

WILD PAROXYSMS OF THE TURBULENT 90s – HOW THE TRAITORS DOCUMENTARY EXPOSED THE RUSSIAN LIBERAL MILIEU

Lev Kadik

July 2024



The story which *The Traitors* tells is pretty simple and well known to academic scholars who deal with the modern Russian state: it was corrupt from its inception and Putin's regime is in no way an aberration, but smooth continuity of the Yeltsin system.



The documentary precipitated a wave of slanderous assaults on ACF and Pevtchikh herself from the "liberal" wing of the Russian opposition outside and inside Russia. They range from obscenities to accusations of Bolshevism, left-wing extremism to collaboration with Putin's regime.



The Traitors broke the main Russian political taboo. In the 1990s, the country underwent a catastrophe of social, economic and political proportions. The 2002 census registered a natural population decline of 1.8 million since 1989. Public discussion about this period was, however, impossible as it could undermine both Putin and "liberal" opposition.

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WILD PAROXYSMS OF THE TURBULENT 90S – HOW THE TRAITORS DOCUMENTARY EXPOSED THE RUSSIAN LIBERAL MILIEU

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Last April, late Alexey Navalny's Anticorruption Foundation (ACF) aired a Youtube documentary series ominously named *The Traitors*.¹ The series delves into a subject that may seem unusual today amidst the bloody war Russia is waging in the Ukraine – the history of the 1990s in Russia.

The documentary is based on widely available and well established witness accounts and testimonies of the participants of those events. If they tell something new, it is the details, some important, some less so. Those details do not go so far as to change the whole picture of events, but they simply make it more clear to those who were not there at the time and explain the behavior of some of the actors more clearly.

The Traitors was met with loud uproar and condemnation from the Russian "liberal"² milieu – opposition figures who trace their formative career development back to the period discussed in the series. The documentary's creator was subjected to a series of vicious attacks from people like Mikhail Khodorkovsky as well as scholars like Sergey Medvedev but garnered significant support from ordinary Russians. This reaction raises more questions about the Russian "liberals", however, than about the architects of the documentary.

INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL

The story which *The Traitors* tells is pretty simple and well known to scholars who deal with the modern Russian state. In the 1990s, the new Russia was constructed on the ruins of the former Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic as a political and economic structure that serves the interests not of its citizens, but of its self-appointed leadership.

Henry H. Hale, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University described it in 2010 as the "electoral patronal regime in which the most important actors are organized into a single pyramid of authority".³ Its modern iteration is colloquially referred to as a dictatorship or a fascist autocracy. Greg Yudin unambiguously calls it tyranny.⁴

Leaving aside the political transformation of the country from a nascent parliamentary democracy into a virtual monarchy, the documentary focuses its attention on several key points of Yeltsin's era. The narrator of the documentary is Maria Pevtchikh, chairman of the ACF.

The first episode tells how CPSU regional boss Boris Yeltsin rose to power on the promises of social justice, populism and straightforward public relation tricks. One of the key points of the episode is the story about his freshly elected president in 1991 commandeering for himself and his chosen circle a block of flats under construction in the high class suburb of Krylatskoe in Moscow. Fast forward to 1995, and he gives to his friendly oligarchs biggest Russian TV channel ORT and chunks of oil industry to finance it. In exchange they pledge to support him in the next elections.

The second episode deals with the loans for shares scheme, concocted by Yeltsin's government to make a few chosen entrepreneurs and government officials filthy rich in exchange for loyalty and political support. These "lucky few" (namely Michail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir Potanin, Boris Berezovsky, Roman Abramovich and Vagit Alekperov) were awarded the most lucrative Russian state assets – mostly oil production companies – for loans funded by state. Paul Klebnikov,

1 The Anti-Corruption Foundation. (2024, April 16). *Traitors*. https://youtu.be/-_vMvLpOnPQ?si=VfooaqccYKDjUVF. Text version available at: <https://predateli.navalny.com/en>

2 Here and afterwards, the term liberal is used in quotation marks as a sign of doubt about the appropriateness of its application to part of the Russian opposition movement.

3 Hale, H. (2010, January). "Eurasian Politics as Hybrid Regimes: The Case of Putin's Russia". *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1(1).

4 Kadik, L. (2023, July 25). Russisk sociolog: I begyndelsen af 1990'erne blev russerne udsat for et voldsomt traume, som de stadig lider under. *Politiken*. <https://politiken.dk/internationalt/art9448542/l-begyndelsen-af-1990%E2%80%99erne-blev-russerne-udsat-for-et-voldsomt-traume-som-de-stadig-lider-under>

American journalist and author of the bestseller *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the looting of Russia* (killed in 2004) estimated the value of assets as \$14 billion.⁵ The “loan” amount was around \$1 billion. Government members at the time, Anatoly Chubais and Alfred Koch, both living in exile now, organized the scheme.

Another issue of the second episode is 1996 presidential elections. Then these freshly baked oligarchs successfully funded Yeltsin’s reelection campaign and utilized for his benefit control of the media, mainly two major TV channels, transferred to them before.

Funding was provided in cash through the shadow campaign office which was illegal even then. The campaign was run by Yeltsin’s daughter Tatyana Dyachenko and her consort, Valentin Yumashev, together referred to as “The Family”. The funds were used for a massive cynical slander campaign that demonized Yeltsin’s opponent, Communist party leader, Gennady Zuganov.

This illegal funding amounted to \$2 billion by contemporary accounts,⁶ far surpassing the legal spending threshold, set at the equivalent of \$3 million. Anatoly Chubais, then Yeltsin’s Chief of Staff, who ran this campaign, told Paul Klebnikov that this threshold was “an insignificant sum” compared to what was spent.⁷ Yeltsin, who at the start of the campaign had an electoral rating of 3%, was successfully reelected.

The third episode of the series tells the story of the succession from Yeltsin to Putin. Then, the same oligarchs, all apart from Vladimir Gusinsky, who put his bets on another candidate, helped to choose and support the installation in the Kremlin of a designated successor and would-be tyrant, Vladimir Putin.

