

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: MIKHAIL LESIN'S ROLE IN SHAPING  
THE RUSSIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Nataliya Rostova, Master of Arts, 2023

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This thesis is one of the first academic attempts to evaluate the career path of Mikhail Lesin (1958-2015), former Minister for Press, Tele- and Radio Broadcasting, and Mass Communications, shortly – Press Minister (1999-2004), Presidential adviser on media (2004-2009), and one of the founders of Video International, a pioneer in Russia's nascent advertising market. Lesin used his powerful post to enable the State to wrestle control of the national TV channels – NTV and ORT – from two prominent media tycoons, Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky. The thesis includes four case studies that illustrate Mikhail Lesin methods of influence, as well as 14 qualitative interviews with prominent leaders in journalism. The thesis describes how members of the political elite can influence and create media systems in countries where governing institutions are absent or weak. The interviewees for this thesis provide us with valuable insight into Russian media after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and how crucial the media's role is to the political culture.

MIKHAIL LESIN'S ROLE IN SHAPING THE RUSSIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

by

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*To the Russian journalism community  
which paid a very high price  
in order to tell the truth to public*

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1. Who was Mikhail Lesin?

### 1.1.1. Death on The Dupont Circle

On November 5, 2015, Mikhail Lesin, a former Press Minister, and Vladimir Putin's media adviser, was found dead in *The Dupont Circle Hotel* in Washington, D.C. The Russian media cited Lesin's family members, who told journalists that it was a heart attack.

In its initial report, four months later, the D.C. Medical Examiner's office announced Lesin died of blunt-force trauma to the head, neck, torso, and upper and lower extremities. The manner of his death was "undetermined," and the death was listed as "accidental."

In December 2017, though, the D.C. police released its official investigation saying Lesin was heavily intoxicated. "Much of the report is blacked out, *The Washington Post* wrote, including key pages that detail the autopsy, thus leaving unanswered how authorities reached their conclusion that the 57-year-old died accidentally after falling and hitting his head in his hotel room" (Hermann, 2017). This was detailed later by journalists who provided a drinking timeline of Lesin's last days (Schreck, 2019).

Citing concerns about the investigation, *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty* filed a lawsuit against the FBI under the Freedom of Information Act, and D.C. judge Hiram Puig-Lugo ordered the city to publicize any relevant medical records, toxicology reports, e-mails, and other materials. "In his ruling, Puig-Lugo rejected arguments by the city's lawyers that the privacy interests of Lesin's family outweigh the public's interest in the circumstances surrounding his death. Puig-Lugo chided city officials for what he said were overly broad arguments for turning over documents that could compromise how D.C. city police, or the FBI, conducted their investigations" (Eckel, 2019).

According to released documents, Lesin "sustained a fracture to a neck bone just below the jaw line at or near the time of his death" (Eckel, Schreck, 2019, 1). One forensic expert told journalists that such trauma is most often associated with strangulation or hanging. "I've done 12,000 autopsies and I've never seen a fractured hyoid bone on someone falling drunk," forensic pathology consultant Donald Jason said (Eckel, Schreck, 2019).

The cause for Lesin's death is still uncertain and surrounded by conspiracy theories.

### 1.1.2. Why is Mikhail Lesin important?

This thesis describes of how people in power may influence and create media systems in countries such as Russia, where governing institutions are absent or weak. Through the lens of those interviewed for this thesis, we can better understand the media sphere and how crucial the media's role is to the political culture. We can see examples of how an authoritarian state can become totalitarian step by step.

The power of Mikhail Lesin, a critical player in the Russian TV advertising market, a political public relations specialist, and Press Minister who regulated the media sphere, cannot be underestimated. Lesin was a key figure in creating a new Russian media system in which private media became subjected to control by the Kremlin and could no longer be financially sustainable. In contrast, control of the editorial agenda on national TV was stripped from the oligarchs who had agendas of their own. This thesis is one of the first attempts to evaluate the roles of Mikhail Lesin, the former Russian Minister for Press, Tele- and Radio Broadcasting, and Mass Communications, shortly – Press Minister (1999-2004) and Presidential adviser (2004-2009) who took control of Russia's national TV channels – *NTV* and *ORT* – from two prominent media tycoons, Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky. Despite Lesin's public statements

supporting the privatization of media outlets, the state became the major supervisor of the media under Lesin's leadership.

The two oligarchs, Gusinsky and Berezovsky, were forced to leave the country when Mr. Putin came to power. In 2013, one of the oligarchs was found dead in his London mansion. Questions still surround the announcement of Berezovsky hanging himself due to depression. The other oligarch has lived in the U.S. owns property in Spain and Israel and has never returned to Russia.

For context, Lesin was also among the Russian elites who helped Boris Yeltsin stay in power in 1996 and later brought Vladimir Putin to the Presidency in 2000. As Press Minister, Lesin promoted disinformation and propaganda campaigns related to the Russian Second Chechen War.<sup>1</sup>

Despite different opinions about Lesin and his activities as an architect of Putin's media system, there still are no detailed academic investigations of Lesin's role in the development of Russian media under Yeltsin and Putin. Therefore, one goal of this thesis is to gain a better understanding of Lesin's powerful influence and to expand our knowledge of his life for a broader and more nuanced picture of Russian media at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

For this purpose, I conducted the interviews with 14 prominent interviewees who will be named below. The first interviews were recorded between March 28, 2022, and April 20, 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> The Chechen Republic is a part of Russia that had two domestic wars after the collapse of the USSR: in 1994-1996 and 1999-2009.

This thesis also seeks to contribute to a rich and more accessible Russian journalism future in which the research of media scholars might help future journalists to swallow the bitter pill of history and build Russian journalism as a stronger and more independent institution.

### 1.1.3. Lesin's biography and explanation of the circumstances

Mikhail Yurievich Lesin was born on July 11, 1958, in the USSR Moscow, and died on November 5, 2015, in Washington, D.C. Lesin was a key media figure, statesman, and Minister for Press, Tele-and Radio Broadcasting, and Mass Communications from 1999 to 2004 under Presidents Yeltsin and Putin. Lesin also served an advisor to President Putin from 2004 to 2008 and to President Medvedev from 2008 to 2009.

"Bulldozer" was Lesin's nickname in the media market, based on his power and his ability to destroy whomever or whatever he wanted. Once, he spoke out about the psychological difference between his generation and that of his kids. "We were wolves who, having closed their eyes, climbed into any hell, any forest, without looking into the road," he said. "Everything was new and interesting. We were striving forward and did not think about a career as such. We thought about how to make money, how to build a business, and how to develop. But the current generation has everything step by step: I will work today, study tomorrow. They really assess their capabilities, as to whether they can or cannot do something. We did not rate ourselves that way. For example, I never asked myself the question as to whether I could or could not do something. There was no alternative. I could do anything!" (Lesko, 2003).

Lesin's media career started in the late 1980s at *Klub Veselyh I Nakhodchivyh, KVN* ("Club of the Funny and Inventive"), a Russian humor competition among the country's universities that became a TV show in 1986. At the show, Lesin not only represented the

Moscow State Construction Institute, where he studied, but was also *KVN*'s administrator. Reportedly, he was in charge of the costumes and tickets (Babich, 2009).

*KVN* was a talent factory, which is why Lesin found his long-time partners there. In 1990, Lesin produced several TV shows, including the TV contest, "Mrs. America – Mrs. Soviet Union," in which 50 finalists from every U.S. state and 21 finalists from the Soviet Union competed. The producer and organizer of the competition was the American company, *Pageant*. When Lesin was able to cut a deal with the company through his advertising connections, his success became inevitable, as was confirmed by later press analyses (Plotnikova, Kutsyllo, 1996).

Lesin also began working for *Novosti Video*, later renamed *Novosti-TV*, or *TV-Novosti*. Press reported, "Lesin, by his nature, is simply not able to pass by the 'goods lying on the road,' which was not only pleasant in itself, but also brought decent money. He had already collaborated with *Novosti-TV* and saw that the television industry, excellent for those times, was idle" (Ibid.). That same year, Lesin created the *Radio and Televidenie* company with his closest friend Yury Zapol. Together with Aleksander Akopov and Aleksandr Gurevich, they founded *The Video International* group of companies. Gurevich developed into a charming TV presenter and Akopov became a TV and film producer as well as the *RTR*'s General Director from 1997 to 2002. The advertising agency started to sell ads on most Russian TV channels, state radio stations, and some print outlets. There was no other large advertising agency in the Soviet market.

The first ads aired on Russian TV were an experiment during the American-Soviet Union space bridges in the late 1980s. But on a regular basis, according to Lesin, it was *KVN* that became "the first platform that launched the commercial use of television formats and

advertising" in the country (Kashin, 2015). "Television had traditionally commanded a high level of trust since the Soviet times," he said, "and television, by definition, could not deceive. Therefore, people trusted television quite strongly, and of course, such trust in television was very much exploited."

In 1995, Lesin left his position as *Video International* General Director with Zapol replacing him. Lesin sold his stake (so it was announced). The group became the exclusive seller of advertisements on the 100 percent state-owned *All-Russian State Television and Radio Company (VGTRK)*, including Channel Two, *RTR* (later renamed the *Rossiya* channel, now *Rossiya 1*). The Channel One, *ORT*, 51 percent of which was owned by the state, had already dealt with several media sellers. After the 1998 financial crisis in Russia, however, the group became a monopoly in Russia selling TV ads. "In 10 years, the enterprise created by Lesin has gone from an ordinary office for the commercials production to the largest agency in Russia, which today controls 65-70 percent of the television advertising market," *Itogi* magazine wrote.<sup>2</sup> "Directly or indirectly, the *Video International Group of Companies* holds an advertising monopoly on *ORT*, *RTR*, *TV-6*, and *STS*. It also has a powerful production center that produces popular programs, print advertising, outdoor advertising, and owns a powerful regional network, that dominates the Ukrainian market" (Pinsker, 2000, 1). By 2005, after Lesin's term as a press minister, the media group had 1,500 staff employees across 18 different companies worth nearly \$1.5 billion (AdReport, 2005).

Lesin left *Video International* in November 1994 "for ethical reasons" and became the deputy director of the *TV-Novosti* department that belonged to the state news agency *RIA Novosti*. In 1999, after taking the position of Press Minister, Lesin admitted, he "took an active

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<sup>2</sup> *Itogi* was a part of *Media-Most* holding, together with *NTV*.

part in *Video International* activities, well into even 1997" (Kachkaeva, 1999). There were no doubts in the Russian media that Lesin, as Minister, did not relinquish any control over the advertisement giant and actually gained more control to regulate the media market (Pinsker, 2000, 1). As Lesin once said in an interview, "a shadow immediately fell on us so that since 1989, we have been using this administrative resource" (Kashin, 2015). "At the same time, we were at a certain peak, and, naturally, no one believed that I had nothing to do with *Video International*. Of course, I was forced, for my part, to work politically even then, and if they appealed to me, they tried to resolve some issues with me. The fact that I talked with my friends is natural, of course. The fact that I acted as a moderator and remained a moderator in the advertising market for a long time, and a huge number of market participants appealed to me and tried to solve some problems of the advertising market through me, is also true. However, I was not directly involved in the business then."

In 1996, Lesin was a key figure in President Yeltsin's campaign team that helped him turn the results upside down: Yeltsin won despite his tremendous unpopularity (his approval ratings were 3-6% five months before the campaign began) and his severe health issues. The Kremlin was not used to dealing with public opinions in a democratic tradition, so Yeltsin's campaign invited American PR specialists for consultation. "We taught [Yeltsin's daughter] Tatyana [Dyachenko-Yumasheva], wrote memos to her, sometimes once a week, and sometimes two or three times," one of them, Steven Moor, told me years later. "In total, we had 27 national surveys, three different polling companies for this, and over a hundred focus groups all over Russia. We taught them how to learn what matters to public opinion and how to use it in

Yeltsin's campaign" (Rostova, Moore).<sup>3</sup> The Kremlin later attempted to downplay the input of the Americans PR experts.

Later, Lesin recollected that his initial public relations proposals for the campaign were completely rejected, and a former campaign leader and the future First Deputy of Prime Minister, Anatoly Chubais told Lesin "it was all nonsense." "Chubais disliked everything; it was unclear how it would all work," Lesin said. "Using Russian slang, I had to perform a gypsy dance for more than one hour and explain how it would work. Yes, it would be unusual, but it would be the best plan. Ultimately, they agreed to take the risk" (Kashin, 2015).

One of the oligarchs of the 1990s, Mikhail Khodorkovsky told me in 2019 interview that Yeltsin did not think about sharing the power with anyone so that he would remain in power no matter what. One of the scenarios for this plan was a prohibition of the Communist Party and the imposition of martial law due to the low Yeltsin approval ratings. "The counterbalance was not whether to go for fair elections or make elections dishonest, but how Yeltsin would stay in power, through martial law or electoral technologies. From any standpoint, electoral technologies were preferable for us," Khodorkovsky said (Rostova, Khodorkovsky). Asked to clarify whether the intent was to simulate democratic elections, Khodorkovsky agreed.

So Lesin provided coverage that created the illusion that democratic elections were underway. While the press mentioned him as an author of the campaign's video series *Spasi I Sohrani* ("Save and Protect") and *Veryu, Lyublyu, Nadeyus* ("I believe, I love, I hope"), attributed to Boris Yeltsin, Lesin himself said that it was "a collective work" of the group members.<sup>4</sup> "We were on Yeltsin's side; I won't hide it. And it was both work, pleasure, and the budget" (Kashin,

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<sup>3</sup> More on this: Kramer, 1996, and in the "Spinning Boris" Hollywood movie, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Some videos from this campaign are available on YouTube, for example, the following: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wxxv48JDoJ0>

2015). "No doubt, Lesin aroused trust and – managed to make sure that Boris Nikolaevich [Yeltsin] learned to ‘identify’ him," *Moskovskie Novosti* wrote. "The video teams in the campaign office were tiny – six to seven people – but Lesin traveled for the most responsible tasks, such as shooting press pictures of the President himself in *Barvikha*.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the President began not only to recognize Lesin but autographed his book for Lesin and did so earlier than for many others in ‘the hierarchy’" (Rykovtseva, 1996). The same year, Lesin received a presidential letter of gratitude "for his active participation in organizing and conducting the election campaign" (more on the campaign and Lesin's role in it are described in Chapter 4.1.). On September 22, 1996, the President offered Lesin a position created eight days earlier: Lesin became Chief of the Public Relations Department in the Presidential Administration. As Lesin explained, the main goal was to "develop new information technologies and recommendations for the President, governmental bodies, and agencies" (Segodnya, 1996). As the press pointed out at the time, he "was entrusted with the most prestigious thing imaginable on the political Olympus: the creation of a technology for the relationship between government and society, models for developing public opinion, post-campaign research, and preparation of recommendations for PR campaigns. In other words, he was supposed to become one of the most important political technologists, who were image makers for those in power" (Garauskaite, 1997). In addition, he was supposed to coordinate all press services of the State agencies. According to the recollections of a witness of those events, *Kommersant* wrote, the work department "resembled a business of the profile structure of a powerful corporation." "Mr. Lesin's management, including Sergei Yastrzhembsky, the President's press secretary, responded to the heaviest part of the burden of media support for the illness, operation, and recovery of

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<sup>5</sup> *Barvikha* is the Presidential residence outside of Moscow.

Boris Yeltsin" (*Kommersant*, 2015). Lesin was also in charge of changing the Presidential speechwriters after the Presidential elections, replacing Lyudmila Pikhoya and Vladimir Ilyin with Vladimir Semenov and Andrey Vavra, who began to work on the weekly Presidential radio addresses (*TsPKR*, 1998).

Since he had become a responsible public servant, Lesin was often criticized for not giving interviews. When he was appointed, Lesin's office refused even "to provide elementary information about Lesin himself" (Vyzhutovich, 1996). "The head of the department created to ensure greater openness of the Kremlin, is closed to the press," *Izvestia* reported (*Ibid.*). The press drew "a strange image of a person who is not inclined to communicate with the press and, to put it mildly, not very diplomatic." Still, *Kommersant* added, that's the way it was. "Lesin never really loved 'to open up' and could be quite tough in business. Moreover, this rigidity can be expected from him – thanks to his weight in the advertising world and his boxer-fighter look. Lesin is interesting because he is not a career official, nor by no means a 'Chicago boy'"<sup>6</sup> (Plotnikova, Kutsyllo, 1996). "He ignores not only the requests of individual publications for an interview but, also is not forthcoming on the 'protocol' press conferences of the leadership of the Channel 2," *Obshaya Gazeta* wrote (Makarov, 1997). Or, as *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* stated, Lesin was "famous for his terrible dislike of talking to journalists, not to mention other people" (Alexandrov, 1997). "Hearing seemingly innocent questions about the stages of his career, Lesin most often goes into 'deaf defense,' stating that he does not have any career, and sometimes gloomily jokes: 'Are you from the prosecutor's office?'" (Plotnikova, Kutsyllo, 1996).

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<sup>6</sup> A term "The Chicago Boys" refers to the Chile economists in the 1970s and 80s who had earned their degrees in Chicago under Milton Friedman and Arnold Harberger.

Still, he gained some public skills over those years, and by 1999 "he had learned how to speak without answering questions" (Kachkaeva, 1999). He started to give interviews. However, he still did not like "uncomfortable interlocutors," *Itogi* wrote in the profile article. "He can't stand it when journalists dig into his biography, especially his business. He gives interviews regularly, but the lion's share of them is with two or three of his 'own' correspondents who do not torment him with questions about the Ministry's plans to limit freedom of speech and do not try to find out details about the role that he had previously played in the activities of the *Video International* company and those he is playing now" (Pinsker, 2000, 1).

On October 2, 1996, it was announced that radio would broadcast Boris Yeltsin's addresses weekly (more on this: Rostova, YeltsinMedia, 5). Ten-minute speeches were recorded on Fridays and were on the air on Saturdays until the summer of 1998. The press called Lesin the creator of this idea (Tregubova, 1997), though he was one among the other top-five officials responsible for the Presidential image. "Certainly, it is commendable that the 'five' read the 1995 book 'Conversations by the Fireplace' that consisted of Franklin Roosevelt's radio addresses to the nation," journalist Natalya Timakova wrote sarcastically then.<sup>7</sup> "The analogies are easy to identify: in 1936, the American President fell seriously ill, and one of his advisers came up with the idea that Roosevelt could communicate with the people by radio, sitting by the fireplace. But what was great for America in the 1930s turned out to be ineffective for Russia in the 1990s. For the layman, each radio message of Boris Nikolayevich presented more evidence that his physical condition leaves much to be desired" (Timakova, 1997). "Yeltsin is in the Central Clinical Hospital, and to rely on radio messages instead of television inevitably leads to a new wave of

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<sup>7</sup> Years later, Timakova would become President Dmitry Medvedev's Press Secretary.

‘insinuations’ about the state of his health, appearance, etc.," *Kommersant* agreed (Kutsyllo, 1996).

Lesin did not stay there for long, however. The press later critically evaluated the whole work of Lesin's PR department. "The Kremlin's work with public opinion, *Moskovsky Komsomolets* wrote, is limited to the Presidential Press-Secretary briefings and denying of journalist accreditation when they write what the Kremlin does not want" (Timakova, 1997).

In 1997, Lesin moved to where the real money could be made: he became a deputy chairman of *VGTRK*, the All-Russia State TV and Radio Company, 100 percent state-owned. The *Video International* group of companies remained under an executive contract to sell *VGTRK* ads, including with respect to *RTR*. At the time, he was criticized for a conflict of interests (Bulanova, 1997; Koshkareva, 1997). "Lesin, by the way, is a member of the Board of the *Video International* company, that receives orders for the production of the most expensive projects of the *Rossiya* channel, which cannot always be attributed to coincidence," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* wrote (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 1997). "Mikhail Lesin is trying his best to present himself as not just a civil servant, but also a state-minded politician who makes decisions according to the President's will and incorporates the interests of the entire society. But somehow, it turns out that the same company – ‘*Video International*’ (‘VI’) – wins every time with the solution he chooses" (Pinsker, 2000, 1). In September 1997, *Yabloko* party Parliament Member Mikhail Yuriev complained about a "paradoxical situation" in which a State-owned channel for which Lesin worked had been serving his business interests as a *Video International* co-founder (Kotiy, 1997). In 1999, another Parliament Member, a Communist Alexander Kravets, asked the law enforcement agencies to check Lesin’s financial activities on *VGTRK* in connection to the *Video International*. According to the Auditing Chamber of Russia to which

Kravets referred, Lesin brought financial losses to *VGTRK* up to \$172.2 million by just not counting about 60 hours of the ads in its financial reports (Topol', Arutyunova, 1999). There were no investigations' results that could threaten Lesin's career.

Immediately after he got this position, several censorship scandals caught public attention. The *Chetvertaya Vlast* ("Fourth Estate") TV program addressing the role of journalists during the Chechen war and the Kremlin's failed policies towards journalists was not broadcasted in late June 1997. The program asserted that the Chechens won the information war, while the Russian press had lost (Rykovtseva, 1997). As the press was aware, Lesin was in charge of this decision (Kichin, 1997; Petrovskaya, 1997). Also, under Lesin's pressure, several previously produced interviews were not aired. Among the interviewees were *ORT* channel CEO Sergey Blagovolin, banker Alexander Lebedev, and State Duma speaker Gennady Seleznev (Kotiy, 1997).

Lesin realized that media could be used to build his image. He tried to advance his own vision, so he started to give interviews. "The most important point with respect to the *All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company* is the very fact that it was actually created," he admitted, for example, in 1997. "It was created solely as a tool, a propaganda machine of [Russian republic leader Boris Yeltsin's] opposition to the central authorities [of the Soviet Union represented by Gorbachev]. I did not find anything new, but something surprised me. The main principle of the organization of the Company was its position. The Head of the Directorate is God here. He was entitled to a car, two Deputies, an assistant, a secretary, a mobile phone, a pager, and additional bonuses. The Company grew by leaps and bounds; I mean the number of bosses, not the amount of work they have done. Each had the right to sign both economic and financial documents, which inevitably led to a violation of control over the receipt and

expenditure of funds. It got to the point of absurdity. For example, the Directorate of External Relations included a foreign and Russian correspondents' network, and was engaged in visa and business trips, external projects, and communications. The directorate of information programs, *Vesti*, had nothing to do with network management. It was necessary to submit a petition addressed to the Director of External Relations to give a task to a correspondent. This is absurd" (Garauskaite, 1997).

While Lesin worked there, in addition to the second-largest national channel *RTR*, *VGTRK* created a new TV channel, *Kultura* ("Culture"), free from advertisements. Also, all federal TV companies in every Russian region were united under the same brand, as well as the *Mayak* ("Beacon") radio station and *Radio Rossii* ("Radio of Russia"). When asked if he would try to build "our Russian *BBC*" while he was at *VGTRK*, Lesin replied: "I do not support analogies; we have a very specific country. And there is no guarantee that the Western standard, which has existed there for decades, will take root in our local soil. We cannot build the *BBC* because we have Russian thinking and a different audience. We are building our state television to be as professional as the *BBC* in the West." He explained that the *RTR* channel had been founded as a "cultural institution" since it had some subsidies privileges, so Boris Yeltsin provided it the status of a unitary enterprise. "If the Civil Code could have a definition of a State political enterprise, then, probably, it would be the most suitable status for the *All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company*. On the one hand, the Company is a factory; on the other hand, it is a political media structure with great influence" (Ibid.).

Still, the most controversial episode was Lesin's involvement in the 1999 scandal around the so-called "Man who looks like the Prosecutor General." On March 17, the *RTR* channel showed footage of two females with one man in a bedroom scene. The Kremlin administration

decided to release the tape on the State channel, former Chief-of-Staff Valentin Yumashev admitted to me in a 2019 interview (Rostova, Yumashev). The program politically killed General Prosecutor Yury Skuratov, who said that the decision was made following an order of Vladimir Putin, the *FSB*<sup>8</sup> Director at the time. On television, Mikhail Lesin reportedly brought the tape to the newsroom and to his boss Mikhail Shvydkoy (more details of this case are described in Chapters 4.3.)

While Skuratov's star passed its prime after the scandal and his resignation, the other participants in the story were promoted. Lesin became Press Minister several months later, in June 1999. Presenting him to the public, Prime Minister Sergey Stepashin suggested that Lesin and his Ministry establish relations with the broadcasting companies and create favorable legal and economic conditions for their work. The second – no less important – task, as Stepashin said, was to work out the general rules in the field of information. "So that it doesn't happen that when we give money to some channels and not to others, that we like some oligarchs and not others. Everyone is dear to us – *ORT*, *NTV*, *TV-6* and *VGTRK*, regardless of whose orders they are following" (ORT, 1999, 1).

After the March 26, 2000, Presidential elections, Mikhail Shvydkoy became a Minister of Culture in the new cabinet, while Vladimir Putin became President of the Russian Federation. Yeltsin addressed the nation on New Year's Eve, 2000, and appointed Prime Minister Putin as acting President. "The most popular version is that supposedly the 'Family' liked Putin's role in this story with Skuratov so much that it decided that he would be a wonderful Presidential candidate," Yumashev told me later. "This is complete nonsense. Putin had nothing to do with the film" (Rostova, Yumashev).

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<sup>8</sup> *FSB*, or Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti is a "Federal Security Service," a descendant of *KGB*.

The media often suggested that Lesin had belonged to the so-called "Family," Yeltsin's closest circle, including Presidential Chief-of-Staff Alexander Voloshin (1999-2003), daughter Tatyana Dyachenko-Yumasheva, Presidential Chief-of-Staff Valentin Yumashev (1997-8), who would become Tatyana's husband at the beginning of 2000s, and businessman Roman Abramovich (Kommersant, 1999; Bulavinov, 2003).

It was reportedly the "The Family" that "chose" Vladimir Putin and staged Boris Yeltsin's resignation, although "The Family" still denies this. In a 2019 interview, Yumashev accused *NTV* of creating this picture. "The picture was painted that people believed with great pleasure. Who is in charge? Of course, not the Tzar, but – cunning, deceitful, thieving *boyars*."<sup>9</sup> 'The Family' appoints Ministers, dismisses Prime Ministers, Primakov was removed – this is 'The Family,' 'The Family' appointed Stepashin, then 'The Family' removed Stepashin and appointed Putin. Although Yeltsin agrees with these decisions, he does not lead the country. A complete lie, every day!" (Rostova, Yumashev).

However, Stepashin, a former Counterintelligence Service Chief, was Prime Minister during the turbulent time of power struggles when the Kremlin changed Prime Ministers constantly. He was appointed PM on May 19, 1999, and his term lasted until August 9 of the same year. Before Stepashin, Evgeny Primakov, a Soviet heavyweight and a former Foreign Intelligence Service Chief, served as Prime Minister for only seven months. Before Primakov, Sergey Kirienko, a civilian who was Minister of Fuel and Energy, had been in the PM position for just four months.<sup>10</sup> The government game of leapfrog ended with Vladimir Putin's appointment as PM on August 16, 1999, where he briefly served until May 7, 2000, the day of

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<sup>9</sup> Boyr, or boyarin was a privileged and aristocratic member in the feudal Russia.

