



# Priamaia liniia s Vladimirom Putinym

Performing Democracy Putin-Style

*Catherine A. Schuler*

Vladimir Putin, if he were American, would be a successful American politician. He has a quality—this has nothing to do with politics—they change a room, they have a certain magnetism. He has “IT,” whatever “IT” is. He has “IT.”

—Larry King (RT 2011)

A forum entitled “The Kremlin’s Theatre of the Absurd” appeared in December 2011 on *LitCetera*, an internet site maintained by Russian émigrés living in Germany (Shneiderov 2011). Titled “Putin’s Political Theatre,” the longest post (four single-spaced pages) uses the language of theatre and performance ironically in order to describe cyclical regime change in Russia and to name Vladimir Putin’s presidency as what it seems to be to critics in Russia and the West: a long-running variety show of loosely related production numbers designed to conceal grubby backstage operations in the Kremlin.

A staple of Russian political history from Petr I through Joseph Stalin, the theatrical metaphor has been revived under Putin—an actor-politician with rare (and largely unforeseen) gifts for stagecraft and statecraft. The most brazen and amusing examples of Putinesque theatricality are universally notorious: bare-chested mountain man, virile vampire, trendy dude, custodian of endangered species, environmentalist, nightclub crooner, Formula 1 race car driver, hockey star, surrogate parent of orphaned Siberian cranes, and more recently, fisherman extraordinaire. Photographic evidence indicates that, far from a “man without a face” (Gessen 2012), Putin is a man with a surfeit of faces: in point of fact, an actor. Pumped up on performance enhancing endorphins,<sup>2</sup> this human bricolage of imperial, Soviet, post-Soviet, post-socialist, and postmodern identities takes focus like a seasoned professional.

Critics contend that PR-driven theatricality emerged early in Putin’s first term, but the most intriguing and amusing self-reinventions appeared rather suddenly in spring 2008, when dramatic changes in the quality, kind, and scale of fabulousness began to mark his public appearances. Many of these changes can be traced to the US and European public relations firms hired by the Kremlin to brand Russia in order to better sell her at home and abroad.<sup>3</sup> Absurd they may be, but until at least 2010, the new genres of PR spectacle not only amused international observers, but more importantly they boosted Putin’s domestic ratings. The departure from Soviet image-making in form, content, and apparent intention is striking. Indeed, despite occasional allusions to Soviet-era parades and mass ritual, Putinesque theatricality feels so antithetical to the values and principles promulgated—if not always practiced—over 74 years by the Soviets that it raises a question simultaneously simple and complex: Why?

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1. Larry King was interviewed on RT, Russia’s state-controlled, English-language television station.

2. From an interview with Gleb Pavolovskii, once a close Putin advisor. Pavolovskii has become quite critical of his former boss. In a conversation with Elena Masuk in *Novaya gazeta* (one of the few oppositional newspapers left in Russia), Pavlovskii suggests that Putin’s machismo PR stunts give him an endorphin rush. He adds rather comically that at 60, men have to get all of the rushes they can (Masuk 2012).

3. See, among others, “Nezavisimaia gazeta: Rossiui sdelauiut brendom” (*Nezavisimaia gazeta* 2008). The US firm is Ketchum, a subsidiary of the global advertising and marketing Omnicom Group.

Figure 1. (facing page) *Reimagining presidential masculinity: Public relations photo shoot on the Khemchik River in the Tuva Republic. 15 August 2007 RIA Novosti. (Photo © RIA Novosti/The Image Works)*

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In 2008, two noteworthy and surely related events marked Putin's abrupt transition from statescraft to stagecraft: Dmitrii Medvedev's ascension to the presidency and Putin's meticulously recorded, half-naked adventures in the Russian wilderness. Paradoxically, in the wake of the election, Putin's advisors launched a PR initiative that would draw attention away from the articulate, comely new president toward his purportedly less powerful prime minister. The campaign rested on a four-pronged strategy to rebrand Russia by reimagining Putin, Medvedev, Gazprom, and the Russian fütbol team as the new face of post-Soviet Russia<sup>4</sup> and its effect was to transform the rather homely Putin into a macho, sexy, international celebrity.<sup>5</sup> An onslaught of photo-ops began in the spring of 2008 (several months before Medvedev took the oath of office): Putin subduing a Siberian tiger, Putin flexing his prime ministerial pectorals while fishing, riding, and hunting in the great Russian wilderness, and a shirtless Putin on the cover of *Secrets of the Stars* (*Tainy zvezd*) promising to "tell all" to admiring fans. In the post-election regime of presidential image-making, Medvedev showed poorly against Putin, whose display of hypermasculinity set off his youthful colleague's rather effete bearing.<sup>6</sup> In the game of image making, neither Gazprom nor the fütbol team proved any more viable than Medvedev. No wonder, then, that among the original PR templates only Putin prospered.

My purpose here is not to mock Putinesque political theatre; Western journalists have, after all, done that for me. Moreover, Putin borrows shamelessly from the West, thus his explicitly theatrical public relations stunts are neither more nor less absurd than our own. Rather than mock, I want to suggest how this seemingly ego-driven, implicitly authoritarian one-man show can be understood in both form and content as a "performance of democracy." An absurd project in light of recent developments in the Russian Federation? I think not; but, in order to allay the inevitable objections, I offer two disclaimers: democracy as it is understood in the United States and much of Europe does not figure here,<sup>7</sup> nor does "performing democracy" as a sort of neo-Boalian, grassroots, community-based theatre practice intended to raise a disenfranchised citizenry's consciousness in the interests of social change. Here, I consider the immediate post-Soviet period under Boris Yeltsin as a kind of botched performance of US-style presidential democracy in which performative gestures and language failed to create the effects they named. I also consider Putin's ongoing reign as a theatricalization of the Russian political system.

Russian democracy has evolved in both theory and practice since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Although still hotly contested, democracy as the West (and Putin's domestic critics) hoped to see it failed in the 1990s, to be replaced in the 2000s by Putin's "sovereign democracy"

4. See *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (2008). The authors of the new branding campaign argue that classical Russian literature, art, and music are no longer effective selling points. Apparently, the government (*vlast'*), especially its highest officials (Putin and Medvedev), the giant natural gas company Gazprom, and the Russian fütbol team now best represent Russia.

5. Although the second Chechen war (launched in 1999) established Putin's "strongman" image, until 2008 the Kremlin's PR team represented him as a sober, reliable father/husband of the Motherland (*rodina*). Putin's discipline and strength manifested publicly not in testosterone-charged theatrical stunts, but in his genuine judo expertise.