Maria Pevtchikh stresses that Putin was never an alien to the Yeltsin government. He was promoted by the reformers of the 1990s for his loyalty to his former patron, St. Petersburg Mayor, Anatoly Sobchak. Loyalty was his honor. He was the best candidate ready to guard the safety of “The Family”. He indeed did exactly that. His first decree as president was a grant of immunity to Yeltsin and his family.⁸

All in all, the series paints a picture of institutional betrayal. Boris Yeltsin was elected in 1991 with the stated purpose of representing his constituents’ will. Russian voters expected him to reform the corrupt and failing Soviet system, to get rid of the Communist Party functionaries and institute a democratic government. They wanted him to open up a path out of poverty through market reform.

Instead, Yeltsin surrounded himself with a small circle of family members and friends and did everything to stay in power as far as it was physically possible with his increasingly debilitating alcoholism. Using the market reforms as a coverup, this group created a closely-knit circle that got a tight grip on the government and the economy at the same time.

Jeffrey Sachs, who today advocates for “negotiations” with Putin’s regime on Ukraine, served as a consultant to the Russian government in the early 1990s. In 2000, he summed up his observations in an interview to PBS: “Russian elites were even more irresponsible in general than I could have imagined, allowing such massive corruption to take place”.⁹

The new Russian state was corrupt from its very creation, argues ACF chairwoman Maria Pevtchikh, and Mr. Putin is not a deviation from the Yeltsin system at all, but instead constitutes smooth continuity as it were.

The series ends with a call to action:

“We did not choose him (Putin) on fair elections. None of us nominated him to be a successor. We did not help him build palaces, seize power, and start wars. We simply received him as a gift from the 1990s, from the oligarchs and the family who seized power.

Fairly or not, it is our duty and the greatest responsibility to put an end to Putin’s madness that has been going on for two decades. To put an end to the oppression, lawlessness, and suffering that Putin has brought to our country. To snatch from his tight grip everything that is dear to all of us – our freedom, our people, our future. To put an end to the oppression, lawlessness, and suffering that Putin has brought to our country. And never, ever let this happen again”.

She then mentions Anatoly Chubais, in particular, and says that people like him shall not be allowed to run Russia ever again.

5 Klebnikov, P. (2000). *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the looting of Russia*. Harcourt. ISBN 0-15-100621-0. p. 223

6 Klebnikov, P. (2000). *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the looting of Russia*. Harcourt. ISBN 0-15-100621-0. p. 220

7 Klebnikov, P. (2000). *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the looting of Russia*. Harcourt. ISBN 0-15-100621-0. p. 221

8 About guarantees to the President of the Russian Federation who has ceased exercising his powers, and to members of his family: Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 1763 of December 31, 1999. <https://www.prlib.ru/item/352157>

9 Sachs, J. (2000, July 15) PBS *Commanding Heights*. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/mini/text/int_jeffreysachs.html

The documentary was inspired by Alexey Navalny. In August 2023, while in prison, he published a post titled “My Fear and Loathing”¹⁰ accusing the Yeltsin family of creating all the instruments of dictatorship which Putin subsequently put to use. “I hate Yeltsin and ‘Tanya and Valya’, Chubais, and the rest of the corrupt family who put Putin in power. I hate the swindlers, whom we used to call reformers for some reason. Now it is very clear that they did nothing but intrigue and take care of their wealth”, the post said.

Originally, the ACF intended to air the series in February, right before the presidential elections in Russia. That could have a tremendous impact on the Russian presidential elections, but the schedule was ruined by the murder of Alexey Navalny in prison and all the events that followed.

FROM KHODORKOVSKY TO PUTIN

The documentary triggered a wave of attacks on ACF and Pevtchikh herself from the “liberal” wing of the Russian opposition outside and inside Russia. Mikhail Khodorkovsky compared Pevtchikh to the “bastard Putin’s prosecutors” and swore “to do everything to never let her” have an opportunity to judge him.¹¹

Vladimir Pastukhov, a political scientist close to Mikhail Khodorkovsky, an honorary senior research associate of the University College London’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies, published an alarmist article in the Russian edition of *Novaya Gazeta*.¹² The ACF series, he wrote, “open[s] the way to power for anti-liberal, antidemocratic forces”, naming Putin’s court philosopher, Dugin and ultra-nationalist entrepreneur, Malofeev as possible beneficiaries of the series’ “emphasis”. In his Telegram post two days later, he went even further and accused ACF of creating a “public relations cover-up for [the] coming Black Repartition” orchestrated by Putin.¹³

This allusion to the term from 1880 – the name of the Russian socialist Georgy Plekhanov’s revolutionary faction – is remarkable. Pastukhov reacted to the series as the late nineteenth-century Russian landlord who fears his peasants wish to capture his lands. Pastukhov wrote at length about how Maria Pevtchikh’s series

supports Putin’s efforts of depravity, labeling her the Russian dictator’s ally.

Another notable person to use the lexicon of Czarist Russia against the ACF series was Ksenia Larina, a former journalist from Echo of Moscow. In her post on X, she called those who liked the series “rabble”,¹⁴ the term which Russian aristocrats traditionally used for peasants.

Kirill Rogov, another Russian “liberal” political pundit close to Khodorkovsky, called the series in a Facebook post a “falsification of history”,¹⁵ using a term from Kremlin’s political lexicon.

Meanwhile, Alexei Venediktov, former co-owner and host of the Moscow radio station Echo,¹⁶ and liberal politician, Lev Shlossberg – both living in Russia – labeled Pevtchikh a “Bolshevik” on an expropriation spree.¹⁷ Georgy Satarov, Yeltsin’s political advisor in 1996, who then claimed that communists were preparing a coup d’etat,¹⁸ labeled the documentary “a paroxysm of sovok (derogatory term defining everything Soviet)”.¹⁹ Some other people of the same milieu in Russia joined the chorus.