<sup>10</sup> Today, Sergey Kirienko is the First Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration.

his Presidential inauguration. In the words of Yumashev, it was Yeltsin who "made an absolutely correct decision that it was necessary to appoint a person not from the old team and not from the team of politicians of whom everyone was already tired." Yumashev said that a new person was needed for every voter to draw their own conclusions. "Everyone found something in Putin. Liberals viewed Putin as a liberal, marketers saw a person who would continue reforms, and others saw a new person who would take care of them, unlike Yeltsin and his team, who, as they thought, had abandoned them and left them to survive on their own" (Ibid.). According to Yumashev, Putin was a man who would continue the reforms; President Yeltsin's Administration's intention was "to demonstrate that Putin was an independent figure, that he went on several international trips and met with *siloviki*.<sup>11</sup> An absolute majority, including, by the way, some colleagues in the Presidential Administration, were sure that Yeltsin's candidate would lose the election. Putin was unknown; he had no chance of winning. Still, for those who understood how the Presidential campaign was organized and how Russian society was structured, there was no doubt who would win. I believed there was a 99.9 percent chance that Putin would win, although his starting position was horrendous" (Ibid.).

Lesin was a crucial element in this transition of power – he provided control over the TV agenda and was a press regulator during two election campaigns, the Parliamentary and the Presidential ones.

During the Parliament elections, monitoring organizations such as European Institute for the Media proved that "coverage of the elections in the most important sections of the Russian media had indeed been 'biased,' and biased against *Fatherland–All Russia* and in favor of *Unity* in a manner that 'failed to live up to the standards set either in Russian law or in international

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<sup>11</sup> *Siloviki* literally mean people of force but used as a term towards security forces as a governing class in Russia.

agreements and conventions signed by the leaders of the Russian Federation'," White, McAllister, Oates wrote (White, McAllister, Oates, 2002, p. 19). "Putin's own standing certainly improved dramatically: just 2 percent saw him as their presidential choice in August 1999; but by the end of the year, he was the first choice of 50 percent, and 79 percent were prepared to give him more general approval" (Ibid., p. 18).

In a 2000 national report on human rights practices, the U.S. Department of State criticized Russia for "the Government's record on media freedom" that "worsened" and had "significant problems." "There was persistent evidence of government pressure on the media," the report stated. "Federal, regional, and local governments continued to exert pressure on journalists by initiating investigations by the federal tax police, *FSB*, and *MVD*<sup>12</sup> of media companies such as independent *Media-Most*, selectively denying access to information. For example, denied were statistics available to the public, filming opportunities, the right to approve certain stories before publication, prohibiting the recording of public trials and hearings, withholding financial support from government media operations that exercised independent editorial judgment, attempting to influence the appointment of senior editors at regional and local media; and removing reporters from their jobs then bringing libel suits against them. The disappearance and subsequent arrest and prosecution of *Radio Liberty* reporter Andrey Babitsky caused great concern since there was credible evidence that the Babitsky case was politically motivated and that units of the Federal Government were involved in trying to silence critical reporting about the Chechen conflict" (Department of State, 2001).

Lesin was sarcastic in his reply to the report. He told journalists that his Ministry specialists were preparing a report about freedom of the press in the U.S. He claimed there "was

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<sup>12</sup> *MVD*, or *Ministerstvo vnutrennih del*, is a Ministry of Internal Affairs.

more freedom of speech in Russia since, in the U.S., 50 corporations controlled the media. There were about 1,000 media outlets in Russia." "If it is so, who guarantees press freedom of the press better?" he asked rhetorically (Vremya Novostei, 2001). "I have not been ashamed of the word 'propaganda' for a long time," he also pointed out. "We must promote Russia on the international market and its positive image. Otherwise, we look like bears in their eyes; we walk and growl!" (Ibid.).

In June 2000, a Russian journalist, Dmitry Bykov, began an interview with Lesin by voicing his own opinion: "You are in a field of such intense hatred now that, in my opinion, it should have a purely physical effect on you" (Bykov, 2000). "I am in a field of my professional activity," Lesin replied. "And this includes quite a natural disregard by a certain part of the press. ... I would like to bring this to the attention of those interested; I have very strong nerves.... I do not dislike any of my opponents; I am ready to understand them. Probably they need such a Demon... or partisan, as I was called by one newspaper, in a very weak article. I should be such a demonic figure, a strangler" (Ibid.).

However, Lesin put harsh political regulations toward the media into place even before Putin came to power. Lesin was appointed chief of a newly formed Ministry for Press, Tele- and Radio Broadcasting, and Mass Communications on July 6, 1999, by President Yeltsin's decree. The previous State Press Committee and the Federal Service for Television and Radio were abolished. The press suggested the new Ministry was created for "state propaganda functions" (Polit.ru, 1999, 1) and "as another step of the Kremlin's Administration in preparation for the elections" (Arutyunova, 1999, 2).

On August 2, the Editors-in-Chief of the leading 14 print media wrote an open letter to President Yeltsin as a "guarantor of Constitutional citizen's rights." "On the eve of the election

campaign," they wrote, "high-ranking government officials are trying to put pressure on the media and journalists, using their influence and even the name of the Russian President. In our opinion, such a development of events threatens freedom of speech in Russia" (Polit.ru, 1999, 2). The journalists' claim was not heard, and pressure on the media became more severe.

On August 30th, the Channel One of Russia, *ORT*, was warned by Lesin that it had committed wrongdoings during the election campaign (ORT, 1999, 2). The issuance of the official "warning" was within the Minister's power. After two warnings, the Ministry had the right to ask a court to recall the media license (in broadcasting) or media registration (for print). The second *ORT* warning was issued in March 2000.

Another channel, *TV-Center*, the shares of which were controlled by Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov (who had Presidential ambitions), also received two warnings. Lesin announced that, because of the two "warnings" of *TV-Center* and *ORT*, he would not renew their licenses automatically after their five-year terms expired, so they would have to compete for their frequencies with the other media companies.

As reported, Lesin and Luzhkov had several lunches that year at the *Pushkin Café*, a luxury restaurant on *Tverskoy Boulevard* in downtown Moscow (Polit.ru, 2000).

The café was the same distance from the Press Ministry on *Strastnoy Boulevard* and the Mayor's office on *Tverskaya Street*. By meeting there, each man would avoid paying a visit to the other's office and thus avoid questions of hierarchy.

The Federal Communication Commission, in charge of competition between the media companies for the broadcasting frequencies, had a meeting on July 6. The Presidential elections had concluded in March, so the mayor was not a danger to the federals. Therefore, the commission voted for the license's extension.

As for *ORT's* situation, its controlling shareholder, tycoon Boris Berezovsky, had been crucial in developing editorial policies and controlling the channel's agenda since the middle of the 1990s. He was also vital in supporting Vladimir Putin's new Presidential election. Thus, *ORT* also retained its license while Berezovsky was playing the Kremlin's game – the channel maintained the favor of the Kremlin and its *Yedinstvo* ("Unity") block which later became the *Yedinaya Rossia* ("United Russia" party) (Oats, 2006; Berezovsky, 2013). *ORT* also favored Putin during the transition of power from Yeltsin to Putin on the eve of 2000 and during the March 2000 Presidential elections. As *ORT* General Producer Konstantin Ernst admitted after the elections, "all the media have gone through a difficult period in the last eight months. The election of the President and the forming of the government show that we are entering a zone of stability, and I think that there will be no more such reproaches against the media" (ORT, 1999, 3).

In October 1999, Ernst became the Channel's General Director. But in fact, "such reproaches against the media" were just the beginning. A lot changed for *ORT* and its romance with the Kremlin after the nuclearpowered submarine *Kursk* sank in an accident on August 12, 2000. One hundred and eighteen crew members were killed in the accident after they were trapped inside for four days. President Putin declined any foreign help and did nothing to save their lives.

This was a turning point in the career of a charismatic and famous TV anchor, Sergey Dorenko, whom President Yeltsin once called "the most handsome." Dorenko was also known as a "tele-killer," who destroyed political opponents, usually in favor of the Kremlin and Putin personally. Now, he, a son of a Soviet military pilot, was transformed into Putin's fiercest critic. On September 2, 2000, Dorenko produced a segment debunking Putin's lies about the *Kursk* and

his accusations of the Navy Chief's negligence. He also exposed the terrible living conditions of the officers – he showed that the nuclear submarine's Chiefs had been so poor that they were living with broken radiators to warm their apartments during the Russian winter; they made holes in the radiators to put portable electric water heaters inside. The reaction was immediate – Ernst asked Dorenko to come to the office and fired him. It was the last appearance of Dorenko on *ORT*.<sup>13</sup>

As Dorenko told me later, Ernst found a new principle, that of obedience; he switched his loyalty from Berezovsky to Putin (Rostova, 2006). As for Berezovsky, he had to leave the country. He found political exile in Great Britain and never returned to Russia, criticizing Putin from abroad for anti-democratic behavior. Still, he agreed to give his shares to his old partner and the Kremlin's new ally, Roman Abramovich. Yet Ernst survived – he remains General Director of the same channel, though it changed its name to *Pervy Kanal* (Channel One) in 2002.

However, the Kremlin's political actions towards the media orchestrated by Lesin just started. Taking *NTV* under state control was a two-year saga, but Lesin did it for Putin, having his own complex relations with the channel's owner. As one of the Russian media critics wrote, "Lesin was actively involved in the redistribution of the media property and contributed to a speedy 'transfer' of such property from the hands of former owners – Gusinsky and Berezovsky" (Rykovtseva, 2000). The State forced all three national channels to set the agenda, including *ORT* and *RTR*.

As Press Minister, Lesin was also in charge of disinformation and propaganda campaigns for Russia's Second Chechen war. During the war and during various civil conflicts, Lesin often threatened Russian media outlets with revoking their TV and radio licenses or registration

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<sup>13</sup> The program is still available on YouTube at the URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnfzQu2X97o>

certificates. It later became known that Putin, who would become Prime Minister in 1999, was personally offended by *NTV's* coverage of the Second Chechen War "and made his opinions known both to his colleagues in the government and to [its owner Vladimir] Gusinsky" (Lipman, McFaul, 2001, p.120).

In October of 2004, *NTV* came under the Kremlin's fire. Following a theatre hostage crisis known as *Nord-Ost* in Moscow's Dubrovka Center, Putin accused *NTV* of broadcasting of Center's attack live. *NTV* General Director Boris Jordan, who had helped Putin to cease the Channel from Gusinsky in 2001, resigned in January 2003 (more on this is discussed in Chapter 4.3.)

Following the 2004 administrative reform, when the whole Cabinet was dissolved, Lesin became an adviser to Vladimir Putin. In 2005, Lesin launched the *Russia Today* TV channel. In November 2006, Lesin was decorated with a fourth-class Order of Merit for the Fatherland and President Putin signed such a decree.

During President Medvedev's term (2008-12), Lesin was fired with unprecedented publicity. Referring to a Presidential Administration source, the *Interfax* news agency reported that Lesin was responsible for "systematic disciplinary violations" on the part of a state official, including non-compliance with "the rules of the Civil Service and the ethics of behavior of a civil servant." Lesin submitted his letter of resignation only "after insistent recommendation." The details were not made public, but *Kommersant* reported that Lesin "used his official position to address issues not related to his official duties." The media market players attributed the resignation to Lesin's having been "closely involved in the affairs" of *NMG Holding*, *National Media Group* owned by businessman Yury Kovalchuk. The following year, Lesin became a member of the Board of Directors of *Natsionalnye Kommunikatsii* company ("National

Telecommunications"), owned by Kovalchuk. In 2013, Lesin became *Gazprom-Media* Holding's Executive Board Chairman, another Kovalchuk's asset.

The following year, U.S. Senator Roger Wicker asked the U.S. Attorney General to investigate whether Lesin had violated the Foreign Corrupt Practices act and Anti-Money Laundering statute. "I understand that Mr. Lesin, who led the Kremlin's effort to censor Russia's independent television outlets, acquired multimillion dollar assets in Europe, including an estate reportedly purchased through a company registered in the British Virgin Islands, during his tenure as a Russian civil servant. I also understand that following his government service, Mr. Lesin moved his immediate family to Los Angeles, California, where he acquired multiple residences at a cost over \$28 million. That a Russian public servant could have amassed the considerable funds required to acquire and maintain these assets in Europe and the United States raises serious questions" (Wicker, 2014).

"I got used to the fact that many do not like me," Lesin replied in an interview to the Russian version of *Forbes* magazine two weeks later. "But I am concerned with respect to what has happened now for one simple reason, I am worried about the family. I never respond when someone discusses me and some of my actions, but touching my family is disgusting, it is a violation of the moral rule" (Surganova, Zhokhova, 2014). He said that his kids were grown adults who had acquired bank mortgages, this property was not his own, and it was clear to him that someone had orchestrated the campaign against him. "And I will find out who was the one who initiated all of this." He mentioned that people who wished him ill were in the U.S. and in Russia as well.

In December 2014, Lesin resigned from *Gazprom-Media*, referring to "family circumstances."

One year later, he was found dead in Washington, D.C.

## 1.2. Press Freedom in Russia as an Exception

### 1.2.1. War as the Last Nail in the Journalism's Coffin

As a result of the full-scale war in Ukraine launched by Russian Vladimir Putin in February 2022, one of the first casualties inside Russia has been independent journalism. "Everything that's not propaganda is being eliminated," 2021 Nobel Peace prize winner, Editor-in-Chief of *Novaya Gazeta* Dmitry Muratov said (Troianovsky, 2022).

Still *Novaya* issued a statement to its readers that it would not be able to tell the truth about the ongoing war and would delete "many materials" as demanded by *Roskomnadzor*, a government agency.<sup>14</sup> "We will have to temporarily forget about shelling in the cities of our brotherly country," the statement noted. "Again, temporarily, we will have to forget about the fate of our soldiers, our peers, who find themselves in hot spots often against their will" (Novaya, 2022). "Yes, we can say that the path to free journalism is through barracks and barbed wire. All this is very beautiful but insane nonsense. The truth is that apart from us and a couple of other newsrooms in the country, there is no one else to do the news work. So, we stay until the very end. We will not run from the pre-trial detention centers and colonies. We are not leaving for Europe or Georgia. We stay in Russia; this is our country." Yet, they could not stay.

On March 4, the lower branch of the parliament, the State Duma, adopted a law according to which dissemination of "fake news" can lead to up to a 15-year imprisonment, and "public actions aimed to discredit the use of the Russian armed forces to protect the interests of

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<sup>14</sup> *Roskomnadzor*, or The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media, is responsible for monitoring, censoring, and warning the Russian media.

the Russian Federation and its citizens" may lead to fines, or up to 5 years of imprisonment (if done repeatedly). On July 8, Aleksey Gorinov, a Moscow legislator became the first person who was convicted for "publicly disseminating deliberately false information about the Russian armed forces while abusing his official position," and sentenced to 7 years in prison (TASS, 2022, 2). He had been arrested in April for saying the following words at a meeting with another municipal lawmakers – any entertainment and leisure activities for Muscovites were inadmissible "during combat actions on the territory of a sovereign neighboring state." On April 11, another Putin opponent, Vladimir Kara-Murza was arrested for an anti-war speech in Arizona, criticizing cluster bombs in residential areas and "the bombing of maternity hospitals and schools" (Rainsford, 2022). Now, he faces a prison sentence of up to 24 years for high treason and other charges. On July 12, yet another opposition politician, Ilya Yashin was arrested and indicted for distributing "fake news about the army on a basis of political hatred" (Meduza, 2022). In April, Yashin had commented on videos of war crimes of Russian soldiers in Ukrainian Bucha. In December, a Moscow court sentenced him to eight and a half years imprisonment.

In today's Russia, it is not allowed to call this war a war. It is a "special military operation" that Putin announced in his TV address, anything else is "fake news."

On March 28, *Novaya Gazeta* received the second written warning from *Roskomnadzor* that the newspaper had published material in which one NGO was mentioned; but it did not mention that this organization was included in the Ministry of Justice registry of foreign agents. The agency did not name the material, the author's name, or that of the NGO. Still, the second warning from the agency during the same year could lead to a court case that might rule to close the paper. *Novaya* moved proactively: it announced its own suspension, until the end of "special war operation in Ukrainian territory" (Novaya, 2022, 2). And on April 11, the newspaper

announced its new version, *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, a Europe-based outlet, with its Editor-in-Chief Kirill Martynov.

Dmitry Muratov still remains in Moscow. On April 7, he was attacked on a train heading to Samara where his mother lives. According to Muratov, the attacker shouted, "Muratov, here's to you for our boys," and poured red paint over him. Muratov's eyes were "burning terribly." The paper investigated the attack, and even found the names of the two attackers (one of whom was on the railway platform), but the police did not investigate the case.

In September 2022, the Russian court agreed with *Roskomnadzor* to revoke *Novaya Gazeta's* print registration.

Meanwhile, on March 1, *Echo Moskvy*, a highly popular political radio station, was forced off the air. It was established in August 1990, immediately after the censorship was abolished in the USSR. For 32 years, it has constantly fought for press freedom but has remained a tiny island in a growing ocean of propaganda. Now, the General Prosecutor's office blamed the station for disseminating "false information" about the war in Ukraine, *Roskomnadzor* blocked its website, and the station's board of directors decided to "liquidate the station" and its website that had an excellent archive of the materials broadcasted by the station.

The same accusation was made on the same day against the independent *TV Rain*. The station created in 2010 has been through constant governmental checks, lawsuits, disconnection from cable networks, and other measures the Russian state can create to make journalists' lives harder. *TV Rain* announced a temporary suspension of work. Many journalists escaped from Russia.

In June, *TV Rain* received a European broadcasting license from Latvia and started the broadcasting from several studios in Latvia, Georgia and Netherlands. In several months, the

station was fined by the regulator for its map showing occupied Crimea as part of Russia and for calling the Russian troops in Ukraine "our army."

In December, the Latvian National Electronic Media Council revoked the station's license. The Council's chairman Ivars Abolins said it was done "in connection with the threat to national security and public order." Several days before, host Aleksey Korostelev was describing the poor conditions in which the Russian troops fought and asked the audience to tell the station more about the problems in the Russian army through the emails on the address [army@tvrain.tv](mailto:army@tvrain.tv) or Telegram bot. "We hope that we were able to help many servicemen, among others, with equipment or just elementary amenities at the front," he added (Kurmanaev, 2022). The *TV Rain* Editor-in-Chief Tikhon Dzyadko made public apologies by saying that the channel never helped the Russian army, and the email box was created for the collection of information about the war crimes of the Russian troops and irregularities during the mobilization (TV Rain, 2022). Still, on December 8, *TV Rain* was forced to stop its broadcasting in Latvia. It continued YouTube broadcasts. On December 22, the station gained the European broadcasting permit from the Dutch Media Authority (DW, 2023).

*TV Rain* was not the last media outlet which stopped its work in Russia in March 2022. Within several days, the other independent media outlets were blocked including *Meduza*, *Mediazona*, *The New Times*, *Republic*, *Sobesednik*, *TV-2*, *DOXA*, *The Village*, etc. A liberal portal that covers culture, *Colta.ru*, closed itself – "the freedom of expression is reduced to zero, and we think it is honest to go silent under those circumstances," it stated (Colta, 2022). *Chastny Korrespondent* decided to suspend itself too. Foreign media including the Russian services of *BBC*, *Radio Liberty*, *Voice of America*, and *Deutsche Welle*, evacuated their journalists from the country (needless to say, their websites are blocked in Russia).

On March 22, the *Tverskoy* district court in Moscow banned *Facebook* and *Instagram* in Russia for being a part of *Meta*, that was accused of involvement in extremist activities since it had not removed "fake news" about Russian military actions in Ukraine (AP, 2022). Even *Conde Nast* that has published seven glossy Russian magazines – *Vogue*, *GQ*, *GQ Style*, *Tatler*, *Glamour*, *Glamour Style Book*, and *Architectural Digest*, announced that it was closing its entire Russian franchise. The company's Chief Executive Officer, Roger Lynch, wrote: "The escalation in the severity of the censorship laws, which have significantly curtailed free speech and punished reporters simply for doing their jobs, has made our work in Russia untenable" (Vogue, 2022).

The growing political repressions and the crackdown on the press brought on a new wave of political emigration. According to one estimate, in 2021 alone, about 1.5 thousand activists and journalists left Russia (Znak, 2022). Within two weeks of the invasion in Ukraine in 2022, at least 150 journalists from 17 Russian-language media outlets had left the country (Agents.Media, 2022).

This crack-down on the press was the last nail that Putin put in the coffin of journalism in Russia. The dictatorship to which Russia returned was not immediate: it was created, step by step, despite the spirit of freedom at the end of the 1980-s and the beginning of the 1990s.

### 1.2.2. How the Dictatorship Started

With the majority of the Russian independent media sources now banned, political opponents have been silenced or imprisoned media and political researchers are investigating what had gone wrong and how Russia strayed from the path of building democracy to the current disaster.

Vladimir Putin's attainment of power twenty-two years ago was well-orchestrated. Boris Yeltsin who had lost all his previous popularity, gave a televised address on New Year's Eve of 2000 that came as a complete surprise to the nation. "I have taken a decision, one which I pondered long and painfully. I am resigning today, the last day of the departing century," he stated. "I am leaving now. I have done everything I could. I am not leaving for health reasons but for a multitude of reasons. A new generation is taking my place, a generation of people who can do more and better. In accordance with the Constitution, I have signed a decree giving the powers of the president of Russia to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. He will be the head of state for three months, after which Presidential elections will be held, also in accordance with the Constitution" (Yeltsin, 1999). On March 26, 2000, Putin was elected as the new president.

Putin demonstrated his attitude toward the press from the very beginning. In his Annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on July 8, 2000, two months after his first inauguration, Putin stated the following: "Censorship and inference with media activity is prohibited by law. The government strictly keeps to this principle. But censorship can come from somewhere other than from the state, and interference is not just always just administrative. The economic ineffectiveness of a significant part of the media makes it dependent on the commercial and political interests of its owners and sponsors. It makes it possible to use the media to score points against rivals, and sometimes even to turn it into a means of mass disinformation, a means of fighting the state" (Annual Address..., 2000). For the media, it was a clear sign of the government's intentions. By the end of 2000, the Security Council issued "The Doctrine of Information Security." It was severely criticized by human rights activists, press, and media scholars for its articulation of the will of the secret services to control the mass media (Fedotov, 2001; Simonov, 2001; Carman, 2002).

Putin became one of the "Ten Worst Enemies of the Press," as announced by the New York-based *Committee to Protect Journalists* in 2001. "The Kremlin imposed censorship in Chechnya, orchestrated legal harassment against private media outlets, and granted sweeping powers of surveillance to the security services," they explained. "Despite Putin's professed goal of imposing the rule of law, numerous violent attacks on journalists have been carried out with impunity across Russia. In an ominous and dramatic move this April, the Kremlin-controlled *Gazprom* corporation took over *NTV*, the country's only independent national television network. Within days, the *Gazprom* coup had shut down a prominent Moscow daily and ousted the journalists in charge of the country's most prestigious newsweekly. Despite *Gazprom's* insistence that the changes were strictly business, the main beneficiary was Putin himself, whose primary critics have now been silenced" (CPJ, 2001).

By 2002, two national TV channels, *NTV* and *ORT*, covering 72% and 95% of the Russian households retrospectively, were seized from the most well-known oligarchs: Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky. These two TV outlets were now under the control of the state. A third national channel, *RTR*, as a part of *VGTRK*, already belonged to the state.

In 2004, Russia became one of the "World's Worst Places to Be a journalist" (CPJ, 2004). "President Vladimir Putin's 'managed democracy,' which includes using various branches of the state bureaucracy to rein in the independent media, is making the practice of independent journalism in Russia more and more tenuous," *CPJ* reported. "A shift from blatant pressures to more subtle and covert tactics, such as politicized lawsuits and hostile corporate takeovers by businessmen with close ties to Putin, has allowed the Kremlin to stifle criticism of the president and reports on government corruption and human rights abuses committed by Russian forces in Chechnya."

According to the *Committee to Protect Journalists*, there have been 58 journalists killed in Russia since 1992, 14 journalists imprisoned, and seven journalists are missing (CPJ, 2022).

Every year the situation has been getting worse for journalists. The government agency *Roskomnadzor* started to block Internet pages in 2012. *Roskomsvoboda*, an advocacy group for Internet freedom appeared the same year and started to monitor the blocked sites and mimicked the state agency's name.<sup>15</sup> By December 2, 2022, *Roskomsvoboda* registered 1,282,473 sites that are blocked in Russia (*Roskomsvoboda*, 2022).

In terms of ownership, since 2016, the State has been prohibited foreign companies and individuals from owning more than 25% of any Russian media outlets, including print media.

The Ministry of Justice has started a registry of foreign agents in December of 2017. By September 14, 2022, the list consisted of 183 "agents," including media organizations, human rights activists, and journalists (Minyust, 2022, 1). The Ministry launched a second registry in which there was only person registered; there are 22 people now, including a Russian Rock legend, Andrey Makarevich, who clearly opposed the war and had to emigrate to Israel. Reportedly, 18 percent of foreign agents are under indictment in Russia (Verstka, 2022). The registries are heavily criticized worldwide. According to *Human Rights Watch*, one registry "imposes a toxic label and burdensome labeling and reporting requirements" (HRW, 2022).

Since July 2015, the same ministry has also listed "undesirable organizations," NGOs and funds, including, for example, the *American National Endowment for Democracy* or *World Institute of Scientology* (Minyust, 2022, 2). The list also included the media organization *Project*

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<sup>15</sup> "Roskom" that stands for "Russian Committee" left the same, but a word "superintendence" was changed to "freedom."

founded in the US by Roman Badanin, the Russian Editor-in-Chief; the media outlet has investigated top Russian officials. Such "undesirable organizations" are prohibited from working in Russia under criminal law, and Russian citizens still working for them, even been abroad, may be sent to prison.

On December 1, 2022, the Duma introduced other changes to the laws that prohibited foreign agents from being public events organizers, and voting members of election commissions, to conducting teaching activities, including educational activities for the minors. In addition, the status of a foreign agent would not allow one to work in the state or municipal service, or in the internal affairs bodies. Such status also should become a reason for dismissal from the *FSB*, the Investigative Committee, the Foreign Intelligence Service, the Federal Penitentiary Service, as well as customs, internal affairs, and the fire service. "In Russia, the term 'foreign agent' is tantamount to 'spy' or 'traitor,'" *Human Rights Watch* noted. "The foreign agent designation remains extra-judicial, with no possibility to contest it in court before the designation is made. Those designated must comply with all requirements the day after the authorities add them to the registry, even if they challenge the designation in court" (HRW, 2022).

In addition, Russia has put more pressure on global companies, including *Twitter*, *Google*, and *Facebook*, demanding cooperation with the Russian state. All international organizations that monitor the situation with journalism worldwide, now agree that Russia is among the most dangerous places for the members of the profession. In the *Reporters Without Borders'* World Press Freedom Index, the Russian ranking in 2021 was 150 out of 180, and since 2013 it has varied from 148 to 152 out of 180 (RSF, 2022). In the *Freedom House* Democracy Status, Russia has 7 points out of 100 that apply to a "Consolidated Authoritarian Regime." For

the Internet Freedom Status, it has 30 points out of 100 ("Not Free"), and for the Global Freedom Status, there are 20 points out of 100 ("Not Free") (Freedom House, 2022). "Not Free" status for the Press Freedom Index was earlier measured by the organization that appeared for the first time in 2003, three years after Vladimir Putin came to power. Previously it had been considered "Partly Free."

### 1.2.3. Was Russian Press Free Before Putin?

Russian journalism before Putin did not enjoy freedom for a long time. The Soviet media were liberated by Mikhail Gorbachev – his policy presented liberties to the society that had not existed since the Bolshevik coup in 1917. It was the time of opening of borders, offering religious freedom, and opening the market to private cooperatives. For the media, it was *the Glasnost* (Openness) policy presented by Gorbachev in 1987. Reporting emerged on the history of the country and the current state of affairs; journalism became a respectable and popular profession; the print copies skyrocketed. *Guinness World Records* recognized *Argumenty I Fauty* on May 1, 1990, as the weekly newspaper with the highest circulation. The audience was more than 100 million readers, with 33,431,100 copies published (Rostova, Gorbymedia). According to Guinness, the largest daily newspaper circulation also belonged to the Soviet Union: *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that published more than 21 million copies (Ibid.).

