the ethic of the community. Information that could incite fear or rage, excuse violent and criminal activity, incite a propensity to use drugs, drink or engage in other negative behaviors is subject to the law. Roskomnadzor had a significant impact on the Russian media scene and assumed a progressively significant and strong position, being in charge of monitoring and controlling all forms of media, including digital communication, media production, information systems and telecommunications. Additionally, it oversees radio frequency service management and law compliance with the use of personal data. It is a powerful tool to control and limit citizens' freedom of expression. In 2011 there was a Mass Media Law's reform. The modified Statute offers a methodical framework for controlling internet media, specifically listing "network publications" as a sort of mass media and treats a single incident or renewal of a network publishing as mass media news outlet output⁹⁷.

c.3 A turning point:2012

On an overall view, during Medvedev's presidency, the main print publications and radio stations started expanding their online presence. The growth of social platforms aided the dissemination of knowledge, strengthened social ties and increased interest in public issues. Civic engagement was on the upswing when Putin retook office. The wider Putin's strategy of "zero tolerance" for any displays of civic freedom included limiting freedom of speech and expression. The 2002's Law and the 2008's establishment of Roskomnadzor represented a small precondition of what was going to happen just a few years later.

Since Vladimir Putin took office again as president in May 2012, the Russian political system started shifting toward a highly individualized rule of governance with an increasingly authoritarian structure. Putin's charismatic legitimacy, which for many years permitted him to be seen as Russia's lone guardian of stability and the symbol of morality, started to fail. The

⁹⁷ Andrei Richeter and Anya Richter, "Regulation of Online Content in the Russian Federation" (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2015).

comparatively pluralist model of the 1990s transformed into a blatantly autocratic, monocentric and individualized system of governance, with the Kremlin's narrative being centered on bringing honor to the nation for its military imperial expansion and spreading fear for the 'hostile' West. As a result of Putin's strategy of centralization, the most coercive establishment of the Soviet system served as the cornerstone of the government's authority. This structure developed firm control over not only politics and government but also the realms of ideology and beliefs. Russia's foreign and internal policies have been influenced by the secret service's ways of thinking, attitude and interest. The few efforts at renovating the Putinist system, like the liberal economic reforms implemented after Putin took office in 2000 or the discourse of liberal modernization during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008–2012), have had little effect on the system's corrupt nature. The modernization initiatives made during Dmitry Medvedev's brief presidency were shallow and the counter-reforms after Putin's return to the Kremlin silenced the hopes for an authentic globalized Russia.

2012 was a turning point, characterized by the so-called 'Snow Revolution'. Beginning in 2011, and throughout 2012 and 2013, protests sparkled against the outcomes of the Russian fraudulent parliamentary elections. Numerous user-made films documenting voting irregularities and election fraud were published online. The main targets of the citizen's rallies were the governing party United Russia and its leader, the president at the time, former prime minister, and former two-term head of state, who declared his desire to run for president again in 2012. The demonstrations in 2011–12 against the corrupted elections showed the limits of Kremlin rule and the need for a new approach. On the afternoon of the actual election day, a few people, chanting slogans such as 'Russia without Putin', started to show out on the streets. About 5,000 people participated in demonstrations but mainstream media sources hardly mentioned them. Some people saw in these protests strong parallelism with the Arab Spring that happened the same year.

In the Crimean Peninsula, a part of Ukraine with a predominance of Russian speakers, men carrying guns and dressed in green army disguise initially arrived in late February 2014. Putin officially revealed the 'special mission' in April on his yearly call-in show, by admitting that Russian forces were present in Crimea. He highlighted that Russian troops supported the Crimean self-defense troops and emphasized the importance of their role in preserving the survival of Russian-speaking Crimeans. The official narrative was that Ukrainians who spoke Russian were being attacked. They claimed that hundreds of thousands were escaping, however, this allegation was ultimately proven to be untrue. Within this context, regulating the channels of mass information and creating a unified, uncontested storyline was critical for

Moscow. The television station was the very first tool pro-Russian forces captured in many places in eastern and southern Ukraine. Ukrainian protesters in Kyiv were called 'radicals', 'extremists' and 'nationalists' by news broadcasters. The revolution, which started with massive demonstrations in the Maidan Square in the capital city of Kyiv in late 2013, gained new momentum when it broke out in armed fighting in the eastern side of the nation, near Russia, in early 2014. Pro-Kyiv sites emerged and began fighting back against the media assault from Moscow. A surprising appearance of the Ukrainian website "Anti-propaganda" on the Russian social networking site Vkontakte ("In contact") occurred in March. It was unknown who was responsible. The website declared: "From the television screen comes a steady flood of information. They persuade us, they brainwash us, and they force themselves on us. Simply put, they control us"⁹⁸. It was said that the goal of the website was to "distinguish reality from misinformation". The Anti-Propaganda site investigated regular news programs of the major Russian TV networks, calculating the proportion of what represented a propagandistic tool. For instance, the Russia24 program's transmission of the show 'Vesti' on April 21 was classified as having 66 percent propaganda. Each show was thoroughly documented, along with statements from the hosts and a description of the propaganda tactics employed, which were indeed really similar to the ones used during the Chechen wars. Some of these methods were 'demonization of the opposition', 'disinformation', 'oversimplification' and 'substitution of facts with views'⁹⁹.

The Ukrainian Revolution, also called 'the Orange Revolution', which gravely concerned the Kremlin and Putin, dates back to late 2004. Circumstances in Ukraine were presented as part of a Western scheme to use foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations to overthrow the Russian government and replace it with a pro-Western one. Putin and his close associates were worried that the rebellion's enthusiasm might spread to Russia and threaten their position. The Kremlin decided to further strengthen its monopoly on power. A party's campaign was initiated and its main target were foreign-sponsored NGOs. Government media began to depict foreign-funded NGOs as Western spies intending to harm Russia. The so called 'Law on Foreign Agents', the law regulating non-governmental organizations was enacted in Russia on the 20th July 2012. As a result, any NGO that acquired foreign donations or participated in political activity', which is ill-determined by the legislation, must record as 'foreign agents'. Both a Russian media organization that receives financing from overseas and a foreign media that reports in Russian, like BBC Russia, may be branded as foreign agents. A blogger who obtains some funding from abroad might likewise be a foreign

⁹⁸ Jill Dougherty, "Everyone Lies: The Ukraine Conflict and Russia's Media Transformation" (2014).

⁹⁹ Ibid

agent, as can a media company with an overseas basis that publishes in Russian, like Meduza. The disclaimer "foreign agent" may therefore need to be put with all of this material as well as disseminating such material alone, which can also make someone a foreign agent¹⁰⁰. The term 'foreign agent' is generally interpreted as a synonym of 'spy' or 'enemy'. Even if foreign financing is not used to support political activity, it is nevertheless necessary, according to the Law, to register as a foreign entity. The Foreign Agents Law has significant effects on the right to free speech. Nowadays many NGOs tackling issues such as human rights or environmental protection have already been silenced as a result of the dreadful option the law gives NGOs: either reject foreign financing, which for many would imply ending activity, or identify themselves as 'foreign agents'¹⁰¹.

Another significant gain of the government's power came only six months after the mass demonstrations with Federal Law Number 89417-6.8 "Blacklist Bill", formally entitled "On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development" that amended on July 28, 2012, the Federal law of Russian Federation no. 436-FZ of 2010. The regulation deals with the protection of children's rights, including the right to restrict access to websites that include child pornography and information on suicide or illegal substances. It represented a huge development for Russian government agencies' ability to obstruct access to internet content: with this Law, the Duma presented the framework for the country's first-ever Internet purifier system. It created a centralized registry of unauthorized websites. The authority to select websites for prohibition was granted to several government entities. Any data that was unfavorable of the Kremlin was included, particularly "promotion of separatism"¹⁰². The justifications for adding websites to the black list were then further enlarged, including reasons of infringement of intellectual property rights, dissemination of material intended to stir up unrest or support extreme behavior, separatism and Nazism's revival.

Russia's government initial disinterest in the Internet transformed into a growing cyber phobia. Russian land is vast, making it difficult to retain a sense of national identity. Television plays a huge role in granting a sense of common belonging to its viewers, but its influence is decreasing, especially among younger people¹⁰³. For the Kremlin authorities in

¹⁰⁰ Mattia Bernardo Bagnoli, *Modello Putin: Viaggio in Un Paese Che Faremmo Bene a Conoscere* (Gallarate: People, 2021).

¹⁰¹ DLA Piper Rus Limited et al., "Media Regulation in Russia, a Landscape Analysis of Laws and Trends," 2016.

¹⁰² Andrei Soldatov, "The New Iron Curtain," 2020.

¹⁰³ Julien Nocetti, "Digital Kremlin: Power and the Internet in Russia" (Ifri Russia/NIS Centre, 2011).

control, the chance to employ currently available technology to fulfill government propaganda goals was very appealing. Internet propaganda was inexpensive when compared to pricey state television, and was perfect to gather data and evaluate its effectiveness. With time the government attempted to achieve complete power over the Web accessibility of Russian citizens: limiting online speech, forbidding data movement and undermining freedom of expression and information became the core principles of Russian Internet regulation¹⁰⁴. Vladimir Putin spoke on a massive platform set up in Red Square two days after Crimea's citizens approved a referendum to enter Russia, which was held on March 16, 2014. The majority of nations, especially those in Western Europe, deemed the vote illegitimate and a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. For Vladimir Putin, it was a pivotal moment, it made it possible for him to further strengthen his narrative: Russia is bordered by adversaries. He remarked that the crisis in Ukraine "is like a mirror, reflecting what is happening and what has been happening in the world over the past several decades... We have every reason to believe that the notorious policy of containing Russia in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries is again being used today"¹⁰⁵. 47% of Russians in 2013 opposed Putin's re-election to the Kremlin. The Maidan Revolution and the Ukrainian Revolution, the beginning of a new nationalist crusade and the takeover of Crimea altered the dynamics¹⁰⁶. After the acquisition of Crimea, there was a massive social euphoria among citizens in Russia, being vulnerable to the government's imperialist strategies. It let them forget for a moment the pain of the Soviet Union's fall¹⁰⁷.

However, a further unparalleled wave of politically driven censorship and propaganda was sparked by the situation in Ukraine. The administration used a variety of strategies, such as restricting or outlawing independent news websites like Lenta.ru. On March 12, the Russian website Lenta.ru received a warning regarding one of its articles published, and a few hours later, the site's editorial director Galina Timchenko and operations manager Yulia Minder were fired¹⁰⁸. Galina Timchenko, the website's redactor since its launch in 1999, was terminated due to the site's news reporting in Ukraine¹⁰⁹. The Public Prosecutor also ordered the blocking of the independent websites grani.ru, ej.ru, and kasparov.ru on March 13¹¹⁰. The weblog of opposition activist Alexey Navalny was also banned as a result of the new

¹⁰⁴ Marek Menkiszak, "Late Putin. The End of Growth, the End of Stability," 2015.

¹⁰⁵ BBC, "Crimea Crisis: Russian President Putin's Speech Annotated," 2014.

¹⁰⁶ Mattia Bernardo Bagnoli, *Modello Putin: Viaggio in Un Paese Che Faremmo Bene a Conoscere* (Gallarate: People, 2021).

¹⁰⁷ Jill Dougherty, "Everyone Lies: The Ukraine Conflict and Russia's Media Transformation," 2014.

¹⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Russia: Halt Orders to Block Online Media," 2014.

¹⁰⁹ PEN International, "Discourse in Danger: Attacks on Free Expression in Putin's Russia," 2016.