Vladimir Putin also entered the fray and on the same day that Petukhov’s article was published, and told the Russian business community in no uncertain terms that he is not going to revise the results of the privatization of the 1990s.²⁰

INSULTS AND DENIAL

Sergei Parkhomenko, a Russian “liberal” journalism guru, compared the series on Facebook to “Onan’s sin” (masturbation). Upon receiving a shower of negative comments, he deleted the post.²¹ This was the most extreme of the series of posts which Parkhomenko dedicated to the series. In the first lengthy

10 Navalny, A. (2023, August 11). My fear and loathing. <https://navalny.com/p/6652/>

11 Khodorkovsky, M. (2024). Film „Predateli“. Moe mnenie bez kupiur | Blog Khodorkovskogo. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/yvCEULANjBg?si=u2blG5SKGKXZawli&t=317>

12 Pastukhov, V. (2024, April 22). Mashina dobra i zlo vtoroy svezhnosti. *Novaya Gazeta*. <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2024/04/22/mashina-dobra-i-zlo-vtoroi-svezhesti>

13 Pastukhov, V. (2024, April 24). Telegram post: https://t.me/v_pastukhov/1066

14 Larina, K. (2024, May 4). X(ex.Twitter) post: <https://x.com/xlarina1/status/1786712031321547155>

15 Rogov, K. (2024, April 16). Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/kirill.rogov.39/posts/pfbid02ysGTEmdQ4ZzMS7X9czwWWS1FuhVW2oFzfp-DfB5SegkfFKK8STMbaKuCZrygUaitzgsI>

16 Zhivov gvozd. (2024, May 3) Zamysel Pevtchikh. V Kremle otsenili “Predateli”. *Utrenniy razvorot*. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4dVEYGldyU>

17 Grazhdanin TV. (2024, April 22) Komu nuzhny ‘Predateli’ / Shlossberg live. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/live/ERFomxngRek?si=u6l4hoUur-RoS3vE7>

18 Gazeta Kommersant. (1996, May 31). KPRF gotovit scenario ‘nелеgitimnogo perekhvata vlasti’. No. 90, p. 3. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/133637>

19 Satarov, G. (2024, April 17) Ne obnaruzheno nikakikh sledov deneg Yeltsina. *The Breakfast Show*. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/OOfOALYNxN0?si=rvoztvaPunzpzYSdw>

20 Markova, A. (2024, April 25). Putin: Peresmotra itogov privatizatsii v Rossii ne budet. *Moskovsky Komsomolets*. <https://www.mk.ru/economics/2024/04/25/putin-peresmotra-itogov-privatizatsii-v-rossii-ne-budet.html>

21 see Figure 1

Figure 1.

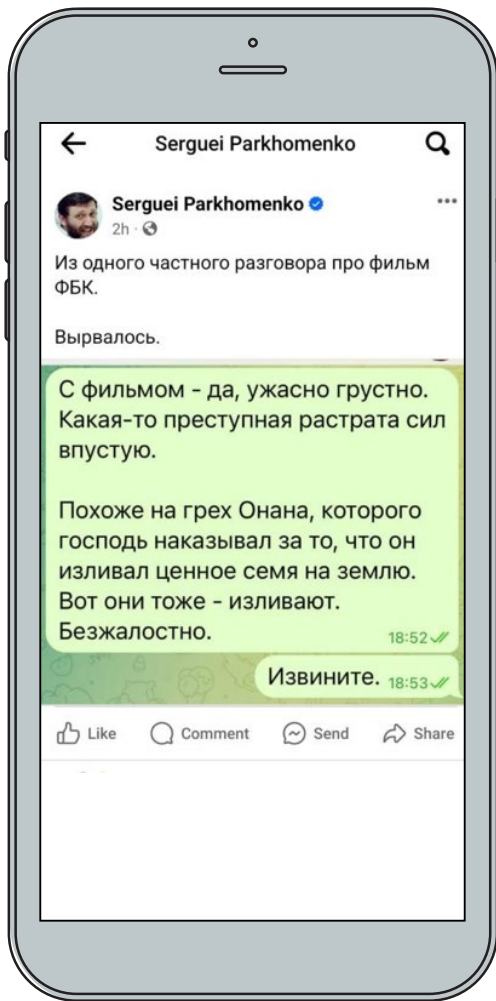
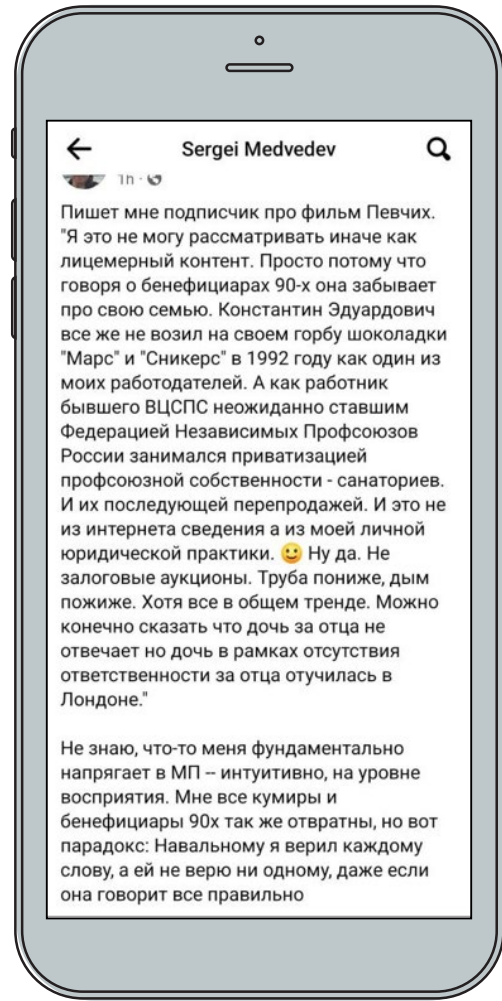


Figure 2.



critique,²² he called the series “flat” and “untimely”. Although he said that the events of the 1990s were not depicted inaccurately, they were nevertheless “squashed”, whatever that meant.

Dr. Sergei Medvedev, the prominent Radio Liberty host and a lecturer of Boris Nemtsov Educational Programme at the Faculty of Philosophy at the Karlov University in Prague, alleged that Pevchikh’s father profited from shady deals with Federation of Labour Unions real estate.²³ This post was also deleted after it turned out that this information came from a slander article from the Russian propaganda tabloid Life.ru.²⁴

Leonid Gozman, another “liberal” pundit and former associate of Yeltsin’s Chief of Staff and the architect of

the loans of shares scheme Anatoly Chubais, charged Pevchikh with repeating Putin’s propaganda.²⁵

Alfred Koch, now living in Germany, who was outed in the series for receiving a hefty \$14 million bribe for organizing loans for shares scheme in favor of its participants falsely accusing Maria Pevchikh of working for the Putin administration²⁶ and her entire generation of organizing massacres in Bucha.²⁷

Harry Kasparov, a former chess master, accused ACF of supporting Crimea annexation and failing to support Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.²⁸