Under Gorbachev, the censorship was abolished for the second time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> In August 1990, a new media law was adopted. One of the articles stated, "Censorship is prohibited." The USSR's collapse and economic turmoil of the 1990s confronted the media with

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<sup>16</sup> The first time of the censorship abolishment happened before the 1917 Revolution, but the first thing the Bolsheviks did was the ban of many media outlets and severe censorship establishment.

new challenges that they had never experienced: Soviet media were paid by the Communist party; they were tools of propaganda. Who should pay them now if the country is still in ruins?

The Soviet Union collapsed, and the first Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, despite the mutual disdain between him and Gorbachev, saw Russia as a democracy too. In economics, he presented an approach of "shock therapy" that had to lead to the free market. During his rule (1991-2000), Yeltsin also put a great effort into globalizing Russia and joining the major international organizations such as WTO, G-7, and the European community.

The 1993 Constitution provided for a division of powers, and a compulsory state ideology was prohibited; diversity of religions was allowed. The notion of free speech and freedom of the press, together with the prohibition of censorship, were incorporated into article 29 of the Constitution.

In 1998, Russia ratified the European Convention on Human Rights.

Boris Yeltsin sought to build a capitalist economy. On January 2, 1992, he introduced price liberalization – it was intended to switch prices from state regulation to the markets. But while the number of newspapers, TV channels, and other media outlets, including those that were privately owned, grew substantially under his rule, the media readership plummeted due to paper shortages, growing printing expenses, lack of money in the country.

Another reason of losing the audience was a decline in the population caused by the collapse of one state into 15 independent states. The Soviet population was 293 million. The population in the newly independent Russian Federation now stood at 148 million. Print lost 18 million subscribers, *Argumenty I Fakty* alone experienced a 10-fold decrease in subscriptions

(more on the crisis of 1992: Rostova, YeltsinMedia, 1). According to UNESCO, "in 1990, the daily print run of Russian newspapers was 708 for every 1,000 inhabitants; by 1996, it had dropped to 105, well below the corresponding figures for other European countries such as France (218), Germany (311), and the United Kingdom (331) (UNESCO, 1999).

The media market had no chance to transform itself into even the semblance of a liberal economy. Some journalists remembered their Soviet experiences and went for government subsidies. Others sold themselves out to a growing class of nouveau riches and bankers hardened by "banker wars," in which media belonging to one oligarch were at war with another just for their business or political interests (more on this: Rostova, YeltsinMedia, 2). "Yet, just as it stifled the nascent civil society in some instances, the political order fashioned by Yeltsin was benign, even nurturing, in others," a Yeltsin biographer wrote (Aron, 2000, p. 718). "The first of these was public criticism. Although subject to manipulation, bribery, and intimidation by business moguls and local authorities (which subsidized the rent, plant, and utilities of most national and local newspapers), the Russian media were free from government censorship."

The Russian press during Yeltsin's time was relatively free – he was the first Russian leader ever who was ever harshly criticized. The remaining Communist or nationalist, so-called "patriotic" press became an opponent to the pro-democratic President. He was constantly called an "occupant of Russia," his cabinet members were "bourgeois," the "anti-people clique," "criminal regime," or "Yeltsin's gang" that should be sent to trial. One of the leading newspapers in this was *Zavtra* ("Tomorrow") headed by Alexander Prokhanov. "*Zavtra's* tenets were few and simple," Leon Aron wrote. "Russia was an occupied country; democracy and the market economy had been imposed on it from abroad; only an authoritarian government with a strong military could save it; Russia's destiny was to save humanity; the borders of the Soviet Union

were the borders of Great Russia and should be restored; any patriotic Russian would support Zyuganov. Between 1992 and 1996, *Zavtra* has constructed a political philosophy that, in the same observer's view, presented 'a very worrying agenda', in which Jews and Americans were the major 'demons'" (Aron, p. 594-5). Yeltsin tolerated this criticism. Interestingly, Prokhanov was among the first Editors-in-Chief with whom President Putin met after coming to power in 2000.

President Yeltsin's unusual position towards the press was also shown during the unpopular Chechen war in 1994-6 – it was the first and the last war in which journalists were entirely against their own government, and it was the first Russian "TV war," as they said – with the daily news of war crimes against a civil population (more on this: Rostova, *YeltsinMedia*, 3). Some saw the war resistance as an analogy to the Vietnam War resistance among American journalists, with perhaps the only exception – the Chechen war was *inside* of the country.

New media were also born during the Yeltsin years. Among them were private TV channels and TV production companies that had never been in the country before: *NTV*, *TV-6*, *Ren-TV*, *ViD*, and *ATV* on a national level, and hundreds on a local level in the regions. Commercial radio was blooming, and print media expressed a broad political spectrum. A lot of Western media outlets opened their bureaus in Moscow, among them *Reuters*, *Bloomberg*, and the *Associated Press*. The print publications were massive.

### 1.3. Disclaimer

When I started to work as a professional media correspondent for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in 2002, my motivation was personal: The *Segodnya* newspaper, where I had landed my first staff job, was a part of the *Media-Most holding*, owned by media mogul Vladimir Gusinsky. He

had an empire that included *NTV*. On April 14, 2001, the Kremlin installed new *NTV* management. On April 17, the newspaper was closed.

This change touched me deeply, so I accepted the suggestion by Editor-in-Chief Tatyana Koshkareva to write about television in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.

Over the years, I wanted to better understand the press in Russia. What were the press' relations with politicians, and their manipulation of public opinion? I interviewed dozens if not hundreds of media executives, editors-in-chief, and prominent Russian journalists.

Several *NTV* founders, such as Igor Malashenko, Evgeny Kiselev, and Sergey Zverev were among the people I interviewed. We met several times, and they knew me through my writings.

Malashenko and Gusinsky both had to leave Russia. Malashenko relocated to New York City where we met for the first time when I was then a *Novaya Gazeta* correspondent. Unlike Malashenko, however, Gusinsky never granted me interviews despite the promises of his close friends that he would do so. My several direct calls and text messages went unanswered.

It was on a cold snowy Moscow day in February 2018, when I met Malashenko for the last time. Malashenko had just returned to Russia from his political exile in the U.S. I was living in the U.S. and working on my project on the history of Russian journalism during President Boris Yeltsin's era, *YeltsinMedia.com*. Malashenko told me that he had seen my previous project, on the Gorbachev era, *GorbyMedia.com*. Soon after Malashenko's interview, the project – including his interview – was launched. In February 2019, Malashenko committed suicide in his Spanish house.

As for Lesin, I had covered his activities since 2002 while he served as Press Minister. I was present on some of his press-conferences and background briefings. Lesin was familiar with my work before we met in person, and I heard twice from different media executives that Lesin

was concerned they had given me interviews. Lesin did not like my critical reporting about him, and he asked others to stay away from me. He avoided me and always refused to answer my questions, except for one instance. Lesin granted me his only interview over the phone in 2014.

I was familiar with most of the interviewees quoted herein in this thesis before I interviewed them for this thesis.

## Chapter 2: Theory

My research contributes to two different strands in the literature on comparative authoritarianism: the informational theory of new authoritarianism, and the investigation of crony capitalism and systematic corruption.

According to Guriev and Treisman's informational theory of new authoritarianism (also known as the informational theory of new dictatorships) incompetent authoritarian leaders survive either through co-optation, or censorship. They explain after Wintrobe (1990) that one way dictators silence criticism is through co-opting citizens with material benefits, instead of investing in repression. Another way is not a total control over the media (which may be costly) but censorship of private media, and propaganda of the message "the leader is competent." Importantly, in addition to the more traditional understanding of repressive censorship as suppressing information, Guriev and Treisman argue that "it can include filtering the internet, hiring hackers to attack opposition websites, bribing the owners and journalists in 'independent' media to censor themselves, and prosecuting and imprisoning journalists who refuse. It can also involve paying friendly investors to buy out and domesticate critical broadcasters, overtly or through shell companies" (Guriev, Treisman, 2015, p. 4). Both co-optation and censorship bare "substitutes – both prevent the elite from publicizing an incumbent's failures – but state

propaganda is complimentary to both" (p.32). Additionally, the dictators, if needed, may use propaganda to persuade even the members of the elite.

Recently, Guriev and Treisman elaborated their theory by including a new concept of leadership, in which the media is a key factor in building and maintaining the new authoritarian regimes, and specifically used post-Soviet Russia as an example. "Except for a few strongmen like Kim Jong-Un and Bashar al-Assad who oblige by playing the villain, most are harder to place," the scholars argued. "Western observers have not known how to describe these new autocrats. Either they equate them to the old – labeling Putin a tsar, Chaves another Castro – or they endorse their democratic act, as some accept Orban's bona fides. In fact, these leaders are neither classic twentieth-century tyrants nor wayward members of the Western club" (Guriev, Treisman, 2022, p. 218). Such leaders are not old-fashioned tyrants like Josef Stalin, Idi Amin, or Augusto Pinochet, though "the central goal remains the same: to monopolize political power." To pursue this goal, violence turns out to be neither necessary, nor efficient, and is complemented by a broad spectrum of tools targeting the population's compliant and even enthusiastically approving beliefs about the world and those in power. Like spin doctors in a democracy, they spin the news to engineer support. They are spin dictators" (p. 4).

The spin dictators, the theory suggests, use rule through deception. Unlike the "dictators of fear," the regimes that are spreading around the world are much less violent, want to preserve the image of enlightened leadership, allow some oppositional media to exist, and use covert censorship through co-opted private media outlets when possible. The theory suggests that while each new dictatorship may maintain its specific national character, they all fit an internally consistent model of unfree governance with the following complementary key elements: "manipulating the media, engineering popularity, faking democracy, limiting public violence,

and opening up to the world – complement each other to produce a model of unfree governance that is spreading" (p.13).

While Russia officially counted as an electoral democracy since the 1990s, at the end, 22 years of Putin's rule returned country to tyranny. The full-scale war launched by Russia in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, effectively closed the discussions about the puzzling nature of the "Russian way" of the regime. Suppressing the media outlets one by one, and step by step, Putin's regime created a public sphere of support, and established the so-called "vertical of power" consisting of the judicial and parliament branches, big business, and regional elites that were more and more loyal to Putin over the years. Of course, the media was a crucial part of Putin's consolidation, so the "pluralism of opinions" suggested by Gorbachev in the 1980s disappeared from public discourse.

Guriev and Treisman's work is based on a broader study of authoritarianism, dictators' behavior, and economic policies they produce. In such regimes, monopolization of the media and criminalization of opposition are used to stop people from sharing information with each other and protesting as a result. Such regimes are perfectly described by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann classic spiral of silence theory. "The fear of isolation seems to be the force that sets the spiral of silence in motion," she wrote. "To run with the pack is a relatively happy state of affairs, but you can't because you won't share publicly in what seems a universally acclaimed conviction; you can at least remain silent as a second choice, so that others can put up with you" (Noelle-Neumann, p. 6).

Still, even dictators need to move towards technological advance, and this question of modernization in a post-industrial global world puzzled many scholars. Such rulers face the so-called "dictator's dilemma" attributed to the former Secretary of State George Shultz. Either

totalitarian regimes stifle technology and pay the price of falling behind in their development, or they compromise totalitarian control due to technological development, which is not quite possible anyway (Kedzie, 1996). As Kedzie suggested, "successful dictators have appreciated the difference in the values and threats of various telecommunication technologies. Broadcasts can be politically profitable while interactivity is likely to be dangerous" (p. 16). In his opinion, during the last days of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev learned that "while new communication technologies may be enticing as they afford new economic opportunities to rulers who seek to capitalize on global integration, at the same time these technologies may offer political opportunities to alternate power sources who seek to oppose authoritarian control" (p. 17).

The studies I mentioned above suggest that authoritarian propaganda and information manipulation normally speak to authoritarian legitimation and persistence issues. However, they miss the matter of *personal influence*. Personalistic regimes are based on the power of a single man. Still, there are many other agents (typically, the subservient elites) who make it possible, including businessmen, corporations, bureaucracy, and political elites. But all those media studies I described before miss the matter of personal influence in the countries that have not yet developed democratic institutions. While concentration is also of the key factors in press control, I suggest looking at the personalistic role of the key actors. As Becker wrote, "in a country where there is a tremendous concentration of power within the executive branch, and where legal institutions are weak and often incapable of serving as an effective check on government, the views of the President and his associates in the executive are of the utmost importance" (Becker, 2007).

My thesis investigates the early stage of the democratic backsliding and authoritarian construction by researching the role that media officials can play in such process focusing on the example of Mikhail Lesin.

The second strand of theories that supports my approach are studies of kleptocracy and power corruption, that are mostly inevitable in new dictatorships. According to Marcus, Russia is among the outstanding countries in this sense. "Russia's wealth inequality is among the highest in the world. The top 10 percent of Russian wealth-holders own 89 percent of total household wealth; the corresponding figure is 73 percent in China and 78 percent in the US, the only two countries with more dollar billionaires but lower wealth concentration) than Russia. Billionaire wealth from the crony sectors in Russia is the highest in the world as a percentage of GDP (18 percent), followed by Malaysia (13 percent) and the Philippines (11 percent); it has also risen since 2014 (from 16 percent)" (Marcus, 2017, p. 26).

Under such conditions, some scholars suggest the creation of An International Anti-Corruption Court (Wolf, 2018). "In 2016, leaders from more than forty countries met in London for the Anti-Corruption Summit," Wolf reminds us. The Global Declaration Against Corruption (2016) emphasizes the "centrality" of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), which 183 countries pledging to create enforceable laws against corruption and new solutions to fight it (Wolf, 2018, p. 144).

According to another scholar, Dawisha, the stability of the immense wealth and power of the Russian oligarchs is directly tied to political loyalty to Putin: "... the state absorbs the risk, provides state funds for investment, and gives those close to the Kremlin massive monetary rewards" (Dawisha, 2015, p. 2). Dawisha concludes that "from the beginning Putin and his circle sought to create an authoritarian regime ruled by a close-knit cabal with embedded interests,

plans, and capabilities, who used democracy for decoration rather than direction. In other words, Russia is both a democratic failure and a resounding success – that is, a success for Putin and his cronies and a success on their terms" (p. 8).

Based on this approach, I focus on the figure of Mikhail Lesin who was in charge of the post-Soviet media system that heralded the transition to Putin's mature regime that we witness today. Although Lesin was instrumental in again putting the Russian press under Kremlin's control after 20 years of liberalization, there is no significant research on the role Lesin played. Existing studies of the inner circles of Putin regime, e.g., Belton's "Putin's People" (2022), or Dawisha's "Putin's Kleptocracy" (2015) do not pay sufficient attention to Putin's Press Minister and adviser, Lesin. This study begins to fill this void by investigating Lesin as being the crucial figure at the intersection of wealth, power, and media in contemporary Russia. After all, Lesin was not only a person who helped Vladimir Putin to build an authoritarian state, but also one of the crony oligarchs mentioned above who profited from the regime, and additionally a member of the elite who *created Video International Group of Companies* which became the major player on the Russia advertisement market. As a member of Putin's government later, Lesin also became instrumental in Putin's crackdown on the media as well as bringing it under state control.

If we want to understand the importance of the individual's role in how autocrats use and manipulate political and media systems, Mikhail Lesin is a perfect example.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1. Design

For this case study, qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals provided testimony who had known or worked with Mr. Lesin. Every interviewee must have met one of those four categories:

1. Former and current leaders of Russian media outlets or journalism organizations (i.e., editors-in-chief, general directors, CEOs, journalists), as well as media critics who professionally followed Lesin's activities;
2. Civil servants who worked with Mikhail Lesin at any time;
3. Former partners who did business with Mikhail Lesin prior to his political career;
4. Former friends of Mikhail Lesin.

This selection of experts was willing to share professional judgments about Mikhail Lesin's role in shaping the Russian media landscape.

### 3.2. Data of interest

This data includes opinions of the professional community about the important role Lesin played in the Russian media landscape. The question is whether he had enough independence as Press Minister to devise the media system or whether he was just another subordinate who followed the orders. There was much press criticism of Lesin, known as the strangler of press freedom, when he was Press Minister. At the same time, there were also some who respected his role as one of the founding fathers of Russia's advertising market and saw him as a knowledgeable person and strong negotiator who set the rules. Interview questions in this case study helped to rekindle the memories of those who had worked or covered Lesin and evaluated his many roles.

### 3.3. Interview Questions

Interviewees were asked to participate in the research via email by answering the following questions. The interviewees were asked six questions including:

1. What is your most memorable experience with or observation of Mikhail Lesin?
2. Did Lesin influence your work, directly or indirectly? (If yes, how?)
3. What is his demeanor or management style and how is it different from other Press Ministers of Russia you have known or worked with?
4. Did the Russian media system change once Lesin was appointed Press Minister? (If so, how?)
5. In your opinion, was Mikhail Lesin's role in shaping the Russian media landscape more positive or negative? Explain.
6. Do you think Lesin performed many or most of his duties as minister independently or as directed by the government? Explain.

When appropriate, follow-up or clarifying questions were asked.

#### 3.4. Interview Procedure

All interviewees were chosen by the researcher, a former Russian journalist with nearly 20 years of experience covering the Russian media. There were no required age, sex, race, or religion criteria for the interviewees. Participants had to be of Russian origin who personally knew and worked with Mikhail Lesin. All participants were 18 years of age or older. The interview protocol was IRB approved at the University of Maryland.

Fourteen experts agreed to be interviewed, and six refused. Three did not answer a recruitment email. Participants were not required to speak English, so interviews were held in Russian by a native-Russian speaker researcher who later translated transcripts into English. All of the interviewees knew the researcher either personally or by the researcher's work in Russia.

The participants were told that according to the university procedures, the researcher was required to have their signature to participate in the interview. All the details of the interview procedures were sent in an attachment to the letter. Those who agreed to participate sent the

researcher the last page of the consent form with a date and a signature, either electronically or by printing the document, signing, and sending a photo/ scan of the page.

All interviews were conducted from the researcher's home in Washington D.C. via phone, or online via Zoom and the WhatsApp mobile app, depending on each participant's preferences. Interviews were recorded between March 28, 2022, and April 20, 2022, and each lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. No one else was present in the researcher's home during the interviews. If participants did not want to be recorded, the plan was to write down answers. The author would later translate them. None of the interviewees requested transcripts.

The limitation of access to participants included current CEOs of state companies who were still in their positions and refused to talk to an American-based scholar during the war between Russia and Ukraine.

Participants had a right to anonymity but only one person requested it. That individual is referred to in this study as an Anonymous, or a journalist who covered the Russian media market.

## Chapter 4: Case Studies

### 4.1. Presidential Heart and its Cover Operation in 1996

Yeltsin came to power on the wave of democratization, but by 1996, the incumbent was highly unpopular. The economic turmoil was severe for most Russians who worked for the state (the so-called "budget sphere"). Doctors, teachers, professors, and other qualified professionals were not receiving their meagre salaries – six-month delays were a norm. The market economy was in its infancy and could not provide relief for the population. This poverty, significant losses in the Chechen War that had started in December 1994, and increased violence (including crimes by organized gangs) were reflected in Yeltsin's abysmal approval rating of no more than six

percent in January 1996 (Moroz, 2006). According to one poll taken from October 17 to 24, 1995, Yeltsin was trusted by only three percent of the voters, while all other opponents had at least twice as much support: Chernomyrdin and Zhirinovskiy had 6 percent each, Zyuganov had 9, Fedorov – 10, Yavlinsky – 12, and Lebed – 13 percent (Ibid.). On December 17, Russians mainly voted for the Communists for the Parliament, and the governing party received only 10 percent, not 20, as Yeltsin was willing to see as a result (Ibid.).

Surprisingly, six months later, on June 17, on Presidential elections, Yeltsin got 35.28 percent of the votes, while his adversary, a communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, received 32.03 percent. The second round of voting was scheduled for July 3. On June 26, Yeltsin suffered yet another heart attack (his fourth or fifth, it is still unclear). Still, he won.

The elections were new for post-Soviet Russia. Yeltsin was elected in 1991 as President of the Russian Soviet Republic, one of the USSR republics, but the 1996 campaign was the first in the election of President of an independent Russian state. Nor was there any tradition of televised presidential debates (which still remains true). Opponents Yeltsin and Zyuganov never met in front of the cameras, so the campaign had to be built around something other than public debate. Yeltsin's campaign instead relied on three major components: advertising (traditional in the West but very new to Russia), a massive anti-propaganda campaign against Gennady Zyuganov, and TV propaganda that promoted Yeltsin. All television companies (such as three national channels – *ORT*, *RTR*, *NTV*, and also a cable *TV-6*), several national radio stations (such as *Mayak*, *Yunost*, *Evropa Plus*), and leading publications (such as *Izvestia*, *Ogonyok*) had a pro-Yeltsin position.

#### 4.1.1. Advertisement

Mikhail Lesin's contribution to the campaign through these three components is difficult to overstate. The *Video International* – which Lesin and his partners created at the end of the Soviet Union – developed a series of ads under a single slogan: "I believe, I love, I hope." A sequence of photos of Boris Yeltsin, who, like many Russians, had suffered under the communists, was accompanied by a calm voiceover by the President narrating his short memoirs. This was just one part of the campaign "Vote with Your Heart." In addition to being the mastermind of the campaign's organization, Lesin is regarded as the creator of the campaign's idea.

One of the *Video International's* competitors in the media market was *Lis's Agency*, founded in 1989 by young businessman Sergey Lissovsky; he was also on Yeltsin's side. Like Lesin, Lissovsky was a pioneer in the Russian advertising industry, and his team created another crucial part of the campaign, a series of ads under the catchphrase *Golosui ili Proigraesh!* ("Vote or Lose!") It mimicked Bill Clinton's 1992 "Choose or Lose" campaign on American *MTV*. Russian *MuzTV*, a channel patterned after *MTV*, was launched during the campaign and started a 12-hour broadcasting daily that included news, talk shows, and music. It aired in 40 Russian cities, mainly in the so-called "Red Belt," that was pro-Communist (Tukan, 1996). *RTR* broadcasted a new TV program, *Golosui Ili Proigraesh!* on May 13. *ORT* had several special concerts devoted to the upcoming elections. In addition to the ads Lissovsky placed on TV, he organized a series of concerts featuring at least five dozen of the most popular bands and singers all over the country, who supported Yeltsin.

The second component of Yeltsin's campaign was discrediting his opponent, Gennady Zyuganov, who had massive support within the country. As one example of his stature, when Zyuganov went to The World Economic Forum in Davos in February of 1996, he was accepted

by the global elites as the next Russian President (Berger, 1996).

Zyuganov was the enemy that Yeltsin's team had to destroy. A political consultant, Gleb Pavlovsky, was among those who actively worked with Lesin to promote Yeltsin's election. Pavlovsky was the founder and director – and presumed to be the leader – of *Fond Effektivnoi Politiki* (*FEP*; Effective Politics Fund), a think-tank created in 1995 to conduct political electoral campaigns. After their success in 1996, the same team worked four years later for another candidate, Vladimir Putin.

Pavlovsky worked with Lesin to promote Yeltsin's election. In an interview for this thesis, media analyst Ivan Zassoursky stated that Pavlovsky told him he held only 20 percent of *FEP* shares. "I first learned about Mikhail Lesin from Gleb Pavlovsky," Zassoursky explained. "Pavlosky said to me that Lesin had owned 80 percent of *FEP*. It made a strong impression on me because I did not know that it was not a Pavlovsky's structure, [as it is still thought] but Lesin's."<sup>17</sup>

Later, Pavlovsky explained the role *FEP* played: "The Presidential campaign of 1996 was fierce, and people were personally invested in it." "Yeltsin's advertisement campaign was run by Misha<sup>18</sup> Lesin, who was a co-director at *FEP*... It was the first time in Russia that 'total television' became a phenomenon" (Krastev, 2018; more on the campaign: Rostova, YeltsinMedia, 6).

#### 4.1.2. Discrediting the Opponent

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<sup>17</sup> There is no accurate way to follow the money in many Russian companies of the 1990s.

<sup>18</sup> "Misha" is a diminutive for "Mikhail".

While the local press in many "Red Belt" regions was pro-Communist, and television was dominated by the pro-Yeltsin campaign (Aron, 2000; Oates, 2006; Colton, 2008). *FEP* concentrated on what was left. "We had complete control of the campaign, with lots of creative tricks, but still dirty counter-propaganda [against Zyuganov]," Pavlovsky admitted. "We published fake Communist Party programs; there were also made-up 'communist' stickers we put everywhere in Moscow. ... We made fake videos with actors playing brutal communists. ... Our campaign targeted the lowest levels of the subconscious. We invited famous astrologists like Alan Chumak, who read horoscopes about the coming war between Russia and Ukraine and the invasion of the marines on Kinburn Spit in the Black Sea. (I drew the map from a book about Suvorov's assault on the Kul-Burun Fortress in the 19th century.) Stories about Satan's train that brought Lenin's corpse from Gorki were now secretly stored somewhere at the Communist Party Central Quarters. And that Lenin's Mausoleum is occupied not by Lenin but by his murdered double, who is swimming in Russian infants' blood. All this suggestive nonsense was pumped into people's subconscious using TV, and then people were reporting nightmares to their doctors. It was when the model of overwhelming and total propaganda was tried out, the same model that contemporary TV, controlled by Putin, practices every day... In 1996, this monstrous brainwashing was real. I remember thinking that it was as if we made a hole in Russia's skull and pumped toxic narratives into it using television as a pump."

When I read Pavlovsky's quote to Valentin Yumashev while interviewing him years later, Yumashev admitted: of course, that he knew that they were running a counter propaganda, anti-Communist campaign. "Pavlovsky produced it. What you quoted means that he had talented guys who worked with him. The electorate had to be motivated, Yeltsin voters thought that the

authorities always win, so there was no need to participate in the voting. That is why such methods were used" (Rostova, Yumashev).

There were many tricks to spread the idea that Zyuganov would be dangerous, including using stickers warning people to "Buy food for the last time," or the publications of "analytical reports" of "secret services" that "found out" the communists would start a violent upheaval if they lost the election, including *Ogonyok* or *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Nezavisimaya, 1996).

Journalists from the respectable *Kommersant* started another publication, *Ne Dai Bog!* ("God Forbid!"), that described the likely horrors of Zyuganov's future regime. Alexander Loktev, who was then-Editor-in-Chief in *Kommersant*, told me years later that he participated "in a famous meeting that was in the *LogoVAZ*<sup>19</sup> reception house, which Boris Berezovsky owned." Loktev remembered all the oligarchs of the time present at this event: Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, Alexander Smolensky, Vladimir Potanin, and Leonid Nevzlin, who were at the meeting with the Editors-in-Chief and General Directors of the prominent Russian media, the main TV channels, and major publications. "There were about 25-30 people," he remembered. "It was said that if Yeltsin would not be supported, the country might turn red again. Therefore, in this situation, we all must give up some principles and come out in support of Yeltsin" (Rostova, 2010).