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Russia: Halt Orders to Block Online Media," 2014.

regulation, which became effective on February 1, 2014, and allowed the Public Prosecutor to censor websites without a court order. Kremlin-compliant governance was also guaranteed at the popular social network Vkontakte: Putin began a fresh campaign against the dominant Russian platform after realizing that social media posed the largest threat to the Kremlin's storyline¹¹¹. Vkontakte, the most well-known networking site in Russia, commonly referred to as the "Russian Facebook", originally defied pressure from the authorities. Durov, the 29-year-old inventor of Russia's wildly successful social network, became a hero of the liberal opposition during the anti-Putin rallies that swept Russia at the beginning of 2012 for declining to shut off groups on the website that were planning the street protests. When the Federal Security Service requested personal information on Ukrainians who were using VK, he refused and posted publicly the FSB's note. He also made public a post with a formal request from a prosecuting attorney to take down the page owned by political activist Alexei Navalny. However, the state did not accept Vkontakte's denial and five days after making his posts, Mr. Durov was fired as CEO of VK and forced to leave the country¹¹². Mr. Durov was then substituted with a Kremlin's puppet. Global social platforms showed a great ability to withstand the pressure, although domestic suppliers were very readily urged to follow imposing government restrictions. For instance, the authorities asked Facebook and Vkontakte to prevent access to websites in December 2014 that were allowing sympathizers of Alexey Navalny to sign up for a demonstration to condemn his impending criminal conviction and get details on the location and time of the meeting¹¹³. Even the most well-known search engine and information site in Russia, Yandex, was already controlled by the state-owned banking titan Sberbank by 2009 when it purchased the "golden share" and was later on forced to shut down its widely famous blog Ya.ru¹¹⁴.

The government was fighting a propaganda campaign to encourage its 'interpretation' of the facts concerning Ukraine, allowing the Russian Orthodox Church to enact 'Russian ethics' on theater and art, branding individual community organizations as 'foreign agents' and enforcing tight restrictions. The government also gained the authority to jail someone, for up to five years under the "Law against Retweets" if they were found to be a propagator or redistributor of 'extremist publications'.

Russia then took another significant step toward limiting its once unrestricted Internet. According to the 'Bloggers Law', everyone with a web page with more than 3,000 daily

¹¹¹ Andrei Soldatov, "The New Iron Curtain," 2020.

¹¹² James Bradshaw, "A Russian Social Network Tale: Censorship and a CEO on the Run" (The Globe and Mail, 2014).

¹¹³ Sergey Sanovich, "Computational Propaganda in Russia: The Origins of Digital Misinformation," 2017.

¹¹⁴ ibid

visitors must register, provide confidential info and abide by the same rules as mainstream media. Several blogging sites have declared their opposition to the law. However, complying with the regulation is necessary not to get fined. For each of its subscriber accounts, the popular blogging platform LiveJournal, for instance, has changed the number of site visits such that it never exceeds 2,500. This was explained as a way to protect the integrity of the country, protect the society, the healthcare and morals of Russian citizens. As previously mentioned, the right of the individual should also be evaluated in comparison to the rights of the majority and the 'greater good'. Specifically, a blogger must abstain from using the online presence or webpage to spread materials containing possible ways to demonstrate, undertake terrorist activities, worship violent action and brutality, or other material considered to be containing 'taboo words'. They should also avoid disclosing information that is thought to be government confidential information. A blogger should double-check the accuracy of the material they have posted on their blog and remove any false information right away. The blog may not be used to disparage a single individual or group depending on their gender, youth, origin, ethnicity, language, creed, career, domicile, place of work or political beliefs¹¹⁵. On July 31, 2014, a measure that further limits internet freedom and forbids anonymous Internet use in public areas was passed into law. Russians now need to subscribe with their phone number to access free Wi-Fi, according to this new regulation. The businesses that manage the networks being utilized are obligated to keep the inputted personal data for six months¹¹⁶.

It is also important to mention that, in July 2018, the so-called Yarovaya bill, which was titled after the politician Irina Yarovaya, went into effect. It mandated that telecommunications and internet service providers could preserve customer data such as phone calls, messages, pictures and videos, all accessible to the FSB intelligence service. The regulations require telephone and internet service providers to preserve traffic data between clients for six months and metadata for three years, in addition to strengthening punishments and processes for all terrorism-related offenses. Censors were aware that activists encrypt their conversations using tools like Tor or applications like Signal, but the majority of Russians relied on popular consumer apps like WhatsApp, Viber and TikTok. The Kremlin wanted to stop using Western applications and replace them with Russian ones that the intelligence agencies could regulate. The plan was to deter Russians from using international applications that couldn't be monitored and encourage them to use home services instead¹¹⁷.

¹¹⁵ DLA Piper Rus Limited et al., "Media Regulation in Russia, a Landscape Analysis of Laws and Trends," 2016.

¹¹⁶ Natalie Duffy, "Internet Freedom in Vladimir Putin's Russia: The Noose Tightens," 2015.

¹¹⁷ Andrei Soldatov, "The New Iron Curtain," 2020.

Overall, the Kremlin's growing influence over the media has been a recurrent pattern in the country's governance of the mass media over the years. The measures aim to have a dictatorial grip over society. The authorities will now harshly suppress anyone deemed to be lacking in loyalty. The intention is to stifle dissent and turn the Russian internet into a place to be feared: there will be no discussion, no forums for the sharing of ideas, and no organized demonstrations. 50 new rules to control Russia's cyberspace were passed just in 2020¹¹⁸. Emerging trends encompass severe controls on foreigners' capacity to own, influence, or operate Russian mass media products, constraints on funded TV adverts, a rise in the number of tight regulations on the dissemination of information in broadcast messages and tightening control over online media; the repercussion of this is clearly visible nowadays. Most of the worst characteristics of Homo Sovieticus, including mistrust of others, social indifference, obedience and devotion to authority, were reproduced in Russia as a result of the power structure established by the Putin government and its celebration of the Soviet past¹¹⁹. Russia has seen a significant shift both domestically and internationally since Putin come back to the Kremlin in 2012. It has evolved globally toward conflict with the West. Internally, Putin's administration has chosen a counter-modernization path that is becoming more solitary; It has also gotten deinstitutionalized and individualized. The Kremlin has implemented additional restrictions on the public sphere and adopted a zero-tolerance stance toward different manifestations of political and civic action. The political unrest in Ukraine and the takeover of Crimea in 2014 made this change much worse.

¹¹⁸ Mattia Bernardo Bagnoli, *Modello Putin: Viaggio in Un Paese Che Faremmo Bene a Conoscere* (Gallarate: People, 2021).

¹¹⁹ Stephen White, "From Soviet to 'Soviet' Elections," 2012.

CHAPTER THREE - Nowadays Russia: Security vs Liberty

The concept of security has always been controversial, ambiguous and broad. 'Security' has indeed several meanings which are related to different approaches to security studies, diverse interpretations and historical developments. Is security a precondition or a threat to liberty? "The ultimate aim of government is not to rule, or restrain, by fear, nor to exact obedience, but contrariwise, to free every man from fear, that he may live in all possible security"¹²⁰. Is it possible to promote security and liberty at the same time? Or is it true that neither security nor liberty can be increased without decreasing the other? Hobbes saw the state's stability as the main way to preserve peace and security. Therefore, according to him, individuals should obey institutions¹²¹. On the other hand, the state of nature, according to Locke, is a state of complete freedom and equality governed by natural law¹²². The state of nature is a state of 'perfect liberty' with no 'Absolute or Arbitrary Power'. The relationship between security and liberty has always been characterized by several ethical issues. One of those is the problem of accountability or responsibility, meaning who should be considered responsible for the derogation of law. The agreement to establish political power entails a trade-off of liberty for security; However, by agreeing, people themselves create the security necessary for their liberties to function effectively. Security should always look at as a tool to support liberty and not as an alternative¹²³. Values such as the right to privacy, freedom of expression and the rule of law should be at the very base of the functioning of any society. Over time, the securitization of a variety of issues has become an abused practice. One of the main questions we can ask ourselves when discussing security is: 'at what cost? At the cost of renouncing some rights and liberties?'¹²⁴. Overall, security should mainly be a tool in support of liberty. However, when guaranteeing security there has to be a compromise with freedoms at stake, a new balance should be found. The main danger is the abuse of security as a justification to take away freedoms or its development with an extreme approach. In today's warfare, the role of the television or the power of the internet is just as important as an army. The question here is: will Russian citizens ever win the war against corruption, misinformation and propaganda, a war against Russia itself? Putin would have been remembered as one of Russia's most brilliant presidents if he had stepped away from the

¹²⁰ Raia Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 204.

¹²¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme & Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (At The University Press, 1935).

¹²² John Locke, *Two Treatises of Civil Government: Introd. By W.S. Carpenter.* (Dent, 1970).

¹²³¹²³ Didier Bigo and Anastassia Tsoukala, *Terror, Insecurity and Liberty: Illiberal Practices of Liberal Regimes after 9/11* (Routledge, 2009).

¹²⁴ David A. Baldwin, "The Concept of Security," *Review of International Studies* 23, no. 1 (1997): 5–26.

office in 2008. But since 2009, the second half of Putin's 20 years in office has significantly diverged from the first. When he came to office in 2000, his main objective was to stabilize the nation. However, during his second term, his major aim was to restructure the national political system, during which the idea of sovereignty was given ultimate importance¹²⁵.

a) Ukraine's 'special military operation': is Kyiv comparable to Grozny?

a.1 Overview of Russian - Ukrainian conflict

Putin once stated that it was crucial to protect Russian nationals both inside and "outside its borders". These comments were a promise for the future, even if they received little attention at the time. Russia was still too powerless to consider any external attack¹²⁶.

Low-intensity combat between the Ukrainian military and separatist rebels supported by Russia marked the beginning of the crisis in eastern Ukraine in April 2014. Since then, it has intensified into an open undeclared conflict between Russia and Ukraine, until the end of February of this year, when the situation dramatically changed.

The main distinction between the regimes in Russia and Ukraine was that Ukraine had a more multicultural state due to its nationalist west and center and pro-Russian east. Ex-president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, opposed a plan for closer integration with the EU in November 2013, triggering large-scale demonstrations, that he then forcefully tried to repress. Yanukovich was backed by Russia during the crisis, while the demonstrators were supported by the US and Europe. Due to this Yanukovich was then forced to leave the nation. A day after Yanukovich left Kyiv, on February 22, Russia started preparing for a special operation to take control of the Crimean Peninsula, in an effort to regain its lost power in Ukraine. The immediately Kremlin took advantage of the situation. Russia's claim that it had to save the Russian-speaking community from neo-Nazi radicals served as justification for its occupation of Crimea. Videos of "extremists" in Crimea assaulting Russian troops were displayed. The Russian state-controlled media skillfully fostered joyful reactions following the seizure of Crimea. Under the banner "Crimea Is Ours". The government-funded festivities celebrated the "return" of Crimea to Russia.

¹²⁵ Mattia Bernardo Bagnoli, *Modello Putin: Viaggio in Un Paese Che Faremmo Bene a Conoscere* (Gallarate: People, 2021).

¹²⁶ David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

This was just one part of Russia's plan regarding Ukraine¹²⁷. The 'reunification' of Crimea with Russia is viewed by the international community as a form of annexation, marking the first alteration in the borders of a European region since the conclusion of World War II. The conflict between Russia and the West started on March 18, 2014, when the agreement allowing Crimea to join the Russian Federation was signed by the Russian president and local authorities. The catastrophe in the Donbass occurred later¹²⁸. The crisis widened ethnical differences, and a few months later pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk staged a vote to establish their country's independence.

Following the Orange Revolution, Ukrainian society developed further as a result of its fascination for the path of growth pursued by its neighboring EU members. However, once the USSR collapsed and Germany was reunited, representatives of the former Soviet Union started to assert that the US had publicly pledged in 1990 not to accept any of the former Warsaw Pact nations to join NATO. The West, led by Bill Clinton's US presidency, began NATO's eastward expansion, pushing the alliance's boundaries into close touch with those of Russia, as in the case of the Baltic nations. Moscow believes in the "great betrayal" story. The Lisbon Treaties, which became valid in 2009, mandate that nations wishing to join the EU must match their security and defense strategies with those of NATO. Brussels also introduced the Eastern Partnership initiative. It is no accident that the European challenge, with the revolt known as Euromaidan, is what lies at the core of the 2014 Ukraine crisis. When, on November 29, 2013, Yanukovich was due to finalize the association agreement with the EU in Vilnius, the Kremlin offered \$15 billion in instant, tangible assistance as well as lower gas costs. Yanukovich stated the agreement's signature would be delayed and the situation persisted until the end of February when demonstrators seized the presidential residence and Yanukovich fled to Kyiv. On February 23, Oleksandr Turchynov was appointed to serve as the interim president of the Ukrainian parliament. During this time, the south-eastern territories started to assert their independence, a process that rapidly escalated into the Donbass conflict. Russia continued with its strategy to reintegrate Crimea into the Russian republic while also providing the Donbass rebels with soldiers and resources¹²⁹. In February 2015, through the Minsk Accords, France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine attempted to initiate talks and mediate an end to the conflict. As conflicts continued, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, an actor and comedian won the presidency in April 2019. Zelenskyy pledged to

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Mattia Bernardo Bagnoli, *Modello Putin: Viaggio in Un Paese Che Faremmo Bene a Conoscere* (Gallarate: People, 2021).