6. Early in his presidency, Medvedev was often photographed performing or observing others perform manly actions, but Putin's brand of mighty masculinity never fit him comfortably. Amusing examples of Medvedev's efforts to appear more masculine abound. For example, Medvedev, a cat lover by nature, had to acquire dogs in order to enhance his image, and in a marvelous moment of misjudgment, he released a PR video extolling the virtues of badminton. In a nation allegedly hungering for potent masculinity, is it any wonder that his popularity soon plunged? On Medvedev and dogs, see *Tainy zvezd* (2009:18–19); on the badminton video, see Tom Parfitt (2011).

7. See Putin (2012). Excerpts from the article were reprinted on the Russian Federation's website. Ann Applebaum's *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956* (2013) offers an excellent guide to the many postwar variations of Soviet democracy.

and “managed democracy.” In 2011, in an article published in *Kommersant*, Putin wrote: “In my view, democracy consists in the fundamental right of the people to choose its government, and also in the possibility to influence the government and the process by which it makes decisions” (Putin 2012). He often reasserts this position without a trace of irony. As recently as September 2013, he declared that, “Russia [...] is on the path to democracy” (Levada Center 2013a). Of course, democracy, as both concept and practice, was extraordinarily malleable throughout the Soviet period and remains so today.

The efforts of Putin’s PR team to fashion him as a show-business president reveal the extent to which the Kremlin has been theatricalized—a project in which the president and his consultants enjoy clear advantages. The state controls Russian-language television, which still trumps the internet by tens of percentage points (see Mickiewicz 2008; Roxburgh 2012; Zakharov 2013)<sup>8</sup>; the Kremlin now houses a PR office; and former Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov, who studied theatrical direction for three years before turning to economics, politics, and public relations, is one of Putin’s closest advisors. Finally, whether his stage sense is learned or innate, Putin has a Reaganesque knack for sincerity of tone and gesture.

Tempting though they are, Putin’s transparently theatrical stunts are not focal here. My questions engage a more subdued, equivocally earnest, and unaffectedly affected performance of democracy: an annual television production variously called *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin* (*Priamaia liniia s Vladimirovom Putinym*, 2001–2007 & 2013) or *Conversation with Vladimir Putin* (*Razgovor s Vladimirovom Putinym*, 2008–2011). Questions central to my argument include: What sorts of image-making happen in these productions and how have producers’ strategies changed since 2001? How do the productions employ action, dramatic form, and believable character, as well as elements of design in order to achieve the desired effect/affect on spectators? What do these performances reveal and conceal? Taking into account both form and content, how can these television shows be understood as performances of democracy? I argue that although *Direct Line* and *Conversation* broadcasts have the look of a high-tech town hall meeting, they are naught but simulacra. Neither staged debates nor even dialogues, each *Direct Line* or *Conversation* is a spectacular one-person show designed to create the illusion of a democratic relationship between Putin and the Russian people.

Putin’s performance of democracy cannot be understood apart from political developments in Putin’s Russia since approximately 2000. For that reason, I begin with two concepts—“managed democracy” and “sovereign democracy”—used by supporters and critics alike to describe current theories and practices of democracy in post-Soviet Russia. Two productions of the *Direct Line* (2001 and 2013) and one *Conversation* (2011) help to illuminate Putin’s tactical use of media to perform these genres of democracy, and data from the Levada Center, an independent, nongovernmental polling and sociological research organization, and the Center for Strategic Development (*Tsentr strategicheskikh razrabotok*; CSD), a noncommercial, governmental research organization, help characterize and make sense of the audience for Putin’s distinctive version of “performing democracy.”

## Political Theatre and Democratic Formations

Russian and Soviet leaders have long understood the performative and transformative power of political theatre: Petr I, who endeavored to drag Russians into European modernity, modeled practices that have maintained throughout imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras. Following Petr’s example, a parade of tsars and party leaders have cast themselves as the leading actors in highly theatricalized performances of authoritarian monocracy. While Putin’s self-stylizations

8. Television reigns supreme: 88 percent of Russians turn to television as their main source of news, while only 21 percent use the internet. More than half of Russians believe what they see and hear on television (Zakharov 2013).

bear superficial resemblance to Western celebrity politicians like Silvio Berlusconi, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, the influence of imperial models and party bosses have, in truth, shaped his public persona and political tactics. A crucial difference between Putin and his authoritarian prototypes, however, lies in Putin's post-Soviet imperative to persuade audiences at home and abroad that he is at heart a democrat and that democratic principles guide his policy decisions. The challenge for Putin scholars and watchers alike is to discover precisely what he means by democracy.

That democracy is guaranteed by the Russian Federation's constitution, there is no doubt,<sup>9</sup> but over the course of 14 (and counting) years, democracy in Putin's Russia has been malleable in both theory and practice. The opacity of constitutional democracy in theory and its implementation in practice surely accounts for the vast literature on Russian democracy that has accrued since 2000. The two concepts of democracy—both of which depart dramatically from the Western-style democracy promised by Boris Yeltsin—inform Putin's theory and practice of democratic governance. "Managed democracy" emerged early in the regime, christened as such by his advisors (Markov 2004); "sovereign democracy" was put forth in 2006 by Vladislav Surkov (*Kommersant* 2006).

A precise definition of "managed democracy," the meaning of which is contingent on the speaker's political (and often geographical) location, is elusive. Needless to say, Putin's lieutenants see it as both desirable and necessary, while critics understand it as authoritarianism in sheep's clothing. In 2004, Sergei Markov, a Kremlin insider and spokesperson for managed democracy, articulated the Kremlin's position:<sup>10</sup>

In a society just emerging from communism, and where the market is still taking shape, wise rulers sometimes have to violate democratic principles from time to time in the name of progress [...] This notion of "correcting" the mistakes of democracy occasioned by the "improper understanding" of progressive reforms held by the majority of voters is basically what is meant by the term "managed democracy." Managed democracy will gradually become normal democracy as the economy grows, the standard of living improves, and the private sector develops.

"Vladimir Putin," Markov continued, "regards democracy as necessary to the development of the country. His attitude [...] is not ideological but instrumental—i.e., where it works we will use it and where it does not, we will try something else (Markov 2004). Quoting from an interview with Markov, the World Socialist Website confirmed the authoritarianism implicit in his statement:

Q. How does this "managed democracy" function?

A. The idea is simple. "Managed democracy" is a system, under which those problems that it is possible to solve democratically are solved by democratic means. And those problems that are not susceptible to democratic solutions are solved by other means.

9. The Constitution of the Russian Federation opens with these lines: "We, the multinational people of the Russian Federation, united by a common fate on our land, establishing human rights and freedoms, civic peace and accord, preserving the historically established state unity, proceeding from the universally recognized principles of equality and self-determination of peoples, revering the memory of ancestors who have conveyed to us the love for the Fatherland, belief in the good and justice, reviving the sovereign statehood of Russia and asserting the firmness of its democratic basic (*sic*), striving to ensure the well-being and prosperity of Russia, proceeding from the responsibility for our Fatherland before the present and future generations, recognizing ourselves as part of the world community, adopt the CONSTITUTION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION" (Constitution.ru [1993] 2001).

10. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

Q. Which other means?

A. Authoritarian.

Q. And who decides, when to apply democratic means, and when authoritarian?

A. The President and his administration decide that. (Volkov 2003)

Arguing that “managed democracy controls society while providing the appearance of democracy,” Nikolai Petrov and Michael McFaul of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace put a somewhat different spin on Markov’s interpretation. Managed democracy has, they assert, four main characteristics:

1. A strong presidency and weak institutions
2. State control of the media
3. Control over elections [which] allows elites to legitimize their decisions
4. Visible short-term effectiveness and long-term inefficiency. (Petrov and Gibson 2005)

If the principles of managed democracy are simple, those of sovereign democracy are even less complicated. In 2006, just before a meeting of the G8 in St. Petersburg, Surkov, the architect of sovereign democracy, characterized it not as something new that would replace managed democracy, but rather as a standard democratic practice implemented long ago in the West. The intention of sovereign democracy was simply to say to the leaders of Western democracies: “butt out of Russia’s internal affairs.” In this sense, Surkov asserted, Russian sovereign democracy does not depart in any significant way from generally accepted European democratic principles (*Kommersant* 2006).

The practice of managed democracy causes Putin’s critics to ask whether elections in Russia are falsified or otherwise engineered in his favor. In other words, whether they are unequivocally “real.” The answer is yes and no. Although Putin and the Duma made at least three significant changes to the Russian constitution,<sup>11</sup> they claim to adhere to the election policies and procedures established in 1993 by that document. Moreover, Russians do in fact go to polling stations to cast votes for the president and members of the Duma. In that sense, elections are “real.” Managed democracy, however, not only discourages pluralism, but also inhibits the development of competitive political parties. Thus elections happen, but not in the context of a level playing field.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, then, in 2012, many Russians claimed to have voted for Putin simply for lack of a viable alternative (see Bode 2012; and CSD 2012b).<sup>13</sup>

Today, democratic rhetoric still features prominently in Putin’s public performances, but over the course of his time in office it has changed in frequency and kind. From early claims of popular electoral consent, his approach to statecraft has become obviously authoritarian and is consistent with a larger pattern in both imperial and Soviet periods to organize social life and political objectives around the personality of a strong leader. His investment in economic revitalization and Westernization, however, bears a stronger resemblance to the Romanovs who,

11. Wishing to advance centralization of power in the Kremlin, in 2004, Putin began to appoint governors rather than allow free elections for the posts. He also changed Duma elections so that deputies were elected to the council assemblies from party lists. In 2006, he took a further step toward one-party rule by requiring new political parties to have at least 50,000 members before they could appear on the ballot. In 2007, only 15 registered parties remained (Dzhanpoladova 2014).

12. Michael McFaul and Nikolai Petrov note that Putin enjoyed tremendous popularity before the 2003 and 2004 elections. Not vote rigging, but genuine approval carried Putin and United Russia to their electoral triumphs (2004:23).

13. Post-election surveys by both the Levada Center and the Center for Strategic Development confirm this (see CSD 2012b).

like Putin, played to international and domestic audiences, crafting different performances for each. The need to satisfy the competing expectations and interests of Western neoliberal democrats, homegrown democrats, post-Soviet communists, and Russian nationalists has helped to create tremendous ambiguity around Putin's political identity and intentions. Perhaps nothing has been more difficult than to create and sustain the image of democratic Russia, while employing increasingly authoritarian tactics. Putin's apparent desire to persuade and reassure all of his audiences of his virtuous intentions toward them requires quite a balancing act and considerable dissimulation. Indeed, pretense lies at the very heart of the postmodern Kremlin. No wonder then that the turn of the millennium witnessed the birth of a post-Soviet actor-politician.

### The Medium and the *Mediageroi*

Strictly speaking, politics and the actor-politician, understood as effects of democracy, do not figure in imperial Russian or Soviet history. Although politicking surely happened internally among the nobility and in the Party, the idea of an actor-politician seeking popular public support has little resonance in autocratic and totalitarian systems of government, which do not, after all, have free, competitive elections. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, however, the inauguration of "democracy" in post-Soviet Russia called for a new conceit: elections, competitive political parties, an electioneering apparatus, and actor-politicians. The full scope of Putin's apparatus and his PR-engineered political celebrity is beyond the constraints of this article and much has already been written about its most absurd manifestations. Here, I consider a component of the apparatus that gets little play in the West, but that may offer a key to "performing democracy" Putin-style and to his remarkably high approval ratings: the annual *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*, which marked its 11th anniversary in 2013.<sup>14</sup> Broadcast live across Russia, this highly mediated, seemingly spontaneous, but carefully plotted and choreographed television event has evolved from a static, neo-Soviet style of presentation into meticulously staged, *gesamtkunstwerk*-like televised spectacles replete with *Star Trek* scenery, live audiences, attractive young women, and celebrities, as well as regular folk (Kachkaeva 2011).<sup>15</sup> I do not argue that these increasingly spectacular productions are democratic in the Western sense or intended to encourage Western-style democracy in Russia. What they *do* is create the illusion of an intimate relationship between state and people in order to buttress Putin's imagined democracy.

A hybrid of Soviet and post-Soviet styles, the Putin *Direct Line* cites Iuri Liubimov,<sup>16</sup> *Larry King Live*, BBC/NPR interviews, and town hall meetings.<sup>17</sup> If King and public broadcasting inspired the live Q&A format, late-Soviet-era television shaped the aesthetic and content of the early productions. In 2008, when Putin descended from the presidential to the prime ministerial office, *Direct Line* programming experienced an extreme visual makeover: rechristened a *Conversation with Vladimir Putin*, it included, among other innovations, a live studio audience. Although oddly less intimate than the early *Direct Line*, the new format endeavored to impart the appearance of a town hall meeting (without actually being one). Two *Direct Lines*

14. Videos and transcripts of the *Direct Lines* and *Conversations* can be accessed at <http://www.moskva-putinu.ru> or <http://archive.premier.gov.ru> (Putin 2014a, 2014b). All quotes from these programs are from this source. Most are also available in part or in full on YouTube, which is a particularly good source for the early *Direct Lines*.

15. Anna Kachkaeva's discussion of Russia's television president reveals the extent to which these seemingly spontaneous events are choreographed (see Kachkaeva 2011).