Zyuganov also had problems with access to TV. Federal channels were obliged by the election law to provide free airtime to candidates. The television management did so but not without their tricks. For example, instead of interviewing Zyuganov or having an interview with him, they would have conversations with Stanislav Govorukhin, his party colleague. Govorukhin was a prominent film director, yet not a particularly popular politician. At least, he was less

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<sup>19</sup> *LogoVaz* was one of the first private car dealer companies controlled by Boris Berezovsky.

popular than Zyuganov. Another time, *ORT* refused to accept what Zyuganov intended to talk about and filled the airtime with Zyuganov ads instead. Next time, they interviewed Zyuganov himself, while at the same time attacking him. At the same time, anchors such as Evgeny Kiselev on *NTV* or Nikolay Svanidze on *RTR* did not attack Yeltsin on the air.

American scholar Sarah Oates analyzed the campaign (Oates, 2006). Out of the 152 news stories in the evening *Vremya* ("Time") on *ORT*, which was aired during the first round, 25 percent were in one way, or another related to the Presidential election. Yeltsin was mentioned in 83 stories (55 percent) and Zyuganov in 53 (35 percent). In addition, 5 percent of that news was shown to the citizens who expressed support for Yeltsin. Other candidates appeared in 26 out of 152 stories (17 percent), but the audience was not able to learn about their views or even about who they were. The candidates merely flashed by in the frame, although sometimes with interspersed sound. And in 4% of these stories, it was falsely affirmed that the Communist Party would split, Oates discovered.

#### 4.1.3. Promoting Yeltsin. Covering (up) Yeltsin's Health

Still, it was not enough to guarantee victory. The disinformation campaign about Yeltsin's health was the third crucial pillar in winning the election.

Yeltsin's health issues were a secret even before the 1996 elections; he was already seen as a leader who had lost the ability to control the country. In 1995, he spent about five months in hospitals and was not seen publicly during the fall election campaign for the State Duma.

TV anchor Sergey Dorenko lost his job at *ORT* in 1995. Years later, he blamed this on the reaction to his statement about the lies the Kremlin provided regarding Yeltsin's health. "At some point, I was fired from the Channel One," he remembered once. "And I think, it was

Berezovsky [co-owner of the channel] who fired me, because it was Berezovsky who was accountable to Yeltsin for the channel. All I said was that it was a lie that Yeltsin had cardiac angina since that can easily be treated by taking a pill, but here we had not seen Yeltsin for a very long time" (Aven, 2018, p. 162).

And then in 1996, it appeared that Yeltsin suffered another heart attack before the second round. Journalist Leonid Mlechin wrote, "Yeltsin's campaign managers were supposed to conduct an election campaign without a candidate. Yeltsin literally could not get up." How could he lead the campaign? (Mlechin, 2007, p. 440). Mikhail Margelov, Lesin's deputy in *Video International*, admitted the same: Lesin came with the bad news. "It seems that we will have to work during the second round in a difficult situation," Markelov retold Lesin's words to American journalist David Hoffman. "We will work with the absence of the client" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 356).

"It was necessary to come up with some way to present the voters the illusion of the incumbent working diligently at his workplace in the Kremlin," *Vlast* magazine wrote later (Zhulebin, Klochkov, 1999). "One of the news agencies improvised an idea that was both genius and simple to execute. The President had to give an extended interview answering all the questions the voters were interested in. Of course, having Yeltsin on TV was out of the question. The trick was to publish the text. So, the agency spent an entire night writing up the President's answers to all sorts of questions, ranging from pensions to the territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands between Russia and Japan. By the morning of June 31, the interview was ready. TV and newspaper commentators had excellent material to comment on, the information vacuum was filled, and almost nobody noticed Yeltsin's public absence during the busy days right before the election. Apparently, the President is still unaware of that interview."

Probably, *Kommersant* authors probably referred to the interview on *Interfax* that went to the subscribers at 6:37 p.m. on June 30, 1996. The title was: "President Yeltsin answers questions from *Interfax* agency" (Interfax, 1996). Here is the first question and the answer to it.

*"Interfax: The whole country is anticipating the results three days before the elections. Your opponent is constantly in public view, talking to the press and the public, while you prefer to stay away from the crowd during those last several days. What is your explanation for that? What are you occupied with those days?"*

***Boris Yeltsin:** Every day, I am working with my campaign headquarters, consulting with my allies, and conducting negotiations about the structure and the constituency of the new government. I also monitor the execution of my decrees and meet regional leaders and the heads of the government. I am also working with journalists: I have recorded several dozen TV and radio interviews with regional media outlets. I actually lost my voice. As for my opponent, all I can say is that he has his approach, and I have mine. He has press conferences every day and conducts fierce anti-Yeltsin propaganda. At the same time, I do my job and do particular things. And, in general, I think that for the incumbent, the actions are more meaningful than talking."*

Anatoly Chubais, "father of privatization" and famous liberal economist, led the campaign strategy. But the media side of the campaign was directed by Igor Malashenko, who, at the same time, stayed in his position as *NTV* President. Malashenko explained this conflict of interest: "This is not America," he told me in an interview. "Even if I had left *NTV* for the campaign, nobody would have believed me that I did" (Rostova, Malashenko). So, he stayed.

Of course, he was fully aware of Yeltsin's inability to at least lead the campaign, not to mention rule the country. "Everybody knew there was something wrong going on with Yeltsin; he completely disappeared from the public," Malashenko told me. He "understood the problem, and the responsibility [for covering up the actual state of Yeltsin's health] rested on him" (Ibid.). "I did not tell anyone," Malashenko said. "I hid it from everybody, including journalists. I did not

talk about it to [the political *NTV anchor* Evgeny] Kiselev or [*NTV news editor* Oleg] Dobrodeev. When I was criticized later, I said that I would rather elect Yeltsin's corpse than Zyuganov alive."

When Yeltsin disappeared from TV screens, the country became worried, and a special message from him was prepared and staged. "The wooden panels replicating the panels in the Kremlin office were installed in his sleeping room," the journalist Leonid Mlechin wrote. "Yeltsin was set in the bed, pillows were placed under him, and a shirt, tie, and jacket were put on him. Even this manipulation cost Boris Nikolayevich enormous strain" (Mlechin, 2007, p. 441). "Only a strong will and a passion for victory could make him overcome the pain and weakness. People whom Yeltsin trusted completely sat around the table; those people were initiated into the true state of affairs – Valentin Yumashev and Tatyana Dyachenko. This picture was shown on television. When Yeltsin's address to the voters was being prepared, all the television men were asked to leave the room so they would not see President, who could hardly utter a few words."

Lesin's deputy Margelov told David Hoffman later: "It was quite obvious that it was very difficult for Yeltsin to speak. He was sweating all the time. It was difficult even to pronounce words. Sometimes he couldn't finish the sentence. Sometimes it was difficult for him to even breathe" (Hoffman, 2011, p. 357). According to Margelov, this videotape was recorded in *Barvikha*, a Presidential residence not far away from Moscow, on the weekend before the second round and was edited in the *Video International* office. "One of the cameramen told Margelov to be prepared for a shock. The old man was in very bad shape," Hoffman writes. The campaign managers cut and edited the video. "It was serious work to make it look nice," said Margelov talking about the work on doctoring the video. "Not many people could see that

something was wrong." Answering the question about the morality of lying to the nation, Margelov said: "No, there were no moral questions during the second round of the elections: are we deceiving somebody or not? Because I think the goal was quite obvious. Not one of us wanted the Communists back" (p. 358).

On July 3, during the second round of voting, *CNN* reported that Russia presumably was electing a dead president. Yeltsin was absent for a long time while the press waited for him at his voting site. Hours later, he arrived in another voting location where there were fewer journalists. Pavel Lobkov, a journalist who covered the elections for *NTV*, was there. He told me that Yeltsin was so bad that he could not put the ballot paper in the box the first time. "If we had not doctored the video, if we showed all of Yeltsin's tries to put the ballot in, it would have meant the definitive win of Zyuganov" (Rostova, Lobkov). Still, he called it a "conscious choice." He thought that a Zyuganov-led government would fail and bring "members of the security apparatus to power" (Ibid.).

After the elections, Yeltsin disappeared again. The inauguration was held on August 9, and the ceremony was cut to 16 minutes – doctors were worried that Yeltsin might not be strong enough to undertake a longer event. After the inauguration, he disappeared again.

#### 4.1.4. Lesin's Initial Role in Helping the Country Elect a "Dead" President

And here, finally, the work behind the scenes was over. Now it was time for Lesin to come on stage. On August 22, Lesin met with Yeltsin for the first short, televised conversation and asked several questions. "There is little point in digging into the content of his brief answers," *Segodnya* newspaper wrote. "The main intrigue of the interview, of course, was just

the actual physical appearance of Boris Yeltsin in front of the television cameras" (Malkina, 1996).

On September 5, Yeltsin's second interview with Lesin was aired on the ORT's *Vremya*. Yeltsin told Lesin that he would have heart surgery soon. Yeltsin's memoirs, written by Valentin Yumashev, presented it this way: "Here, in *Zavidovo*, I made a final decision to tell it like it is. I gave an interview to Mikhail Lesin right here, in the winter garden; I remember I was wearing a sweater. I remember I stumbled a bit. It was difficult to say out loud the words 'heart surgery.' While watching that segment on TV, I remember thinking casually: well, here begins my new life. But what kind of life?" (Yeltsin, 2000). Yeltsin said that his heart problems were discovered during his extended hospital stay (Arutyunova, 1996). "And the doctors offered him two options: surgery or leaving busy work." The latter "did not ever seem to me to be a satisfactory solution," he stated. So, he decided to undergo surgery to recover from the illness completely. Yeltsin also stated that he was not going to have the surgery abroad. "Our cardiologists should be able to perform such surgeries. I think that the president of a country must do this at home. I am counting on the support of Russians" (Yeltsin, 2000).

"Yeltsin stated that the disease was unexpectedly discovered during an examination," political scientist Lilia Shevtsova wrote of that meeting (Shevtsova, 1999, p. 300). "He obviously didn't want to say that he had had a heart attack before the second round of the elections – otherwise, he would have to admit that the society was misled, and it elected a person who was not fit for office." She explained the reason for the interview with Lesin, stating that "it was no longer possible to continue this performance, especially since the chancellor [of Germany Helmut Kohl] was coming to Moscow. He clearly wanted to know about health of his 'friend Boris.' So, it was decided to tell the truth."

It was clear to the observers that Lesin "simply acted as a 'mic stand' and articulated the questions formulated by the Presidential administration and the government team" (Kachkaeva, 1999).

But even at this point, Lesin was true to his instinct for making money (which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1). "For unclear reasons, the right to record the interview with President was given to just one single camera that belonged to the state-owned media outlet *RIA-Novosti*," Evgenia Albats wrote (Albats, 1996). "It was decided that it would be best if the President would announce his decision during the interview. Of course, it would be strange to let him read his own medical history. And then, as we know from several media outlets, those outlets sent protests to the President's Press Secretary. The decision to tell the entire country the unfortunate news about the illness and the upcoming surgery was turned into a commodity and could become lucrative." Albats blamed Lesin for the speculation that he was doing it for personal interest – the interview was offered for sale to other media outlets: \$270 for one minute or \$1100 for the entire interview. "Frankly, the interview was offered at a reduced price. And for a good reason that would be familiar to petty speculators: there were only a couple of hours left for the sale. After the interview is aired, nobody will want to buy it."

It was another sale on a metaphorical level. Later, Lesin was asked if, as the chief ideologist of the Presidential campaign, he felt responsible for "selling a political corpse to the country" (Kachkaeva, 1999). Lesin "completely disagreed" with such "a wrong position." "The nation has chosen Yeltsin. We did not sell anything to anyone. You speak so as if we changed the ballots and deceived the people. They voted. And there is no statement about falsifying the results of the elections today." (Ibid.) His later interviews show that he did not view elections in terms of creating the state institutions. "Elections are the same as an advertising campaign,"

Lesin explained. "Spectators and voters are the consumers, and they vote using three parameters: head, heart, and, perhaps, heels – which we consider to be the place for the instinct of self-preservation. Their hearts are filled with fear. Their heads make a rational choice. The heart is emotional. And heels need a sense of security. In our case, the latter [that sense of security] was supported by the slogan ‘Save and Preserve,’ that is, the idea of a guarantee against a return to the bloodthirsty past" (Bykov, 2000).

"During the Presidential campaign, Lesin solved two problems at once: he brilliantly worked ‘for victory’ by airing a series of television videos, ‘I believe, I love, I hope’, and on the radio by playing calls from listeners on the ‘Telephone of Trust’,” *Moskovskie Novosti* wrote (E.R., 1996).

After those two interviews, on September 22, Lesin was appointed chief of a newly-created public relations department in the Presidential Administration. When years later I asked Valentin Yumashev why it happened, he replied: "Lesin appeared in the Kremlin during the elections. He created a talented election project, ‘Vote with Your Heart.’ [The Kremlin Chief-of-Staff in 1996-97 Anatoly] Chubais decided that Lesin was a proper candidate for the position of leading the Kremlin's public relations" (Rostova, Yumashev). Lesin himself explained that the main goal was to "develop new information technologies and recommendations for the President, governmental bodies and agencies" (Segodnya, 1996). In addition, the department was intended to coordinate all press services of the state agencies.

Mikhail Margelov became Lesin’s deputy again, now in the Kremlin. All the campaign members got a Presidential note of acknowledgment. Gusinsky’s *NTV* received another present. On September 24, President Yeltsin signed a decree that allowed *NTV* to use a dedicated

frequency 24 hours a day. Previously, the frequency was shared with another media organization – *Rossiiskie Univeritety*. In November 1996, the latter channel had to disappear from the air.

#### 4.2. "The Man, Who Looks Like the Prosecutor General"

On March 17, 1999, the *RTR* channel, which was the main asset of the *VGTRK* holding, showed footage of a bed scene of two females with one man. As TV anchor Dmitry Borisov said, it was a "man who looked like the Prosecutor General." Yury Skuratov had been in the position since 1995. While eroticism appeared on Russian screens after the collapse of the USSR, the show was quite unusual. A TV news presenter of the *Vesti* program asked parents to forbid their children from watching. The "documentary," as it was said, was shown after midnight.

Editor-in-Chief of *Vesti* Aleksey Abakumov told *Kommersant* that the tape was delivered anonymously to *VGTRK* on March 15, and "it was the state channel that was supposed to defend the state, society and the Prosecutor General himself" (Arutyunova, 1999, 1). Therefore, according to his logic, the airing of the footage on TV ruled out the possibility of blackmailing the Prosecutor General.

Skuratov immediately connected the tape demonstration with the investigation of bribery among inner Yeltsin's inner circle of Russian officials in connection to the Swiss company *Mabetex*. He even went to see President Yeltsin at the Central Clinical Hospital on March 18, 1999, and discussed this version with him (Zapodinskaya, 1999). Later, he accused Vladimir Putin, the *FSB* director at the time, of staging this "special operation" (Skuratov, 2014).

*Mabetex* was a company that had a Moscow contract for renovating the Kremlin. Swiss Prosecutor General Carla Del Ponte provided some materials to her counterpart in Russia. The

Facilities and Property Management Department officials under President Yeltsin were accused of money laundering and backsliding. Skuratov opened the case in October of 1998.

The instructions to release the recording on the state television were given to Mikhail Lesin by Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana Dyachenko, personally, at a meeting in the Presidential Administration, *Kommersant* noted (Klochkov, 1999).

Years later, I asked the Presidential chief of staff in 1996-7, Valentin Yumashev, if it was really Dyachenko. Yumashev got annoyed: "Well, how could *Kommersant* know this? Was a journalist standing by there? A complete lie! Tatyana could never have given any command to any channel. She could have attended the meeting, but only to understand the logic of the discussion as, why this proposal for the President was accepted, and not another" (Rostova, Yumashev). Yumashev admitted, though, that the video release on TV was discussed at the Presidential Administration meeting. "Of course, it was the Kremlin that decided to show the tape! As a matter of fact, Skuratov was a General Prosecutor." When I asked to explain the logic, he said: "The Administration's decision was ruled by the thoughts that General Prosecutor was connected to criminal structures who supplied him with the prostitutes. Such a General Prosecutor cannot be a General Prosecutor. To my mind, it is so obvious that it is even ridiculous to talk about" (Ibid.). So, it was blackmailing, I suggested. Of course, he agreed. "If you don't want to leave your position, get the truth about yourself publicly. If you have criminal ties and if you are caught naked, do you think that you have the right to lead the Prosecutor's office? Ok. It is your decision" (Ibid.).

Yumashev also admitted that it was also the Kremlin Administration's decision to choose the channel for showing the tape. "It is logical that it is the *RTR*, which is controlled by the authorities and receives money from the authorities, that shows the tape. The authorities needed

to get rid of such a Prosecutor General" (Ibid.). According to such logic, *RTR* was not so much a TV channel that was financed with taxpayers' money, as it was a kind of private channel that instead belonged to Yeltsin's ruling inner circle and received the orders from it. Also, Yumashev denied accusations that it was out of vengeance for the investigation into *Mabetex*. He said that if Skuratov "would not have slept with the prostitutes, he would have been able to continue as the Prosecutor General and would have been able to continue investigations of the criminal cases that he had started, including the *Mabetex* case" (Ibid.).

However, according to the same *Kommersant*, on television level, the decision to make the recording public was signed by Mikhail Shvydkoy, a chief of *VGTRK* at the time, his deputy Mikhail Lesin, *VGTRK*'s Information Department chief Lev Koshlyakov, and *Vesti*'s Editor-in-Chief Aleksey Abakumov (Klochkov, 1999). And years later, Shvydkoy stated publicly: "I am proud of my best, and certainly the most famous literary work, which is a catchphrase that later became: 'The Man, who looks like the Prosecutor General.' I wrote it with my own hand" (Sirin, 2010).

Unlike Shvydkoy, Lesin, his deputy at this time, was not that proud of himself. He admitted that every TV channel had this tape, and "this was not a secret." Lesin explained why the release happened on state TV: "One would naturally wonder who would determine the airing of this tape, perfectly understanding the public consequences. The Prosecutor General is still in the state power structure, right? This person must be absolutely clean from all standpoints if we talk about normal approaches to the state power system" (Kachkaeva, 1999).

During this interview on the radio, it sounded so that Lesin felt obliged to defend the decision. And he did. "Firstly, in my opinion, we have not violated any parameter, neither from the legislative point of view nor from the moral point of view. We could have released the tape at

8 p.m., but we did not. We did it at 1 a.m. Secondly, we did not insist [that it was Skuratov]. We said: ‘The Man who looked like the Prosecutor General.’ The Prosecutor General has already had opportunities to say: no, it was not me. He did not. He avoids the answer; he says: Let the court decide. But we still have not heard, whether it was him or not. So, we decided to use the formula ‘The Man who looked like the Prosecutor General,’ and partially, it was done not to take the responsibility to admit whether it was him or not. But as you know, the tape was real. We did not have internal doubts that it was him" (Ibid.).

However, because of the smear campaign, in April 1999, Yury Skuratov was suspended from his duties "for the period of investigation of the criminal case initiated against him" and finally left the position after the Federation Council, a higher branch of the Russian Parliament, voted for his resignation.

For Mikhail Lesin, it was time for promotion – he became Press Minister in June of 1999 (more on this is described in Chapter 1.1.3.).

### 4.3. NTV

#### 4.3.1. The NTV beginning

1993 was a year of intense political struggle between the Communist Parliament, which was opposing a new democrat, Boris Yeltsin. The resultant Constitutional crisis ended with the President’s decision to use military force. The tanks were deployed that fired on the Parliament building. Exactly at this moment, *NTV* was born.

When we were last talking about the start of *NTV*, Igor Malashenko, a former *NTV* President, spoke about the budgets he had planned for a new enterprise – a private TV channel that had not been seen in Russia before. Vladimir Gusinsky, a banker, launched a liberal

newspaper *Segodnya* ("Today") on February 23, 1993, and had now become interested in creating a new TV channel. "I remember we spent \$30 million in 15 months between October 1, 1993, and the end of 1994," Malashenko told me. "It was a miracle since it was exactly the budget I had planned; I had it for 29.5 million. I made some calculations about the average hour of broadcasting, and I was about right in the calculations. Of course, I was buying films for myself and knew how much the information service costs, but the results were even better" (Rostova, Malashenko).

As is clear from his recollection, Lesin was important for the new channel from the very outset. "I put in place insignificant amounts as advertisement income, but we got much more," Malashenko said. "In under three months, *Video International* came to us eagerly and offered us a lucrative contract. [Co-founder of *Video International* Yury] Zapol and [Mikhail] Lesin showed up" (Ibid.).

The "channel" started as three programs broadcast on the Channel Five frequency – it was *Leningrad TV* that, according to *Kommersant*, had an audience of 75 million people back then (Belopolskaya, 1993). During Perestroika, it broadcasted to the entire country from Saint-Petersburg, while all other channels were coming from Moscow.

The Sunday *Itogi* ("Conclusions") was one of the first analytical programs in the country since January of 1992. And it was the first TV show with anchor Evgeny Kiselev who agreed with Gusinsky to start *NTV* and brought his program with him. Kiselev's popularity was so significant even before the launching *NTV* that he was included in the list of "100 leading politicians," compiled by a monthly examination of the *Vox Populi Public Opinion Research Service* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, for the first time (Moskvin, 1993). In August 1993, Kiselev took 99th place, and over time, his influence only increased.

His partners in the creation of *NTV* were Igor Malashenko, who previously had worked at Gorbachev's press office, and Oleg Dobrodeev, an Editor-in-Chief of the well-known TV program *Vremya*. As Kiselev told me years later, Gusinsky was a Russian version of Santa Claus – Grandpa Frost for the journalists. "Every year," he said, "in October, we had a corporate celebration, and he gave presents to us, distributing salary bonuses, giving loans for cars, and apartments, raising wages. Since 1993, the salaries have risen annually. The salaries decreased by 20 percent only once, after the Russian currency defaulted in 1998, but only among the highest-paid staff. They were, however always paid on time, unlike in the rest of the country in the 1990s. At one point, there were some problems with withdrawing cash from ATMs, so *Most-Bank* brought its ATM to *NTV's* office" (Rostova, 2009).

In addition to *Itogi*, the new channel started *Segodnya*, a daily program, at 9 p.m., the name of Gusinsky's newspaper. (Several years later, he would launch a new magazine, *Itogi*, that was published in cooperation with American *Newsweek*.)

Finally, *Namedni* ("The Day Before") was added. It had also had previously started on the Channel One with the anchor Leonid Parfenov; now, he was given a time slot on Saturdays.

The agreement that allowed the Moscow team to have these three shows on the Saint-Petersburg TV frequency was signed with the support of new democratic Mayor Anatoly Sobchak. Years later, Pavel Lobkov, first *NTV* journalist in Saint-Petersburg, told me in an interview that he often organized Oleg Dobrodeev's visits to the city. He knew that Sobchak and his unknown aid at the time, Vladimir Putin, played a key role in signing this agreement. The new "TV channel went on air with an information program, competitively at 9 p.m., in parallel with the *Vremya* program [on Channel One]. The documents were signed by Sobchak and Putin" (Rostova, Lobkov).

Igor Malashenko told me that the channel was ready to start on October 3, but the creators decided to change the date to October 10, so they would be better prepared for the launch. It was a prescient decision. On October 3, the shooting started in Moscow due to the standoff between President and the Parliament. Crowds stormed the *Ostankino* television center,<sup>20</sup> and all broadcasting was stopped. A new music channel *TV-6* started to rebroadcast *CNN*, even without Russian translation. Channel Two found a backup studio and broadcasted from another building. "I was not a witness of the historic event," Malashenko stated since that he felt sorry. "I was in Cannes buying foreign movies [for NTV]" (Rostova, Malashenko).

Still, Gusinskiy's *Most-Bank* lost a lot during the coup. Oleg Dobrodeev told *Kommersant* then that material losses amounted to 1 billion 700 million Russian rubles; Most had offices in the building where the Moscow Mayor was sitting. It was stormed too (Vladykin, Osipova, 1993).

*NTV* was on the Presidential side in the crisis. And soon enough, in December 1993, President Yeltsin signed a decree that allowed *NTV* to share the frequency of an educational channel, that became known as the fourth, *Rossiiskie University*. So *NTV* moved the programming from the Saint-Petersburg frequency into the *Rossiiskie University*, and gained 58 hours in broadcast weekly, the rest of the time was left for *Rossiiskie University*. The decree explained this as "an experiment."

During the turbulent 1990s in Russia, *NTV* played a crucial role in forming professional journalism standards and influencing politics since it "provided a truly independent source of information that reached beyond Moscow," Lipman and McFaul wrote. "Defying government

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<sup>20</sup> *Ostankino*, the television and radio center and a tower that was created in the USSR in 1967 to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1917 October revolution. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it remained the headquarters for the majority TV channels, even those which compete with each other.

threats to revoke its license, *NTV* earned its credentials as a serious news organization when it provided critical coverage of the first Chechen war. *NTV* also achieved a new level of post-Soviet professionalism, quality, and style that its rival channels, *ORT* (Channel 1), and *RTR* (Channel 2) lacked. News anchor Evgeny Kiselev became a national celebrity by producing and hosting *Itogi*, a Sunday night talk show on politics. Hoping to replicate the success of *NTV* in other media markets, Gusinsky and his *Media-Most* holding company also bought a stake in a popular radio station, *Ekho Moskvy*" (Lipman, McFaul, 2001, p.117-8).

"We just did what we thought was necessary, and we did everything without looking back," Malashenko told me. "I'm serious. We simply ignored attempts to explain anything to us. That time was different from now, and no one was particularly afraid of anything. We were supported by society, you know. To paraphrase de Maistre, every audience has the television it deserves. At that time, the audience wanted this kind of television, and it was a powerful defense for us. But by 2000, the situation had changed, and *NTV* no longer had such protection. Therefore, it could be destroyed, albeit not with bare hands" (Rostova, Malashenko).

*NTV* coincided with the public opinion that did not support the Chechen war. In the fall of 1995, according to *FOM*, 69 percent of the Russian population opposed the war, while only 10 supported the military operation (*FOM*, 1995). *NTV* survived.

But in the Presidential elections of 1996, *NTV* shut down the criticism towards Yeltsin and became a part of the Kremlin's game. There were no doubts about which side the other channels would join. With the state owning 51 percent of *ORT* shares, and *RTV*, a part of wholly owned state *VGTRK*, both were playing against the Communist candidate, Gennady Zyuganov. Private *NTV* had not just supported Yeltsin in its news – Malashenko became a strategist for the whole media campaign for Yeltsin (more on this is discussed in Chapter 4.1.).

The Kremlin was satisfied: Yeltsin won. On July 9 and on July 25, the President signed two decrees expressing gratitude to his supporters "for active participation in the organization and conduct of the election campaign of the President of the Russian Federation in 1996." Malashenko and Lesin were among the campaigners, that included the leaders of other prominent journalist's organizations.

In the fall of 1996, Yeltsin provided *NTV* ability to broadcast for 24 hours, also with a decree – *Rossiiskie Universitety* disappeared. In 1997, Gusinsky left the banking business, and decided to concentrate on media, so he united all his assets into *Media-Most* and launched a satellite television, the first in the country.

During the 1998 Russian financial crisis, Gusinky obtained loans for *Media-Most* from *Gazprom*, and this aid became fatal for him the following years.

#### 4.3.2. Why was there a fight over NTV?

The conflict over who controls *NTV* – between the company, its owners, the state gas monopoly *Gazprom*, and a Russian oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky – started in the summer of 1999 and lasted for about two years. It was the first national-level dispute over freedom of speech and press at the beginning of Putin's reign. Supporters of the *NTV* journalists argued that there was an attack on freedom of speech and independent media, while opponents suggested that the media company had never been independent. The latter believed that it had been used by its owner Gusinsky as a tool to manipulate public opinion, and now he did not want to pay for gas monopoly loans and used journalists for his own commercial and political purposes.