22 Parkhomenko, S. (2024, April 17). Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/serguei.parkhomenko/posts/pfbid0HGw9c17bAUK-WrzY4tK6qpH7rKtceH1LJE8XSLxWYq5Li6DVn5VrwuZPww9uKKivl>
23 see Figure 2
24 Yegorov, P. (2023, November 13). Rasprodannye kurorty Kubani: Kak otets Marii Pevchikh razbogatel i zachem on sdela iz teplopunkta osobnyak. <https://life.ru/p/1585435>

25 Gozman, L. (2023, April 20). Kino na fone katastrofy. Novaya gazeta Evropa. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/04/20/kino-na-fone-katastrofy>
26 Kokh, A. (2024, April 22). Pomoshch’ SShA UZHE V PUTI. Kak izmenitsya front. Chto s FIL’MOM PEVCHIKH. Komiks o 90-kh ili provokatsiya? Yevgeniy Kiselyov
Youtube:<https://www.youtube.com/live/DyxtFEgAyhE?si=OvPgCgjahLZkcq3>
27 Kokh, A. (2024, May 4). Kokh otvetil Pevchikh! Moe pokolenie ustroilo Buchu ili vashe?! Forum svobodnoy Rossii. Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHMyFLE4oWo>
28 Kasparov, G. (2024, May 17). O slabosti SShA i Baydena i truslivykh liderakh Zapada. Kak pobedit’ Rossiyu [Interview]. VotTak TV. Youtube: <https://youtu.be/70gHsuWLwTY?si=C-NNwwjCecfo5bed&t=672>

Marat Guelman, former co-founder (together with infamous Gleb Pavlovsky) of the Effective Politics Foundation, the biggest public relations contractor of the Russian presidential administration from 1996 to 2011, and former deputy CEO of the ORT (now 1st Channel) TV channel (2002-2004) turned art dealer, wrote on X (ex. Twitter) after the second episode of the series: “there is a hope for positive effect, that after this movie, when everything will be said, ACF will sacrifice Pevtchikh and Julia Navalnaya with Michail Khodorkovskiy will create a common anti-Putin front”.²⁹

Viktor Shenderovich, a playwright and in Yeltsin’s time director of Kukly show (franchise of the British puppet TV show Spitting Image) called the series “a shank directed at political competitors”.³⁰ This is another remarkable allusion. Shenderovich compared the documentary filmmakers to the criminals trying to kill his opponent in prison with a sharpened toothbrush. Criminal parlance is ubiquitous in the language of people of his generation and social position. In the 1990s, it ultimately replaced political language in Russia.

Yevgenia Albats, a journalist famous in the 1990s, now a Davis Center for Russian & Eurasia Studies at Harvard University Non-resident Senior Fellow in her lengthy critical post³¹ on X (former Twitter), denied that Yeltsin’s taking over of the apartment building for himself was an act of corruption. She also denied the fact that the loans for shares scheme was a sham. She called Maria Pevtchkh a Marxist, using this term as derogatory.

This is just a small collection of slander attacks on the movie and its presenter Maria Pevtchikh from the Russian liberal milieu. There are many others written by much less influential persons from among the Russian “liberal” milieu. There are many others written by much less influential persons from among the Russian “liberal” milieu.

Several tropes can be discerned. The series “lacks style”, they “misinterpret” or “flatten” the events, and Pevtchikh cannot understand what happened due to the simple fact that she is too young and even because she is a woman. Accusations of Bolshevism, left-wing extremism and allusions

to the Revolution of 1917 are also widespread among critical posts and videos of the “liberal” pundits. They demonize Pevtchikh just as they demonized Zuganov in 1996.

Counterarguments are the following: Yeltsin’s era was an age of “freedom and endless opportunity”; people could start their own businesses, travel abroad, and have all the political freedoms they lost under Putin. One of the notable protagonists of this version of events is Evgenia Albats. The key point of the majority of these lamentations is foreign travel. Their authors forget that in 2012 - 21 years after the collapse of the USSR, 83% of Russians did not possess a passport³² for traveling abroad. In 2023, this number stood at around 70%.³³

None of the critics ever disproved any of the events or decisive facts, documents, or testimonies shown in the series, excluding minor details. None of them has any memory that all the political freedoms they talk about were the result of Perestroika and not some specific actions of Yeltsin personally. Laws granting freedom of enterprise, assembly, speech, associations, religion, and travel were all passed in the USSR from 1988 to 1991.

POVERTY AND HUNGER

The series received much more welcome from the Russian audience within the country. It was viewed more than 15 million times in total and created thousands of positive responses from a broad swath of people of all ages from Russia and abroad. They recall their and their parents and relatives’ tough experiences of survival from the 1990s.

Novaya Gazeta journalist, Elena Kostyuchenko, 2013 Zeit Stiftung Bucerius Free Media Award recipient, recently published a series of posts about her life of hunger and fear as a 10 year-old girl in the 1997 town of Yaroslavl.

The first one depicts how in 1997, she was given a heavy bag of barley by a stranger, how she then unwittingly dropped it into snowy slush on the street, proceeded to try and collect the scattered grains, and then got unwanted help from a stranger toting the bag to her apartment.

29 Guelman, M. (2024, April 24). X(ex.Twitter) post: <https://x.com/galerist/status/1783027924565684357>

30 Shenderovich, V. (2024, April 26). Shenderovich - o novoy serii „Predatelyei” Pevtchikh, areste zama Shoygu i ob ekspertnom sovete. Khod mysli. VotTak TV. Youtube: <https://youtu.be/9x1ieUI7704?si=t7JekeCZSlv-Yxfmc&t=759>

31 Albats, Y. (2024, May 10). X(ex.Twitter) post: <https://x.com/albats/status/1788718013362868401>

32 Interfax. (2012, April 5). Bol’she 80% rossiyan ne imeyut zagranpasporta i nikogda ne byli za granitsey. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/239530>

33 Ivolgin, A. (2023, July 20). U skolkikh rossiyan yest’ zagranpasport. Tinkoff Journal. <https://journal.tinkoff.ru/zagran-stat/>

She feared that the stranger – a big man – would assault her or break into her apartment. She feared that her mom, a school teacher with a meager salary, would scold her for her clumsiness in dealing with such a precious haul of food. The post ends with “This is my most shameful memory. But it’s not me who should be ashamed”.³⁴ Another couple of posts were about the malnutrition and destitution that her family endured.