16. A connection suggested to me by poet-pundit Dmitri Bykov.

17. In September 2000, more than a year before his first conversation with the Russian people, Putin appeared on *Larry King Live*. In March 2001, he participated in a Q&A broadcast by the BBC that was streamed live in Russia on the internet. NPR followed a similar script for a live Q&A with Putin in November 2001. Perhaps encouraged by positive responses to these events, he staged his first live conversation with the Russian people in December 2001. For part one of Putin on *Larry King Live*, see King ([2000] 2008).

(2001 and 2013) and one *Conversation* (2011) mark significant shifts in style and/or content. The first *Direct Line* established a style that endured until 2007, while the fourth *Conversation* (2011) happened during a period of growing anger and social unrest over perceived election fraud. The most significant *Direct Line* aired in 2013, five months late and in a visibly more hostile environment.

In the *Bulletin of Social Opinion* (*Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia*) Anna Kachkaeva calls Vladimir Putin Russia's first "media hero" (*mediageroi*; 2011), while Gleb Pavlovskii, a former presidential handler, calls Putin's Russia a regime of images (in Masuk 2012). Recall, for a moment, the anti-telegenic qualities of late-Soviet leaders and the peculiar truth of these observations becomes immediately apparent.<sup>18</sup> Between 2001 and 2007, *Direct Lines*, which required two attractive, young broadcast journalists (female and male) to sit with Putin for 2 hours and 20 minutes asking and fielding questions, took place in a rather cramped, characterless Kremlin conference room, decorated modestly with the national flag (Niknikolay 2008). Direct telephone and internet connections allowed Putin to take questions from regular Ivans and Mashas in 10 cities across the nation. Of course, crews spend several days setting up for the show and gathering questions at the offsite locations. Phone banks and websites take questions for at least a week in advance of the production. It seems likely that Putin's advisors—and perhaps Putin himself—select the questions to be asked/answered online. Although most questions had been gathered, selected, and arranged well in advance of the live event, an offsite communications center, shown on a screen in the conference room, appeared to be accepting new calls and emails. Once in a great while, something spontaneous happens, although spontaneous questions/comments were more likely in the early years (see Putin 2014b).

Stirring patriotic music and the image of a telecommunications satellite opened the 2001 show; snowy Kremlin towers and the sound of Kremlin chimes followed. Both sound and image were purely Soviet. Although telegenic, the anchors wore modest gray suits; Putin's entrance from behind a screen was underwhelming, and the three sat rather stiffly around a conference table. Frequently referring to his notes, Putin responded to questions from anchors and citizens alike about social and economic crises with mind-numbing facts, statistics, and the alien language of indexes, mortgage loans, and markets.<sup>19</sup> Periodic cuts to the screen at the end of the room for shots of the call center and live locations provided some relief from talking heads and visual monotony, but there was little dramatic tension. A barrage of questions selected by Putin from among the thousands of phone calls and emails collected before the broadcast marked the climax and denouement. The most striking (many from children) were sweetly personal.

By Western standards, the first *Direct Line* felt rather awkward and amateurish—and yet viewers apparently responded enthusiastically. Three aspects of the production may illuminate its early success: ostensible transparency, the creation of a convincing illusion of participatory democracy, and Putin's remarkable performance. Although initially wooden, he warmed to his interlocutors, appearing frank, honest, spontaneous, intelligent, sober, and sincerely concerned for the well being of the pensioners who begged him for help. Putin admitted to crises in the economic and social life of the nation, answered questions eagerly, explained at length, and, like a good father/son/brother/husband, often promised to investigate their various misfortunes personally. As Putin became more confident, he inserted more comic moments into the *Direct*

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18. If still photographs of late-Soviet leaders fail to capture their insensibility to the power of the image, video does it brilliantly: Leonid Brezhnev's 1979 annual New Year's greeting is exemplary in this regard (Lord13VV 2011). Seen against the background of the many videos of Brezhnev, Yeltsin, and even Nikita Krushchev available on YouTube, Putin's innovations seem even more remarkable.

19. According to Ellen Mickiewicz, Soviet leaders commonly used their television time to cite obfuscating, mind-numbing statistics (2008:44–45). Until 2010, Putin launched every *Conversation* with a summary of the nation's economic condition. In 2010, terrorism preceded economics, and in 2011 social unrest kicked off the *Conversation*. In 2013, it was back to the economy.



Figure 2. An overview of the redesigned Direct Line with Vladimir Putin television studio (2011): Putin's post-Soviet "Starship Enterprise." (Photo © RIA Novosti/The Image Works)

*Lines*, but even in 2001, gentle humor—for example, about his wife's hearty New Year's Day cooking—punctuated the production's otherwise serious conversational tone. Unlike his Soviet predecessors, Putin often smiled shyly, flashing his endearing dimples to the television audience. The finale, which allowed him to display a seemingly genuine humanity, was relentlessly upbeat.

Although not as smooth as subsequent *Direct Lines*, the performance in 2001 established a style that played well enough to be repeated in similar formats until 2008, when both title and production style changed dramatically.<sup>20</sup> Producers had fiddled for years with the opening images and music, but 2008 saw the first truly striking change: a collage of vibrantly colored images of postmodern Russia set against the red, white, and blue flag of the Russian Federation replaced the drab Kremlin scene. The boardroom had also disappeared, replaced by a television studio arranged with a central playing area and steeply raked auditorium. A soft blue and pink cyclorama sparkled behind Starship Enterprise-type scenery and high-tech props, while attractive female staff worked busily at computer stations designed to match the set in form and color. Smartly dressed, star-quality anchors sat or stood in a space designed for a visually effective presidential entrance. Striding along a hallway, Putin entered the studio, mounted the steps of the raised, circular platform, and shook hands firmly with the male anchor, Ernest Matskiavichius, before sitting confidently at the very center of the space.<sup>21</sup> A studio audience

20. Angus Roxburgh notes that Surkov trained to be a theatre director before turning to economics and business (2012:143). Although confirmed evidence of Surkov's influence on the form and content of the *Conversation* and *Direct Line* programs waits on access to Kremlin archives, such speculation is surely justified.

21. Although not entirely lacking journalistic credentials, the stunning Mariia Sittel', a television personality who once performed on Russian TV's *Dancing with the Stars*, anchored from the call center, while Ernest Matskiavichius, a newsman with considerably more gravitas, sat center stage with Putin and asked all of the questions.

composed largely of youth listened attentively and applauded his best lines; the cameras cut back and forth constantly from audience to actors to maintain visual variety. Although fewer in number, off-site proceedings have remained central to *Conversation* and *Direct Line*; their purpose, however, has changed. Rather than providing opportunities for local citizens to speak with the president, they are increasingly used for dramatic punctuation and effect through display of monumental construction, industrial development, and military projects. By 2008, highly produced theatrical spectacle had overwhelmed the easy intimacy of the 2001 chat, marking a new emphasis on aesthetics and theatricality. With slight variations, this arrangement of space and performers obtained through 2013.