Anyway, the conflict started immediately after Lesin was appointed Press Minister on July 6, 1999. Yeltsin was still serving as President, but his so-called "Family," discussed above

was working to present a "successor" at the end of the year. Lesin was among this small circle of people who worked on the reelection of Yeltsin in 1996 and the election of Putin in 2000.

Just two days after Lesin's appointment as Minister, on July 8, the *Media-Most* management issued a press release to inform other media outlets about "upcoming attempts to discredit the holding and its assets" and asked the journalists to be more accurate fact-checking and more careful with the materials media may come into possession of (Kommersant-Vlast, 1999).

On June 9, *ORT* channel, a competitor of *NTV*, broadcasted its news program *Vremya* on June 9 which included the first report accusing Gusinsky and his empire of financial insolvency. The next day, the same accusations were repeated in *ORT*'s weekly program. "The war has been declared," *Kommersant* stated (Pestereva, Gridneva, 1999).

The participants of the story still have different opinions as to why this happened. Viktor Shenderovich, one of the *NTV* anchors, a satirist and one of the strongest critics of Putin since as the latter became President, explained that Putin was offended by the weekly program *Kukly* ("Dolls") (Shenderovich, 2003). Shenderovich was one of the scriptwriters for this puppet show, that usually used a famous piece of literature as a base for a new scenario, on the political situation in Russia. In this particular issue by which Putin was supposedly offended, Shenderovich compared Putin to *Little Zaches called Cinnabar*, the creature of the German writer Hoffman. The segment was on air on January 23, 2000.<sup>21</sup>

There were other reasons. As Arkady Ostrovsky writes, Shenderovich supposedly received the message from Kremlin "that the attack on *Media-Most* would stop if *NTV* fulfilled three conditions: changed its coverage of Chechnya; halted its criticism of the 'Family,'; and

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<sup>21</sup> The program is still available on YouTube at the URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CholpZhFbs>

removed 'the first person' – that is, Putin – from *Kukly*." "In response, Shenderovich publicized the message and made an even more provocative skit based on the Bible, in which Putin was portrayed as God. His puppet did not make an appearance, though: he was represented by a burning bush and a stormy cloud. Chief of Staff Voloshin was Moses conveying the Ten Commandments: 'Thou shalt not kill anyone, except ethnic Caucasians in a shit-hole' and 'Thou shalt not worship other gods but Him – at least for two terms' and 'Thou shalt not steal unless it is federal property.' Asked how 'He' should be referred to, Voloshin said: 'Just call him *Gospod Bog* or Lord God, abbreviated as *GB*.' In Russian, *GB* is shorthand for *KGB*" (Ostrovsky, 2015, p. 272).

In addition, during the 1999-2000 election cycle *NTV* supported liberal candidate Grigory Yavlinsky, not Putin. Also, *NTV* again opposed war, as Putin launched the Second Chechen War.

*Echo Moskvy* Editor-in-Chief Aleksey Venediktov nevertheless had a different version of the conflict's origin. "Everything broke down in *NTV's* position regarding the apartment bombings, though I don't know for sure, and I never talked about it with Volodya<sup>22</sup> Gusinsky," Venediktov told me in 2019 interview (Rostova, Venediktov). He was referring to a series of explosions in apartment buildings that occurred on September 4-16, 1999, in three Russian cities (Moscow, Buinaksk, and Volgodonsk), when over 300 people died. Against the backdrop of the war on terrorism, Putin became a popular Prime Minister, famously promising to "waste the terrorists in the john." It was a pretext for launching the Second War. "There were programs on *NTV* that discussed suspicions that the *FSB*, Federal Security Service, was blowing up those apartment buildings,<sup>23</sup>" Venediktov continued. "If I were Putin, then I would have closed *NTV*,

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<sup>22</sup> "Volodya" is a diminutive for "Vladimir."

<sup>23</sup> American journalist and writer David Satter still publicly expresses his trust in the version of *FSB* involvement in those crimes.

as if the channel would have crushed it. You are still very lucky that I was not the Presidential candidate." (Ibid.).

As Ostrovsky reminds, two days before the elections of 2000, *NTV* produced *Nezavisimoe Rassledovanie* talk-show ("Independent Investigation") to which Venediktov referred above.<sup>24</sup> "The program's host [Nikolay Nikolaev] interviewed former and present *FSB* officers and tenants of the apartment building who had discovered the bags of the white substance that was first identified as hexogen but that the *FSB* later claimed was sugar. While the program did not prove anything definitively, it certainly raised the strong suspicion that the *FSB* was concealing the truth and had actually intended to blow up the apartments. Putin saw this as a deliberate and subversive attack timed for the elections" (Ostrovsky, 2015, p. 272).

At the same time, when I asked Malashenko why the fight over *NTV* started, he said that the "Family" was offended by the reports of their own corruption. He said that some publications about their foreign property had appeared, while he "adhered to the idealistic views that one should not interfere in the editorial board's work." He therefore did not intervene when *NTV* had news segments about the property. "Tanya and Valya<sup>25</sup> saw it as a coordinated campaign," Malashenko told me. "[They did not understand] how it was possible – I have just helped them to re-elect Yeltsin, and now – this?" (Rostova, Malashenko). Then, he says, Boris Berezovsky fueled the flame by telling them that *NTV* was betting on Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov as future leader of the country. Malashenko said it was a complete lie.

He also talked about another conflict with a "Family" member. In May of 1999, Malashenko had a meeting with the Presidential Chief-of-Staff Alexander Voloshin. "He told

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<sup>24</sup> The program is still available on YouTube at the URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqTzTAHJrXc>

<sup>25</sup> "Tanya" is a diminutive for "Tatyanya" [Dyachenko], and "Valya" is a diminutive for "Valentin" [Yumashev].

me, there were those who made the decisions, and our task was just to execute them. Alexander Stalievich<sup>26</sup>, I replied, you probably have mixed up something. In order to implement your decisions, you should call State television. *NTV* would function as television does, we are not the ones who are to execute any of your instructions." It was the last meeting with Voloshin and Malashenko, he said. "Gusinsky told me that I was not speaking to Voloshin in appropriate manner. But he himself also was not able to improve their relations" (Ibid.).

#### 4.3.3. The "Appendix # 6"

After Putin became President, *Gazprom* demanded \$211.6 million back from *Media-Most*. Three months later, on June 13, Gusinsky was arrested – he was charged with embezzling \$10 million in the privatization of the *Russkoye Video* company in Saint-Petersburg. Three days later, he was released on bail. Coming from prison, Gusinsky told the press about the reasons for the arrest: "They want *NTV* television and *Media-Most* to have a different owner so that this owner will force the journalists to describe the grandeur of our President, the great accomplishments he wants to implement in Russia and say that the law has never been violated in Russia. What is happening now is the open violation of law, and no one even hides that it is absurd" (AP, 2000).

Still, he signed the agreements to sell *Media-Most* to *Gazprom* for \$773 million. However, the deal did go through. According to Gusinsky, in July "he was told he would be arrested again if he did not agree to sell his empire for \$300 million, a deal that would include the forgiveness of his \$473 million debt to the natural gas monopoly *Gazprom*" (Hoffman,

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<sup>26</sup> "Stalyevich" is a patronymic name of Voloshin. By using patronymic names, Russians express either their respect, or underline the formal standing.

2000). "I knew two days in advance that I would have to sign it," he said to the *Washington Post* back then. "I had two options. They said it more than once; there were constant threats threatening to put me in cells with TB patients, with AIDS people – everything that can be promised was promised to me. I was indeed a hostage, and everybody understood it this way. Let us put it this way: I consciously signed this deal... I thought it was dishonest; I had no choice. When you have a gun to your head, you have two options: to receive the conditions of the bandits or get a bullet in your head. I did not want to have a bullet in my head" (Ibid.).

Gusinsky signed the deal on July 20, 2000 but kept the details in secret until he had a chance to leave the country. In September, he announced that the deal was signed under Lesin's pressure, and had a secret "protocol # 6," an appendix, in which it was stipulated that the deal was valid only if Gusinsky was not in custody. It was freedom in exchange for his assets. Besides Gusinsky and Lesin, under the document, it was a signature of Alfred Koch, *Gazprom-Media* chief at the time (Pinsker, 2000, 2).

Another *NTV* founder, Sergey Zverev in a later interview with me described the appendix as "a hilarious document. In fact, it guaranteed Gusinsky and his group our Constitutional rights, such as to being able to enter and leave the country, and so on" (Rostova, Zverev). But Lesin's patron, Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, got angry with the scandal. He lambasted Lesin for interfering in "a dispute between economic entities" (Pinsker, 2000, 2).

In the end, Gusinsky sold his assets for \$300 million. Since then, he has never been in Russia. When I asked Malashenko why, he explained that there was still a danger for Gusinsky of being arrested in Russia; the criminal case was still open, and "I even do not remember what it was about." But why did Lesin publicly promise that "Gusinsky would not be back while Lesin was alive"? Malashenko explained that "after the scandal, Lesin, of course, absolutely hated

Gusinsky: all the dogs were let loose on Lesin, although Putin then showed 'great humanism', leaving him in the public service" (Rostova, Malashenko).

Still, when Lesin himself explained the deal later, "he did not think that had committed crime." "It is another matter that being Press Minister, I did not have to sign the deal, but not wrong anyone who does nothing" (Ivkin, 2001).

So, when in April 2001, Lesin helped *Gazprom* to get rid of Gusinsky, *NTV* journalists who were against Putin left the channel, led by Evgeny Kiselev. In May, the team accepted an offer from Gusinsky's former adversary, Boris Berezovsky, who was already in exile in London and became Putin's enemy as well. Berezovsky lost *ORT* but still was a co-owner of *TV-6*, so he offered jobs for the *NTV* journalists. They agreed, and Berezovsky fired his own *TV-6* staff members. Another co-owner of *TV-6* was State-owned *LUKoil*, and the corporation was not going to become the Kremlin's enemy, as Berezovsky had done. So, it decided to stand against the journalists and Berezovsky, and filed a lawsuit for *TV-6* bankruptcy. *LUKoil* was using a legal point by which a minor shareholder could dissolve a company if its income dropped below a certain amount in two years. This law was annulled in Russia as on January 1, 2002. Still, the Moscow court fulfilled *LUKoil's* demand 10 days later, on January 11. Minister Lesin shut down the *TV-6* broadcasts on January 23, 2002, and launched *Sport* channel on the same frequency.

In March, the FCC had a competition for the frequency in the building of Press Ministry Lesin was a Head of the commission, and several of his deputies were its members. The twelve wealthiest people in the country now backed the same team of the journalists, led by Kiselev. The press sarcastically called this consortium of businessmen a "collective farm of the oligarchs." It was clear that all the "farmers" in *TVS*, and the journalist's victory in the competition were a product of the Kremlin. However, the saga did not last for long. The channel

was in turmoil. The owners, each of whom had 7.5 percent of the shares, could not agree on anything. At the end, broadcasting was shut down by Lesin himself on June 22, 2003. He could no longer resort to flimsy excuses or pretexts – there were no legal grounds for the shutdown. The Ministry's press service asserted that: "the television channel had run into a financial, professional, organizational and management crisis that leaked into the public sphere and could harm the viewers' interests" (Rostova, 2003).

The journalists' team was destroyed. Vladimir Soloviev, whose program was on the air when *TV-6* was shut down, became the most prominent warmonger advocating for the attack on Ukraine and a subject of the Western sanctions imposed on some Russians. Other journalists tried to find job on TV, not always successfully, turned to the print media, radio or left the profession.

Evgeny Kiselev left Russia for Ukraine in 2008 and never returned. He is still remembered in the Kremlin – in 2022, the Russian Ministry of Justice put Kiselev on the "foreign agents" list that is discussed in the Introduction.

#### 4.4. The Kremlin's Digger Meets FSB chief Putin, and Press Minister Lesin

Unlike many of his colleagues in 2001, Leonid Parfenov stayed on *NTV* under new management, and became the most popular *NTV* anchor, with the highest ratings for the weekly show *Namedni*.

In November 2003, Parfenov called Elena Tregubova, his colleague from the print media. A month before she had published a political bestseller, "The Tales of the Kremlin's Digger," in which she described her experience of being a member of "the Kremlin's pool," the Russian version of the American White House Press Corps.

Born in 1973, Tregubova had graduated from Moscow State University in 1995, and like many young people of her generation had already had a skyrocketing career in a new, reformist Russia. She worked for the prominent newspapers of the new era, such as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Segodnya*, and *Russkiy Telegraph*. Two years after her graduation, in 1997, as a 24-year-old correspondent, she became the reporter who traveled with Boris Yeltsin, covered his international visits, and wrote news from the Kremlin.

When Vladimir Putin came to power, Tregubova was the Kremlin correspondent for *Kommersant*, one of the best dailies. In 2001, the Kremlin decided to exclude Tregubova from the pool, and annulled her accreditation. "No one liked Tregubova there [in the Kremlin]," *Kommersant's* General Director and Editor-in-Chief Andrey Vasilev explained later. "I went to Aleksander Voloshin to complain about the persecution of her by - I'd go as far as saying - [Presidential Press-Secretary] Aleksey Alekseevich Gromov. Voloshin did not help her; he did not even promise to help. Now you ask me why; why did you defend Tregubova then? And I defended her because the Kremlin administration has no right to dictate to the Editor-in-Chief whom he should delegate to the 'Kremlin pool.' This war lasted, with varying success, for more than a year, and Tregubova liked it very much. There were open letters to the same Voloshin, boycotts of Presidential visits, and even victories" (Vasilev, 2005).

In his 15-paragraph text, Vasilev added some sexist remarks about Tregubova. Also, Vasilev answered the question that "the serious, powerful people, not idiots, have asked him, - why was the new Kremlin correspondent Andrey Kolesnikov not expelled from the pool yet?" "What could I tell them? Putin likes him very much" (Ibid.). Putin likes Kolesnikov. Even now, in 2022, Kolesnikov is still in the pool, unlike many other journalists, not to mention Tregubova.

"Under Yeltsin, to get to the Kremlin, one had to send a paper from the publication; no one was refused accreditation for official events," Tregubova explained later. "I then worked as a Duma and Kremlin columnist at *Kommersant*. The President now conducts the selection of accredited journalists himself, and only the loyal ones are selected. There are three taboos at any Putin's press conference: reference to Chechnya, freedom of speech, and Khodorkovsky's arrest.<sup>27</sup> This is just the beginning, and they won't stop if we stay this pliable" (Egorova, Morozova, 2004).

Still, after her dismissal from the Kremlin's pool, she stayed in *Kommersant* as a political correspondent, until she was fired in 2003. Having had this experience with the Kremlin, Tregubova decided to write a book, and its success brought her the attention of Parfenov, who asked her to give an interview.

In his typical style, Parfenov detailed of one of the scenes described by Tregubova: her dinner with then-*FSB* chief Vladimir Putin in a Japanese restaurant, *tete-a-tete*, in December of 1998. She was about half an hour late, trying to exchange two hundred dollars into rubles; she intended to pay not just for herself but also for the "main Chekist of the country."<sup>28</sup> Igor Sechin met her at the restaurant's doors: "Vladimir Vladimirovich is already waiting for you." Sechin is currently the CEO of *Rosneft*, the Russian oil company that had \$14 billion in net income and \$228 billion in total assets in 2021. He then stayed by the doors.

Putin was the only customer. They discussed politics and were trying to find other topics, but it was not an animated conversation, as far as she described it in the book. Suddenly, he

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<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the wealthiest businessman of the time was arrested in October 2003 and served more than 10 years in prison. His assets in an oil company *Yukos* were taken from him, and became a part of *Rosneft*, a company that is headed by Igor Sechin, a friend of Vladimir Putin since the 1990s, and Presidential Chief-of-Staff Deputy during the first Putin's term.

<sup>28</sup> It was usual then in Russia to keep money in dollars due to the permanent inflation and economic crises.

asked her where she was going to celebrate New Year's Eve. She did not know for sure. He said he would like to go to Saint Petersburg. "It sounded like an invitation," she wrote. "And I hastened to say that I would most likely have to go to my closest friend, Masha Slonim, who had recently lost her husband, and support her. Putin became sad, expressed his condolences, carefully asked me about the deceased Sergei Shkalikov, and even assured me that he had heard that he was an excellent actor. The conversation was over. The sushi had been eaten." And, of course, he did not allow her to pay: "Lenochka,<sup>29</sup> I don't even know how much it all cost! Honestly! I didn't pay for all of this myself – you see, I don't even have money with me! Don't worry; my assistants have already paid for everything."

But it was not Putin about whom Tregubova had concerns before talking to Parfenov – it was Press Minister. "The day before, she said in the interview, when the segment was filmed, I asked [Parfenov] if there would be any problems with Lesin. I have already narrated Lesin's words about the book he read: 'That Tregubova is a bastard, but everything she wrote about me is true. And I conclude from this that it was also true about other people.'" Lesin also said Tregubova should be aware that she had gotten blacklisted (Egorova, Morozova, 2004).

So, what was written about Lesin then? "In his inner circle, behind his back, affectionately, like sons, they call him a man with the kind face of a child murderer," Tregubova wrote. "I still want to categorically refute the slanderous assessment about this Minister. Because according to my impressions, Lesin, on the contrary, is not only a caring father, but also a person who sincerely, like a father, cares about the entire younger generation in Russia" (Tregubova, 2003). And she "proved" her statement with the following story told in her book.

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<sup>29</sup> "Lenochka" is a diminutive for "Elena."

"After Putin came to power," she wrote, "the Ministry of Press, under the strict guidance of Lesin, took an active part not only in creating a program on a positive Russian image in the West, but also a program on the patriotic education of the population."

At the end of February 2001, the Russian government approved the state program called "Patriotic Education of Citizens for 2001-2005." As it was announced officially, "the program's implementation would help maintain social stability, restore the national economy, and strengthen the country's defense capability. The program was aimed at all Russian citizens' social strata and age groups. The goal was the development of patriotic education for citizens of the Russian Federation based on the formation of patriotic feelings, as well as addressing issues to further consolidation of society. The coordination of activities for the implementation of the program was carried out by the government commission on social issues of military personnel, citizens discharged from military service, and members of their families" (RBC, 2001).

Tregubova came to Lesin to interview him about the program. She asked what he thought about attempts to cultivate patriotism in him while he was a Young Pioneer and if he had liked military training and patriotic upbringing back then. "Are you going to avoid all those words that were used under the Communist regime, such as patriotic upbringing, respect for your country, to the national flag, the military, and defense of the country?!" Lesin exclaimed, according to her book. "We are faced with the fact that systematic work to create a negative image of Russia in the West is going on. Therefore, it is time to stop being shy and to promote our country. The preparation of the terms of reference for this project is underway today" (Tregubova, 2003). Lesin assured that he knew that "of course, everyone will start looking out for his interest and the kickbacks that they will receive for this. I say in advance: do not try!"

Tregubova asked whether patriotism meant praise for the military, despite the corruption in its leadership, the fagging system, the murders, and the Chechen Republic situation. He replied that she already had answers to her questions, and she hated everything. "Can you imagine how we could have won World War II if we initially hated our military?" he asked rhetorically. "Can you imagine how much less blood there would be if, under Stalin, the Soviet military and generals had not been initially blindly praised?" she replied. Lesin showed temper: "You know, in the same way, one can say there are reasons for hating our journalists!" They exchanged some more emotional statements when she asked him if his son would do his military service.<sup>30</sup> Lesin did not know what his son would choose. "Listen, Lesin said, you ask me so as if I am running the Propaganda ministry. But the Ministry is no more than an executive body! We carry out the tasks that are given to us! And in general, you know, today, just before you, I had a meeting at the FCC, and now my head is generally filled with other things. Therefore, I feel that you are already starting to annoy me! You better come tomorrow." Tregubova replied to Lesin that she was not sure if *she* would not be annoyed tomorrow and left, "finding out on the way back that his last sentence was also recorded."

The next morning, she got a call from Lesin's old friend Aleksey Volin, deputy of the Government Chief-of-Staff then and a future Deputy Minister of Communications (2012-2020). He announced that the whole text of the interview "was annulled."

Tregubova's boss Maxim Kovalsky, Editor-in-Chief of the *Vlast* magazine, a part of *Kommersant* publishing house, did not think so. He was not going to "annul" the interview but to print it, including the final Lesin's final sentence about being annoyed. Lesin understood it

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<sup>30</sup> In Russia, there is mandatory military service which can be skipped for health issues or while studying in higher education institutions.

would be published and called Tregubova himself on a mobile phone, asking her not to do so. They had a heated exchange, and he warned her that he would call her Editor-in-Chief. At the end of the day, he won as he persuaded another editor, the Managing Editor of the whole publishing house, to publish "unflavored, censored text with none of Lesin's gems, and emotional recollections of his youth" (Ibid.).

This censored interview was published in *Vlast* on March 6, 2001 (Tregubova, 2001). Also, *Kommersant.ru*, which has a pretty accurate archive since 1990, suggests that her last article in the paper was published in April of 2003. Tregubova reflected later that *Kommersant* fired her for her absenteeism, as she had been told. "I didn't even call there [to the editors] because it was unpleasant. It was such a punch in the gut that I did not expect it. Probably, it is a more convenient way for those people; this is their and Lesin's journalism" (Egorova, Morozova, 2004).

Parfenov was satisfied; he recorded the interview. It was Friday, November 15, 2003. The segment was advertised on both Saturday and the following Sunday on *NTV*, the day when the interview was to be shown. The interview was aired in Russia's Far East but did not appear the Moscow time zone.

Due to the size of the country and its 11 time zones, TV news and weekly political programs in Russia are recorded live twice: the first time for the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East; and the second time for the European part of the country including Moscow. Technology has become a great tool for TV administrators: usually, censorship of the programs happens after they watch the first version. That's what happened with Parfenov – then *NTV* General Director

Nikolay Senkevich<sup>31</sup> watched the program and came to Parfenov's office. "It was evident that he was very high-wrought," said Parfenov to *Kommersant* the same day. "In an absolutely categorical manner, Senkevich banned the showing of the story about Tregubova's book. He explained his decision with political, ethical and numerous other considerations" (Borodina, 2003). Even though Parfenov called *Kommersant* himself to tell his own version of the story, thus sparking a scandal, he did not explain the absence of the announced segment to his viewers the same day when he appeared live for the second time in the Moscow time zone.

Asked to explain why the piece did not air, Senkevich said that he "did not do public relations for the books on his channel," declining any political reasons for doing this. "*Namedni* is a very sophisticated, professional program, and there is no need to dive down into the indecent mud that the book represents. As for the pressing political issues, we still have this in *Namedni* and other *NTV* programs" (Ibid.).

"I know very well that the situation on today's television is such that any material can be censored by a call from the Kremlin or the Press Ministry," explained Tregubova later. "But Parfenov's program is independent to some extent; he relaxed and thought that everything was possible. After the scandal with this segment, Lyonya<sup>32</sup> was in mourning. And I was comforting him when he called and said that Lesin had censored the material" (Egorova, Morozova, 2004). "They still don't kick me out; they don't expel me [from the country]. And in those publications where, by order of Lesin, they won't hire me, I don't want to work myself" (Ibid.).

The words invited disaster. The following month, in February 2004, an explosive device blew up by Tregubova's apartment; she was not harmed by the accident, although the capacity of

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<sup>31</sup> Nikolay Senkevich replaced Boris Jordan on January 22, 2003. More on this is discussed in Chapter 5.1.

<sup>32</sup> "Lyonya" is a diminutive for "Leonid."

the device was 60 grams of TNT. The police qualified the explosion as malicious hooliganism. No one launched a criminal investigation, so it is not clear who was behind it. Tregubova decided to escape to Germany and wrote a new book on how the first one influenced her life.

Two years later, *Novaya Gazeta* correspondent Anna Politkovskaya was shot to death in her apartment building elevator. It was Vladimir Putin's birthday, October 7, 2006. Tregubova wrote an open letter to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who hosted Putin at the time. It was published in *Spiegel*. After saying that Politkovskaya "was the most consistent and incorruptible critic of Putin and his political regime," Tregubova ended the letter as follows: "Do you really believe, Mrs. Merkel, that Russian gas or Russian oil is sufficient payment to justify closing one's eyes to the physical destruction of the opposition and the free press in Russia? In this situation, silence means complicity" (Richter, 2006).

Then Tregubova moved to England, and in April 2008, official London approved her petition for political asylum. "I think this is a particular case of a general trend," the secretary of the Russian Union of Journalists and one of the authors of the media law, Mikhail Fedotov, said. "This is not a good sign. It's bad when people leave their country, but it's even worse when they do it to obtain political asylum." In his opinion, the Russian authorities "needed to think not just about the case of Elena Tregubova, but about the general trend" (Khristianova, 2008).

As for Parfenov, he experienced yet another segment banned in May of 2004. He, again, discussed it with *Kommersant* (Tirmaste, 2004), explaining that his chief justified the decision by the request of secret services, and the newspaper even published the transcription of the banned segment (Kommersant, 2004). On June 3, 2004, he was fired. As Senkevich explained it this time, it was done "in connection with L. Parfenov's violation of the labor contract that required him to support the policy of the TV company's management" (Borodina, 2004). He meant that

Parfenov provided *Kommersant* a copy of the order from Deputy Director Alexander Gerasimov not to present the segment. Since then, Parfenov has never worked on national TV channels.

Lesin did not comment on Parfenov's dismissal: the government's resignation happened in February 2004 due to the administrative reform. After that, Lesin lost his position as Press Minister, but became a Presidential adviser who was less visible to the public.

## Chapter 5: Findings

I conducted interviews with 14 prominent Russian media personalities. The interviewees include:

- 1. Anonymous journalist** who covered Russian media market. Interviewee requested anonymity for fear of possible retribution.
- 2. Manana Aslamazyan**, *Internews Network* Russian General Director (1993-2007), member of the Russian FCC, Federal Communications Commission (2000-2004). She was hit by a car and died in Yerevan, Armenia, on August 30, 2022.
- 3. Vasily Gatov**, a Russian media analyst, senior fellow at USC Annenberg Center for Communication. He is a former executive and strategist for several Russian media companies, including *Ren-TV*, Media 3, Russia's largest print conglomerate (2007-2012), and *RIA Novosti* (2011-2013). Also, he is board member in *Russian Publishers Guild* (GIPP) and *WAN-IFRA* (World Association of newspapers and news publishers). Lives in Boston.
- 4. Dmitry Gubin**, a prominent Russian journalist, TV anchor (*RTR*, *TVC*, *Pyatyy Kanal*) and a radio host (*Radio Rossii*, *Mayak-24*, *Vesti-FM*, *Kommersant-FM*). He also served as an Editor-in-Chief of *FHM Russia* (2004-2007) and a Chief Editor of the Russian version of *Robb Report* (2008-2009). Lives in Germany.
- 5. Evgeny Kiselev**, one of the most prominent political TV anchors in Russia since the beginning of the 1990s. He was a co-founder of *NTV* channel, a host of a weekly analytical TV-program *Itogi* (1993-2001), *Glas Naroda/ Vox Populi*, and others. A general director of *NTV* (2000-2001), *TV-6* (2001-2002), *TVS* (2002-2003) suppressed by the Russian government. Served as an Editor-in-Chief of *Moskovskie Novosti* (2003-2005). In 2008 he had to flee to Ukraine where he became a prominent TV personality.
- 6. Alfred Koch**, a former head of the Federal Agency for State Property Management and a deputy prime minister of Russia (1996-1997). He was also a head of *Gazprom-Media*, a

subsidiary of *Gazprom* gas corporation who participated in 2001 takeover of *NTV* channel owned by the Russian oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky. He is also known for being a TV-anchor on *NTV* program *Alchnost* ("Greed"), for his books, and articles. Became one of the fiercest critics of Vladimir Putin. Lives in Germany.