“For me, for my family, for so many people around me, this was a time of horror. A time of habitual, non-poignant, disgusting horror which, yes, you want to forget. But I remember”, writes Kostuchenko.³⁵

Vasily Zharkov, a Russian political scholar in exile, visiting lecturer of European Humanities University in Vilnius, recounted how he was saved by an ambulance from an anaphylactic shock in Moscow in 1993. The paramedic, writes Zharkov, asked him rather casually if he had had any food in the morning. Zharkov understood that hungry faints were common.³⁶

“I watch this and remember the 1990s and my heart bleeds. I was working in a kindergarten. I waited in line to get my social rent apartment. And here I am alone with my child. No salary, no apartment... How much grief these nonhumans brought to millions of people! Let them burn in hell!!!”, comments on the third episode Svetlana Soboleva.

“A very difficult film experience. It seemed like I knew everything and guessed something. But during these three episodes, I again experienced all the horror and despair of the 90s. They stole not only the country’s money but also the youth and opportunities of millions of Russians, raising hell on earth, survival instead of life”, comments Yana Krasilnikova from Novy Urengoy.

“I watch and cry. I mourn my country, my life, full of hardship and hopelessness. I’m 58. I remember everything. I lived it all and now I lived it again while watching the film. My wage was miserable, and now the pension is humiliating. Thank you, Maria. It was very difficult to finish watching this film. It’s like a cut to the quick. But we must not forget them and forgive them nothing. Eternal memory to all those killed and

freedom to political prisoners. No war. Putin and all thieves and murderers have to be held accountable”, writes Albina Kotelnikova.

These are just a few examples of tens of thousands of comments on the series posted on YouTube. They illustrate what Greg Yudin, Visiting Research Scholar at the Princeton University Center for Human Values in a recent interview called the “severe trauma”.³⁷ In 2020, Levada Center polled Russians about their attitude toward the 1990s. 62% replied that this decade had brought more bad things into their lives than good.³⁸

PRIVILEGES, INVOLVEMENT, AND BELIEFS

Ilya Matveev, a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley (USA), cites, as the main reason for such opposing reactions, the difference in life experiences of the 1990s between ordinary Russians and the privileged “liberals”. Specifically, “many liberal-minded members of the opposition who lived through 1990s were privileged in ways they never reflected on. Muscovites, for example, had a much milder experience of the decade than the rest of the country because of Moscow’s vast resources and the paternalistic social policies of mayor Yuri Luzhkov”.³⁹

While valid, this argument hardly tells the whole story. Everyone in the “liberal” milieu who in one way or another assaulted the ACF and the series, was himself in some way involved in the events it depicted. To prove that, one need only check the biographies of the persons in question published on Wikipedia.

They were not just passive beneficiaries of the reforms. They were active participants. Khodorkovsky got his Yukos Uko’s oil conglomerate through the “loans for shares” scheme. Parkhomenko and Shenderovich took active part in Yeltsin’s reelection campaign and were substantially compensated accordingly.

Parkhomenko was an active participant in Yeltsin’s reelection campaign in 1996. He was part of the slander campaign against Zuganov as the Editor of

34 Kostyuchenko, E. (2024, May 6). Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/elena.kostyuchenko.7/posts/pfbid02TiVpa2y7asqxgUGdg2b-CoMmKWuvpsHPNcX4pa9ytEWb9DB5Au1ZbtNvPQ3NwYf8EI>

35 Kostyuchenko, E. (2024, May 7). Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/elena.kostyuchenko.7/posts/pfbid034KuC5rfMTTrChEjipyNTD6yyZ-bEsk8z4VFhbgcXdL25QkQV7x2kgDzKDos75KXUNI>

36 Zharkov, V. (2024, May 8). Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/jarkhon/posts/pfbid02Fgn6CMnffMAJ2UDp1YfYPK353xs5151VBxb-fHcDgwa9vqqZaXmtoFuLxz51rfKbxl>

37 Kadik, L. (2023, July 21). „Posledovatel’nye lyudoedy“ i chudovishchnyy fatalizm. Sotsiolog o vine rossiyskikh elit i prichinakh vtorzheniya v Ukrainu. Delfi. <https://www.delfi.lv/a/55772610>

38 Levada-Center. (2020, April 6). Vospriyatie „Devyanostykh“. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/04/06/vospriyatie-devyanostykh/>

39 Matveev, I. (2024, May). When did it all go so horribly wrong? The Russian opposition turns to introspection. Russian Elections Monitor. <https://www.russian-election-monitor.org/when-did-it-all-go-so-horribly-wrong-the-russian-opposition-turns-to-introspection.html>

“the Newsweek-style magazine Itogi”, as Paul Klebnikov put it in his book. For that, Parkhomenko was awarded by Vladimir Gusinsky a country cottage in the posh outskirts of Moscow – “dacha” in Russian – with an estimated value of at least \$600,000⁴⁰ (in 1996, the average monthly salary in Moscow was about \$187⁴¹). This gift he vehemently denied receiving ever since.

In June 1996, Parkhomenko told the Los Angeles Times about his participation in Yeltsin’s campaign: “This is not a game with equal stakes. That is why I am willing to be unfair. That is why I am willing to stir up a wild anti-Communist psychosis among the people. And, you know, this is why the Communist indignation over all of this is funny. They accuse us of something we don’t deny”.⁴² Klebnikov wrote that Parkhomenko was willing to subordinate his journalistic ethics to prevent a Communist victory. Plainly speaking, Parkhomenko told the LA Times that for him, the ends justified the means.

The anti-Putin stance of Parkhomenko and much of the “liberal” milieu comes from the 1999-2000 election cycle when their boss, oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky played against Putin and lost. His opposition to Yeltsin and Putin came not from the ideological differences, but from his lack of faith in their ability to hold power in the interests of the nouveau riche.

That’s why he and his media empire supported the political tandem of Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, former head of the Russian foreign intelligence. The plan, however, fell through. Primakov abandoned the presidential race a month before the election and became Putin’s ally. Later, Luzhkov’s party Fatherland-All Russia merged with Putin’s party, Unity, to create a political construct, United Russia. Gusinsky’s media empire was taken from him in 2000 as collateral for a \$1 billion loan he received earlier from Gazprom and two state-owned banks.

For his part, Khodorkovsky has also never had any political views different from Putin’s. In his recent interview to Yuri Dud, he said that Yeltsin was “a good czar”, and remarked that he feels no re-

grets or responsibility for financing his reelection.⁴³ He referred to his shadow staff as a “private” one and claimed that he didn’t know how this organization had spent his money. He also said that Yeltsin’s appropriation of the public property – the apartment building in Krylatskoye – did not amount to corruption since Yeltsin did not understand the concept of private property.