¹²⁹ *ibid*

achieve reconciliation with Russia and put an end to the Donbass conflict.

But in October 2021, Russia commenced stationing troops and military assets close to its frontier with Ukraine, rekindling fears of an impending invasion. At the beginning of February 2022, US President Joe Biden issued an order for the deployment of 3,000 US soldiers to Poland and Romania, NATO members that border Ukraine, to deter Russian forces posted there and reassure NATO partners. On February 24, Putin declared the start of a full-scale land, sea, and air assault on Ukraine, targeting Ukrainian military resources and towns all around the nation. In collaboration with European partners, Biden announced harsh sanctions after describing this strike as "unprovoked and unjustifiable".

The present war in Ukraine and the tactics employed by the Russian government during the ongoing conflict are extremely similar to those used during the wars in Chechnya, particularly the Second Chechen War. As already explained, the second war in Chechnya is of particular importance because with it came Putin's rise to power, a key player in today's conflict. Putin's rise is not only the main cause of today's war but also perfectly characterizes the Russian government's years-long path against freedom of expression, imposing strong censorship and placing the nation's 'security' as the main excuse behind its actions.

It was thought that the corrupt nature of the Russian system of governance could have been overthrown by the current conflict with Ukraine. However, it is still in place because of specific reasons. The ruling elite, which owes its fortune to be in a place of leadership, is now faced with a harsh change: their assets in the West have either been taken or are being sanctioned. But the ruling class is unable to oppose Mr. Putin because they are constrained by their need for status for their wealth's prosperity and personal safety. At the same time, those who have chosen to bravely oppose the regime, are being either fined or imprisoned.

a.2 A possible comparison between the Russian-Chechen wars and today's invasion of Ukraine. Similarities:

a.2.1 'Russia's security is threatened and the nation is under attack'

While, during the Chechen wars, Russia declared to be threatened by the 'separatist and terrorist Chechens', in 2022 it declared to be under attack from the West, particularly from NATO. The only declared objectives, plans and programs of NATO have been security and cooperation, as well as a work of prevention and defense. NATO is depicted by the Kremlin

as an empire with an aggressive expansionist agenda, instead that as an alliance of independent states. The organization, which is not just a military alliance, is founded on an open-door policy toward European states wanting to join. This disproves each and every one of Russia's false claims over NATO's being a supposed danger to its safety within this context. The real threat to Russia is Russia itself. The latest of Russia's neighbors to be attacked is Ukraine, but it is not the first. Since the early 1990s, the Kremlin has recurrently shown its neo-imperialist aspirations, whether overtly as it did in the cases of Transnistria in the 1990s, Georgia in 2008, and Crimea in 2014, or more secretly as it did in the contexts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s and the Donbass region of Ukraine since 2014¹³⁰.

a.2.2 The Kremlin's 'secret maker': Putin's wars

Both conflicts have been labeled by the Kremlin as 'liberation wars'. However, in reality, both of them are Putin's wars: the degree of public support among the Russian people for their leaders' military efforts during the battles was not only positive, as Vladimir Putin tries to make its citizens believe. Even Russian soldiers, glorified and depicted as victorious heroes by the Kremlin, are merely cruel tools of the Russian military machine¹³¹.

Two of the Kremlin's 'secret makers' are Sergei Shoigu, the Russian defense minister, and Valery Gerasimov, the army's chief of staff. They have assumed prominent roles in Vladimir Putin's conflict since Russia started invading Ukraine. According to Putin, they were responsible for the successful 2014 operation to seize Crimea, Russia's military tactics in Syria, and the country's assistance for pro-Russian fighters in the Donbass area. The pair is also said to be among Putin's most devoted supporters and a symbol of the nation's military success.

a.2.3 The myth of the 'speed' victory

Putin's strategy and plan did not take into account the prospect of strong opposition. Both the Russian-Chechen wars and the war in Ukraine have flaws in intelligence and present a poor strategy. In both scenarios it was stated and proven that Russian troops were expecting minimal resistance: Russian forces were very surprised when they saw a considerably larger

¹³⁰ Oleg Chupryna, "The Truth behind the Myth of Russia 'Threatened' by NATO," 2022.

¹³¹ Anja Westberg, "Media Portrayals of the Russian-Chechen Conflict, Representations of Political Violence and Identity- a Discourse Analysis" (2009).

and more well-equipped adversary than they had anticipated. The rebels in Chechnya and Ukraine are well-drilled and experienced, many of them were veterans. They also had the benefits of defense in an urban setting¹³².

Moscow's reliance on outdated soviet strategic thinking was a direct cause of the first defeats in Grozny and Chechnya. Despite warnings from Russian leaders that the troops should not expect a fight, the Chechens were prepared and eager to defend Grozny. The three expected stages of the capture of Grozny, which was supposed to take place over only eight days, were individually explained by General Grachev. Later on, Grachev's ambitious schedule started to slide.

The administration faulty anticipated a "speed victory" also in Ukraine. Although Russia has an advantage in the air and can launch long-range missile attacks, this is not enough to launch a blitzkrieg. Battalion tactical units can move over a wide terrain, but they are often trapped in the suburbs of important cities like Kharkiv and are unable to make a meaningful assault on Kyiv¹³³.

Both the Chechen and the Ukrainian sides of the resistance are shown as fierce and courageous while Russian soldiers targeted any opposition and avoided coming into direct contact with Chechen fighters by using air power and bombardment. Just as Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyi appealed for the all mobilization of everyone of fighting age, Dudaev demanded a major military mobilization of Chechens to oppose the occupiers.

a.2.4 Forbidden words: the 'label' of the attack

The actions in Chechnya were not recognized by Russian authorities as a 'war' or any other kind of armed struggle. The conflict was instead referred to as a 'contra-terror operation' and the narrative of Chechen soldiers being labeled as terrorists was abused. The same thing is currently happening in Ukraine: there is not a war, just a "special operation for de Nazification". Therefore, the Kremlin instinctively associates Ukrainians who defend their country from Russian aggression with the Nazi Party. Media outlets were given a warning by Russia's communications watchdog to stop calling Moscow's invasion of Ukraine an "assault, invasion, or declaration of war" or risk having their content banned and fined. The use of non-approved language, in any media account, is prohibited by law: it applies to all those who talk

¹³² Olga Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars, 1994-2000: Lessons from Urban Combat* (Rand, 2001).

¹³³ Pavel Baev, "Putin's Dangerous Miscalculation of a Swift Victory," 2022.

about the "special military operation" in a news report, on television, or even merely on social media.

a.2.5 The justification of hostilities, an enemy with no national identity: 'Terrorists' Chechens and 'Nazis' Ukrainians

Russia always saw Chechnya more as a region rather than a country. It clearly resembles when, shortly after Ukraine's invasion, Putin remarked on Ukraine's lack of national identity. The thriving of Homo Sovieticus meant that Russian nationals were expected to conform to a mold that was accepted in Russia: diversity was tolerable as long as it complemented Russian expectations and demands. The Russian state's statements and regulations, which intended to compel unification and stifle nationalism, reflect the forced nature of this issue.

An entirely new global discourse—that of terrorism—emerged as a result of the September 11 attacks on the United States. The rhetoric and excuse needed for fighting and targeting any entity, from nation-states to armed rebels, were given by the war on terror. Russian authorities embraced this new narrative, portraying the separatist movement in Chechnya as terrorist groups. During the first Chechen war, Yeltsin was forced to explain the incursion to the West as a matter of domestic security while Putin portrayed the fighting and bloodshed in Chechnya as a component of an ongoing anti-terrorism operation. A myth was constructed: Russia was under attack and needed to protect itself. Russia stated its intention to "restore the constitutional order" immediately after Chechnya declared its independence. Other often cited objectives of the conflict were demobilizing the "power-usurped government" and fighting the "Chechen criminal gangs". In trying to end the "genocide" of ethnic Russians in those regions, Moscow first chose to declare the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk. Moscow has since presented several justifications and objectives for its "special military operation" in Ukraine which are almost identical. Putin both de-legitimized the Ukrainian nation by stating that "it is not a real country" and demonized its citizens, by highlighting that "Ukraine is full of Nazis".

a.2.6 The horrible unjustifiable war crimes

Wars' nature also revealed Russia's true intentions. The Chechen nation was on purpose intended to be destroyed by the way the war was fought. The infrastructure of Chechnya was destroyed by the Russians' all-out assault. More significantly, the Russian military

deliberately targeted the Chechen community, displacing, killing, and forcing tens of thousands of Chechens to flee their homes. The current situation in Ukraine is certainly following the same trend. Complete disregard for civilian life and grave violations of human rights have occurred and continue to take place. When Russian soldiers stormed into Chechnya and Ukraine and assaulted a variety of targets, including civilians and public infrastructure as well as military facilities, it was all intended to crush any and all resistance to Russia's expansion. Russia is fighting a war that aims at subjugating independent nations and bringing them back under its control. Russia's indiscriminate shelling of residential areas and its well-reported examples of killings of Chechen civilians amounted to genocidal use of force against people¹³⁴. While observers have emphasized Bucha and other Ukrainian slaughter locations, comparable sights have also been reported in Samashki and other locations in Chechnya.

a.3 A possible comparison between the Russian-Chechen wars and today's invasion of Ukraine. The new weapon: social media

a.3.1 Social media platforms in the global economy

Social media platforms now play a crucial role in the world economy. Understanding the functioning of cyberspace platforms and the types of information that are spread is crucial in a world that depends on the internet for its existence. We are living in the so-called "information era", in which people are continually exposed to online networks and go through significant systemic changes as a result. Social media networks have a broad range of impacts on the public, nonprofit, and corporate sectors.

The effect of social media on businesses and consumption patterns is crucial because it demonstrates how companies may engage with customers online and influence supply and demand. This phenomenon affects consumer decisions and the economic balance in our daily lives. They have an intangible form of power, which includes their ability to affect public opinion, molding our values, political views, and other aspects of our everyday lives through both direct and indirect influences.

The emergence of social media platforms and their present dominant market position may be attributed to three main causes.

¹³⁴ Chaim Shinar, "Chechens: Freedom Fighters or Terrorists?" *European Review* 27, no. 1 (2018).

The first component is what is referred to as the "network effect," which describes how the value of the service increases as a direct result of the number of users, buyers, and sellers that participate in it. A social media platform's ability to link users quickly fascinates new customers, who will therefore find the network to be pretty efficient. The same idea applies to business accounts on social networking sites: with only a few clicks, the online world provides the opportunity to become well-known in a quick and simple manner. The most significant benefits of social media marketing are brand exposure and recognition. Online communities may be created where users will feel a sense of connectedness. Although this aspect is not new, the development of social media transformed its size and reach. Since both the network and its users enjoy the convenience of this dynamics, this situation is sometimes referred to as a "win-win" since it appears that everyone profits from this mechanism.

The capacity to extract and interpret data is the second element. Platform owners have a competitive advantage because they learn about the digital world from its users. Social media has made it simpler than ever to collect data since the preferences of consumers are always being recorded. Platform firms build their offerings around the interests of their users, and they make an effort to recommend things to them through both explicit and implicit advertising, we basically are what is being sold. Social media networks are funded by advertisements, not by users. Advertisers are the customers, and the product is our time and attention. Users are positioned in a precarious situation since it is simple to continuously affect their behavior.

The substantial switching costs make up the third component. The likelihood that a user would desire to switch to another platform once entering one is quite low. There are various causes. The user would have to waste time and re-learn how to use the new platform's functions and would have to lose time building its presence in the new network. Businesses make significant investments in developing their social media identity. The "network effect" and the idea of switching costs can have lock-in consequences, which are the difficulty or lack of desire to transfer suppliers. In the fiercely competitive and ever-evolving market, switching costs' impacts are growing more complex. Since they have a strong and stable foundation, these processes are built on cycles that are hard to alter.