**7. Irena Lesnevskaya**, a founder and co-owner of an independent production company *Ren-TV* 1991, together with her son Dmitry. Later they got a TV frequency, and she was a general director of *Ren-TV* channel (1997-2005). She is also a former owner of *The New Times* magazine (2006-2014). She stays in Moscow.

**8. Vladimir Lensky**, a former *Toshiba* CEO in Russia. He became a media top manager in 1999, as an Executive Director of *NTV Plus*, a digital satellite television service. A General Director of *Kommersant* publishing house (2005-2006). Lives in the US.

**9. Elmar Murtazaev**, a General Director (since 2018) and Editor-in-Chief (2014-2016) of the Russian version of *Forbes* magazine. Editor-in-chief of *GZT.ru* (2008-2010), *Chief Editor* of *Kompania* magazine (1998-2005), General Producer at *RBC-TV*, an author for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Izvestia*, *Russkiy Telegraph*, and other. Lives in Moscow.

**10. Olga Romanova**, a prominent Russian journalist, writer, and a founder of a non-profit group *Russia Behind Bars*. A former TV anchor at *TV-Center* and *Ren-TV* channels, radio host at *Echo Moskvy* station, a staff journalist, editor, and Editor-in-Chief in a number of including *BusinessWeek*, *Vedomosti*, *Slon.ru*, *The New Times*. Romanova was also a Professor at the Faculty of Media Communications, Department of Journalism at the National Research university – Higher School of Economics. Lives in Berlin.

**11. Natalia Sindeeva**, a founder and General Director of *TV Rain* (2010-now), the last independent television in the country. On March 3, the Channel's website was blocked by the Russian General Prosecutor's office for the week of coverage invasion to Ukraine. The leading journalists including an Editor-in-Chief Tikhon Dzyadko left the country under the threats. The Channel suspended its work, obtained Latvian broadcasting license, and started to work from Riga, having staff in Amsterdam, Paris, and Tbilisi, where the journalists relocated.

**12. Aleksey Venediktov**, a co-founder (1990) and Editor-in-Chief (1996-2022) of *Echo Moskvy* radio station, the most popular political talk station in Moscow that was shut down by the Russian authorities on March 1, 2022, a week after full-scale war with Ukraine was launched.

In 1994, the station joined *Media-Most* holding owned by Vladimir Gusinsky who had to flee the country in 2001, during takeover of *NTV* and other holding's assets by *Gazprom-Media*. Lives in Moscow.

**13. Ivan Zassoursky**, a media scholar and media professor descended from a family of media scholar: his grand-father Yasen Zassoursky was a dean of Moscow State University School of Journalism (1965-2007; 2007-2021 – President of the School). Founder and publisher of *Chastny Korrespondent* online newspaper. Former journalist at *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Obschaya Gazeta*. Worked as a political consultant. Was a member of Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights until November 2022. Author of "Mass Media in the Second

Republic" (1999). Lives in Moscow.

**14. Andrey Zolotov**, a former media critic at *The Moscow Times* (1997-2003), a former Editor-in-Chief of *Russia Profile* magazine, and an adviser of *RIA Novosti* Chairman of Board of Directors. In 2013-5 was an Austrian correspondent for *RIA*. Lives in Vienna.

I asked the above interviewees six questions to help me to understand the image Mikhail Lesin had among professionals and to learn from their knowledge of him and from their experiences. Having had my own experience with Lesin and having frequently covered his activities, and constantly reading articles about him in the press, I wanted to check my own conclusions regarding him. I sought to and learn more about him, since there were still no academic investigations of his life, or any books written on him.

I asked the experts follow-up questions when appropriate. Below are the responses.

#### 5.1. How my interviewees remember Mikhail Lesin when interviewed for this thesis?

Understanding that every person has a unique experience with life events and people we meet, I asked the experts what their most vivid memory or experience was with Mikhail Lesin.

Probably, the earliest memory about meeting with Lesin among the interviewees, belongs to **Evgeny Kiselev**, the person whose career suffered most from the press minister. Kiselev was *NTV* co-founder and was its General Director when the company was taken out of the hands of Vladimir Gusinsky in 2001 and placed under the control of the state by *Gazprom*. Boris Jordan took over the position Kiselev had.

After that, Kiselev and his team went to *TV-6* owned by Boris Berezovsky, and the channel was shut down by Lesin less than a year later, in January 2002. *TVS* – the next channel led by Kiselev – was shut by Lesin in June of 2003 (more on this is described in Chapter 4.3.).

Interestingly, Kiselev did not choose to remember those episodes in April 2022 when I asked him about the ex-Press Minister in an interview for this study. Instead, Kiselev recalled his first meeting with Lesin as the most vivid. "When we started creating *NTV*, we were like blind kittens," Kiselev told me. "The idea that you could rent some offices in *Ostankino* was not there yet. At that point, it seemed to us that the creation of a new, independent, non-state television company could not be based in a Soviet television center."

They searched for a new place, and another *NTV* co-founder, Igor Malashenko, suggested meeting with *RIA Novosti* chairman Albert Vlasov.<sup>33</sup> "Our counterpart Vlasov said: I do not understand anything in the television production," Kiselev recollected, "but here I have one guy, he knows everything – Misha Lesin. During this conversation, Misha masterfully played a role of a dim-witted, stupid techie who could hardly put two sentences together and said: if the higher-ups give us an order, we will do so, and if they don't, then we will not do anything. Later I got to know him better and realized that he was, of course, a completely different person: thinking clearly and systematically, not stupid, and well-read."

In Kiselev's opinion, Lesin gathered and organized the television capacities that were at *RIA Novosti*'s disposal – they appeared in *APN* during the Moscow Olympics when a television editorial office was created in the news agency. There was both editing and filming equipment and even some studio facilities. "Lesin's task, I think, was to play the role of a simple-minded tech-savvy person under a highly ideological boss, and to quietly pick up everything that was valuable there."

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<sup>33</sup> *RIA Novosti* was a successor in a new Russia of the former Soviet *APN* news agency, *Agentsvo Pechati Novosti*. Before that, the agency was known as *Sovinformburo* which was a creature of World War II – it was founded on June 24, 1941, just two days after the Nazis invaded the USSR. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, *RIA Novosti* was supposed to work in the market economy. A couple of months before the annexation of Crimea, *RIA Novosti* was liquidated by Vladimir Putin's decree, and became *Rossia Segodnya* agency (Russia Today), with Margarita Simonyan and Dmitry Kiselev as its leaders. *Russia Today* TV-Channel, or *RT*, is also led by Margarita Simonyan.

Later, when someone introduced Lesin to Kiselev as the *Video International* owner, the advertisement agency that would sell ads on *NTV* for the next five years, Kiselev asked Lesin: "Do you remember how you pretended to be a fool when Malashenko and I came to your boss?" Of course, Lesin couldn't forget Kiselev, who was already a TV star at time of their first meeting and whose weekly analytical program *Itogi* had begun in 1990. So, he admitted, he remembered.

It is still an intriguing question as to why Vladimir Putin and Mikhail Lesin had such a strong antipathy towards Gusinsky, who lost the battle over *NTV* in 2001. Partially this question is discussed in Chapter 4.3. But a new information emerged during the interview for this thesis with **Vladimir Lensky**. A former *Toshiba* regional director in Russia, Lensky was among the first business executives in Russia to have a Western MBA, so Gusinsky invited Lensky to lead *NTV Plus* company, a new satellite television project that the oligarch included in his empire.

When I asked him about his most vivid memory of Lesin, Lensky said that Gusinsky insulted Lesin at least once, during the 1998 crisis. Lensky knew about the insult in 2000, when the war with *NTV* had already started, and *Video International* had already broken the contract with *NTV* to sell advertisement. "Lesin came to us," Lensky said, "and very openly told us that he was going to grab *NTV's* assets. And when Gusinsky's deputy Andrei Tsimailo, and all my other colleagues were outraged by this, Lesin calmly asked: 'Do you remember what you did to us in 1998? I have no guilty conscience'." Lensky did not know this, so he asked the colleagues. "I was told that back then, Gusinsky almost grabbed 50 percent of the *Video International* by exploiting its financial hardship at the time."

The country was hit by the 1998 financial crisis that was a consequence of the Asian crisis. "On August 13, 1998, the Russian stock, bond, and currency markets collapsed due to investor fears that the government would devalue the ruble, default on domestic its debt, or both," economic scholars explain. "Annual yields on ruble-denominated bonds were more than 200 percent. The stock market had to be closed for 35 minutes as prices plummeted. When the market closed, it was down 65 percent, with a small number of shares traded. From January to August, the stock market had lost more than 75 percent of its value, 39 percent in May alone." (Chiodo, Owyang, 2002.) The advertisement market broke from approximately \$540 million to \$190 million (Bohlen, 2001).

"*Video International* managed to get it back," Lensky finishes the story, "but as they say, the vestiges remained," a very unpleasant aftertaste was left. And Lesin remembered it.

Unlike Lensky, who was working with Gusinsky, **Alfred Koch** was on the side of Lesin to destroy *Media-Most*. He also had reason to hate Gusinsky. A former head of the Federal Agency for State Property Management and a Deputy Prime Minister of Russia (1996-7), Koch lost those positions because of the information war on *Svyazinvest*, started by Gusinsky.<sup>34</sup> Now it was Koch's revenge to destroy him. Koch became a CEO of *Gazprom-Media*, a subsidiary of the gas corporation *Gazprom*, which participated in the takeover of the *NTV* channel. When Koch and Lesin won in 2001, Koch also became a TV anchor of the new *NTV* program *Alchnost* ("Greed").

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<sup>34</sup> *Svyazinvest* was the largest State-owned telecommunication company. In order to fill gaps in the budget, the Russian government decided to put *Svyazinvest* 25 percent shares on auction. The auction was held in 1997, and Vladimir Gusinsky lost it to Vladimir Potanin, another oligarch. Having an idea, that Potanin bribed the government members in order to win, together with Boris Berezovsky, Gusinsky launched the information war against the government in their media assets. Alfred Koch, one of the auction organizers was one of the first victims. More on this has been written about by Zassoursky, 2001; Hoffman, 2011; Rostova, YeltsinMedia, 2.

He said, he could not name the most vivid memory about Lesin since there were too many of them. "I remember when, after a long break, I accidentally saw him in St. Petersburg and was very surprised at how much Lesin lost weight and how bad he looked. It was probably in 2010-1." Back then, Lesin had a surgery on his back, and the doctors told him that the spine would no longer withstand the weight, so he had lost weight. "He was like a skeleton, and he said that it was easier for him. We sat together for a long time, talking; he was in bad shape."

I had to ask Koch to talk about Lesin in a professional sense, so Koch said that he had liked Lesin when he ran the *Golosui ili Proigraesh!* campaign in 1996. "It was professional; there was drive; he was young, self-disciplined, creative, organized." Koch told me he liked Lesin during the battle over *NTV* too. "Still, I liked him more than I disliked him. Sometimes he did all sorts of dirty tricks that I did not approve of. At first, he tried to take the lead in this project. Then, for some reason, he signed this agreement<sup>35</sup> with Gusinsky, and it was not left a secret." For the press, it was not a secret that Koch's signature was also under the deal (Pinsker, 2000, 2). Still, Koch continued, I told him: "Misha, you do not understand a damn thing in this matter; don't go where you don't belong, do what you are told. And since I was appointed by *Gazprom* to deal with this business, let me decide myself." For some time, Lesin became "constructive," Koch said, but he ultimately went with a kind of power play. "Before Easter night in 2001, when I had already left work, without telling me, Boris Jordan and others went to *NTV*.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, Lesin, of course, loved simple primitive solutions. And in this regard, he was certainly not a subtle man."

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<sup>35</sup> Koch meant the "Appendix # 6," described in Chapter 4.3.

<sup>36</sup> Koch meant the night of April 14, 2001, when a new management was set on *NTV*, with the force of private protection agency, working for *Gazprom*. Previous *NTV* security personnel were removed, Boris Jordan took office of Evgeny Kiselev. After the incident, the majority of *NTV* stars resigned.

In order to understand Lesin's power, it is important to remember that he was not only Press Minister, but a head of the Federal Communications Commission that held the competitions between country media companies for the TV and radio frequencies. The Cabinet adopted the rules of FCC and appointed the members under a new government decree twenty days after Lesin became Press Minister in 1999. There were nine members, five of whom were federal civil servants. In addition to Lesin and his three deputies, there was also a Communications Minister Leonid Reiman. Four other members represented civil society – *Russian Television Academy* President and TV anchor Vladimir Pozner, the media sociologist Vsevolod Vilchek, *Radio Research Institute* Senior Staff Scientist Mark Krivosheev, and the director of the Russian branch of *Internews* **Manana Aslamazyan**.<sup>37</sup> So for her, the most exciting moments with Lesin were watching him during the competitions between media companies the FCC held. "There were some cities, companies, or people for whom he had no special interest, so they were usual applicants," Aslamazyan said. "In those cases, he was objective, and it was impossible to predict the winner; he could afford it. But it was curious to watch him when the decisions were politically significant for him, and he was trying to convince us to make the decision he wanted. Sometimes he honestly told us about his interests."

For Aslamazyan, whose entire career was devoted to the U.S., it was important that Lesin took an active part in the *Russian American Business Dialogue* announced by George Bush and Vladimir Putin in July 2001. "Lesin played a significant role in the media part of the dialogue," she told me. "At the conference that was a part of it, he said that the state should completely withdraw from the media sphere, leave the media to be free and honest, and so on."

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<sup>37</sup> Aslamazyan died in a car accident in Yerevan, Armenia, about 5 months after our interview.

Indeed, the conference "Media Industry: Reform's Direction" which took place in June 2002, was a very important industry event. It occurred one year after the *Media-Most* destruction, and many media were still fighting with the State to maintain independence. During the conference, crucial issues were discussed. For example, the *National Association of the Broadcasters* President Eduard Sagalaev said then: "The main media problem is the corruption. And we all know very well that many of those who are sitting in this hall personally built this whole system of bribes and disguised advertising!" (Tregubova, 2002). And as *Kommersant* wrote back then, "at he uttered these words, Mr. Sagalaev for some reason expressively glanced at the first row" – Lesin was sitting there with TV executives. "At the end of the speech, the troublemaker Sagalaev also called for the sale of state-owned TV channel packages" (Ibid.).

Lesin gave his speech after Sagalaev, and it was a bolt from the blue – the Press Minister suggested that most of the State media assets should be privatized, leaving just one form of each media outlet – a newspaper, a TV channel, a radio channel, and a news agency in state hands. He also promised to leave his position in two or three years, dissolve the Ministry, and to keep only two agencies or commissions that would license the broadcasting companies and exercise regulatory compliance oversight. For the time, it was a revolutionary idea.

"Unfortunately, all these statements were promptly swept under the carpet," Aslamazyan told me. "On the contrary, the State presence in the media sphere increased greatly, to the level we have today."

For **Dmitry Gubin**, a well-known writer TV and radio host, Lesin, was above all his own boss – before taking the position of Press Minister, Lesin worked on *VGTRK*, and as Gubin told

me, Lesin was in charge of the news program on *RTR*, the main *VGTRK* asset. Previously, the fact that Lesin, actually, ruled the news, was unknown.

It was, therefore, not unusual that Lesin would call Gubin after he became Press Minister. "At the end of 1999 or the beginning of 2000, he summoned me at night to his office on *Strastnoy Boulevard*," Gubin recalled. Lesin was not alone there – State media manager and Government official Aleksey Volin were sitting next to him. Lesin pushed back the green curtains on the slate board, the same curtains that Stalin had at the Supreme High Command headquarters, shown in the Soviet films, Gubin recollected. "He showed me an entity designated on the board as the *Rossiiskiy Informatsionny Tsent*r ("The Russian Information Center") and honestly and sincerely offered to lead the work of misinforming the population during the Second Chechen War. He had the strength, cynicism, and charm of a large and dangerous beast."

After careful thought, Gubin refused the offer.

For another prominent journalist, and a TV anchor, **Olga Romanova**, Lesin is associated with the word *kolpachki* ("caps") that he used "long before Putin came to power." "He was very fond of repeating it regarding a person who goes into politics, into public sphere, that such a person puts on a cap, a cap of a patriot, a cap of a liberal, a nationalist cap, or a stability-lover cap," Romanova told me. "And those caps are subject to change. Let's say, I have a cap of Berezovsky, and I am for his Channel One. Or I'm for Gusinsky, and then it's a different cap. And we, as the foot soldiers of pen and camera, must keep track of the caps that change over time, so we would not do harm to Russian politicians."

Romanova was a news presenter on *Ren-TV* channel the day a terrorists attacked the *Nord-Ost* theatrical production in Moscow. She was the first in the country who delivered the news to the public.<sup>38</sup> *Ren-TV* had been plagued with problems following the incident, since Romanova and her colleagues let the terrorists appear on air. Lesin was furious and promised to shut the channel down. That did not happen – *Ren-TV* survived.

*Ren-TV* was one of the first independent television production companies in Russia, created in 1991, and it began its operations as a TV channel in 1997. The founders were **Irena Lesnevsckaya** and her son Dmitry. Memories about *Nord-Ost* as it relates to Lesin are also significant for Lesnevsckaya. Asked for this thesis to voice her most vivid memories of him, Lesnevsckaya said that his personality "was controversial," and she had "mixed feelings about him." She remembered his "big birthday, either his 50th or 45th, when Lesin was already Press Minister."<sup>39</sup> Lesnevsckaya was invited there as were many prominent media industry leaders. She was given a floor to make a toast. "I can say a lot of nasty things about you, but since this is your birthday, and there usually should be pleasant words on such days, I want to thank you for being Press Minister on the day of *Nord-Ost*," Lesnevsckaya recollected her speech for this thesis. "You did not take us off the airwaves at that time, even after I told you to f\*\*\* off. And as long as we have a Minister, who can be told to f\*\*\* off at times like this, I would only say good things about you." (Other recollections of Lesnevsckaya are discussed further.)

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<sup>38</sup> The siege started on October 23, 2002, and lasted for three days. Forty terrorists held in the building with 916 people in it. Officially, 130 people died. The NGO *Nord-Ost*, created to investigate the case, insisted there were 174 deaths. Almost all the victims died because of gas used by the Russian secret services.

<sup>39</sup> AUTHOR'S NOTE: It had to be 2003, since Lesin was Press Minister, and he was 45. When he was 50, in 2008, Lesin was already a Presidential adviser.

Indeed, Lesin did not bring harm to the company then. But *NTV*, again, was less lucky with respect to *Nord-Ost* coverage. President Putin falsely accused *NTV* of providing a live stream during the special forces operation to free the theater center, while the journalists owed the movement of the forces only after the operation ended. Putin had a meeting with the top-managers of the Russian media on November 25, 2002, and was outraged. "A television picture on one of the national channels the day of the assault, a few minutes before the assault, which showed the movements of the special forces and told what was happening in the building, could have led to a huge tragedy," he said. He accused the company of intending "to make money on the blood of fellow citizens, unless, of course, they consider them to be their fellow citizens." And while Putin did not name the company, or any personalities, he was clearly pointing to Boris Jordan, *NTV* General Director and an American citizen, who helped Putin in 2001 to get rid of Evgeny Kiselev and took his place. It had to be an American, who did not consider Russians "to be their fellow citizens." Still, Jordan left his position only in January 2003, due to the will of *Gazprom* management. He never got *NTV* shares, as he was promised in 2001. The media connected his resignation to Putin's rage over the *Nord-Ost* coverage.

*Nord-Ost* was a turning point in some sense. The State moved to tighten the screws in order to fight terrorism. For example, during those days, Minister Lesin issued official warnings to radio station *Echo Moskvy* and TV channel *Moskovia* for providing air to the terrorists – two warnings from the Ministry in one year could lead to license revocation. But when the media deleted the interviews from their archives, the warnings were revoked. Still,

**Aleksey Venediktov**, the *Echo Moskvy* Editor-in-Chief was nervous. Gusinsky bought some shares of *Echo Moskvy* in 1994, the station had a good reputation, so it was Venediktov

who interviewed Bill Clinton in 2000, during the Clinton-Putin summit in Moscow. But by 2002, the station was the only former Gusinsky's asset that survived during his battle with the state: NTV had new management. The newspaper *Segodnya* was shut down on April 17, 2001. A whole team of journalists, led by Sergey Parkhomenko, was fired from the magazine *Itogi*, and some colleagues from *Segodnya* took their places. Only Venediktov managed to negotiate between Lesin, Putin, the *Gazprom-Media* on one side, and Gusinsky on the other.

Venediktov remained a constant Putin irritant. For example, in 2012, while Putin served as Prime Minister and Moscow experienced the largest wave of anti-government protests, Putin met with media executives, and criticized Venediktov in front of them. Putin blamed the station for "serving the foreign policy interests of one state at the expense of Russia" in a program that discussed a missile defense system in Europe. Putin also asked Venediktov whom he would vote for in the Presidential elections on March 4, and the following dialog happened, later it was published in *The Washington Post*:

*"I haven't voted since 1996, Mr. Venediktov said.*

*Why? Putin asked.*

*I will explain to you why, Mr. Venediktov said.*

*Mr. Putin interrupted: I see that you are upset with me. I see it in your face.*

*But why? Mr. Putin continued. I am not offended with you when you pour diarrhea on me from dawn to dusk. But you are offended!*

*After that exchange, the microphones were switched off, and the meeting with about 30 editors from the Russian media continued behind closed doors" (WP, 2012).*

Four years earlier, on August 29, 2008, at a similar meeting with the media leaders, Putin criticized Venediktov for the coverage of the Russian-Georgian military conflict. "Many of the loyalist editors in the room were delighted as they watched Putin rough up Venediktov on a range of editorial and factual points," David Remnick wrote back then. "Not for the first time, there was the sense that Putin might shut down the station. Later, in a hallway, Venediktov

protested to Putin that Putin was being 'unjust.' Putin pulled out a stack of transcripts to support his points, saying, 'You have to answer for this, Aleksey Alekseevich!' Venediktov was shaken but calculated that Putin would never have invited him to Sochi with the delegation had Putin intended to get rid of him or the *Echo of Moscow*. That could have been accomplished with a telephone call. 'Afterward, we met one on one, and there Putin's tone was more positive,' Venediktov told me. But he made his point. He was demonstrating his ability to do whatever he wants with us at any time" (Remnick, 2008).

And now it was Lesin threatening to shut the station down for *Nord-Ost* coverage. In addition, after *Nord-Ost*, both chambers of the Parliament voted for the draconian amendments to the mass media law, which had to be signed by Putin to make it a new law. One week earlier, the mass media CEOs in an open letter to Putin, asked President to veto the amendments. November 26 was the last day the President could do so.

"Lesin suddenly calls me and says to come to him, as soon as possible," Venediktov recollected for this thesis. "When I came to his office, there were four people there: the *VGTRK* Chairman Oleg Dobrodeev, the *Pervy Kanal* General Director Konstantin Ernst, Slava<sup>40</sup> Fronin from *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, and Lesin himself. There was no one from *NTV*." Everyone in attendance except Venediktov represented the State media, partially or fully owned. His radio station was still owned by the state's *Gazprom* but had a reputation as the most independent radio in the country. "Let's go to Putin," Lesin said. "Those amendments are insane. So, I persuaded

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<sup>40</sup> "Slava" is a diminutive for "Vladislav".

President Putin to meet with the Editors-in-Chief. There would be 20 people there. Lyosha,<sup>41</sup> you will attack the amendments."

- What would they do? Venediktov pointed a finger to the others in the room.
- They would nod, Lesin answered.

The group met with President on November 25. "When we entered, Misha told me: 'Don't be afraid of anything,'" Venediktov added. "I thought I had ended up in an insane asylum. Putin says: 'Well, listen, I know why you all came here. I have already vetoed this law.' Misha was sitting two people away from me, so I couldn't tell him anything. But I still objected to Putin's position. I said there was no live broadcast of the theater storm on *NTV*, Vladimir Vladimirovich. Sorry, I watched it myself. The guys nodded, and Putin then said, 'If everyone from the loyal Dobrodeev to the disloyal Venediktov supports this position, then I did the right thing by vetoing the law.'"

The gentlemen left and behind closed doors, Venediktov asked Lesin: "Why are you making a clown of me?" So "Lesin spread his hands, pointing at the others, in a business attire."<sup>42</sup> 'Well,' Lesin replied. 'I wouldn't do it to them'."

In conclusion, Venediktov explained that: "Lesin staged this. He clearly understood that I was a tool, that I would achieve the greatest effect because everyone else was like an indentured servant. And since we know how Putin treats the media, Lesin persuaded Putin to veto the law. This is perhaps the most vivid example of how Mikhail worked."

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<sup>41</sup> "Lyosha" is a diminutive for "Aleksey".

<sup>42</sup> Venediktov is known for his very informal style, with passion for checkered flannel shorts.

For **Irena Lesnevskaya** it is also important that industry leaders not forget the discussion of the media law amendments. "Lesin supported us when we shouted that television should be free, that the state without any private investment should have only one channel, and only one channel should be in one hand of our billionaires, the seven-banker-seven-boyars."

Informal meetings with Lesin were important for a journalist who covered him as the Minister but preferred to stay **Anonymous** in this thesis. Lesin used to bring media journalists to his office on *Strastnoy Boulevard*, for the background briefings. "'To drink tea at Lesin's,' that's how we called it." "He always behaved informally, and the briefings often provided both irony and revelation in terms of Lesin's unofficial position on some issues. We must give him high marks – Lesin knew how to work with journalists; he knew how to provide information to us because he was engaged in promotion and public relations all his life." Still, any contact with Lesin was "emotionally difficult." Lesin used to tell the journalist "something between a threat and black irony," a phrase "Remember about social responsibility!" "I had to contact him regularly like any other newsmaker for comments and information and to maintain a neutral status," the interviewee explained. "Yes, I received comments, but I'm flesh and blood, with my own views and position. The combination of my views and positions often clashed with an emotional contradiction as a professional journalist."

Another media correspondent, **Andrey Zolotov** was also among those who "drank tea at Lesin's." And he shared yet another memory of Lesin's birthday. *The Moscow Times* where he worked, decided to present Lesin a gift. "Our cartoonist Viktor Bogorad made a cartoon of Lesin standing next to a gravestone. *NTV* was written in it. It was a spirited idea to present such a bold

caricature of him for his birthday. I worried about whether to give it to him, but everything worked out. He accepted it without any problems." Suddenly Zolotov asked me rhetorically: "Do you remember he had a tattoo on his arm? Of course, you should. It was also impressive to see a Minister who had a tattoo."<sup>43</sup>

**Vasily Gatov**, a media analyst, had "two completely different, but equivalent memories" about Mikhail Lesin. "Once I worked on the side of a man who fell, as we say, under Lesin's steam roller, under his huge pressure, and it was part of a political decision that Lesin was pushing. Later, I collaborated with Lesin in an unexpected way with a political decision that Lesin was pushing. In both cases, I saw an absolute two-faced Yanus."

The first situation was related to the *Almaz-Press* printing house, where Gatov worked as a development director from 1999 to 2001. "Mikhail Lesin tried to create a super holding of the Russian printing companies that would monopolize the provision of printing services, with the 'squeezing' of those that were privately owned and the merging of those that were state-owned in whole or in part," Gatov said. "*Almaz-Press* was a unique enterprise created by the will of capital and the efforts of one person – Marina Pereverzeva. Protecting her was interesting to me. This defense could be built by turning to a more senior official and explaining there that Lesin was misbehaving, or by building such an economic structure and system of orders and transactions that would make the takeover of *Almaz-Press* economically impossible or meaningless for Lesin and the people behind him."