If the production aesthetic remained largely consistent from 2008 to 2013, content did not. Large-scale anti-Putin demonstrations in Moscow and St. Petersburg (fall 2011) forced Putin to address corruption and perceived electoral fraud directly. Despite the protests, the production in 2011 of *Conversation* happened on schedule. New doubts about Russian democracy, however, put greater pressure on Putin to perform it persuasively. And perform he did.

The impulse to “monumentalize”—a constant feature of imperial, Soviet, and now post-Soviet culture—manifested variously in the *Direct Line* and *Conversation* broadcasts and nowhere was this more apparent than in the productions’ running time, which in 2011, finished at 4 hours and 33 minutes. The performance unfolded in five acts separated not by commercial interruptions but by onsite intermezzi peopled by “regular folk” (many wearing signifying costumes). Dramatic narrative and theatrical effect clearly governed site selection: Vladivostok and Sochi featured stunning shots of monumental Putinesque construction projects; the least visually spectacular, Novoterskii and Ufa (regions of ethnic and religious tensions), were included for the sake of a complete national narrative; and at the last site, the Nizhnii Tagil munitions factory, enormous weapons framed a gaggle of workers being lectured by Mr. Putin on the principles of free-market economics.

Dramatic and theatrical effect also guided the selection of the live studio audience. Earlier audiences had consisted primarily of “folk,” but in 2011, the “folk” appeared as set dressing while the microphone was reserved for the makers of opinion and culture: film, theatre, press, religious, and political celebrities. Paradoxically, although many were (in some sense) Putin’s allies, several asked difficult questions. Rather than opening with the usual soft economic question, Matskiavichius asked Putin directly about the allegedly corrupt Duma elections that set off fierce protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg, while Aleksei Venediktov of radio station Echo of Moscow (Ekho Moskvyy) called for recounts. In a delicate balancing act, Putin denied corruption and diminished the significance of the protests without actually evading the questions. He often sighed theatrically before answering as if to say, “I know that the Russian people are hurting and I share their pain. I work night and day on their behalf.” For the most part, his tone was soft, measured, and reasonable; he smiled and laughed readily. Listening attentively to hard questions, complaints, and occasionally praise, he rarely interrupted or showed impatience. Topics covered included law, “real” democracy, the economy (without the mind-numbing statistics), religious tolerance, adoption and child welfare, art and culture, internet freedom of expression, and international relations. Passionately but without obvious melodrama, Putin hit every available emotional note, chording them expertly: veterans, pensioners, orphaned children, family, *rodina* (motherland),<sup>22</sup> and, of course, women and mothers.

For reasons of form, style, and content, the denouement, which commenced at 4 hours and 20 minutes, exemplifies political seduction Putin-style. In what has become a ritualized convention, Putin opened a folder of questions selected from among the thousands of calls, emails, and texts received over six days and answered several in rapid succession. The first, which concerned

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22. Politicians traditionally use *rodina* when they want to stir up listeners emotionally on behalf of the suffering motherland. *Otechestvo*—fatherland—is more martial in feeling.

Russo-Japanese relations, nationalizing natural resources, and the need for highway improvement funds, were short but substantive; then, at 4 hours and 24 minutes, the questions trended toward warm and personal: “What does the motherland mean to you?” “Exactly what it means to many of our fellow citizens, practically everything. [The motherland] is my life.” Ten-year-old Grisha asked, “How can all people come together?” Putin didn’t answer the question, but smiled: “With children like these our future is secure.” Question: “Do you have negative qualities in your character?” Answer: “Of course, plenty, like everyone else.” Question: “What do you expect from us and what can we expect from you?” Putin responded: “You know, this is a very serious question [...] I expect unity from our citizens [...] cohesive, positive work toward the development of our Motherland.” At 4:27, he read the penultimate question: “What is happiness for you?” Answer: “For me—love.” And at 4:28:21, the penultimate comment and response: “We love you” and “I love you too. The feeling is mutual.” Putin flipped through the folder as if looking for more questions, closed it, assured viewers that negative as well as positive questions and comments were contained therein (and that he takes the negative seriously), rather shyly thanked the “folk” for their support, and wished them a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. An exemplary, seemingly spontaneous performance of sincerity, transparency, and rectitude—inconceivable in the Soviet era—climaxed with expressions of love between president and people.<sup>23</sup>

In view of what happened next, deferral of the 2012 production surely surprised no one. The “folk” reelected Putin in 2012 and despite new charges of fraud and corruption he probably won fairly—by which I mean that even without rigging the election he received a majority of legitimate votes sufficient to avoid a run off. Even so, the outcome angered many Russians. Shortly after enraged critics (primarily in Moscow) expressed their fury in large-scale demonstrations, three members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot were arrested and jailed in Moscow for protesting the too intimate relationship between Putin and Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’ and Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church. Their trial for criminal hooliganism in July 2012 provoked another storm of protests and arrests (Schuler 2013).

Well before the Pussy Riot trial, however, Putin had already begun to push back against the demonstrators. Immediately after his inauguration in May (also accompanied by mass protests), new laws prohibiting large gatherings of people and restricting internet access passed quickly through the Duma. More protests and arrests followed. Although Putin’s approval ratings rarely fall below 60 percent, when he and his handlers staged their next manly PR stunt—the “Flight of Hope” with a flock of orphaned Siberian cranes (see for example Roth 2012)—many more Russians expressed dissatisfaction with their media-hungry, show-business President.<sup>24</sup> The ensuing ridicule apparently discouraged this more spectacular genre of Putin performance (Osipov 2012), and caused the annual *Conversation* to be suspended temporarily. Apologists claimed that Putin was suffering from severe back pain (caused, some whispered, by the ill-fated crane flight), but it seems more likely that controversial legislation initiated by the executive branch, mass demonstrations, and an angry, exasperated electorate made such a delay desirable. The next *Conversation* (re-christened *Direct Line*) did not happen until April 2013, by which time protesters’ fury had cooled.

23. Kachkaeva claims that by the third *Direct Line*, Putin had learned how and when to hit every emotional note (2011:74).

24. Evidence gathered from focus groups by the Center for Strategic Development reveals widespread awareness of Kremlin theatricality and growing dissatisfaction with that strategy. If the PR excesses of the 2012 presidential election were galling, the flight with orphaned Siberian cranes was the last straw. “Stop messing around and do the nation’s work,” participants demanded. Based on this evidence, CSD researchers wonder whether Putin’s “political rhetoric” and “acting skill” can sustain his presidency. Positing that he’s almost exhausted these resources, they add: “Political pundits have long understood that, unlike film and theatre actors, political actors cannot radically change type” (CSD 2012a).