Furthermore, just like Yevgenya Albats before him, he said that the loans for shares scheme did not constitute embezzlement of public property because it was “transparent”. This sounds in line with Putin’s April statement that “claims against the owners of privatized assets are inappropriate. At that time, the authorities themselves controlled this process”.⁴⁴

This interview raised a lot of questions for Khodorkovsky. Back in 2005, while in prison where he was thrown by Putin, he condemned the loans for shares scheme and Yeltsin’s elections in 1996.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the ACF series repeats his position at the time almost verbatim. So why is the former oligarch’s position now completely different? Was his article from 2005 just an exercise in populism?

A day before his interview, Khodorkovsky gave a summary of his views on the media freedom in a Facebook post⁴⁶ discussing Parkhomenko’s dacha. For him, this outrageous gift was not a sign of media corruption, but simply a fair pay for journalistic services.

“Between us – the publisher always has firm leverage over the editor-in-chief, and the editor-in-chief has a simple dismissal over almost any journalist, except for rare stars”, continued Khodorkovsky – “In 5 years, AI will leave out of work those who only know how to rephrase other people’s thoughts without exclusive information or amazing creativity”.

This is what you can hear from any editor of Kremlin-controlled media in Russia today – “He who pays the piper calls the tune”. Propaganda stars are awarded with lavish payments whilst others are a replaceable resource.

40 Zharkov, S. (2001, August 14). Po sosedstvu s Gusinskim. Vedomosti. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2001/08/14/po-sosedstvu-s-gusinskim>

41 Rosstat. (2003). Srednemesyachnaya nominal’naya nachislennaya zarabotnaya plata rabotayushchikh v ekonomike. https://rosstat.gov.ru/bgd/regl/B03_14/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d010/010520r.htm

42 Shogren, E. (1996, June 25). Backing Yeltsin is a matter of survival to Russian media. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-06-25-mn-18230-story.html>

43 Dud’, Yu. (2024, May 22). Khodorkovsky – devyanostye i „Predateli”. vDud’. Youtube: <https://youtu.be/xVah87LK504?si=LoEOxd7ePNkRGqjC>

44 Markova, A. (2024, April 25). Putin: Peresmotra itogov privatizatsii v Rossii ne budet. Moskovsky Komsomolets. <https://www.mk.ru/economics/2024/04/25/putin-peresmotra-itogov-privatizacii-v-rossii-ne-budet.html>

45 Khodorkovsky, M. (2005, August 1). Levyy povorot Mikhaila Khodorkovskogo. Lenta.ru. <https://lenta.ru/articles/2005/08/01/khodorkovsky/>

46 Khodorkovsky, M. (2024, May 21). Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/MBK313373/posts/pfbid02QYbmYZZNS9bpBCN5y6R-X2eFrRbTsCviBn4f5r4VWtzvctnKocG4NjAMdftrj>

Khodorkovsky, however, controls a Youtube channel, KhodorkovskyLIFE,⁴⁷ that presents itself as a champion of Russian democracy, as well as several Telegram channels that work in the field of counter-propaganda. Khodorkovsky styles himself on the X social network as “a leader of the Russian opposition, reformer”.⁴⁸

UNSPOKEN TABOO

Meanwhile, Navalny followers found an ideal political force application point within Russian society. There is no Russian family that was not affected by the 1990s. While Yeltsin and his cronies built themselves up a new capitalist system, people’s lives collapsed, factories closed, social infrastructure crumbled and crime became rampant. Speaking in monetary terms, the real average wage in Russia rebounded to the level of 1991 more than a decade later – in 2006. Andrey Illarionov, a Russian ultra-liberal economist once arrived at a calculation that in the first 4 years of reforms, Russia suffered cumulative inflation of 11718.2%.⁴⁹

In the 1990s, Russians lived through three catastrophes – economic, social, and political. Market reforms brought profound social disparity, as 1% of the Russian population now controls 47% of its national wealth.⁵⁰

Social structures failed, education and healthcare standards declined, and law enforcement and courts fell under the control of the authorities and the rich. Results of the 2002 National Census registered a population decline of 1.8 million since 1989 – the first natural population decline in Russian history since the Second World War.⁵¹ In the central Russian regions the population declined by 5%, and in the Far East region of Chukotka, by a staggering 28%. The results of that census were so appalling that they were later altered to appear less bleak.

Political changes including the dissolution of the Supreme Council by force in 1993 and the approval of the new Constitution that made the President a vir-

tual monarch ultimately stripped the nation of political representation. Instead of the social state, a neoliberal one was installed.

This trauma of the 1990s was shrewdly played by Putin. He masterfully positioned himself as the protector of the average Russians from the unashamed recklessness of “the reformers” who were assisted by the conniving “West”.

Putin’s anti-liberal rhetoric was accompanied by paternalistic policies. The government raised miserable pensions and state benefits to be enough for the recipients to stay just above the poverty line. Salaries in the public sector were also raised. Petty corruption was largely defeated. Street crime rampant in the 1990s went down. Putin was posing as a guarantor of stability against the tumult of the Yeltsin’s era.

Still, throughout all his reign, Putin safeguarded the beneficiaries of the 1990s on the condition that they wouldn’t question his authority. Indeed, to this day, only two of them have suffered – Michail Khodorkovsky and Boris Berezovsky. Everyone else is still there. Putin never attacked Yeltsin or his family verbally or in any other way.

Meanwhile, Ms. Dyachenko and Mr. Umashev got married, acquired Austrian citizenship,⁵² and spent their leisure time in a \$15 million villa on the posh Caribbean island of St. Barth.⁵³ Umashev served as Vladimir Putin’s advisor till May 2022.⁵⁴ He is a member of the board of directors and Tatyana Dyachenko sits on the Board of Trustees of the huge Yeltsin Center in Yekaterinburg. This museum, along with an electronic library, and a business center dedicated to the memory of Putin’s benefactor, served for many years as a Mecca for Russian liberals in their nostalgia for the 1990s.

All the while, Anatoly Chubais, the architect of the loans for shares scheme, manager of Yeltsin’s reelection campaign and former national electricity czar and failed chief innovator, quietly left Russia in March 2022, leaving his position as Putin’s Special Representative for Relations with International Organizations to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals.