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<sup>43</sup> In the Soviet Union, where Lesin was raised, tattoos signaled criminal culture. In new Russia, it is a little different now, since there is a youth culture of tattoos made as a fashion.

Lesin led the offensive on all possible fronts, the analyst recalls. "On the political front, Lesin sent some crazy members of the State Duma who threatened or tried to persuade us. On the bad guy's front, there were real militants who came to bully us. On the economic front, there were some big investment bankers representing all sorts of deals. And there was another, friendly front – the world of media elite was small, and everyone knew each other in one way or another. Therefore, for example, some [*Independent Media* publishing house founder] Derk Sauer could come and say: 'Listen, why are you resisting? Just give it to him.'"

Somehow *Almaz-Press* found ways to defend itself, and "it is still a non-governmental organization."

Gatov remembers several conversations in which Lesin "constantly turned from a bad guy into an intellectual, a cultured person." "He would start a conversation in a raised voice, aggressively, with a clear, demonstrated disrespect for the interlocutor, but as he was building the argument, he would go back to being a normal person. By the way, if something really interested him, then he connected, lost interest in the result, and began to think on the side of his opponent. I think I'm not the only one who says this."

Gatov predicted right. It was also **Elmar Murtazaev** who talked about Lesin's ability to change faces (Murtazaev's memoirs are coming later in the thesis).

The second time Gatov met with Lesin was about a year after the first episode, he told me. "It was about 2003 when my friend [a media manager] Volodya Khanumyan<sup>44</sup> asked: 'Are

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<sup>44</sup> "Volodya" is a diminutive for "Vladimir." In 10 years after this Gatov's recollection, in 2013-4, Vladimir Khanumyan served as Mikhail Lesin's deputy in Gazprom-Media.

you free? Can you come? Lesin has come up with an idea.' At this time, Lesin was going to create something to promote the Russian image abroad in terms of investments and culture. One of his ideas was a TV channel like the *BBC World Service*, *France International*, or *Deutsche Welle*. Although Gatov "did not like this idea," he joined the conversation, in the *VGTRK* building where Lesin gathered his Deputy Vladimir Grigoriev, *VGTRK* Director Oleg Dobrodeev, Dobrodeev's Deputy Andrey Bystritsky, and the General Director of *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Alexander Gorbenko. "I remember well how Lesin said that this was an interesting task, not only technically, but financially," Gatov told me. "The excitement of a winner appeared in his eyes."

In a paper he wrote for them, Gatov proposed something different. That was an institution that would replicate the format of the *Cervantes Institute* with a significant media component. "It could be the Russian embassies that would allow the distribution of high-quality video content local television stations could use," Gatov said. "Soon, someone from Dobrodeev arrived, giving me three thousand dollars in an envelope, and a thank you note. After that, I never participated again. It was one of the first meetings that raised the idea for a program that later became *Russia Today*, *RT*."

Created in 2005, *Russia Today* became a worldwide television network broadcasting in several languages that was seen as a propaganda channel for the Russian government. The channel was banned in England since it was not considered to be "fit and proper or a responsible broadcast." The channel was also blocked on *YouTube*. In the United States, *Russia Today America* began broadcasting in 2010, and in 2017, the U.S. Justice Department required *Russia Today* to registering it as "a foreign agent." After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *Russia*

*Today* lost business partners that provided the channel with cable and satellite distribution, so *Russia Today* had to terminate live broadcasts (Alter, 2022).

**Elmar Murtazaev**, who later became the Editor-in-Chief of the Russian version of *Forbes*, and several other prominent publications, met Lesin for the first time in 1997, during "the golden fall of the golden age of Russian freedom." Murtazaev was a correspondent for the new liberal newspaper *Russkiy Telegraph*, owned by Vladimir Potanin. According to the August 2022 edition of the *Bloomberg Billionaires Index*, Potanin was the 40th wealthiest person in the world, with an estimated net worth of \$31.2 billion (Bloomberg, 2022).

Potanin was among the first oligarchs in Russia who united support for Yeltsin's re-election in 1996. In the fall of 1997, Potanin was appointed to the cabinet as the first Prime Minister Deputy, but this appointment was short-lived. The next year's March, Potanin returned to the business world and the club of media owners.

Potanin purchased shares in the two oldest Russian papers, *Izvestia* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. He also financed a start-up paper *Russkiy Telegraph* in which Murtazaev began to work. All three papers were united into Potanin's new *Prof-Media* holding. In the beginning of 2010s, *Gazprom-Media* purchased Potanin's holding, when Lesin served as CEO.

So back then Murtazaev discovered that Potanin was lobbying for a new Russian foreign trade system and decided to write about it. Murtazaev said he felt no pressure from Potanin, who allowed the paper "to be absolutely free" from the owner's influence but the Kremlin sent Lesin to talk to Murtazaev to stop the publication of news. Lesin had already left the position of the Kremlin's public relations chief and was the *VGTRK* Deputy Director. Behind the scenes, however, Lesin continued to serve the Kremlin's interests, Murtazaev said.

One day, Murtazaev received a call from the Presidential Administration and was asked to meet with Lesin. The two met in a Japanese restaurant on *Kutuzovsky Prospect*, not far from the Russian White House, Government residence. Lesin proposed a deal – Murtazaev would keep this information from being published for five days, and in exchange Lesin would provide Murtazaev with all the information about Potanin's plans. "I happily agreed," Murtazaev said in the interview for this study. "I did not have enough information and I had no second source, so my editor would not publish the article anyway. And, honestly, I would not, too." Several days later, someone whose name Murtazaev does not even recall met with Murtazaev on Lesin's behalf. That person provided the journalist with newsworthy information, and a subsequent article was published.

There were still two more personal meetings with Lesin that Murtazaev could not forget. The journalist was already a co-owner of the *Kompania* business weekly where he served as Deputy Editor. One of his correspondents found details about a circle of businessmen that were involved in the *Ozero* ("Lake") dacha cooperative, which Vladimir Putin and his friends had launched in November 1996. After Putin's election as President in 2000, many within his circle became the wealthiest people in Russia and recipients of state contracts. Murtazaev's colleague was following activities of several of those businessmen from when they started, so the colleague was the first in the country to investigate the *Ozero* businesses. The article was published in *Kompania*. After the second article about *Ozero* published there, Murtazaev received a call from Lesin's office with the request for a meeting.

At the meeting, Lesin asked why the magazine was covering the cooperative and asked if it was paid material. The information was not paid material, but for about an hour and a half, Murtazaev argued to disprove Lesin's comments. Lesin mentioned the names of

*Kompania* investor Alexander Lebedev and oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and asked Murtazaev whether either person or both of them were behind the news coverage, meaning they could order the publication. "No, no one paid for our article to be published," Murtazaev said again. "You, guys, are doing this in vain; this is a very dangerous topic," Lesin replied. "I'm not threatening you; I just know you do not need to do this, and I highly recommend that you don't."

"It was very upsetting," Murtazaev told me, but he said he wasn't scared. "Those times were different from today; it was possible then to leave by saying f\*\*\* off. But since 2014, it became different when one in every two newsmakers was off putting, and I knew my word could be used against me," Murtazaev recalled.

Interestingly, according to this recollection, Lesin already knew Yury Kovalchuk in 1997, while he was an unknown businessman. Years later, in 2008, Kovalchuk launched the *National Media Group (NMG)*, which gradually became a major shareholder in a plethora of the Russian companies and corporations, including leading Russian media channels: *Pervy Kanal* (Channel One), *Ren-TV*, *Pyaty Kanal* (Channel Five), *STS Media*, the *Russkaya Sluzhba Novostey* radio station, *Izvestia*, *Sport-Express*, and others. Kovalchuk also became an owner of the Russian versions of 11 *Discovery* channels, 12 *Viasat* channels, 3 *Turner Group* channels, and *Sony Pictures*. Since 2010, Kovalchuk also controlled shares of the *Video International* group of companies which was announced to the public in 2015 (RBC, 2015).

In 2014, the most decorated Russian gymnast Alina Kabaeva, who reportedly was the longtime mistress of Vladimir Putin, became chair of the *NMG* Board of Directors. Mikhail Lesin served on the Board from 2010 to 2011 and as a General Director of *Gazprom-Media* from

2013 to 2015, later became an asset of Russia's *Bank Rossiya*. The bank's shares were controlled by Yury Kovalchuk too.

Still, Murtazaev could not forget the last time he met with Lesin, so he continued to answer the question about the most vivid memory for this thesis. It was at a party organized by the founder of *Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company*, Iskander Makhmudov. "We were selling the *Kompania* magazine to him, and Lesin, as far as I understand, was in a good relationship with Makhmudov." One of the facts that signaled about it was that Lesin's longtime partner Aleksey Volin, who served with Lesin as Deputy Chief of the Kremlin's PR department from 2003 until 2007, was also President of the *Rodionov Publishing House*, one quarter of which owned by Makhmudov. In addition, Lesin was present at the party.

"I heard about your great deal," Lesin said to Murtazaev. "Congratulations. It is exactly the time to exit the media; well done. Believe me, as an experienced person, this is shit, not a business." Murtazaev expressed regret to me that he "did not listen to wise people" such as Lesin back then and stayed in journalism. "Lesin at this time was very pleasant. He could be different, as I saw in our meetings. He could be a nice guy who could change to a wild beast; he could easily change faces."

Another prominent media manager, **Natalia Sindeeva**, was also interviewed by me for this thesis. Sindeeva founded the *Dozhd channel (TV Rain)* in 2010, and it was closed down by the Russian government after 12 years of operation that included covering Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Since then, most journalists have left Russia (more on this is discussed in Introduction.)

Sindeeva remembered she was on good terms with Lesin. Once she met him accidentally in *Zhukovka*, an elite village in fifteen miles from Moscow. Following her 1995 launch of the *Serebrany Dozhd* Moscow radio station ("Silver Rain"), she "believed that the station was starting to receive ads and dividends." Sindeeva bought a red *Jaguar Cabrio* that got Lesin's attention. The two chatted briefly, later they met on very different occasions.

Lesin called Sindeeva over the phone when she was already an owner of *TV Rain*. "We did not have the kind of relations that required him to call me. It was the time when he came back from obscurity into business." Reportedly, Lesin returned to Russia after two years in Beverly Hills in the U.S., where he allegedly helped his son Anton Lessine to start a career as a Hollywood producer. In October 2013, Lesin became the General Director of *Gazprom-Media*. So Lesin called Sindeeva and "yelled terribly": she "did not understand she had a tiger by the tail! Whose order was this?" She did not understand what even he was talking about. She was not an Editor-in-Chief but a General Director of the company, and typically did not have time to watch all the latest news. "It was an unpleasant, tough conversation," she recollected. "After I hung up, consulted the staff, and viewed the content, I saw that he apparently referred to a story with the comments on Lesin, some news about *Video International*. It was not even an investigation, but a commonplace report. Apparently, something angered him." She still did not know what exactly.

*TV Rain* ran into even greater trouble after an online poll in the program conducted at the TV station, together with *Echo Moskvy* and *Dilettant* magazine on January 26, 2014. The poll's

question asked whether the Soviet Union should have surrendered Leningrad in the siege during World War II in order to save lives.<sup>45</sup>

The prosecutor's office in St. Petersburg started an investigation "checking on possible violations of whether the channel crossed the lines of what was permissible in describing the final breakthrough of the blockade" (RIA Novosti, 2014, 1). The St. Petersburg parliament asked a General Prosecutor "to punish the channel, including it shutting down." An anonymous person who "felt offended" filed a complaint to another prosecutor's office of Leningrad Oblast, which started its own investigation (Ibid.). The State Duma criticized the channel by calling the poll "Nazism rehabilitation" even after the channel apologized, removed the poll, and called it a mistake. Four Russian providers suspended the channel from their packages and some advertisers terminated their contracts with the channel.

*Dozhd* Editor-in-Chief Mikhail Zygar asserted that the "negativity surge was politically motivated," Zygar wrote in a statement. "This is a campaign, the purpose of which is to denigrate us, undermine our reputation and the trust of the audience in us" (RIA Novosti, 2014, 1). Sindeeva also apologized publicly, after Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov suggested so (RIA Novosti, 2014, 2).

It did not help to save the business in a previous form. Ultimately, *Dozhd* had to change a whole business model, cut costs, laid off some staff, and started to offer subscriptions. Colleagues from *Snob* magazine provided *Dozhd* some office space, but when the leaseholder recalled its contract, *Dozhd* was asked to leave its temporary office. In December 2014, Sindeeva

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<sup>45</sup> About 800.000 people died of starvation during the siege.

started broadcasting from her Moscow apartment until the channel found new offices in February of 2015 in a location that was occupied until 2022.

In sharing her memories of Lesin for this thesis, Sindeeva said all of this was the result of Lesin in action behind the scenes. "I still have no knowledge for sure," she said, "but many different people had told me it was Lesin's idea not to use the authorities' orders but to find reasons to get different commercial partners to shut *Dozhd* down."

Sindeeva also suggested that high audience ratings of *Dozhd* were the reason for Lesin to worry. "We had an audience of 12-16 million viewers that grew monthly," she explained. "When we started, I went to *Video International*, not to Lesin though, and asked whether they wanted to sell our ads. *Video International* was not interested in the deal since we were small. But when Lesin returned to Russia, he was shocked that a cable channel could capture such a substantial piece of the advertising money pie." Advertising revenue for 2014 was so successful for *Dozhd*, that she believed, Lesin and his partners saw it as a danger – the major advertisers could consider moving their advertising money to the cable TV market. By her estimations, the cost of ads on cable TV was ten times lower than the costs of ads on other major TV channels while advertisers could also reach a larger audience.

It was October 8, 2015, when Sindeeva heard from Lesin for the last time, one month before his death. "He was in America again, in disgrace for not being at the helm. He wrote me that he would like to give an interview to our channel. I thought it was strange, but probably he wanted to say something." "Let's do it" she replied. "He wrote I would come to Russia and write to you then. However, he died in the meantime."

## 5.2. How he influenced the work of the interviewees

For journalists who covered the media in Russia, Lesin was a newsmaker. However, it was possible to contest him. "Directly and indirectly, he always exerted an influence administratively," said the **Anonymous** participant for this thesis. "He could call an Editor-in-Chief directly and demand, to remove or not publish something. There were direct calls, indignation. Yes, he tried to influence me, but in most cases, I can honorably say that neither the editors nor I succumbed to this. It may sound pretentious to say this was the art of working in those days when it was possible to publish information and not succumb to pressure."

The journalist provided me with an example of compromise between the Editor-in-Chief and Lesin. "It was the time when *TVS's Media Socium*<sup>46</sup> was created when we going to publish one report. According to my source, Lesin's colleagues were trying to influence the *Media Socium* founders. Lesin's representative called me, but I realized soon enough that it would be Lesin himself who would call my Editor-in-Chief next. That is exactly what happened. As soon as I reached the Editor's office, Lesin had already called. He asked not to stop the article's publication, but at least not publish the name of his colleague. The name would not change the picture of the world, so we did not include it in the report. It was the Editor-in-Chief's decision, and it was a compromise. However, Lesin understood when it was possible to exert pressure and when it was pointless. There were still times when it was possible to ignore this pressure."

Another journalist, **Andrey Zolotov** says that Lesin "influenced his work only as a source." "I worked for *The Moscow Times* that was one of the most independent newspapers in Russia, partially because we wrote in English and were generally very protected.<sup>47</sup> Nobody

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<sup>46</sup> *Media Socium* was an administrative structure over the *TVS* channel.

<sup>47</sup> *The Moscow Times* belonged to the *Independent Media* holding founded by a Dutch citizen Derk Sauer. It was financially successful, and in 2001 launched the best Russian business daily, *Vedomosti*, together with *The Financial*

touched us at all. Lesin was a source for me; he had all those meetings with the press when he explained things to us. He had his agenda as a Minister, and he promoted it this way – he influenced precisely as a source, but not as an administrator."

In his turn, **Alfred Koch** said Lesin did not influence his work when they worked directly for over a year, from May-June of 2000 to October 2001. Lesin was not involved in the financial issues of *Gazprom-Media* Koch told me. "Still, I discussed with him the candidacy of Boris Jordan. After all, Lesin was a Minister, so I observed some decorum." The relationship between the two men had developed long before Koch started to serve as *Gazprom-Media* chief, and while Lesin was still a private entrepreneur in *Video International*. "At that time, I was a full Deputy Prime Minister," Koch explains. "So, I could put him in his place, send him to hell, and he understood. We had normal, good relations."

Interestingly enough, **Evgeny Kiselev** also says Lesin did not exert influence on him, despite the fact that three TV channels he was leading suffered from Lesin's actions. "We did not obey him," Kiselev explained. "We never communicated with him about the company's editorial policies; no orders, requests, or recommendations have ever been received from the Ministry of Information and Press." Even more, Lesin was a great help for his *Itogi* program, when they "still had normal relations" – Lesin helped to organize an interview with the chief surgeon who performed heart surgery on the President Yeltsin heart. At that time, Lesin was already the chief of the Public Relations Department of the Presidential Administration and was personally

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*Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Since January 1, 2016, by the law, the foreign ownership of any Russian media, including print, was limited to 20 percent. The foreign media investors left the country.

responsible for the press coverage of the heart surgery story. Lesin suggested Kiselev needed to meet and talk with the doctor before an interview was to be held, so the latter "would feel relaxed and understand that I was not coming with provocative questions or would somehow expose him later as an inappropriate witness."

Another interviewee for this thesis, who did not say that Lesin influenced his work during the takeover of *Media-Most*, was **Aleksey Venediktov**. He remembered Lesin's influence at the time when the latter served as Chairman of the Board of Directors of *Gazprom-Media* and the Board of Directors of *Echo Moskvy*. "We had not seen each other and had not spoken since his dismissal by Medvedev in 2009," Venediktov said. "We met again in 2013." They met in the luxury *Palazzo* restaurant, "with gold, diamonds, and marble that is not my style at all." "I took the menu; he sat opposite, and this was our conversation:

- *I'm glad to see you. You need to fire [the most prominent Echo personalities] Evgenia Albats, Yuliya Latynina, Sergey Parkhomenko, and Viktor Shenderovich.*
- *Are you in good health?*
- *I will be Chairman.*
- *OK, but you did not answer the question. Are you OK?*
- *Fire them!"*

Before the meeting, Venediktov did not know that Lesin would become a *Gazprom-Media* Chairman, but when he knew, he told Lesin the same thing he always told everyone else. Firstly, those radio anchors were not his staff journalists; they were the station's guests. Secondly, he would not fire them. "This is how Lesin's work resumed at a time when he was not even an appointed Chairman yet, but he acted like he had control, like he was in charge."

When Lesin acquired "direct responsibility" for *Echo Moskvy* and became a legal representative of the shareholders, he started to exert influence on the station directly, sometime in 2014, Venediktov recollected. And then a massive scandal aroused. In November of 2014, *Echo Moskvy* radio anchor Alexander Plyushev was asked to come to the General Director's office: Ekaterina Pavlova had been recently appointed to the post by *Gazprom-Media*. She replaced Yury Fedutinov, who had worked as *Echo*'s General Director since its launch in 1990. She was hostile toward journalists, and it was also widely known that she was the wife of Aleksey Pavlov, Deputy Chief of the Presidential Press Service Department.

Pavlova fired Plyushev for the tweet he posted about the death of Sergey Ivanov's son Alexander. Sergey Ivanov, a former *KGB* officer, the Presidential Chief of Staff from 2011 to 2016, and former Defense Minister from 2001 to 2007, was seen as a potential presidential candidate for the 2008-12 term while Putin served as Prime Minister. In May 2005, while Ivanov was Defense Minister, his son Alexander had a car wreck in which he killed a 68-year-old woman. She was legally crossing a road at a green light. The case was closed due to the "absence of violations" and *corpus delicti* in the driver's actions. Ivanov's son was found not guilty.

Ten years later, Alexander Ivanov died in the United Arab Emirates while on vacation. Plyushev of *Echo* tweeted: "Do you think the death of Ivanov's son's the one who ran over an elderly woman with his car and later sued her son-in-law, is proof of God's existence or some cosmic justice?"

The scandal became massive. Venediktov stood by the journalist, asserting no one could fire a journalist except him, the Editor-in-Chief. Lesin publicly threatened to change the mission of *Echo Moskvy* to a music station, but Venediktov managed to keep the journalist in his position. He saved *Echo* for some time, too.

"This is how all our conflicts with Lesin were such, I did not let him control us," Venediktov said for this thesis. "Not because I disagreed with him. I know that Lesin was a 'Boatswain,'<sup>48</sup> but I was no longer a 'sailor,' we grew, and become first-rank captains."

But had Lesin not influenced Venediktov's work while he was Press Minister who put pressure on *Media-Most* and Gusinsky? Of course, Venediktov agreed. "We had a famous fight in the *Vox Populi* program on *NTV*.<sup>49</sup> I was told by program creators to be take the lead against Lesin. But we were on a first-name basis after all, and we were from the same generation and media landscape of the 1990s. When I told him that what we had was a gangster takeover of *NTV*, he was very offended. 'Prove it, Lyosha!' Lesin said. But we were on equal terms, although he was a Minister, and I tried to save *Echo* while not by making concessions to him."

**Aslamazyan** also said Lesin did not influence her work. "We had a non-profit organization that acted according to our values, charter, work plan, and projects funded by various donors," she stated. "Lesin had the opportunity to interfere with us, but he did not. On the contrary, he helped as he did in the 2000s. When foreign grants from England or the European Parliament were issued as technical assistance to us, we had to obtain permission for their implementation in Russia. Permission was granted by an interdepartmental government commission, which included representatives of the Press Ministry, Customs, and the *FSB*. Lesin signed everything necessary in our support. He treated our work with sufficient interest, curiosity, and good feelings. Lesin understood that we were doing an essential job – something that the Ministry would never do – training, dealing with small companies, and involvement with

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<sup>48</sup> *Boatswain* was another Lesin's nickname in the media community, together with the *Bulldozer*.

<sup>49</sup> The show was aired on April 6, 2001, and still available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7f7Z6FM9Tw>

endless conferences and competitions. Lesin's group in the Ministry was small, and I would say democratic, and it was headed by the capitalist Lesin who was an influential person that supported the idea of making money."

**Sindeeva, Lesnevskaya, Lensky, and Zassoursky** all claimed that Lesin did not significantly influence their work.

So, it was **Dmitry Gubin** who provided the relatively rare admission during this study that Lesin did in fact exert influence. Gubin was news anchor on *RTR's Vesti*, and Lesin "led the launch of *Vesti* in September 1999." "With a 99.5 percent certainty I can say it was Lesin, not the Editor-in-Chief, or CEO, who decided what *Vesti's* prime time program should be, that it would move from 8 P.M., when it had been airing since its beginning, to an hour later, 9 P.M. His mission was to win *ORT* in direct competition. As far as I understand, he also disapproved of the program's host, who did not like. He made all of the major decisions, and he was constantly in *VGTRK* building in the so-called *Yama*<sup>50</sup>. I saw him all the time. And it was he who decided I have done the live interview at the end of each program."

Unlike others, **Romanova** stated her work was influenced by Lesin for several years, directly or indirectly. "I remember very well how he set up a Press Center on the Chechen war and appointed Misha Margelov – the building was across the street from the *Ren TV* building. At that time, it was still possible to communicate with Margelov and even to be friends. Of course,

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<sup>50</sup> *Yama* is a slang name of a geographic place in Moscow where *VGTRK* sits; the word comes from the street named *Yamskogo Polya*.

Lesin influenced the lives of people who were active in the 1990s and early 2000s, and the famous protocol # 6 of course affected all of us, and society in general. It was a disgusting thing – exchanging property for freedom began back then. Many people have lost their jobs, and the country has lost normal TV. Since then, the trend has worsened."

### 5.3. How Lesin's style as Press Minister was different from that of others

Only a few interviewees could compare Mikhail Lesin to other Press Ministers in the new Russia. The aforementioned, anonymous journalist, **Zolotov, Kiselev, Lensky, Lesnevskaya, Sindeeva, and Zassoursky**, had no responses when asked the question.

**Aslamazyan** recalled Mikhail Fedotov, who was a Minister from 1991 to 1992, while she was the *Glasnost Defense Foundation* founder and its first President and had not yet established *Internews*. "Fedotov was a knowledgeable, a liberal, a lawyer from God, and a mass media law author, but not a very good manager," Aslamazyan told me. "It was interesting to have meaningful conversations with him." But nothing more than that. When she launched *Internews* in Russia, she had no relations with the state. "We were a small organization doing seminars, so the Ministry noticed us after the crisis of 1998. Our portfolio had expanded, and we had started anti-crisis projects that sometimes-needed letters of support from the regional governors or other officials." That is how she became in contact with Lesin's predecessor and later his First Deputy, Mikhail Seslavinsky, who supported *Internews*.

*Internews* was shut down under pressure from the Russian authorities in 2007, and Aslamazyan had to leave the country. "Lesin tried to help me and advised me when I could come

back. He checked whether I was on the 'stop lists' at the border," she recalled. (In Russia now, *FSB* is in charge of such "stop lists.")

For **Vasily Gatov**, Lesin "was a unique character in the Russian bureaucracy." "He was a man of the New Age, more modern than the previous Ministers: Nenashev, Laptev or Poltoranin," Gatov told me for this thesis. "Not only because Lesin was much younger, but he had no background in the Communist Party. Also, unlike others before and after him, he was a man of blunt language. The others were soft-spoken people who posed as neutral technocrats. Misha was exceptionally passionate, and his passion was felt in what he did. He brought a startup management style into the Ministry – it looked like this: we have this problem; we are urgently solving this problem; we only have to grow here."

**Dmitry Gubin** agreed, that Lesin "was more brutal" than other Press Ministers. "Lesin belonged to the era when it was not clear who was a businessman and who was a gangster; some migrated between the two with incredible ease, so even lawyers looked like thieves. Lesin had a callous style and heavy look. The impression he made was that he could make you rich or could murder you. This is not an exaggeration." At the same time, Gubin described Lesin as "insanely charming, especially with women, when he turned into a dandy."

For him, it was also important to note that Lesin was independent. "All the Ministers I saw were the Ministers performing the duties of a Minister, doing what was directed by the Kremlin. Lesin made the decisions himself."

**Elmar Murtazaev** also thought Lesin had charisma, something that was seen among the Russian elites of the 1990s. "He certainly was a very charismatic businessman who, for unknown reasons, became a Minister. He comes in, he sits down, and by his mere presence one feels that the cognac on the table had just become five degrees stronger. He was a man with great erudition and an author of the brilliant phrase: 'It has become so difficult to steal now that it is becoming like a job assignment.' That was how he toasted someone at a birthday party in Saint-Petersburg. Everyone roared with laughter."

**Venediktov** agreed that Lesin "decided everything himself, and never said 'I would go to the Prime Minister, or President, or to the Minister of Economy to ask if they would agree.'" Lesin was lobbying for the media industry in economic terms, with Pavel Gusev, Editor-in-Chief of *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, and Mikhail Komissar, founder of *Interfax* news agency, Venediktov said. "They defended our business interests as a corporation. His conversation was always tough, and once he was clear on everything, he would say: I will do it. Then he got it done."

"Misha stood apart from the others; he was more of a businessman, not an official," **Alfred Koch** said. Lesin "felt and certainly understood many things professionally. I did not have any media education but acted as a person from finance. I sued Gusinsky with some tricky arrangements based on his debts and so on, but I didn't get into this media mess. When Lesin advised something in professional, media terms, everyone listened to him and gave him the credit."