Kachkaeva argues that the Putin administration is the first truly to understand the difference between reality and image and to fully appreciate the power of the latter. Whatever they are called and no matter how spontaneous they seem, she writes, the *Conversations* are meticulously staged spectacles that leave nothing to chance. Comparing the annual *Conversation* ritual to “the theatre of antiquity,” Kachkaeva asserts that the two kinds of performances even have similar objectives: like the “Hellenes,” Russians understand that a miracle may happen for a “chosen one” whose topic (and plea) corresponds to the *Conversation*’s “dramaturgical line” and who is therefore able to “ring through” during the program (2011:64).<sup>25</sup> Such dramaturgically devised, affective miracles happen in all of the *Conversations* and *Direct Lines*, but nowhere more transparently than in the 2013 production.

While much in the opening sequence of images and music remained the same, an image both old and new (re)materialized: the Kremlin, now superimposed over the red, white, and blue of the Russian flag. In the redesigned studio space, a circular platform surrounded on three sides by spectators replaced the amphitheatre arrangement of the prime ministerial *Conversations*. Putin entered as usual, but this time against an image of the Kremlin. Indeed, the Kremlin functioned like a silent character on the set: when the three enormous screens connecting the studio to other locations were inactive, a similar though much larger image of Russia’s national holy site appeared on the cyclorama behind him. Rather than one anchor-interlocutor sitting in conversational style next to Putin, two sat opposite and on either side of him with their backs to the audience. The woman, Mariia Sittel’ (a Putin favorite and by this time a fixture), now sat on the stage with a new male anchor, Kirill Kleimenov, a shaggy-haired, decidedly “cute” (but obviously nervous and sometimes inarticulate) young man. If the physical relationship between Ernest Matskiavichius and Putin created the illusion of a conversation, the effect of these changes was to position Putin spatially as both leading actor and lone wolf.<sup>26</sup>

Journalists and sociologists replaced the celebrity-studded studio audience of 2011 and for the first time a woman — Sittel’ — ran the show, which opened quite differently. In 2011, Putin kicked off the *Conversation* by inviting questions about election fraud, but in 2013, he preferred to open on safer ground: the economy and his many accomplishments, including higher wages, pensions, and positive demographic statistics for European (i.e., white) Russia. Discussion of recent economic crises and economic reform lasted for more than 40 minutes before an audience member managed to insert a question about criminality and corruption. With this, a new dynamic emerged: the anchors — more so Sittel’ than Kleimenov — began gently to goad Putin on questions of social and political dysfunction. Although undoubtedly prearranged and tactical, this marginally more confrontational approach felt new. If little in a Putin Q&A happens spontaneously, what was its purpose? Had Putin inserted a new page into his performing democracy playbook? Yes and no. Small novelties of this sort pervaded the production, but most were designed to enhance the appearance rather than the substance of democratic dialogue.

At approximately an hour and 30 minutes, the program shifted to live sites across Russia where allegedly average people had gathered to ask spontaneous questions about local and national problems. This year, Putin and his PR team chose six sites, four of which depicted the usual monumental projects, including an air force base replete with jets and a general, Sochi’s Olympic Park, the magnificent new Mariinskii Theatre, and the Academy of Business in Novosibirsk. For several reasons, the first two sites, a family home in Novoshakhtinskii and a WWII memorial in Prokhorovka, merit special attention: the scenarios that unfold at these

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25. The reference is to Greek tragedy, which, as Richard Schechner points out, rarely ends well even for the most reverent petitioner. Kachkaeva may misunderstand Greek tragedy or simply be drawing from plays like *Medea*. Metaphor rather than fact tends to organize feuilletons of this sort.

26. The physical arrangement of the space confirms visually what Gleb Pavlovskii says about his former boss: Putin is a loner. Even in the KGB, he was, to certain degree, a “white crow” (in Masuk 2012).



Figure 3. In 2011, against an image of the Kremlin, Vladimir Putin makes his presidential entrance onto the set of *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*. (Photo © RIA Novosti/The Image Works)

locations were uncharacteristically domestic and allude to recent, highly divisive incidents—the US Magnitsky Act, which provoked Putin to ban foreign adoptions,<sup>27</sup> and the arrest and trial of Pussy Riot. Borrowing their dramatic narratives and personae from the world of melodrama, the producers of *Direct Line* populated Novoshakhtinskii and Prokhorovka with a cast of suffering women, adorable children, anguished elders, and invisible villains. Only newborn puppies and kittens could have further raised the emotional stakes.<sup>28</sup> Before asking what the scenarios *do* to spectators (and for Putin), let’s consider what *happens* in each.

A family home in a remote provincial town provided the setting for the first scenario. Its political context is both historical and immediate: the abiding resistance of Russians to adoption and the urgent need for adoptive families in the wake of Putin’s ban. The onsite anchor

27. Ostensibly a response to the death of an adopted Russian child in the US, the adoption ban was in fact retaliation for the Magnitsky Act (Elder 2012). On the Magnitsky Act: “The U.S. Senate [...] repealed a trade sanction imposed 38 years ago to force the Soviet Union to allow Jews and other religious minorities to emigrate, replacing it with a modern-day punishment for human rights abuse that has enraged Russian officials. The old law, one of the last vestiges of the Cold War, was called the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, named after a U.S. senator and a representative. The new law [...] grants Russia and Moldova permanent normal trade relations, but it is coupled with the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, which honors a dead Russian. The law blacklists Russians connected to the death of Magnitsky in police custody and to other gross human rights violations, prohibiting entrance to the United States and use of its banking system” (Lally and Englund 2012).

28. Kachkaeva observes rather cynically that by the third *Direct Line* Putin had learned to smile “when people started talking about puppies” (2011:74). Perhaps that also explains the frequent appearance of children.

(needless to say, female) explained that the parents, Elena and Sergei, have 3 biological and 12 adopted children, one sickly from birth. In contrast to the stylish, strikingly attractive, rail thin women on Putin's stage in the Moscow studio, Elena fits a familiar Russian stereotype: dumpy, pink-cheeked, brightly dyed red hair in a simple, short cut, and wearing a flowery, unfashionable blouse. In contrast to the attractive, smartly dressed men on the set, the solidly built Sergei, who wore jeans and a grey sweater, was drab and tight-lipped. As a couple, they embody the *narod*, the "real" Russian people. Apart from Sergei's brief contribution, Elena spoke for both of them. Her script—revealed as memorized by her frequent verbal stumbles—concerns maternal capital: Elena and Sergei were there to challenge a policy that calls for the state to subsidize only families with two or more *biological* children. The more affective visual text, which showed 15 children, from infant through adolescent, basking in parental love in what might be described as a comfortable working-class home, made a strong impression. As the camera moved through the house, children popped up and followed their interlocutor into the living room, where the rest of the family waited. Once settled, the youngest and the most adorable of the children became focal points. At the scenario's penultimate moment, one of the older children—a pretty, modestly dressed girl of about 10—took the microphone to ask Mr. Putin for a desperately needed family playground. In a display of paternal benevolence, a smiling Putin granted the charming adoptee's wish.