It is crucial to keep in mind that everything internet users do is closely monitored, traced, and recorded.

a.3.2 Weaponization of social media in today's war

With several million citizens, Ukraine is a nation with recognized boundaries, while no country in the world recognized Chechnya's declaration of independence, even though it came sooner than other Soviet republics and even before the USSR's formal collapse in 1991. Moreover, the two wars between Russia and Chechnya were fought in circumstances in which no state in the world condemned them. There weren't any penalties nor sanctions against Russia: international organizations published condemnatory comments and resolutions, but no one contested Moscow's right to use force against the separatists. In the context of recent events, several packages of sanctions, mostly of an economic kind, were imposed on Russia and the conflict got huge coverage and public attention in the West, which is not common in every war.

The main difference between the two conflicts is yet one of a different nature¹³⁵. Nowadays, there is a new weapon throughout which the war is fought: social media. Social media is a double-headed sword: on one hand, it helps to keep all of us constantly updated and provides us with first-hand sources. However, on the other hand, that does not always help to fight disinformation. In fact, it is used as a tool to spread it. The main threat to the Sovereign Internet is the occupation of Ukraine. The Kremlin now seeks a complete information monopoly rather than intermittent blocking and delays. Putin's Sovereign Internet is more than simply a barricade: it is now an offensive tool. It is a disruptive device designed to suppress Russian independent media and ban international websites like Twitter and Facebook. The Kremlin's claims that it is safeguarding its Internet sovereignty are just a pretext for a strategy to silence opposition. The Kremlin has responded to protests by using repression and censorship. Over 150 journalists have been obliged to flee because of the obstruction of independent media and the closure of broadcast stations. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are no longer allowed. Russia's new "fake news" law went into effect at the beginning of March. This regulation aims to prohibit persons from publishing material in news outlets that are thought to be in opposition to Russia's official account of the conflict with Ukraine. The phrase "war" and demands for "peace" are prohibited under the new legislation, which also prohibits independent reporting on the conflict with up to 15 years in prison¹³⁶.

¹³⁵ Aurelie Campana and Kathia Legaré, "Russia's Counterterrorism Operation in Chechnya: Institutional Competition and Issue Frames," 2010.

¹³⁶ Andrei Soldatov, "The New Iron Curtain," 2020.

Images and videos of the conflict's atrocities have swiftly traveled over the world, burning into people's minds. The personal accounts and content posted by common people on social media have grown even more powerful as a result of the war since some areas of Ukraine are inaccessible to all but a small number of journalists. Because of the use of social media, political and strategic political communication now has more complexity and immediacy. The interconnection, accessibility, and usefulness of social media have been dramatically underscored by Russia's unexpected intervention in Ukraine. There are numerous images and videos of shootings, blasts, and Russian tanks firing at Ukrainian public structures. Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter are also the main sources of videos showing rallies from Berlin to St. Petersburg and the migration of Ukrainian refugees into neighboring nations. President Zelenskyy, a skilled communicator, both on screen and in person, has crowdsourced a virtual army using the strength of platforms. A global audience that wants to help Ukraine has mobilized to provide money, supplies, and volunteers.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not the first full-scale "social media war", but is the most viral¹³⁷. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is rather unique in that it is an internet age conflict where the narrative is not virtually totally controlled by the attacking side, even if within the Russian Internet area, the messaging is regulated and the restricted narrative is pro-invader. Social media is another platform that Russia uses to spread the "fog of war"¹³⁸. As much as it is being conducted over land, this conflict is also being fought over information. The volume and promptness of information on the fighting in Ukraine have a drawback. While technology makes it easier for crucial conflict updates to propagate, it has also sped up the creation of competing narratives. According to the material being circulated by Russian official media, NATO and threats from the United States and its Western allies made the operation imperative. Propaganda from the Kremlin is not just a political weapon; it is also a real military instrument designed to manipulate society and affect democratic nations' decisions. It is important to see the Kremlin's omnipresent propaganda as a serious military instrument rather than just a strategic instrument. Often Russian goal of contaminating and losing sight of reality is accomplished and the Kremlin's propaganda attempts to delegitimize the enemy are successful. To regain the Russians' fallen pride and honor as a superpower, Putin decided to abandon the road of Western integration and adopted the neo-imperial path. To

¹³⁷ The Economist, "The Invasion of Ukraine Is Not the First Social Media War, but It Is the Most Viral," 2022.

¹³⁸ Dan Ciuriak, "The Role of Social Media in Russia's War on Ukraine," 2022.

do this, Putin spread delusional misinformation on TV and in the media about a NATO-encircled country being disgraced by the anti-Russian West¹³⁹.

Appeals for social media corporations like Facebook to adopt a more proactive strategy when it comes to detecting and removing inaccurate or deceptive content have already been generated by Russian attempts to disseminate disinformation about the invasion of Ukraine. Propaganda spreads unchecked in the meanwhile on community messaging apps like Telegram and WhatsApp. Participative media has made information warfare accessible to anybody with an internet connection, and this phenomenon will continue to influence the fight. In the meantime, we have a front-row seat to the fight as political figures provide daily update news on Twitter, celebrities and influencers raise awareness on Instagram, and individuals on the ground in Ukraine share real-time stories from the frontlines.

b) Russia's bubble: RuNet

b.1 The meaning of RuNet and its implications

The term "RuNet" is used to refer to the Internet used by Russian-speaking citizens, who may be geographically based in Russia or in other former Soviet states. "RuNet" refers to the world wide web and it includes Russian browsers, email providers, anti-virus software, dictionaries and Russian-language versions of Facebook, Amazon, YouTube, eBay, Uber, PayPal and several other domains. It also refers to online stores that have offices in Russia. Being on the RuNet provides a business with certain advantages since many domestic IT companies outperform international competitors in the Russian market. In fact, nowadays, some Russian consumers are not interested in using services such as Facebook or Google Maps, since local services, for instance, VK.com and Yandex, are specific for Russian users and have more local community support. However, it is important to keep in mind that the phrase "Internet on Russian territory" is frequently used by Russian government representatives to also refer to Internet infrastructures that are governed by Russian legislation, including the country's censorship, copyright, business, and advertising regulations.

¹³⁹ Matteo Pugliese, "Gli Obbiettivi Dell'info War," in *Il Mondo Di Putin* (Zolfo editore, 2022).

The historical nature of RuNet highlights how this unique network has been evolving as well as expanding its sphere of influence. There are two parallel growth phenomena when talking about RuNet: what occurred with Runet and what Runet actually is. Over time, the Russian government started seeing cyberspace as a 'region' with virtual borders. Putin's wish became for this imaginary frontier to coincide with actual state borders. He started desiring that only national law was going to be applied to Russia's internet 'area', to uphold the ideals of sovereignty and non-interference.

As a 'net', RuNet is very reliant on the historical and cultural setting. Regarding its technicality, the alteration in the ownership structure of the leading online platforms constituted one of its main developments. After the 2011–2012 election cycle, the government recognized the geopolitical danger posed by Runet. In fact, through the network, it was possible to raise doubts about the validity of the vote or citizens were able to support considerable opposition groups. Therefore, the third Putin administration began with several restrictive regulations and Russians started creating a terrific firewall¹⁴⁰. Runet's takeover needed a multifaceted operation that covered content, technological infrastructure, and the institutional ownership of key Internet platforms, influencing how Russians saw the Internet and building a legal framework to justify different oppressive actions. This was done by sovereinizing and securitizing the Russian online space¹⁴¹.

There were five distinct stages in the formation of the Runet. Firstly, when the Internet was becoming widely accessible, RuNet was ruled by the technological elite and those who could code. Then, with the introduction of LiveJournal, RuNet was converted into a cultural setting where online authors, artists, and reporters were taking over as the driving energy. Thirdly, in the 2000s, it became a platform for new and alternative media before evolving into one of the main ways to express discontent. It was the main space where it was possible to organize demonstrations in crisis situations, such as the 2011 Duma election. Lastly, it became a state-controlled tool. The state recognized the political danger that RuNet posed and started owning it¹⁴². The internet has democratized and decentralized information, which can now be developed and disseminated by anybody in the age of social networking. Opposite to

¹⁴⁰ A network monitoring system that keeps track of and regulates all internet traffic according to established security criteria. In most cases, a firewall creates a 'wall' between what are considered secure networks and untrusted ones.

¹⁴¹ Polina Kolozaridi and Gregory Asmolov, *Run Runet Runaway: The Transformation of the Russian Internet as a Cultural-Historical Object*, *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 277–96.

¹⁴² Gregory Asmolov, *Runet, Multidimensional Politics, and Crisis. A Conversation with Dr. Gregory Asmolov*, 2020.

Beijing's actions, Russia has not always governed the Internet, therefore it is now too late to enact strict top-down control. Putin's plan, therefore, appears to be working in the other direction, favoring self-censorship. Both the web's information-dissemination capabilities, such as bloggers, social media sites, and chatting, and its ability to acquire personal data are under attack by the government. The number of different regulation proposals has consistently increased, indicating that the RuNet is under more and more pressure¹⁴³.

As it is well known, after the start of the war with Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions imposed on Russia, several global networks were banned in the country. Moreover, as part of the larger economic exit from the nation, the majority of Western technology firms, from Airbnb to Apple, have discontinued or reduced their activities in Russia. In the early weeks of the conflict, a lot of Russians acquired virtual private network software in an effort to access information and websites that were prohibited. By the end of April, 23% of Russian internet users said they used VPNs occasionally. In order to stop individuals from getting around political censorship, the official media authority Roskomnadzor has started monitoring VPN services more strictly since June 2022. RuNet is growing and strengthening, as more users leave the globalized social media networks social, to use Russian ones.

b.2 Russian's Google: Yandex

The second-largest search engine in Russia, after Google, is called 'Yandex'. Offering more than 70 Internet-related goods and services, such as e-commerce, navigation, mobile apps, and digital advertising, Yandex LLC is a firm that services largely to Russian and Russian-speaking customers. Ilya Segalovich and Arkady Volozh launched Yandex earlier than Larry Page and Sergey Brin ever developed Google. With over 50% of the Russian search market as of right now, Yandex continues to dominate the sector. Another major factor for Yandex's popularity is that it started specifically as a Russian-language search engine. Since the entire search product concept was based on Russian morphology, it was able to comprehend and analyze Russian terms better than any of its rivals.

¹⁴³ Mattia Bernardo Bagnoli, *Modello Putin: Viaggio in Un Paese Che Faremmo Bene a Conoscere* (Gallarate: People, 2021).

b.2.1 The dark side of Yandex

In 2016, the Russian federal law "On news aggregators" (No 208-FZ) made it possible to penalize news aggregators for disseminating false information. The law went into effect on January 1st and established a method of indirect media control, allowing the Russian state to affect how internet news was distributed through already in place media regulatory frameworks. The law specifically holds Yandex News, and the news search algorithm, liable for any actions which are contrary to Roskomnadzor's legislation. However, links to news stories coming from state-recognized media sources, or registered media outlets, are free from accountability. News aggregators, including Yandex News, had to update their algorithms. The legislation "On News Aggregators" is an example of how Russian governance of internet news has evolved from focusing on control over the content and content providers to regulating the algorithmic infrastructures that determine how news is disseminated.

On March 26, 2017, the repressive government of Russia had to deal with anti-government demonstrations, because of which at least a thousand individuals were detained only in Moscow. From Vladivostok to St. Petersburg, thousands of people went to the streets to protest governmental corruption. The demonstrations took place in reaction to an investigative report about the self-enrichment of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, which was posted on YouTube by the Anti-Corruption Foundation of the opposition leader, Aleksei Navalny. These were the greatest revolts since 2012. The nationwide anti-corruption rallies, however, rarely appeared in the top-five Yandex news report. Even if Yandex reassured the public, stating that the broadcasted material was dependent on an algorithm, the event increased mistrust in the firm and sparked a heated discussion over their purported biased coverage. The possible effects of search engine 'bias' suddenly received considerable attention not just in Russia but all around the world, in both academic and popular groups. It was noticed that, compared to Google, Yandex algorithms directed visitors to much fewer websites that provided information about the demonstration occurrence. This demonstrated the *reference bias* of the firm. Moreover, users were directed to fewer web pages that critiqued Russia's autocratic regime. This showed the *source bias* of the Yandex algorithm¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴⁴ Daria Kravets, "Gauging Reference and Source Bias over Time: How Russia's Partially State-Controlled Search Engine Yandex Mediated an Anti-Regime Protest Event," 2021.