47 Khodorkovsky LIVE. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@khodorkovskylive>

48 Khodorkovsky, M. Twitter: https://x.com/khodorkovsky_en

49 Illarionov, A. (2010, March 11). Chem Gaidar otlichaetsya ot Bal’tse-rovicha, Klaus, Laara, etc.? LiveJournal. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230918121413/https://aillarionov.livejournal.com/179370.html>

50 World Inequality Database. Income inequality, Russian Federation, 1905-2021. <https://wid.world/country/russian-federation/>

51 Vserossiyskaya perepis’ naseleniya 2002 goda. <http://www.perepis2002.ru/content.html?id=11&docid=10715289081460>

52 Der Spiegel. (2013, April 25). Jelzin-Tochter ist Österreicherin. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/jelzin-tochter-hat-oesterreichische-staatsbuergerschaft-erhalten-a-896512.html>

53 Romanovsky, R. (2021, April 7). Chudesnaya villa na ostrove millionerov. Vazhnyye Istorii. <https://stories.media/investigations/2021/04/07/chudesnaya-villa-na-ostrove-millionerov/>

54 Vedomosti. (2022, May 30). Yumashev ushel s dolzhnosti sovetnika prezidenta Rossii. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2022/05/30/924337-yumashev-ushel-s-dolzhnosti-sovetnika>

The liberal milieu also juxtaposed Yeltsin's era to Putin's reign claiming that it had been a period of real democracy. Putin, they explained, came from the dark inner circles of the KGB and usurped power from the ailing Yeltsin.

Both were against the idea that the new Russian state was constructed to serve the interests of the privileged elite. In the situation of such political hypocrisy coupled with repression and pressure put by government censorship, any substantial public discussion about the foundations of the Russian state was simply impossible. Liberals would label the one who would dare to talk about it "Putinist" and "Soviet revanchist", and Kremlin would label this person a Western agent attempting to subvert Putin's stability and will put him in prison.

This false dichotomy served to the benefit of both parties. The thorough discussion could blow off the cover-up of Putin as the protector of average people against "the rampaging reformers" of Yeltsin's era and at the same time the legitimacy of the liberal milieu as an opposition movement.

From the average voter's perspective, the difference between Putin and the liberals was that Putin offered fewer freedoms with more social benefits, and the liberals offered a return to the past with ephemeral freedoms and stark poverty.

To this should be added the Russian "liberal" cult of Augusto Pinochet, which persists to this day⁵⁵ in the mind of Leonid Gozman at least. It is no wonder that liberal parties and politicians entertained very little popular support in Russia. They had no vision for the future whatsoever, and they still have none today.

In the years following Putin's succession, Russian "liberals" even invented an explanation for the low popularity of their appeal. This is called "inability to embrace freedom". In 2015 Sergey Medvedev wrote: "Right now, I think it's about nearly 500 years of enslavement of the population by the Moscow khanate, the internal colonization of the country by the state, the habit of relying on state handouts, laziness, drunkenness, and the unwillingness and inability to work".⁵⁶

The essentialist cliché of "inherent slave nature of the Russians" can be traced through a multitude of articles, posts and interviews of many representatives of the "liberal" milieu. Since the start of the Russian invasion into Ukraine, it had become more and more persistent in their rhetoric. A lot of it is distributed and amplified by U.S.-funded media, Radio Svoboda and its subsidiaries and affiliations. The "slave nature of the Russians" is now a staple of Ukrainian propaganda.

Still, the discussion about the 1990s went on, however in closed intellectual circles. In 2015, Russian journalist, Michail Zygar, interviewed Alexey Navalny and was physically taken aback by his idea of making beneficiaries of the loans for shares scheme pay a compensation tax.⁵⁷

Later, Zygar published two nonfiction books on the issue. One, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin*⁵⁸ was published in 2016, selling a meager 12,000 copies. The second «Все свободны: история о том, как в 1996 году в России закончились выборы»⁵⁹ (Everyone may go: story about how in 1996 free elections in Russia were done with) came out in 2021, selling 20,000 copies. Both went on to become bestsellers.

Yet even after the invasion of Ukraine, the myth of the "Golden Age" of the 1990s persisted. When in August 2023, Alexey Navalny published his "My Fear and Loathing" post, liberal pundits immediately questioned his authorship, mocked him, and accused him of "dividing" the opposition.⁶⁰

ARE RUSSIAN "LIBERALS" LIBERAL.

Today, the genie is out of the bottle. Maria Pevtchikh said out loud what every Russian knew, but was afraid to speak up about – Putin's Russia is a continuation of Yeltsin's one. It is not enough just to replace him with some other "benevolent" dictator. This state was built on corruption and was supposed to be overhauled and rebuilt on the basis of social justice and peace.

55 Collignon P. (2023, April 15) Kritiker på flugt fra Putin: »Det er ligesom med Hitler. Vi får kun fred med en total kapitulation« Berlingske <https://www.berlingske.dk/debat/interview/kritiker-paa-flugt-fra-putin-det-er-ligesom-med-hitler-vi-faar-kun>

56 Medvedev, S. (2015, September 20). Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/sergei.medvedev3/posts/pfbid0ACd79PqzSyFLZAAC-TQYL2XrctzEuKbjp3mgkrYVHGLKVaY458oqHDhps5ATzrYfrl>

57 Zygar. (2024, March 8). Naval'nyy v 2015 godu: o svoey motivatsii, strakhakh, riskakh, i o tom, pochemu protesty ne bespolezny. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/CUKT1-wnHDS?si=qmUJFrUa4HZHJ4o>

58 Zygar, M. (2016). *All the Kremlin's men: Inside the court of Vladimir Putin*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs. ISBN 9781610397407

59 Zygar, M. (2016). *Vsya kremlëvskaya rat': Kratkaya istoriya sovremennoy Rossii*. Moskva: Intellektual'naya literatura, ISBN 9785961440188

60 Rudina, A. (2023, August 14). „Pismo otchayaniya“. Sotsseti obsuzhdayut tekst Naval'nogo ob upushchennom shanse. Radio Svoboda. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/pisjmo-otchayaniya-sotsseti-obsuzhdayut-tekst-navaljnogo-ob-upushchennom-shanse/32546180.html>

In response, she was accused of being a Bolshevik by the people who call themselves the opposition. The young Russian audience is stunned with the viciousness of attacks on the “liberal” milieu on ACF and their shameless denial of facts.