In the second scenario (also profoundly and purposefully *narodnyi*), emotionally distraught WWII veterans vented their anger, while still affirming their patriotism. Staged outdoors at a magnificent memorial to the largest tank battle of the war, this narrative pitted sympathetic senior citizens against teenage hooligans in order to expose an alarming generational schism manifested in willful desecration of WWII monuments.<sup>29</sup> The anchor (once again, female) selected a gruff 90-year-old man, sitting proudly in his medal-draped uniform, to speak for the gathered veterans and other concerned citizens. Calling forth all of his pent-up outrage, the old man thundered against disrespectful young people who dance half naked and urinate on sacred WWII monuments. They must, he roared, be given moral and patriotic education—a demand followed immediately by the inevitable appeal to Putin: "Vladimir Vladimirovich! Seeing and hearing these things offends and upsets people like us, who took part in the war. I want to know your opinion, what else can be done to defend our memory, what more can we do with young people to help them understand and attend to the Great Patriot War and our glorious defense of the fatherland?" (Putin 2014b). The venerable patriot finished with an invitation to Putin to join veterans in Prokhorovka to celebrate the battle's 70th anniversary.

Scenarios of this sort invoke a trope familiar in imperial and Soviet society (and now replayed in the post-Soviet era): the common folk appeal to a wise and powerful leader to relieve their many afflictions. Playing the role of child or woman, the suffering folk eagerly await the magical intervention of an invincible hero—Tsar, Father of Nations, or President—a charismatic leader who embodies manly certitude, strength, and beneficence. Appeals to Putin—"help us," "how can we live," "what can we do," "tell us what to do Vladimir Vladimirovich"—pervade *Direct Line* and *Conversation* narratives. Sympathetic supplicants receive promises of investigation, action, and intervention, while Putin bolsters the identity and role conferred on him by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia as savior of the Russian people.<sup>30</sup>

Surrounded by both birth and adopted children, the profoundly Russian Elena exemplifies just such a supplicant. This matrioshka-like figure appeals to Putin on behalf of abandoned children and adoptive parents. It is the appeal of suffering mother Russia to her sovereign lord. Her

29. Indeed, the whole of the 2013 *Direct Line* was notable for its parade of middle-aged and elderly everyday heroes. I propose two objectives: to undermine the heroic martyrdom of Pussy Riot and opposition leaders like Aleksei Navalny, and to ingratiate himself with certain skeptical sectors of the public.

30. Patriarch Kirill, among others, calls Putin the hope of the Russian people; a man sent by God to save the Russian nation (Kachkaeva 2011:69; Shneiderov 2011).

daughter's meek request for a playground—not for herself, but for all of the children—caps the scene emotionally. It concludes, as it must, with Putin graciously granting Elena's wish for maternal capital and the child's wish for a playground. The second scenario expands the supplicant narrative. Begging their President-Savior to rescue Mother Russia from the youthful hooligans who would rip the heart from her breast, the venerable veterans arouse both sympathy and righteous outrage. Reminding viewers of their sacred duty to honor Russia's veterans and promising to attend the anniversary celebration, Putin pledges support for reeducation programs—a smooth segue into a soliloquy about impending government intervention into the education of Russian youth.

That *Direct Line's* dramatic core rests on emotion rather than reason should be obvious, but these scenarios, which are plainly designed to trigger affect rather than rational effect, are both curiously deceptive and transparently manipulative. So much so that one wonders what motivated them. Oddly, it might have been love.

Gleb Pavlovskii argues that Putin not only lost the people's love in 2012, but also that he desperately wants to regain it (in Masuk 2012). Stories of abuse in cases of foreign adoptions and the storm of protest following the elections created tremendous critical noise at home and abroad, much of it negative. There was no dearth of emotion after the 2012 elections—but the emotions were wrong in kind and mode of expression for Putin's purposes. The urban, educated middle class voiced its dismay in a series of violent public demonstrations and support for Putin in this voting bloc plummeted. Putin's immediate response was to employ the familiar Althusserian Repressive State Apparatus,<sup>31</sup> but if Levada Center polling during fall 2012 can be trusted, the result was to increase the breadth and depth of unhappiness with the Putin regime. Rather than calling out the militia, Putin and his PR team had to change the conversation. The *Direct Line* offered a perfect opportunity to rewrite the Magnitsky and Pussy Riot narratives by casting virtuous, "authentic" Russian heroes engaged in a Manichean struggle with invisible, abstract villains. Putin's role in this battle was to erase moral ambiguity, redefine the social good, and intervene on its behalf. By so doing, he hoped to redirect the common folk's love and reanimate their emotional bond with him.

For Kachkaeva, the "metaphysics" of the *Direct Line* are transparent: the goal is to "imprint the image of a miracle maker on the consciousness of the spectator" (2011:64). Putin—Russia's omnipotent benefactor—displays strength and compassion, thereby fortifying his image as father of the nation prepared always to intervene on behalf of Russia's most vulnerable citizens. If, as Kachkaeva contends, Putin is engaged in a war of images, the *Direct Line* and *Conversation* programs (in contrast to other planned public performances) paint a picture of a smart, articulate, thoughtful, wise, kind, occasionally waggish, and discreetly fashionable statesman. But is this statecraft or stagecraft? Growing public dissatisfaction over promises made but not kept suggests that many more Russians now understand the primacy of stagecraft in Putin's presidency.

If the first scenarios were remarkable for their domestic qualities, the last four offered more standard Putin fare: displays of military muscle and enormous, technologically cutting-edge projects intended to demonstrate Russian dynamism and superiority. The third scenario was staged on an air base where the buzz of fighter jets accompanied an air force general's tribute to his commander in chief. Four through six paraded Putin's mega-initiatives before viewers: St. Petersburg's sparkling new Mariinskii Theatre (the best, most modern of its kind), Sochi's titanic skating rink ("the most modern in Russia"), and Novosibirsk's technology-science park, home to the Academy of Business, which improves Russian lives through application of the

31. Louis Althusser wrote: "Remember that in Marxist theory, the state apparatus (SA) contains: the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc., which constitute what I shall in future call the Repressive State Apparatus. Repressive suggests that the State Apparatus in question functions by violence" (1971:142–43).

most modern business technologies. These scenarios cast Putin as a doyen of culture, a sportsman, and a CEO. In all areas of social and cultural life, he is the dynamic driver of post-Soviet, post-socialist Russian identity. Indeed, since 2008, “dynamism” has been the driving metaphor for Putin’s regime of images.