In 2020, Russia's Yandex and China's Baidu, two of the top five most used Web search engines worldwide, were run by businesses rooted in authoritarian governments. Even if Yandex tries to convince its customers that it doesn't alter its search algorithms for political purposes, various factors might indicate the contrary. It is very indicative just to realize that the most notable of the seven investors that provided funding to Yandex were Roman Abramovich, Russian tycoon and politician, and Alexander Abramov, billionaire businessman and Putin's aide.

The authoritarian system in Russia has been more open and "leadership-critical" than its comparable in China. Russia is an example of a nation where two search engines, internationally-owned Google and locally-owned Yandex, have similar market shares. This factor is obviously very different from China's 2010 total ban on foreign-owned Google. The complicated relationship between Yandex and the increasingly assertive Russian state has changed over the last ten years, shifting from public hostility to collaboration. Through the state-owned bank Sberbank, the Russian government had a so-called "golden share"¹⁴⁵ in Yandex. This grants Sberbank and the country's governing elites significant but unofficial influence over the company's policy. In comparison to the foreign-owned worldwide powerhouse Google, Yandex is expected to be more susceptible to political pressure because of its informal links to and partial ownership by the government. According to Yandex, their software gathers data on users' devices, networks, and IP addresses and keeps it both in Finland and Russia. Researchers are worried that the Kremlin might have gained knowledge of the data gathered by Yandex and thus be able to monitor individuals using their mobile devices. Yandex may have been obligated by local legislation to grant authorities access to user data once it has been gathered on Russian servers. AppMetrica is a software developed as part of a kit, or SDK, by Yandex. SDKs are foundational components that computer engineers use to build programs. In exchange for gaining access to user data that aid in targeted marketing, several SDKs are made available 'for free'. According to the business, data is only gathered 'after users have given their approval to the app'.

One thing is certain: Yandex is spreading propaganda and misinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, helping monetize state and oligarchs-owned sites.

¹⁴⁵ A nominal share frequently owned by a government agency that, under certain conditions, has the power to override all other shares in a governmental firm that is in the course of being privatized and converted into a stock corporation.

On the 3rd of June 2022, due to Russia's attack on Ukraine, the European Union sanctioned Arkady Yuryevichon Volozh, founder of Yandex. The EU claimed that Yandex participated in promoting official media and narratives in its search results and removing information connected to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On the same day, Yandex released an announcement declaring Volozh's immediate resignation from his positions and the board of directors. Following a recent revelation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, more than six Russian-language news websites utilize Yandex, Russia's version of Google, to insert advertisements in stories that propagate untrue information about the war in Ukraine. The Bureau found that Yandex delivered ads campaigns running alongside false reports that, for instance, repeated Russian alleges that Putin's "special operation" was proceeding as planned, that the Russian invasion was an "operation to denazify and demilitarize Ukraine" or that the US has bioweapons labs located in Ukraine.

Interestingly, despite having its corporate headquarters in Moscow, Yandex is listed on the New York Nasdaq under a firm with Dutch corporate registration. According to the Bureau's research, Western shareholders, particularly US firms like Yandex's majority investor, Capital Group, possess the great majority of its stocks. Fidelity and Invesco, two significant US wealth management companies, were the second and fourth-largest stockholders¹⁴⁶.

b.3 RuNet's Facebook: VK

Known as VK for short, VKontakte is a social media networking platform, often compared to Facebook. The use of the two networks is really similar: using the app, it is possible to find and add friends, collect followers, and share pictures. VK also enables businesses to set up their personal pages for advertising purposes. Since October 2016, Boris Dobrodeev has served as the Mail.ru Firm's Chief Executive Officer and was the CEO of VK. However, in December 2021, the son of a powerful Kremlin ally was subsequently named as his replacement. The decision came after a contentious purchase of VK by businesses state-owned gas company Gazprom. The controversy concerning Kiriienko's promotion to the top position at VK is due to his parents' association with Vladimir Putin. One of Putin's most important advisors and the head of the nation's domestic policy is Kiriienko's father, Sergey.

¹⁴⁶ Sebastian Shehadi, "US Investors Are Supporting Putin's Propaganda via Yandex Search Engine," 2022.

Sergey Kiriyenko served in 1998 as prime minister under Boris Yeltsin and he is now the lead person for the Kremlin in the Donbass and other Ukrainian regions that are under Russian occupation. The idea of a sovereign Russian internet, which would cut off Russia's network infrastructure from the rest of the world and allow the Kremlin considerably more authority, has also been actively promoted by Kiriyenko Senior. Analysts have taken the hiring of Kiriyenko junior, who once had a key position at state-owned telecom business Rostelecom, as the most recent development in VK's progressive loss of sovereignty from the Russian administration. This was clear, particularly after the Yarovaya law of 2016. Because of this new legislation, internet service providers, including VK, have to keep conversations, postings, pictures, videos, and information for up to six months.

By the end of 2021, VK had united with Mail.ru and changed its name to the VK Group. The business was struggling to develop quickly enough to fight with US competitors. By the end of 2021, WhatsApp has surpassed VK in terms of user numbers, as per Statista. Instagram followed closely. The business was once more "struggling" and seeking investors in the months before the invasion of Ukraine¹⁴⁷. Due to Russia's current ban on its rivals, VK has benefited greatly. After Facebook and Instagram were prohibited, VK achieved a record 50 million daily visitors in March, making it the most used social media platform in the nation.

¹⁴⁷ Morgan Meaker, "How the Kremlin Infiltrated Russia's Facebook," 2022.

CHAPTER FOUR - Future trends

a. Interviews: Scholar Andrey Indukaev and Professor Camilla Pagani

To conclude my research, I was able to interview Scholar Andrey Indukaev, which I personally met while he was co-teaching the 2019's 'Digital Transformation of history and society in Russia' summer course, held at the University of Helsinki. Working at the Digital Russia Studies department at the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki, Andrey Indukaev is a postdoctoral researcher who is specialized in the socio-technical mechanism and political agenda of Russia's technological age. He also developed unique methods for working with digital data, notably those that allow sociologists and political scientists to filter through enormous amounts of text to find recurring argumentation and ideational trends.

What are the main consequences of the spread of digital technologies in an authoritarian regime such as Russia?

Andrey I.: 'Economic development, transformation of political communication both for opposition and government, new forms of surveillance and control as well as new forms of resistance.'

Are the consequences of the Russia's securitization of the IT sector and of the internet destructive for innovation and digital technologies?

Andrey I.: 'While the securitization could enhance innovation and technological development in some areas, the overall effect would be indeed destructive.'

What transformations did technologies undergo, in the post-Medvedev's years - Putin's third term?

Andrey I.: 'A post war update would be that the commitment to the integration in the global economic and technological space is off the table, has lost any priority status. Now there is a completely unrealistic discourse of Russia tacking advantage of the challenges posed by its being cur from that space and will develop economically and technologically. And there are pragmatic efforts to solve the oncoming problems.'

What geopolitical role will Russia's technological development will have, in regards to future power competition?

Andrey I.: 'The military technology, will play a role as Russia has advanced armament. Some reserve of technological capacity, advancement in some areas, especially the digitalization, will help Russia to decline slowly and not abruptly. I do not think Russia being able to somehow use it in the geopolitical competition.'

Did recent sanctions particularly affect Russia's digital technology department? If yes, what are/will be the main consequences?

Andrey I.: 'Here is the area where Russia is relatively resilient, if we do not talk about hardware, I would say. I think the combination of copyright infringement, use of products of countries that do not introduce sanctions, and local development will keep the digital sphere working.'

Furthermore, I had the pleasure of interviewing Professor Camilla Pagani, which I also personally met during my Exchange semester in Moscow. She has been a board member at Sciences Po Alumni since 2019, an Academic Fellow of Bocconi University and has been teaching Political Theory at MGIMO University School of Government and International Affairs for more than seven years.

Will we experience, or are we already experiencing, a fragmentation of Putin's power?

Camilla P.: 'This question will depend on the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine. At this stage it is still too early to talk about a fragmentation of Putin's power.'

Will Putin's reign last 'forever'?

Camilla P.: 'Nothing lasts forever except the City of Gods! The famous motto "the King is dead, long lives the King!" testifies that while humans are mortal, institutions last longer. The problem of current Russian institutions is that they have been built over the personalization of Putin. Therefore, once his mandate will take to an end, either in 2024, either later thanks to a change in the Constitution, there will be a political vacuum and a potential instability.'

How will Russian institutions be in the post-Putin context? The question of succession in authoritarian and personalized regime is essential and will need a careful analysis. What about the integration of the Russian Federation?’

What role do you think repressed social discontent will play in the unfolding of the events, if any?

Camilla P.: ‘The problem of the expression of discontent in nowadays Russia seems to follow a vicious circle. On the one hand, since the beginning of what has been officially defined "military special operation", the Kremlin has been intensifying a strong repressive policy. Although the suppression of discontents through censorship, misinformation and imprisonment has started years ago, it has now considerably changed in its scale and nature, reaching unprecedented levels. Most independent media have now left the country, journalists have moved or have been silenced by authorities. On the other hand, reactions from Western countries with the introduction of sanctions and the intention to isolate the country, represent a perfect justification for the Kremlin to blame the West for the economic crisis. Isolating the country might provoke in the population a resentment and a nationalist sentiment which cannot but reinforce Putin's rating of approval, giving him more leverage to adopt repressive policies.’

What are the consequences of the spread of digital technologies in an authoritarian regime such as Russia?

Camilla P.: ‘Digital technologies can become a powerful means of surveillance in both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Contemporary digital technologies permit to collect, track, predict and prevent many social behaviors. Bernard Harcourt in his work *Exposed*¹ accurately demonstrated how individuals, instead of being reluctant, take pleasure in exposing their life entirely and in being tracked in all their personal movements. A smart watch can collect more data and sensitive information over an individual than an electronic bracelet commonly used in prison. Certainly, in a democratic regime with strong and mature juridical systems of individual protection, like the GDPR in the European Union, juridical security is better preserved than in authoritarian ones. In the latter, the uses and abuses over the huge amount of personal and sensitive data can represent a real danger for citizens, who might be imprisoned for a like in social media or a suspected movement. The cases of large-scale imprisonments in Turkey during the 2016 coup and now in Russia, exemplifies how authoritarian regimes spread fear through the control of digital behaviors. Notwithstanding,

even in democratic regimes, the use and the transfer of personal data should receive more attention and precaution than it is now the case.'

Do you think that 'security' acquired a different meaning with Putin's presidency? If so, how?

Camilla P.: 'Security, as an ontological category has played and still plays a fundamental role in Putin's strategy. First of all, external security. Following the theory of neo-realism, security is the primary goal of every state, it is state survival in K. Waltz's terms. Putin has followed the strategy of being under attack to justify the invasion of Ukraine. In his justification, what he defined "the military special operation" was meant to protect the Russian territory from the expansion of NATO close to its borders. Concerning domestic security, during his presidency, the securitarian apparatus has been reinforced. The justification of many repressive tools has been built over a securitarian and surveillance-based ideology. This was accepted by a part of the population who witnessed the chaotic and dramatic period of the "liberal" years in the '90s. The achievement of economic and political stability was made at a price of a total depoliticization and acceptance of a loss in liberties, through an "invisible pact" between the government and part of the population.?

Did recent sanctions particularly affect Russia's population/perception of the regime? If yes, what are/will be the main consequences?

Camilla P.: 'Recent sanctions have had an enormous impact on the economy of the country, in particular the private sector and the middle class living and working in large cities. This will certainly affect the population perception of the regime, because isolation and misinformation will provoke a resentment and an increasing nationalism. The reduction of trade with international companies, the closure of most multinational companies' offices and stores in the Russian territory, the departure of expats, the loss of university exchanges can bring unpredictable and serious consequences for the medium and long term. If sanctions can be an effective tool used to weaken Russia's capacity in the conflict, at the same time they can reinforce the Kremlin power.'

Are the consequences of Russia's securitization of the cyberspace destructive for the country's future innovation?