Vasily Zharkov compared⁶¹ the documentary to the famous 20th Congress of the CPSU that condemned the crimes of Stalinism. The difference for him is that today, the revelation taking place is public.

He also simlizes⁶² the rhetoric of Russian Stalinist Nina Andreeva’s famous letter “I Cannot Forsake My Principles”⁶³ in which she tried to whitewash Stalin’s crimes with the false Winston Churchill’s quote (“Stalin took Russia with a plow, but left it with atomic bomb”) and said that his repressions “are being blown out of proportion”. Zharkov point out that the same rhetorical trick is used by the Russian “liberals” who insist that, notwithstanding all the “mistakes” Yeltsin made, he ultimately left behind a market economy and stores full of merchandise.

Talking about comparisons between Stalinism and the reforms of the 1990s, one should bear in mind that the reformers – whilst calling themselves “democrats” – never actually held any democratic views. In 1990, Anatoly Chubais penned the policy paper called “By the Tough Course”.⁶⁴ This amazing document, openly published that time, outlines an unmistakably repressive approach to society:

“It is very important for the government to adopt the right tone towards society: on the one hand, a readiness for dialogue, on the other hand, no apologies or hesitation. It is necessary to foresee the tightening of measures against those forces that encroach on the core framework of the reform measures, such as the dissolution of official trade unions if they oppose government measures, as well as the creation of parallel trade unions... Measures of direct suppression against representatives who do not actually enjoy the support of the population [sic - V.G.]⁶⁵ are absolutely necessary... On the other hand, it is necessary to maintain political outlets - pluralism and transparency in everything that does not concern political reform...

The main sociopolitical aspect of the reform is for the political leadership of the country and the government to maintain control over the situation in the country and over the course of the reform itself...”.

So even before the reforms began, Chubais planned to force them on the nation instead of gaining citizens consent and approval as a true democrat would do. Later on, his idea was followed by Yeltsin to the letter. Main acts of reforms were forced by means of his presidential decrees. The protesting parliament was forcefully dissolved in 1993. Now Chubais opened a center for Russian Studies at Tel Aviv University. This center will “explore possible scenarios of Russia’s future development”.⁶⁶

Thus it seems reasonable to put several questions for the Russian opposition milieu.

First: is it really liberal or democratic?

Second: how much support its ideas could garner in Russian society today?

This January, the independent pollster, Chronicles, recorded 82% support for the candidate who would end the war in Ukraine and 83% for the one that would tackle the issue of social justice.⁶⁷

Recently, Maxim Katz, a young member of liberal milieu and a critic of ACF documentary, polled his supporters on who they would prefer today if Yeltsin, Putin, Medvedev and Gorbachev were competing in the elections. Gorbachev, a left-wing champion of social justice, won decisively with 54.3%.

Third: are they ready to discuss the future of the country with Russian society? Leonid Volkov, one of the members of ACF staff, recently offered⁶⁸ exactly this – open public discussion on the future of Russian state. This opportunity hasn’t been offered to Russian citizenry ever since Perestroika.

Forth and fifth: what social strata, class or group does this milieu represent? How it positions itself relative to its fellow Russians if its members talk about them in terms of “inherent slave nature” and “inability to embrace freedom”?

61 Zharkov, V. (2024, June 14). Dvadtsatyy s’yezd v emigratsii. The Moscow Times. <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2024/06/14/dvadtsatii-sezd-v-emigratsii-a134023>

62 Zharkov, V. Ibid.

63 Andreyeva, N. (1988, March 13). Ne mogu postupat’sya printsipami. Sovetskaya Rossiya, p. 2 <http://revolucia.ru/nmppr.htm>

64 Zhestkim kursom... Analiticheskaya zapiska Leningradskoy assotsiatsii sotsial’no-ekonomicheskikh nauk, Vek XX i mir, № 6, p.15–19.

65 Quoted in Gelman, V. (2019). „Liberally” versus „demokraty”: ideynye traektorii postsovetsoy transformatsii v Rossii. Preprint M-72/19. St. Petersburg: European University Press.

66 Boltianskaya, N. (2024, May 7). Chem zaymetsya Tsentr Chubaisa v Tel-Avive. Detali. <https://detaly.co.il/chem-zajmetsya-tsentr-chubajsa-v-tel-avive/>

67 Chronicles 12. The latest Chronicles survey 2 years of war and citizens’ expectations from the “special electoral operation”. <https://www.chronicles.report/>

68 Leonid Volkov. (2024, May 27). Chto nam nado delat’ dal’she? YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ch_JW7xMws

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lev Kadik, Foreign affairs correspondent of Delfi. lv (Latvia). Writes for the Danish daily Politiken. Former political editor of the Russian business daily Kommersant (2019-2021). BA in History and Archives (1999, Russian State University for the Humanities).

Email: lev.kadik@delfi.lv

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ABSTRACTS



The Russian reformers of the 1990s never held any ostensibly democratic views. In 1990, Anatoly Chubais published a policy paper called "By the Tough Course". This amazing document outlines an unmistakably repressive approach to society: "It is very important for the government to adopt the right tone towards society: on the one hand, a readiness for dialogue, on the other hand, no apologies or hesitation. It is necessary to foresee the tightening of measures against those forces that encroach on the core framework of the reform measures...Measures of direct suppression against representatives who do not actually enjoy the support of the population are absolutely necessary...".



From the average voter's perspective, the difference between Putin and "the liberal opposition" was that Putin offered fewer freedoms with more social benefits, whilst the liberals were offering a return to the past with ephemeral freedoms and abject poverty. It is no wonder that liberal politicians thus enjoyed very little popular support in Russia. In the years following Putin's succession, Russian "liberals" invented an essentialist explanation for their low popularity. In 2015, Sergey Medvedev wrote: "Right now, I think it's about nearly 500 years of enslavement of the population by the Moscow khanate... laziness, drunkenness, and the unwillingness and inability to work".



When examining the Russian "liberal" milieu today, we arrive at several quite reasonable questions. Is it really liberal and democratic? How much support can this milieu's ideas garner in Russian society today? Are "liberals" ready to enter into a discussion with Russian society on the future of the country? What social strata does this milieu represent if their members talk to their own nation in terms of an "inherent slave nature" and "inability to embrace freedom"? Latest polls show that for more than 80% of Russians, the end of war and the reinstatement of social justice are the most pressing issues.