"Never was he the Minister; he was Richelieu," **Olga Romanova** stated referring to the influential French cardinal of the seventeenth's century. "There was nothing official in him; he did not have the genes of an official; he did not have the ferment of an official. He allowed himself to do whatever he wanted. We say the Lesin's era has gone, it was an era of bright personalities, and he was certainly a very bright personality and a powerful man. The era of the independent people is gone, and Lesin, of course, was completely independent. He belonged only to himself. It would be impossible to assume that Lesin would have been forever faithful to Yeltsin or Putin. He was for himself. There are no such people now, and there will be no such people anytime soon."

#### 5.4. How Lesin influenced the media as Press Minister

It was another question I asked the interviewees. "In Lesin times, the media were more interesting," said **Ivan Zassoursky**. "It was the time of romantic capitalism, and the primary income came from advertisements, with the monopoly of powerful *Video International*, which Lesin headed. The media were more independent. There were many private companies, and in addition to the owner's direct control, there was relative freedom of speech and criticism. After Lesin, the Kremlin began changing media owners and enforcing stricter controls over the system. The special services began to select, collect, and appoint their people." As a result, "we've got an insane propaganda system, that is, on the one hand, quite effective, not harsh. On the other hand, it is very fragile – a few severe psychological blows, like losing the war in Ukraine, would be enough for the whole system to lose stability."

"It was a romantic period of independent media and complete freedom," **Aslamazyan** believed. "There was no understanding of what the media were, what a license was, how much it should cost to operate or be sold. In the early 1990s, there was not much pressure on the freedom of speech. It all started with *NTV*, and then it got worse. However, the commercialization of television has dramatically changed the market. Former independent regional stations began to gain sway; media began to be worth something; regional advertising markets were formed. It was an interesting period, and in any case, more interesting than now."

For **Murtazaev**, the "media system has changed for the worse. The story with *NTV* and Gusinsky began to break the backbone of the Russian media. It was one of the first significant losses. We lost everything. Lesin is certainly one of the people who started the process of destroying freedom of speech in Russia."

"Lesin was a destroyer," the **Anonymous** journalist claims. "Lesin carried out some business reforms, held conferences in the regions began to grow, the industry started to develop, and the FCC began to work. There were undoubtedly positive things, but at least two federal TV channels, independent of the state, were destroyed, outweighing everything else." For the journalist, it was still unclear why Lesin signed Protocol # 6. "There were no state laws applied. Gangster laws took over. There was state racketeering when a federal official signed a protocol revoking the freedom of the media owner, and I don't know how it could be called anything but that." Moreover, the journalist told me, Lesin "did not deny his non-participation in *Video International* very convincingly. Of course, he politically influenced all the election campaigns, and censorship flourished. Major censorship scandals never happened without his participation."

For **Evgeny Kiselev**, Lesin's time in the Ministry was the start of consolidation of power in the mass media. "The Ministry started to select for itself all the existing levers of influence of pressure on any public or private mass media," he told me. "This had not existed before. Under Lesin, the Ministry began to claim to be the command center that controls the industry, television in the narrow sense, and entire media platform in the broader sense." Still, the print press had freedom at that time. After *NTV*, *TV-6*, and *TVS*, all channels on which Lesin put pressure, Kiselev became Editor-in-Chief of *Moskovskie Novosti*. "For two years, we had no contact with the Ministry of Press," he told me. "Lesin's reach did not yet include newspapers and magazines."

**Olga Romanova** told me that Lesin "was undoubtedly the 'cardinal' of all the media and PR. Even his love affairs were important since he loved women anchors and had a lot of affairs with them."

**Gatov** argued that Lesin's ministry had also some bright sides. "Lesin was well known for his charming behavior. He led a very active social life as a Minister. He didn't catch star fever, and while he did not like publicity under the cameras, he appeared at different parties where there were no cameras."

According to Gatov, what was important was that prior to the Lesin's Ministry, "there was no media system as such." "The media market developed naturally; it grew like grass in a forest. After the default of 1998, a rapid recovery began, amounting to ten percent per month. This first occurred in TV. Lesin understood both the value of an advertising monopoly and

control of the media rating research, if not directly, then indirectly. He knew perfectly well how to put pressure on advertisers; he exercised this pressure through [*co-founder of VI Yury*] Zapol and other channels, as well as through corruption. The media outlets he did not like, could not receive system money, including *Procter & Gamble*, or *Johnson & Johnson*. The position was as follows – go for small advertisers, but we will deal with the big ones ourselves."

Gatov also pointed out that Lesin had begun developing the architecture for media money management since Putin became Prime Minister. "This idea of a state printing holding<sup>51</sup>, the plan for excluding [*Video International* competitor] *Premier SV* from business took shape at this time. The latter was done cunningly: *ORT* created its own sales department, which [*Olga*] Barskaya headed, but she had no choice but to take the sales system from *Video International*. That meant Lesin had complete control over the top two of the three cash flows on television. This is the dark side of Janus-Lesin, which few people have seen, understood, or heard about."

Gatov also pointed out that Lesin had understood the information agenda could be managed through "balanced requests if done infrequently but clearly." Regarding the struggle for *NTV*, Lesin realized it was important to control the news agency's agenda. "By the end of his term, Lesin had fallen in love with [*Putin's Press Secretary Aleksey*] Gromov, a man of bureaucracy but a stranger to media people," Gatov explained. "I don't know who came up with the idea – either Lesin or Gromov – that crucial information distribution points should be linked through dedicated telephone lines."

According to Gatov, in 2003-4, Lesin and Gromov built a special network based on a dedicated ATS inside ATS-2, so they had an opportunity to call the leaders of the news agencies, TV channels, and radio stations by pressing one button on a large remote control. In addition,

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<sup>51</sup> The plans on state print holding are discussed by Gatov in Chapter 5.1.

some of these organizations agreed that the same phone, without a disk, would be at the news producer's offices. Phones were at the key distributors of the agenda, including the Editors-in-Chief offices in *RIA Novosti*, *TASS*, and *Interfax*, on *Radio Rossii*, and *Mayak*, Gatov told for this thesis, and it was a new information. "A phone was also near Venediktov at *Echo Moskvy*, but Venediktov did not take orders – he had to be persuaded," Gatov told. "For some, like *RIA*, the phone was visible in offices, but in Venediktov's or the [*Interfax* founder Mikhail] Komissar's offices, phones were hidden in desks. When Gromov called, they opened the desk. It was the key system Lesin implemented that determined that determined an editorial agenda of the media outlets controlled by Kremlin. It did not have an immediate effect because it was necessary to break the routines of not only people of newsrooms, which was more complex."

To Gatov's knowledge, this system appeared after the biggest anti-Kremlin protests in Russia since Perestroika. After 2011, "Gromov could no longer stand it – any refusal to him or disobedience almost immediately led to a demand to be fired or move that individual to another place."

The same phone system existed in the Soviet Union, and in some media outlets, e.g., *Izvestia* it survived in the modern Russian era.

When I asked if he had a phone that Lesin and Gromov installed, **Venediktov** replied so: "It's a funny story." "About a month after Lesin became *Gazprom-Media* CEO," Venediktov told me, "I got a call from his receptionist. You are a major player, you are a great one; you need a direct connection with the big greats, I was told. But I did not need one! And you know, on *Echo Moskvy*, the office assistants had clumsy hands. The next day dusting the phone, they broke the device. Two days later, a new device came, but I had the same office assistants. Again, the

clumsy hands, so they again broke the device. Lesin called, saying I was wasting state property; there would be no other phones. God bless."

As for **Alfred Koch**, "Lesin became one of the creators of this new reality." "I think he suffered greatly, but he could no longer get out of this rut. Everything became clear from the second half of the 2000s to the beginning of the 2010s. Lesin had seen how it all worked in America, he had worked in the media in the free 1990s. Do you think he did not understand what the 'abomination' was doing? He once told me when he was drunk that he was jealous that had I quit. He could not. I did not have a business connection with the media, yet Lesin's whole business was the media. If he would quit, 'they' (*i.e., Russian authorities*) would go broke and maybe put Lesin in prison. Still, Lesin left for the States but returned for some unknown reason and became head of *Gazprom-Media*."

When I asked Koch if he felt guilty for his participation in the *NTV* story, he told me he did not. "Let's suppose it was not me who became the head of *Gazprom-Media*, but Putin's nominee, a former intelligence officer, " he explained. "I don't think Gusinsky would have been released from prison; there would have been no bargaining with the company and no contracts. We signed an agreement with them, which Gusinsky did not fulfill. He was supposed to transfer the shares to *Deutsche Bank* in London, and the shares were supposed to be sold internationally, *Gazprom* agreed in advance that the money we would receive would become a repayment debt, and *Gazprom* would forgive them. The fact that Gusinsky left this project meant those shares went to *Gazprom*. They could have gone to some Turner, about whom he talked all the time. I give myself credit for the fact that I tried to find a normal solution. Secondly, I managed to create a team that worked normally for another 3-4 years."

**Lesnevskaya** answered to this question, that she could not " I was so busy, and I hated everything that happened at the top, and I hated going to the Kremlin. I attended one meeting in the Kremlin and two meetings in Sochi<sup>52</sup>. Four to five other people were invited and sat with their pissed pants wet. Putin talked to me for two and a half hours since I was the one who asked questions."

**Sindeeva** could not answer the question saying she avoided bureaucrats and tried to be "far away" from them.

#### 5.5. Lesin's role, primarily positive or mostly negative?

For several interviewees, it was difficult to answer this question since Lesin was "a controversial figure," as **Zolotov** noted. "Taking *NTV* away from Gusinsky was, of course, largely completed by Lesin. One of his trump cards was that he understood what he was doing but he led activities as a media professional and a businessman; he sent signals to those who were worse and to those who came after him. The general trend by which the media system became more subordinate to the leadership of the Kremlin was, of course, negative. But within this trend, Lesin's term in office was still a period of development, the formation of media dimensions, and the advertising market."

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<sup>52</sup> Lesnevskaya was referring to the closed briefings of Putin meeting with the top media personalities.

For **Aslamazyan**, Lesin was "a complex figure, a millionaire minister, and a sentimental bandit." "Lesin was a charming person, charismatic, attractive, and energetic," she told me. "He was capable of decent, human deeds, which justified his role in some people's eyes. Still, Lesin also did a lot of harm, especially in his last years, with the creation of the propaganda media. I would say 70 percent of his actions were evil and 30 percent not evil. Through his activity and cynical attitude towards journalism, Lesin destroyed what had not yet been created – a market for professional, honest media."

The *NTV* story, described in Chapter 4.3., was significant in determining Lesin's role for many interviewees. For **Anonymous**, Lesin's role was "categorically negative." "He was a destroyer. He took an active part in the destruction of *NTV*. When part of the *NTV* team moved to *TV-6*, Lesin shut down its broadcasting; this was an illegal decision. The next channel on which the team moved – the *TVS* channel, was also closed by him."

In his turn, **Kiselev** told me: "If you call a spade a spade, Lesin was an oppressor. His task was to end the freedom in the television market and then in other media. But there were also other players, including Aleksey Alekseevich Gromov."

**Sindeeva** thought Lesin was a demiurge – by creating *Video International* and trying to civilize the advertising market. "He taught the market how to organize advertising sales but still his role was negative. It seems to me that he saw no value in freedom of speech; he perceived the media as a tool."

In the eyes of **Koch** "Lesin played a very positive role in forming the advertising market and the game rules. Until 2000, his role was rather positive." For Koch, Lesin "created monsters like Margarita Simonyan and Vladimir Solovyov;<sup>53</sup> after the end of 2001, everything that he managed to do has been a big minus. He monopolized the advertising market, which was not good even for business, not to mention the humanitarian part. When Yura<sup>54</sup> Zapol died, Lesin went into a rage and started to manage this business."

"It is impossible to deny the contribution of Lesin and a group of his associates made to the development of the economic potential of the Russian media market; it would not be intelligent and honest," **Gatov** told me. "These people created the Russian advertising market and developed the systems that ensured filling this market with money for almost three decades." At the same time, Lesin's role was also profoundly negative. "Starting from the 1998-9 period when he expanded his influence, he viewed the market as one to be more manageable. In this market, free agents did not exist, because they would be more manageable and profitable without them. As soon as he realized this, Lesin began to promote this, confidently and constantly. He set out a goal – to build one market controlled from a central point and to take his share from it. So, he converted his skills to manage the media market, its agenda, the behavior of editorial offices, general relations, and acquired knowledge as to how do this with money in order to make money for himself, although he did share money with others." At the end, "as a devoted patriot of Russia," Gatov concluded sarcastically, "Lesin took all of his wealth to America to give his two children a good life."

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<sup>53</sup> The most prominent warmongers in now day's Russia.

<sup>54</sup> "Yura" is a diminutive for "Yury."

**Romanova** found it difficult to describe Lesin in two dimensions. "He was not a Minister at all!" she exclaimed. He was "simply the heart, mind, and hands of the industry. He drank, but still influenced the industry. He was Lesin." She also pointed out that "without the media and Lesin, Yeltsin would not have won the 1996 elections." "Zyuganov would have won. We were all convinced Yeltsin's victory was a good thing at any cost. And Lesin worked for it. In this regard, we, the journalists, were with him, Chubais, and Dyachenko. Time passed, and we realized that it was not a boon." Still, it was "scary to realize" for her "the extent to which he was a bastard, albeit a charming bastard. He was a villain who accidentally did good things."

Romanova viewed Lesin as a person who "did not think in terms of good or bad. He thought about an empire called Lesin and managing people." She said that Vladimir Gusinsky wanted to influence the Kremlin, the "decision-making center," and he "tried to bypass Lesin, but this was impossible." Lesin managed to sell the Kremlin an idea that he could influence likes or dislikes of people towards the Kremlin. "He was a man who served the decision-making center but also influenced it."

Most of the interviewee's framed Lesin's role as unfavorable. **Lesnevskaya** told me she did not know "a single official who positively influenced the establishment of new relations in the media, everyone was doing their own thing." So like others, Lesin "did what benefited him and his huge corporation *Video International*. For those in *KGB*, he was one of their own."

**Gubin** described Lesin's role as "profoundly negative, despite all his outstanding talents." "Lesin started turning journalism into propaganda. I suspect he justified himself by thinking there was propaganda everywhere else, that journalism worldwide was propaganda."

For **Murtazaev** "the role of any person who survived in the Russian State system after Beslan<sup>55</sup> was always negative." In his opinion, "Putin had formed a picture in which the Western world wanted to take power from him and threatened Russia. The world trembled from this terrorist attack, and there were many attempts to lend a helping hand to Putin. He not only did not accept help, but he was also terribly offended." After Beslan, the structure of the Yeltsin Constitution was destroyed, Murtazaev pointed out, and those changes included the regions' sovereignty and federalism – the regional elections were cancelled, and Putin won the right to appoint governors in the regions as Kremlin subordinates. "The Russian Federation ceased to be a Federation." Thirdly, he believed that directly after Beslan, massive changes were made to the judicial system, which became a tool of Kremlin as well. "Before, in the 1990s, the judicial system was classically corrupt, but then it turned into a paramilitary tool and became one of the heavy-handed units of the State." So, for Murtazaev, under those conditions Lesin could not survive, in that he played a positive role for the industry he was leading.

Still, some saw Lesin as a tragic figure. "I feel despondent when talking like this about him," **Aslamazyan** told me at the end. "I had a positive attitude toward him as a human being; I could drink with him, three, and five glasses. So, it is hard for me now to say that he was an absolute scoundrel. But he was evil, undoubtedly."

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<sup>55</sup> It was a terrorist attack on a school in September 2004.

The fact that he went to America suggested for **Koch** that Lesin wanted to distance himself from everything in Russia. "And his end says a lot about how he viewed all of this."

#### 5.6. Was Lesin independent, or just following governmental decisions?

Some interviewees noted that Lesin was more powerful than Putin at some point. "In the beginning, when Putin was promoted, they dragged him to the premiership, then to the presidency; but Misha himself led the company there," **Koch** said.

For **Gatov**, "Lesin was pretty independent; he determined what needed to be done, not Putin. Putin did not understand this." Gatov thought, Putin perceived Lesin as someone from the Yeltsin era. "However, Misha, by definition, was an independent and rich person. I think he would have viewed the *chekists*<sup>56</sup> with deep contempt, if not hatred."

He seemed an independent figure for **Sindeeva** too. "He defined things. He was a figure," she noted.

For **Zolotov**, Lesin "was not just a performer; he influenced media policy." "Lesin carried out certain orders, but in my opinion, he influenced the formation of those orders, he did not just execute someone's orders." This was a significant point for Zolotov, since he thought, that over the past decade the ministries have lost their influence in terms of crafting policy formation. "For

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<sup>56</sup> Chekists stands for people from the secret services. It is a word made from abbreviation of *Chrezvychainaya Komissiya*, the first iteration of *KGB* in the Soviet Russia.

example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has become just an executor of the policies formed by the Presidential Administration."

The **Anonymous** participant held a similar view. "As for his work in the Press Ministry, Lesin was a conveyer of the Kremlin's ideas, which he largely formulated for the Kremlin," the person told me. "Lesin had a special status; let us not forget that he flew to Chechnya with Putin on the first New Year's Eve<sup>57</sup>. Even though Lesin was not a man of the system, he began to form this system together with Aleksey Gromov." His personal interests drove Lesin's actions. "When Lesin became an adviser to Medvedev, he crossed all the boundaries, even according to the Kremlin's view – his own interests were more important to him than those of the State. Lesin used his position as a government official to defend his interests, which played a fatal role in his life."

Lesin was "a big player" for **Zassoursky**. "When the state structures were still weak, much depended on people, and Lesin was the very embodiment of the institution himself. Moreover, as it turned out, his ministry was better structured than those filled with insignificant, poorly educated people who were chosen based on their loyalty. In general, institutions became utterly uninteresting."

**Koch** thought that "Lesin was more independent than anyone appointed after him. Now the ministers are the Kremlin adjutants." Lesin himself was in this "trinity" of those who were in

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<sup>57</sup> The Second war occurred during the transfer of power from Yeltsin to Putin. By going to Chechnya to support federal soldiers, Putin shaped an image of a strong man who would manage the terrorism threat.

charge of the media, that is, Putin's former Press-Secretary Aleksey Gromov and the current Press-Secretary, Dmitry Peskov. "Misha professionally surpassed them so much that they obeyed him rather than give him commands. He had direct access to the President."

**Gatov** told me that "most of what Lesin did, he understood as the interests of the State or his own interests." "When State money was given to *Russia Today*, Mikhail Yurievich did not miss the opportunity to put his hand into the pocket of his native country. It was a very independent position."

Lesin created *Russia Today* "with a nasty young woman as its head," **Aslamazyan** said about Margarita Simonyan. "Since the war with Ukraine started, I saw how everything they created affected people's minds. I still cannot understand how this could happen, how cynicism got into every human pore. Lesin and all of his kind brought so much cynicism that was almost impossible to cure." But in the business market or market areas, in her view, "Lesin very subtly knew which direction to turn."

For **Gubin**, Lesin was independent to some extent. "Lesin maintained good relations with the economic departments of the Government such as the Central bank, and he appreciated their advice. But he also knew whose opinion he had to consider."

**Lesnevskaya** and **Kiselev** had no answer to the question.

Eventually, Lesin became a tool of Putin's policy, some interviewees believe. "At some point, Putin had become unattainable," **Koch** noted. "At one time, I saw how Lyosha Kudrin<sup>58</sup> took Putin to the offices and asked his friends to find a position for 'this good guy'. Now, Kudrin cannot get an appointment with Putin – nothing remains constant for those in charge. So, at first, Lesin held a more senior position and was on equal footing with Putin. Later Putin became the main person."

"Over time, everyone turned into one of Putin's soldiers," **Murtazaev** said. "Lesin was free to do many things, but it was impossible to violate the general line. Lesin followed the trend, which at its peak was far-reaching."

## Chapter 6: Discussion

During the turbulent years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, strong personalities in Russia were able to create a skyrocketing career that brought them wealth, power, and influence. The life of Mikhail Lesin is one such example.

As this case study has shown, Mikhail Lesin was a complicated figure in the Russian media landscape. He was one of the most prominent players in the advertising media market, as well as television, radio, and print. Lesin was one of the founders of the *Video International* group of companies that became a dominant advertising broker in Russia and some European markets. Lesin became the person who formed many of Russia's market rules, relations, and regulations. His word was very influential.

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<sup>58</sup> Aleksey Kudrin was a Minister of Finance in 2000-11. He, as well as Putin and speaking Koch came to the Moscow ruling class from Saint-Petersburg. "Lyosha" stands here to demonstrate a closeness of Koch to Kudrin, since it is a diminutive for "Aleksey."

Moreover, as discovered in the interviews cited in this study, Lesin managed to influence top media advertisers, including global corporations, not to support press outlets that Lesin did not like personally.

The absence of regulations in the first years of the new Russia, with a growing market economy, brought Mikhail Lesin into the spotlight of political consulting and political advertising. At this time, people could quickly transfer from one institution to another. The position as a Kremlin's consultant helped Lesin to become one of the influential figures who brought to power two Presidents. Lesin played a critical role in the 1996 campaign for the re-election of Boris Yeltsin, an enormously unpopular incumbent. And in 2000, Lesin again played an essential part in the presidential campaign of Vladimir Putin, a little-known candidate even to the Russians, not to mention the West. "Who is Vladimir Putin?" was a famous question the U.S. journalist Trudy Rubin asked during the Davos Economic Forum in 2000, where Russian officials were unable to come up with an answer. Lesin was one of those who worked to bring about Putin's recognition.

Lesin had a strong personality and charisma that the majority of the media personalities described for this thesis as negative. Lesin had few moral restrictions to using his bureaucratic position for his business interests. At the same time, several investigations against him for corruption did not yield any results.

As a prominent businessman, Lesin felt it worthwhile to accept the position of Russia's Press Minister in 1999. The resulting power allowed him to exert even more influence, regulating and shaping Russia's media market, including new restrictions on the press. As Press Minister, Lesin had the authority to "warn" the press about its coverage with official warnings.

The warnings could lead to the restriction or ultimately, revoking print media or broadcasting licenses.

Over the years, the results proved negative to freedom of the press. Step by step, the press became more dependent on the Presidential administration, relinquishing its ability and freedom to criticize authorities, including President Putin himself. The voices of dissidents that at one time could be heard by most of the Russian population were shut down. Journalists who did not agree with the new rules or the government were threatened, pressured to leave the country or even murdered. Media outlets resisted becoming dependent on the government. They had to fight with the state, which was and is always strong enough to shut them down because of the power it wields. The state has the power to threaten media with tax frequent inspections, lawsuits, and legal restrictions, including the buying out of journalists and editors-in-chief, co-opting them to the system. In short, since Lesin, Russian media ownership has again become highly controlled by Putin's administration.

Focusing on his own interests, Lesin did his best to influence television, radio, and print publications; he was a part of creation new media holdings, while at the same time clamping down on dissidents. Lesin was also capable of breaking the law without any consequences.

Lesin's behavior did not influence his career in 2001 when Lesin signed an appendix to an agreement with media tycoon Vladimir Gusinsky. The appendix, also known as "Protocol # 6," is considered to have been "under the table" and unlawful. In 2003, Lesin also unlawfully shut down the national channel, *TVS*. Eventually, his behaviors became a public reason for his leaving his position as President's Medvedev adviser. The departure was blamed on "systematic disciplinary violations" by a state official, including non-compliance with "the rules of the civil service and the ethics of behavior of a civil servant."

Even after that, Lesin returned to the Russian media field in 2013 to work for Yury Kovalchuk's media empire. It is a matter for further investigation as to how Kovalchuk, President Putin's friend from the early 1990s, managed to become the owner of *Video International* and major media outlets in Russia.

At the same time, the later developments have led to the questioning of Mikhail Lesin's death in Washington, D.C. in 2015. Perhaps Lesin knew too much. Perhaps he was too influential and could eventually damage members of Russia's ruling class. The possible reasons for his death vary from alcohol consumption or heart attack to physical assault or murder intended to shut him up in the FBI's investigation of his corruption or the lines he had crossed when in business. Some people believe Lesin could still be alive and is in the American Witness Protection Program.

Regardless of what happened to Lesin and why his death still a mystery, the interviews conducted in this thesis and even speculations about his death all exemplify how important Mikhail Lesin was to Russia's media transformations during a unique time in Russian history. Perhaps his life and influence on Russian media and leadership may someday be further investigated by other media researchers, or even a Hollywood studio.

### 6.1. Limitations

The limitations of this study include the fact that there was only a limited number of people who could still participate in interviews. Other scholars might be able to investigate Mikhail Lesin's influence on other interviewees. Factors that provided only limited access to some experts include:

1. Mr. Lesin was a complex figure whose death still looks suspicious to some members of the Russian media community. Some people were fearful of talking about him.
2. Current Russian control over the media did not permit interviews with some people who were familiar with Lesin but are still a part of the Russian media.
3. The current political relationship between the U.S. and Russia may lead some professionals or prominent figures to deny an interview with a researcher associated with an American institution of higher learning, especially an institution in the Washington, D.C. area.

## 6.2. Conclusions

As is clear from this thesis, Russia's history is created by complex personalities. Mikhail Lesin's life gives us some understanding as to why the Russian media failed in order to become independent. Having no tradition of free journalism and in the absence of other solid democratic institutions, both the market and the media appeared weak and had no chance of surviving. Mikhail Lesin, a high-ranked official, wielded the power to punish the media; he had strong business interests, and disrespected media as an independent institution. This could put pressure on the media that they could not avoid. Backed by the State interests, at least, as how they were understood in the inner power circles in Moscow and by the State's repression apparatus, people like Lesin shaped the media landscape so that media could not become an independent player – the media's role was *to serve* the authorities, not to control them for society.

As much of the anecdotal evidence from the interviewees suggests, the picture of the Russian media suppressed by the State is not yet complete and is simplistic. In addition to its sins, such as bribes, *compromat* publications (in favor of the elite's struggles), or information wars, the journalist community in the 1990s was not able to create a mechanism to become economically independent. It also lost the respect of the audience it had during the Gorbachev era and failed to explain to the audience its own need for building of a democratic society.

The media could not fight against such people as Mikhail Lesin or Vladimir Putin, who were perfectly aware of those sins – such politicians could use those sins as a pretext to put pressure on the media in general, or on media personalities, specifically.

The members of the political elite also had personal reasons to be emotional and revengeful – Vladimir Gusinsky and his *NTV* case tragically show that Alfred Koch and the "Family" members such as Valentin Yumashev, Alexander Voloshin, and Mikhail Lesin had reasons to hate him. However, another reason for Gusinsky to fail was his personal participation on the side of the Kremlin in 1996. Putting severe pressure on public opinion, Gusinsky and the journalism community dug their own grave. When the Kremlin decided to crack down on the media, the latter could not prove to the Kremlin they were independent. The independence was lost already. Yet, it is another question whether the television which was born by the Presidential decree could be truly independent.

Still, from the investigation of the career path of Mikhail Lesin, we can learn what happens when the states change the institutions. His career is an example of how the institutions should not be formed since it provides case studies with the evidence as to how far from the democratic standards journalism was formed during the President Yeltsin era. Lesin's career tells us how tainted certain practices were from the very beginning, after the collapse of the Soviet Union when Russia started to move to democracy, adopted the Constitution with the division of powers and started to learn from the outside world about institution building.

One can only voice a hope that Russia will eventually seek democratic change and strive to build new institutions, such as an independent press. This investigation can then be used as a bitter lesson that will serve to prevent a recurrence of the concentration of money, power and corruption that the nation of Russia has experienced.

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