Camilla P.: 'Innovation always originates from cooperation and exchange of ideas and thoughts. The isolation of Russia, internally through the securitization of the cyberspace with

the creation of rusnet and externally through the interruption of scientific cooperation and exchanges, will certainly have a very negative impact on the country's future innovation.'

Is there any insight, regarding your experience as a visiting Professor at MGIMO University, that you would like to share?

Camilla P.: 'My experience as visiting Professor at MGIMO in Moscow, where I have been teaching for more than 7 years to graduate and undergraduate international students, is an extraordinary one. I have had the privilege to teach complex and sensitive political topics such as democracy, liberalism and political regimes to international students with very different social, cultural, historical and religious backgrounds. My classes were composed by students literally from all over the world (Russia, United States, European Union, Turkey, Pakistan, Syria, China, Uzbekistan, India, just to mention some of them). In particular, I remember a student from Nigeria during a class on democracy and elections, explaining that her family never voted because they feared that they might be attacked and injured. This biographical episode made me realize how political science can be enriched through dialogue and discussions in such international and heterogeneous classes. At MGIMO I truly experienced a plurality of situations and perspectives, which were put in a fruitful and free dialogue during the interactive sessions.'

b. The implications of today's disinformation campaign

The Russians have long been skilled users of disinformation, both throughout the Tsarist and Soviet eras. Nowadays, in the digital era, Russians have more opportunities than ever to master the shadowy art of fake news. Russia now has an authoritarian power system in place, with significant restrictions on the rights to free speech, the press, and association, and with fraud elections and no separation of executive and judicial authority. Despite this, the Tsar's system is not entirely forced from above on an unresponsive public; rather, it rests directly on the shoulders of the populace, which occasionally suffers its effects while at other times enjoying its advantages. There were two major phases during the Tsar's rule: the restoration of Great Russia and its imposition. In the first instance, it is about creating and enjoying consensus, but in the second, it is about "abuse". The Russian government is currently transitioning into its third phase, which is marked by the evolution of consensus.

Goodbye to the hybrid system and welcome to complete suppression of any sector that isn't aligned with Kremlin policy, with Putin secluded within safe and secure cyberspace¹⁴⁸.

Disinformation campaigns can be employed by foreign governments and their enablers and a clear contemporary example of this is Russia's aggressive disinformation campaign against Ukraine. In several places throughout the world, especially over the course of the last eighteen to thirty-six months, would be possible to find hostile state and non-state actors who tried to target elections at the national and sub-national levels. The fact that digital tools are available at all our fingertips also means that disinformation reaches far broader than it could have done once upon a time. The intended and unintended consequences that this phenomenon has in the offline world make it difficult to address the repercussions which are nowadays much more profound. The possible implications are reflected in the transformation of social stability, solidarity, justice and human rights, among other major influenced areas. The global pandemic created even more fertile ground for the thriving of disinformation since citizens all over the world became connected in ways they have never been before and have seen the evolution to what is referred to as the 'infodemic', that followed alongside the pandemic. For democracies, openness is a strength and democratic governments blossom thanks to the ability to freely and actively debate and share ideas with one another. This capability depends on the proficiency to have a diverse and reliable source of news and information, based on a set of 'agreed facts' that should help the citizens to form an opinion. What is so harmful about today's disinformation campaigns is that they are really undermining the ability to have a sensible conversation with our neighbors. The lack of a 'shared set of facts' weakens not only citizens' trust in each other but also the understanding and respect that they have towards experts and government officials. Faith in governance could be lost and that entails the risk of threatening the democratic spirit of a nation. Those who are deploying disinformation have precisely that as their objective and they do play a dangerous game. Pervasive disinformation risks leading to conflicts and violence, becoming a challenge to democracy itself. Disinformation is indeed both a simple and a complex subject. We are all responsible for countering disinformation and we have to develop the best practices and the most effective tools, with the assistance of our governments, to establish policies to protect our societies. One step in countering the threat is identifying the source of disinformation, the malevolent tool.

¹⁴⁸ Mattia Bernardo Bagnoli, *Modello Putin: Viaggio in Un Paese Che Faremmo Bene a Conoscere* (Gallarate: People, 2021).

The Kremlin, inactivating a disinformation campaign focused on the war in Ukraine, has the goal of undermining European and transatlantic unity, utilizing not only fake news but also spreading a grain of truth in a lot of lies.

Going back to 2014, there was the first Russian invasion of Ukraine, a time when Russia had annexed Crimea and when the Malaysian airline was shot down. The emergence of Russia's media state narrative was trying to seed and deflect responsibility. The playbook of what Russia did in 2014 set the stage for today's situation. The deflection and the spread of disinformation thrive online. Unverified claims easily spread on platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, generating hundred and thousands of comments, shares and revenues. This is an actual business model that, along with the approaches of the government news website, is also responsible for the spread of misinformation and the creation of mistrust. 2016 was a year of considerable changes, during which we witnessed, among many other events, the impeachment of the President of Brazil Dilma Rousseff, the referendum for Brexit in the United Kingdom and the presidential election of Trump in the US. Around 2018 investigating disinformation already became a job. Fact-checking is now a well-funded and organized global practice and there are now hundreds of facts checking organizations pursuing this area that did not exist in 2016. However, even in today's world, this field of study is not evenly distributed. While western nations are trying to work on this issue, not all governments are taking the same efforts. In the meantime, we are experiencing a conflicted scenario: platforms like Facebook are major founders of fact-checking organizations since they find themselves in need of specific data, in order to know what content to remove or cut down. This creates a potential for conflict since disinformation operations, in some areas of the world, are just part of running a business. Making informed decisions and reinvigorating the public debate remains an essential part of every democratic society. The war in Ukraine, as well as the pandemic and global economic uncertainty, is seen as an opportunity to create confusion and fear, undermine people's trust in institutions and societies, while generating disinformation.

However, even Russians fell for the 'disinformation trick'. Putin was recently forced to withdraw troops from Kharkiv since the Kremlin's army was routed by Ukrainian forces in a surprise counteroffensive. An extraordinary disinformation campaign, that has been going on for months, convinced Russian troops to focus on southern Ukraine, in Kherson. This was said to be a clever strategy to distract Russian forces and trick them into pulling away from the northeastern front of Kharkiv.

What is known for sure is that the Ukrainian counteroffensive has been going on since the 6th of September. Ukrainian troops were able to retake the entire region in just 11 days, including the entire city of Izyum, which had been lost to Russia early in the war. The city is a strategic infrastructural point since there are key rail lines to resupply and reinforce their troops from Kyiv all the way near Donbas. Moscow claims that this was part of a planned orderly withdrawal and the Russian Ministry of Defense called it a 'regrouping'. Some groups on Telegram are spreading the news that the 'retreat' was a measure designed to protect civilians, in order to take more strategic positions.

However, it is clear from ground evidence that the offensive happened where Russian forces least expected it. There are already unconfirmed reports from the Ukrainian general staff that Russian units near Kherson are negotiating their surrender. However, not all Russian forces are willing to give up without a fight in retaliation for this battlefield loss and they have escalated strikes on a key Ukrainian infrastructure piece that they have avoided attacking up until now. Russian forces launch 18 missile strikes and 39 air attacks on the key Kharkiv tech number 5 power station located in the southwest of the city, the second largest energy hub in all of Ukraine. The bomb cut off the heat and water supply to millions of civilians in Ukraine.

Overall, this episode seemed to be a turning point for the possible evolution of the conflict. It sparked comments and it appeared to have opened a debate on the Kremlin's future tactics. In fact, after the successful counteroffensive of Ukrainian forces, the Russian rhetoric changed, searching for who to blame for such an ineffective and losing war. Opposition politician, Boris Nadezhdin, during a live television panel discussion accessed and circulated by Russian Media Monitor, had some interesting comments on what is happening. He started by saying that President Vladimir Putin was 'set up' by someone among his collaborators, receiving wrong information and perception of what a military intervention in Ukraine would turn into. He continued by stating that it is clear that the President was told that the operation in Ukraine would have been fast and victorious. According to Nadezhdin, Putin was convinced that Russian forces would have been welcomed with open arms as saviors and that there would not have been any strike against the civilian population. Russian television programs are now apparently allowing the use of the word 'war' during discussions, which constitutes a further interesting development. Moreover, during the discussion, Boris Nadezhdin suggested peace talks to end the war, stating that Russia has no other possibility to win the war. However, it is not really clear where this will lead to. Because, while saying that peace talks could be a possibility to end the conflict it is also said that negotiations will be

highly improbable under Zelensky's Nazis regime, fighting with the help of the NATO block. The situation is rather complex, since western Europe and the US are not only part but also important players of this war theater. Putin stated that a global war is on its way, and this is just a fragment of it. After the shift in the Kremlin's narrative, will the conflict escalate or will it end in negotiations?

CONCLUSIONS

In Putin's Russia, there are several causes of dissatisfaction, including an economy dependent on the extraction and export of raw resources, an ineffective public sector, a politically-controlled judicial branch, pervasive corruption and the Kremlin's strict social control on citizen's everyday life. The Kremlin's choice to exclude opposition candidates from the Moscow polls proves the leadership's fragility. Post-Soviet Russia was believed to have rebirth into a nation of the democratized world. Nowadays, it is a nation that drowns in corruption and authoritarianism.

Russia has undergone significant transformations since the 1980s: the glasnost policy reforms and Gorbachev's perestroika, the years from 1989 to 1991, when many former Soviets found themselves residing in a different nation, the economic stagnation and the privatization process, the clash at the Moscow White House under Yeltsin in 1993, the new constitution, the two Chechen wars, Putin's rise, RuNet's regulations and the invasion of Ukraine. The government never truly changed, and once Putin took office in 2000, it quickly reclaimed the influence it had briefly ceded to the oligarchs, a rising civil society, and independent media. Early on, Vladimir Putin had the opportunity to recognize the media's power to influence public perception and shift the course of political events. By the end of the fight for Yeltsin's succession, which never truly existed since political pluralism is an unknown feature in Russia, the success of a previously unknown KGB member was mainly due to a brilliant propaganda campaign launched in his favor by Russian oligarchs. Putin learned from this and fought to seize control of the media.

State-run media have been an effective government tool in populace mobilization in favor of the conflict in Ukraine and against the West. Everyone is asking themselves what to expect now. Due to Putin's military aggression, the West imposed economic sanctions targeting several of the government's wealthiest and most influential members. However, a coup is unlikely to occur, given that collaboration with the state and participation in its corruption are prerequisites for getting powerful in Russia. The ongoing crisis in Ukraine is not the first criminal action by Putin's government or the post-Soviet Union after communism was overthrown. The history of atrocities, now buried, dates back to the theft that prompted the privatization process, the apartment bombings in 1999, the Nord-Ost theater siege in 2002, the assault of the Beslan school in 2004, the poisons and murder of Alexander Litvinenko, as well as those of Anna Politkovskaya and countless others. The average Russian today supports a system that, despite its corruption and brutality, has provided some level of everyday peace and security and, until recently, ruled over improving living conditions.

Since its beginnings, the Putinist governance structure has been distinguished by a vertical power structure, targeted political coercion, and ideological and cultural deception for political advantage. The state apparatus has become even more oppressive and authoritarian over recent years. Following the Kyiv Maidan protests, Russia's annexation of Crimea, the fighting in eastern Ukraine and the struggle with the West, the trend of dictatorial radicalization accelerated, together with Russia's media propaganda campaign. The Kremlin's ideology and strategic goals are reinforced by the intelligence agencies' dominance of information, the usage of deception tactics and the capitalization of hate speech. The President's isolation from society has grown from labeling critics as "foreign agents" to intimidation, imprisonment, prosecution, political killings, and harshly punishing any criticism or autonomous social and political activities. Vladimir Putin is the source of today's poisonous political heritage in Russia, which has seeped in and destroyed expectations for a liberal, democratic, and law-abiding nation.

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SUMMARY

The history of Russian media as a political tool dates back to 1917, the beginning of a period that lasted for over 70 years well known for its Tsarist censorship and propaganda on Bolsheviks-Soviet politics. In 1990 Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev became the President of the Soviet Union and the situation started changing. Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy reform and *perestroika* were followed by the most important step towards the democratization of the media: the 1990 Press Law, which established the legal basis for freedom of expression. The USSR's collapse was sealed by the failed August coup against Gorbachev, which was orchestrated by radical Communists and encouraged Yeltsin and the democratic forces to be the frontline of Soviet and Russian governance. At that moment in Russian history, a new generation was claiming economic and political liberties, feeling reawakened after Soviet rule. Boris Yeltsin was their charismatic leader, an inspirational figure, popular and successful. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and during the early 1990s, Russian media obtained brief and unprecedented independence, undergoing significant transformations. First of all, television became pluralized. However, despite Yeltsin's overall genuine commitment to the democratic process, media freedom was in imminent jeopardy, being exposed to new challenges, including the market economy, the end of the Communist Party's ideological control and the aspiration of the Western media model. The fight for the control of television was a crucial issue in the bloody clash between President Boris Yeltsin and the Parliament in October 1993, the so-called 'Moscow civil war'. Following his victory in the October conflict, Yeltsin introduced a new draft constitution to the citizens, which provided the President with near-authoritarian leadership. The Supreme Soviet was substituted with a smaller council, the State Duma, which would have almost no authority over the executive branch. If 1991 provided Russia with various possibilities, including a way toward a rule-of-law state and an open society, 1993 effectively eliminated all but one. This alternative was a new system of individual authority with no checks and balances, no counterbalance to the Kremlin's residents

One of the main reasons behind the October dispute between the President and the parliament was privatization. Since Yeltsin's administration was forced to handle the massive state enterprise sector left by the Soviet economy, the Congress obliged the government to pursue a voucher-based privatization. The privatization process started in October 1992. Vouchers were evenly distributed and each Russian citizen, including children, obtained a 10-thousand-ruble state privatization cheque. Each voucher was said to reflect a citizen's part of

the country's national wealth. Enterprises were transformed into joint-stock corporations and Russians were encouraged to trade their coupons for shares in any company. However, because the majority of Russian citizens were either unaware of the program's significance or extremely impoverished, when given their vouchers, they were ready to sell them in exchange for just a little cash. This made possible the rise of the influential entrepreneurs that accumulated massive wealth and power: the oligarchs.

The Russian government stopped printing money in late 1994, in response to the World Bank's demands to lower inflation and started the "loans for shares" scheme to pay obligations. The loans-for-shares auctions scheme was designed to consolidate the bankers' support for Yeltsin's reelection campaign in 1996. In fact, on the verge of collapse, Yeltsin's government desperately needed cash to pay salaries and pensions. The oligarchs agreed to funnel money to the state by making a series of loans that the government could not afford to repay. When the loans did default, the oligarchs got the right to buy Russia's biggest state enterprises in sham auctions run by the oligarchs themselves.

The oligarchs, scared of the return of communism, encouraged Yeltsin's victory in the election campaign of 1996, shaping public opinion through the media they owned. At that time, what was not broadcast on television simply did not exist. Media at that time had relative freedom and independence from the state but it was used instrumentally to manufacture favorable public opinion. Still, nowadays the major national networks are either directly controlled by the Kremlin or are managed by businesses with strong links to the government.

Russia and Chechnya have had a long history of hostility which dates back to the 19th century when the Imperial Russian Army attacked the territory as part of a colonial operation. The invasion quickly grew into a purposeful campaign that incorporated several "independent territories," including Chechnya, into the USSR. In Chechnya, Islam enabled the Chechens to feel part of a larger Caucasian battle for independence, supplying the moral justification for resistance against the non-believers and conquerors: the Russians. Aspirations for independence became a major political issue in the early 1990s and when the Soviet Union began to disintegrate, the Chechens saw a chance to rebuild their cultural identity. The "Chechen Revolution", commonly referred to as the time between 1990 and 1991, culminated with the dissolution of the administration of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic of the Soviet Union and Dudayev's election. Chechnya's secession represented a danger to Russian sovereignty, compromising Russia's geographic security and integrity, and therefore had to be avoided at all means. The first Russo-Chechen conflict of 1994 broke out when, in

December, Russian forces entered Chechnya following an upsurge in tensions between the Russian government and Dudayev. Russia aimed to disrupt Dudayev's separatist rule to replace it with the Provisional Council, a pro-Russian government.

However, Russia's military campaign failed and Boris Yeltsin's administration had to declare a truce with the Chechens, signing a peace deal in 1997. Chechnya was politically autonomous after the war but was not internationally recognized as a sovereign nation.

Parliamentary and presidential elections were conducted at the beginning of 1997 and Aslan Maskhadov was elected President of the renamed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Russia continued to consider the Caucasus its 'backyard' as it represents a territory with which is inextricably intertwined. Chechnya represented an issue of territorial integrity, a problem of international law and order. The strong nationalism of the region was the biggest single threat and the most tenacious challenger authority to the Soviet state.

While Basaev, leader of the Chechen independence movement, was invading Dagestan with his army of Islamist fighters, the 1999 Russian apartment bombings happened. After these horrible attacks, the country's recently chosen prime minister, the then-unknown Vladimir Putin, emphasized Russia's thirst for revenge. On December 31, Boris Yeltsin stepped down, leaving the office to the newcomer.

Although the investigations had not given any clear results, Putin's government was quick to accuse the bombings on Chechen terrorists. However, the people responsible for the bombings of the residential buildings, which killed nearly 300 people were never caught. To the degree that proof exists, it leads to the Kremlin leadership and the FSB rather than Chechen militants.

In October 1999, a ground attack marked the start of Russia's second conflict with Chechnya. The 2002's Nord-Ost theater hostage crisis and the 2004's Beslan school siege, aided Putin's attempt to portray himself as a counter-terrorist and to justify the Chechen conflict in Russia and the West.

The tyrant Ramzan Kadyrov, the current pro-Moscow President, was nominated by Moscow in 2007. Nowadays, Ramzan Kadyrov is still the Head of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, which has the facto independence but is a de jure part of Russia. The Russian Federation's attitude toward Chechnya has been labeled 'Chechenisation,' and the destruction of the Chechen insurgency is considered a narration of Putin's political system's triumph. The actual federal government's goal was to change the character of the conflict from Russian-Chechen to 'interchechen'.

The wider issue of Chechnya, which is now regarded as a foreign enclave within Russia, continues to be a huge concern for Russia, one that might have a big impact on the state's

union and internal safety in the future, as well as jeopardize its geographical integrity. Throughout the Russian-Chechen wars, the impact of discourse on degrading the Chechens as a social group and generating a "we against them" mindset has been widely observed. This was mainly done through a weaponization of words and images in an attempt to shape the beliefs of both supporters and opponents of the fight. During the first Russian-Chechen war, pro-Chechen backing granted the Chechen revolution legitimacy and faith, portraying the Chechen community as a victim of Soviet persecution that merited to be liberated. However, the situation completely changed during the second war: Russian citizens' support shifted toward the federal troops. What was the catalyst for such a difference? Firstly, Russia started an anti-Chechen disinformation operation aimed at changing national and international opinions regarding the fighting in Chechnya, while transmitting a strong anti-Chechen sentiment. Secondly, the propaganda campaign, which mostly consisted of pictures or videos circulated through media channels, became extremely successful in discrediting the insurgency after 9/11: Chechens became labeled 'terrorists' and the war a 'counterterrorism operation'. The third factor was the spread of disinformation due to the one-sided report on the conflict. New regulations imposed did not allow any more journalists to report from Chechnya. Lastly, after years of economic, societal and military losses, Russian citizens were desperate for a win and the state narrative, or better Kremlin's propaganda, strengthened Russia's image as a strong political power and security guarantor.

However, the most important difference of all, between the first Russo-Chechen conflict and the second, was the election of Putin. The prosecution of the Chechen conflicts together with a booming economy, two key elements that contributed to his rising popularity, enabled Putin to settle wage and pension debts. Both of these features represented the state's comeback. Even though Mr. Putin was an autocrat, he was perceived as a democratic leader. Since the start of Putin's administration, an absolute political authority has been consolidated at the apex of the executive branch and public access to policy decisions has been blocked. Over time Putin has become Russia's undisputed and unquestioned ruler. At that time, Russia was going through a phase of 'self-negation' while other nations in the former Soviet Union welcomed their national freedom and 'return to Europe'. With Putin's usage of a hybrid politics, that combined liberal economics with centralized control, Russians who felt they had lost out in the 1990s began to engage in identity politics. The guilt over the national greatness decline was transformed into a reinvigorating feeling of a collective frame of belonging. Russian citizens praised Putin for his exceptional character traits, as well as for promoting Russia's position abroad and granting order and security within their nation. The establishment of the Putin-era regime was characterized by a vertical command structure and

the eradication of alternative power sources, two features that reinforced one another. Before Russian citizens realized what had happened, a dictatorial system was established.

One of Putin's main objectives was to increase state control over the media, and he started his fight against privately held national television immediately after taking office. Putin planned to manage the resources so that the main media would either be controlled by the government or held by Kremlin's allies. In Putin's Russia, independent public action had been completely sidelined, adversarial opposition abolished and the parliament had been transformed into an instrument of the presidency. In 2008, the Federal Service for Supervision of Information Technologies and Communications ("Roskomnadzor") was founded.

Putin had to leave office in the same year since the Russian Constitution forbade a candidate from standing for the presidency longer than two terms in a row. However, Putin selected Dmitry Medvedev, one of his longstanding allies, as his heir and the balance of power in Russia never truly shifted: ninety-five percent of the roles in Medvedev's administration were held by Putin supporters.

During Medvedev's presidency, the main print publications and radio stations started expanding their online presence. The growth of social platforms aided the dissemination of knowledge, strengthened social ties and increased interest in public issues. Civic engagement was on the upswing when Putin retook office.

The wider Putin's strategy of "zero tolerance" for any displays of civic freedom included limiting freedom of speech and expression and the 2002's 'Anti extremism Law' and the establishment of Roskomnadzor represented just a small precondition of what was going to happen just a few years later. The comparatively pluralist model of the 1990s transformed into a blatantly autocratic, monocentric and individualized system of governance, with the Kremlin's narrative being centered on bringing honor to the nation for its imperial military expansion and spreading fear for the 'hostile' West.

2012 was a turning point, characterized by the so-called 'Snow Revolution'. Beginning in 2011, and throughout 2012 and 2013, protests sparked against the outcomes of the Russian fraudulent parliamentary elections. Numerous user-made films documenting voting irregularities and election fraud were published online. The demonstrations against the corrupted elections showed the limits of Kremlin rule and the need for a new approach. The so-called 'Law on Foreign Agents', the law regulating non-governmental organizations, was enacted in Russia on the 20th of July 2012. Another significant gain of the government's power came only six months after the mass demonstrations with Federal Law Number 89417-6.8 "Blacklist Bill". It represented a huge development for Russian government

agencies' ability to obstruct access to internet content: with this Law, the Duma presented the framework for the country's first-ever Internet purifier system. It created a centralized registry of unauthorized websites and any data that was unfavorable of the Kremlin was included, particularly "promotion of separatism".

Putin began a fresh campaign against the dominant Russian online platforms after realizing that social media posed the largest threat to the Kremlin's storyline. In fact, television played a huge role in granting a sense of common belonging to its viewers, but its influence was decreasing, especially among younger people. Several regulations were passed, such as 'The law against retweets' and the 'Bloggers law', targeting freedom of speech in the cyberspace. In July 2018, the so-called Yarovaya bill mandated that telecommunications and internet service providers could preserve customer data such as phone calls, messages, pictures and videos, all accessible to the FSB intelligence service. The regulations require telephone and internet service providers to preserve traffic data between clients for six months and metadata for three years. Overall, the Kremlin's growing influence over the media has been a recurrent pattern in the country's governance of the mass media over the years. The measures aim to have a dictatorial grip over society.

The authorities will now harshly suppress anyone deemed to be lacking in loyalty. The intention is to stifle dissent and turn the Russian internet into a place to be feared: there will be no discussion, no forums for the sharing of ideas, and no organized demonstrations. 50 new rules to control Russia's online world were passed just in 2020. Russia has seen a significant shift both domestically and internationally since Putin come- back to the Kremlin in 2012. It has evolved globally toward conflict with the West, while internally, Putin's administration has chosen a counter-modernization path that is becoming more solitary; It has also gotten deinstitutionalized and individualized.

The concept of security has always been controversial, ambiguous and broad. Is it possible to promote security and liberty at the same time? Or neither security nor liberty can be increased without decreasing the other? Is security a precondition or a threat to liberty? In today's warfare, the role of the television or the power of the internet is just as important as an army. The question here is: will Russian citizens ever win the war against corruption, misinformation and propaganda, a war against Russia itself? Putin once stated that it was crucial to protect Russian nationals both inside and "outside its borders". These comments were a promise for the future, even if they received little attention at the time.

The main distinction between the regimes in Russia and Ukraine was that Ukraine had a more multicultural state due to its nationalist west and center and pro-Russian east. The

Ukrainian protests, at that time called the 'Orange Revolution', date back to late 2004. In November 2013, the ex-president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, opposed a plan for closer integration with the EU, triggering massive demonstrations in Maidan Square in the capital city of Kyiv, which he then forcefully tried to repress. Yanukovich was backed by Russia during the crisis, while the demonstrators were supported by the US and Europe. Due to this, Yanukovich was then forced to leave the nation. A day after Yanukovich left Kyiv, on February 22, Russia started preparing for a special operation to take control of the Crimean Peninsula, in an effort to regain its lost power in Ukraine. Russia's claim that it had to save the Russian-speaking community from neo-Nazi radicals served as justification for its occupation of Crimea. Vladimir Putin spoke on a massive platform set up in Red Square two days after Crimea's citizens approved a referendum to enter Russia, which was held on March 16, 2014. The 'reunification' of Crimea with Russia is viewed by the international community as a form of annexation, marking the first alteration in the borders of a European region since the conclusion of World War II. The crisis widened ethnical differences, and a few months later pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk staged a vote to establish their country's independence. Since then, it had intensified into an open undeclared conflict between Russia and Ukraine, until the end of February of this year, when the situation dramatically changed. On February 24, Putin declared the start of a full-scale land, sea, and air assault on Ukraine, targeting Ukrainian military resources and towns all around the nation. The present war in Ukraine and the tactics employed by the Russian government during the ongoing conflict are extremely similar to those used during the wars in Chechnya, particularly the Second Chechen War. As already explained, the second war in Chechnya is of particular importance because with it came Putin's rise to power, a key player in today's conflict. It was thought that the corrupt nature of the Russian system of governance could have been overthrown by the current conflict with Ukraine. However, it is still in place because the ruling elite, which owes its fortune to be in a place of leadership, is now faced with a harsh change: their assets in the West have either been taken or are being sanctioned. But the ruling class is unable to oppose Mr. Putin since they are constrained by their need for status for their wealth's prosperity and personal safety.

There are several similarities between the conflict with Chechnya and the current war with Ukraine, such as the 'victim' narrative: during the Chechen wars, Russia declared to be threatened by the 'separatist and terrorist Chechens', in 2022 it declared to be under attack from the West, particularly from NATO. Both conflicts have been labeled by the Kremlin as 'liberation wars'. However, in reality, both of them are Putin's wars: the degree of public support among the Russian people for their leaders' military campaign was not only positive,

as Vladimir Putin tries to make its citizens believe. Putin's strategy and plan did not take into account the prospect of strong opposition. Both the Russian-Chechen wars and the war in Ukraine have flaws in intelligence and present a poor strategy. In both scenarios, a 'quick victory' was expected. Moreover, the actions in Chechnya were not recognized by Russian authorities as a 'war', the conflict was instead referred to as a 'contra-terror operation' and the Chechen soldiers were labeled as terrorists. The same thing is currently happening in Ukraine: there is no war, just a "special military operation" for de-Nazification. Wars' nature also revealed Russia's true intentions. The Chechen nation was on purpose intended to be destroyed by the way the war was fought. The Russian military deliberately targeted the Chechen community, displacing, killing, and forcing tens of thousands of Chechens to flee their homes. The current situation in Ukraine is certainly following the same trend. However, there is a key difference between the two conflicts: the use of social media platforms. Social media platforms now play a crucial role in the world economy. Understanding the functioning of cyberspace platforms and the types of information that are spread is crucial in a world that depends on the internet for its existence. We are living in the so-called "information era" and social media are a new war weapon. With several million citizens, Ukraine is a nation with recognized boundaries, while no country in the world recognized Chechnya's declaration of independence. Moreover, the two wars between Russia and Chechnya were fought in circumstances in which no state in the world condemned them. There weren't any penalties or sanctions against Russia, while the war in Ukraine got huge coverage and public attention in the West. Putin's Sovereign Internet is more than simply a barricade: it is an offensive tool, a disruptive device designed to suppress Russian independent media and ban international platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The Kremlin's claims that it is safeguarding its Internet sovereignty are just a pretext for a strategy to silence opposition. Russia's new "fake news" law went into effect at the beginning of March. This regulation aims to prohibit persons from publishing material in news outlets that are thought to be in opposition to Russia's official account of the conflict with Ukraine. The phrase "war" and demands for "peace" are prohibited under the new legislation, which also prohibits independent reporting on the conflict, threatening regime's opponents with up to 15 years in prison. Ukraine's President Zelenskyy, a skilled communicator, both on screen and in person, has crowdsourced a virtual army using the strength of platforms. A global audience that wants to help Ukraine has mobilized to provide money, supplies, and volunteers. Images and videos of the conflict's atrocities have swiftly traveled over the world, burning into people's minds.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not the first full-scale "social media war", but is the most viral. As much as it is being conducted over land, this conflict is also being fought over information.

However, social media are a double edge sword: while technology makes it easier for crucial conflict updates to propagate, it has also sped up the creation of competing narratives and fake news. Russia uses the cyberworld to spread the 'fog of war', disinformation and propaganda.

The term "RuNet" is used to refer to the internet used by Russian-speaking citizens, who may be geographically based in Russia or other former Soviet states. "RuNet" refers to the world wide web and it includes Russian browsers, email providers, anti-virus software, dictionaries and Russian-language versions of Facebook, Amazon, YouTube, eBay, Uber, PayPal and several other domains. It also refers to online stores that have offices in Russia. Being on the RuNet provides a business with certain advantages since many domestic IT companies outperform international competitors in the Russian market. However, to them, it applies Russian legislation, including the country's censorship, copyright, business, and advertising regulations. The historical nature of RuNet highlights how this unique network has been evolving as well as expanding its sphere of influence. There are two parallel growth phenomena when talking about RuNet: what occurred with RuNet and what RuNet actually is. Over time, the Russian government started seeing cyberspace as a 'region' and Putin's wish became for these imaginary borders to coincide with actual state frontiers, to uphold the ideals of sovereignty and non-interference. This was done by sovereignizing and securitizing the Russian online space.

The second-largest search engine in Russia, after Google, is called 'Yandex'. Offering more than 70 Internet-related goods and services, such as e-commerce, navigation, mobile apps, and digital advertising, Yandex LLC is a firm that services largely Russian and Russian-speaking customers. On March 26, 2017, Russia's government had to deal with anti-government demonstrations, in reaction to an investigative report about the self-enrichment of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, which was posted on YouTube by the Anti-Corruption Foundation of the opposition leader, Aleksei Navalny. These were the greatest revolts since 2012. The nationwide anti-corruption rallies, however, rarely appeared in the top-five Yandex news report. Even if Yandex reassured the public, stating that the broadcasted material was dependent on an algorithm, the event increased mistrust in the firm and sparked a heated discussion over the server's reference biased coverage. It is very indicative just to realize that the most notable of the seven investors that provided funding to Yandex were Roman Abramovich, Russian tycoon and politician, and Alexander Abramov, billionaire businessman

and Putin's aide. The complicated relationship between Yandex and the increasingly assertive Russian state has changed over the last ten years, becoming a collaborative one. Through the state-owned bank Sberbank, the Russian government also had a so-called 'golden share' in Yandex. On the 3rd of June 2022, due to Russia's attack on Ukraine, the European Union officially sanctioned Arkady Yuryevichon Volozh, founder of Yandex. The EU claimed that Yandex participated in promoting official media and narratives, removing information connected to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On the same day, Yandex released an announcement declaring Volozh's immediate resignation from his positions and the board of directors.

Even VKontakte, a popular social network platform often called 'the Russian Facebook', has governmental ties: it was purchased by businesses state-owned gas company Gazprom. Vladimir Kiriyyenko was promoted to CEO of VK. Interestingly, one of Putin's most important advisors and the head of the nation's domestic policy is Kiriyyenko's father, Sergey. Sergey Kiriyyenko served in 1998 as prime minister under Boris Yeltsin and he is now the lead person for the Kremlin in the Donbass and other Ukrainian regions that are under Russian occupation. Due to Russia's current ban on its rivals, VK has benefited greatly. After Facebook and Instagram were prohibited, VK achieved a record 50 million daily visitors in March, making it the most-used social media platform in the nation.

To conclude my research, I was able to interview Scholar Andrey Indukaev, which I personally met while he was co-teaching the 2019's 'Digital Transformation of history and society in Russia' summer course, held at the University of Helsinki. Working at the Digital Russia Studies department at the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki, Andrey Indukaev is a postdoctoral researcher who is specialized in the socio-technical mechanism and political agenda of Russia's technological age. He also developed unique methods for working with digital data, notably those that allow sociologists and political scientists to filter through enormous amounts of text to find recurring argumentation and ideational trends. Furthermore, I also had the pleasure of interviewing Professor Camilla Pagani, which I met during my Exchange semester in Moscow. She has been a board member at Sciences Po Alumni since 2019, an Academic Fellow of Bocconi University and has been teaching Political Theory at MGIMO University School of Government and International Affairs for more than seven years.

The Russians have long been skilled users of disinformation, both throughout the Tsarist and Soviet eras. Nowadays, in the digital era, Russians now have more opportunities than ever to master the shadowy art of fake news. Russia now has an authoritarian power system in

place, with significant restrictions on the rights to free speech, the press, and association, and with fraud elections and no separation of executive and judicial authority. Despite this, the Tsar's system is not entirely forced from above on an unresponsive populace; rather, it rests directly on the shoulders of the populace, which occasionally suffers its effects while at other times enjoying its advantages. There were two major phases during the Tsar's rule: the restoration of Great Russia and its imposition. In the first instance, it is about creating and enjoying consensus, but in the second, it is about "abuse". The Russian government is currently transitioning into its third phase, which is marked by the evolution of consensus. Goodbye to the hybrid system and welcome to complete suppression of any sector that isn't aligned with Kremlin policy, with Putin secluded within safe and secure cyberspace. The fact that digital tools are available at all our fingertips also means that disinformation reaches far broader than it could have done once upon a time. The intended and unintended consequences that this phenomenon has in the offline world make it difficult to address the repercussions which are nowadays much more profound. Even Russians fell for the 'disinformation trick'. Putin was recently forced to withdraw troops from Kharkiv since the Kremlin's army was routed by Ukrainian forces in a surprise counteroffensive. An extraordinary disinformation campaign, that has been going on for months, convinced Russian troops to focus on southern Ukraine, in Kherson. Overall, this episode seemed to be a turning point for the possible evolution of the conflict. It sparked comments and it appeared to have opened a debate on the Kremlin's future tactics. In fact, after the successful counteroffensive of Ukrainian forces, the Russian rhetoric changed, searching for who to blame for such an ineffective and losing war.

In Putin's Russia, there are several causes of dissatisfaction, including an economy dependent on the extraction and export of raw resources, an ineffective public sector, a politically-controlled judicial branch, pervasive corruption and the Kremlin's strict social control on citizen's everyday life. The Kremlin's choice to exclude opposition candidates from the Moscow polls proves the leadership's fragility. Post-Soviet Russia was believed to have rebirth into a nation of the democratized world. Nowadays, it is a nation that drowns in corruption and authoritarianism. Since its beginnings, the Putinist governance structure has been distinguished by a vertical power structure, targeted political coercion, and ideological and cultural deception for political advantage. The state apparatus has become even more oppressive and authoritarian over recent years. Following the Kyiv Maidan protests, Russia's annexation of Crimea, the fighting in eastern Ukraine and the struggle with the West, the trend of dictatorial radicalization accelerated, together with Russia's media propaganda

campaign. The Kremlin's ideology and strategic goals are reinforced by the government's dominance of information, the usage of deception tactics and the capitalization of hate speech. Pervasive disinformation risks leading to conflicts and violence, becoming a challenge to democracy itself.