That very year, a “dynamist” aesthetic began to animate Prime Ministerial *Conversations* and *Direct Lines*. Had they survived Stalin, Liubov Popova and Vsevolod Meyerhold might have designed the scenery, directed the actors, and set the pace. A montage of images moved at the tempo of Eisenstein’s 1925 film, *Strike*. Talking at the speed of light, or as if on speed, the frighteningly thin figure of Tatiana Remezova, broadcaster for a state-TV news program, anchored the call center: frequent camera cuts to Remezova kept viewers up-to-the-minute on the thousands of calls, emails, and text messages flooding into the center. Behind her, brightly colored images flashed, including a gender breakdown in percentages of women and men who contacted the center. Scads of lovely young women all wearing identical costumes worked behind computer screens designed to match the set. A relentlessly streaming news ticker with questions asked by callers and internet users zipped past viewers on television screens across the nation. On-location correspondents—especially the men who anchored scenarios three through six—strode vigorously through their spaces. Punctuated by fleeting moments of bathos and humor, a sense of urgency prevailed as the drama built. Perhaps the futurists would find in the Putin *Direct Line* a concrete expression of dynamic theatre: although arguably lacking in *zaum*,<sup>32</sup> many other qualities conjured by theorists and practitioners of futurism manifest in these annual events.

Between the third and fourth scenarios, there was a moment of what might be called genuine tension. As a rule, Putin does not invite real critics of the regime to participate in *Direct Lines* and *Conversations*, with one exception: Aleksei Venediktov, the head of Echo of Moscow, an allegedly independent radio station. Looking like a relic of the Soviet dissident community, this peculiar, wild-haired, bearded little man stood out in the audience of freshly pressed youth, soldiers, and fashionably attired new Russians. Venediktov is no stranger to the *Direct Line*. His usual role is provocateur—that is, to ask the difficult question that’s on everyone’s mind, but that no one else has permission to ask. Unlike others in the studio audience who are quick to call themselves Putin’s trusted allies (*doverennye litsa*), Venediktov claims to stand proudly apart from the Putin cabal. The fact that Gazprom owns his radio station must surely compromise his autonomy, but if appearances can be trusted, he has maintained the reputation of gadfly since the station went on the air in 1990.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, his questions about Pussy Riot, the mass demonstrations, and the Stalinesque tone of Putin’s new term turned out to be little more than a set up for more Putin oratory.

Despite being buried in the middle of the program, this soliloquy was substantive because in it Putin disavowed the Stalinesque tenor of recent measures taken to suppress dissent. No, he declared emphatically before millions of Russians: “Stalinism is connected with a cult of personality, massive violations of the law, repression, and camps. There’s nothing like this in Russia and I hope there never will be again [...] But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have order and discipline.”<sup>34</sup> Erasing all distinctions between teenage hooligans and legitimate political protest,

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32. The transrational language founded and favored by Russian futurists. Vladimir Markov explains: “Whereas artists of the past went through the idea to the word, futurists go through the word to direct knowledge. [...] The word carries not only an idea, but also the transrational, which [Aleksei] Kruchenykh specifies parenthetically as ‘irrational part, mystical and aesthetic.’ The word is broader than its meaning” (Markov 2006:127).

33. David Remnick wrote in the *New Yorker*: “Now, eighteen years later, in the authoritarian ecosystem of Vladimir Putin, Echo of Moscow is one of the last of an endangered species, a dodo that still roams the earth” (2008:37).

34. While Western scholars were discussing Putin’s apparent bid for international celebrity, Western political pundits were talking about a “cult of personality” (especially at the height of Putin’s PR campaigns). In 2011, 55 percent of Russians surveyed by the Levada Center agreed that such a cult already existed or that conditions were ripe

he went on to link Pussy Riot's performance actions to the young misfits who "desecrate soldiers' graves" and dismissed his critics as self-promoting publicity hounds (Putin 2014b).<sup>35</sup> The Pussy Riot women are not political prisoners, he asserted, because there was nothing political about their action: Russia is a nation of laws, they're lawbreakers, and lawbreakers belong in prison. Juxtaposing these publicity-seeking criminals to real Russian heroes, he cited the example of an 85-year-old woman who worked through the system to expose local injustice, referring to a member of the studio audience whose tale of defying corrupt local authorities earlier had inspired appreciative chuckles. She—not rabble-rousers like Pussy Riot, blogger Aleksei Navalny,<sup>36</sup> and other hooligans—exemplifies a real citizen-hero of Putin's Russia. Not surprisingly, neither Venediktov nor anyone else asked follow-up questions. This, after all, was Putin's show.

I've already observed that the dramatic denouement of each *Direct Line* and *Conversation* requires Putin to draw (supposedly randomly) from a folder of questions received before the live event. Until 2013, he selected all of the questions; in 2013—in response, perhaps, to public opinion surveys that equated theatricality with lying and indicated widespread dissatisfaction with Russia's show-business president—tactics changed.<sup>37</sup> No wonder, then, that new bits and pieces of the *Direct Line* show seemed designed to produce a more persuasive illusion of authenticity. While the 2011 studio audience showcased television, film, and popular culture celebrities, this one featured priests, soldiers, journalists, bureaucrats, and a few regular folks. Elena and Sergei, the veterans, a kolkhoz (collective farm) manager—all appeared as representatives of authentic Russian people, while Venediktov looked and sounded like a real dissident. Sittel' and Kleimenov unexpectedly pressed Putin on controversial topics. Camera shots of Kleimenov appearing to read new emails and text messages from a tablet embedded in his desk were new in 2013, reaffirming the anchors' agency and the event's immediacy. The quest for greater "realness" may also have inspired the denouement's new format, which required each actor on the set—Putin, Sittel', and Kleimenov—to draw from their own folders of questions from calls, email, and the internet. Spectators at home and in the studio were asked to believe that Putin had no foreknowledge of the anchors' ploy or of their questions. Although this change of format was surely planned, Putin feigned surprise and, perhaps to demonstrate his openness and flexibility, even turned to the studio audience, pointed out two people, and took questions directly from them.

In other respects, the 2013 *Conversation* concluded, like others before it, in an up-tempo barrage of short questions and answers that signaled the finale—a segment referred to by Sittel' as a *blits-turnir*, which could be translated (albeit awkwardly) as blitzkrieg-tournament. After almost four-and-a-half hours of policy questions, answers, and soliloquies, these were mostly puff questions that provoked laughter from the audience and humanized Putin: an elderly polar explorer asked that he recognize a new polar explorer holiday; a para-Olympic athlete asked for a new swimming pool; an anonymous admirer asked whom Putin favored for the next president (to which he democratically replied: "The people of the Russian Federation will elect my successor" [Putin 2014b]); the victim of a bee sting urged the federal government to take up arms

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for one (Levada Center 2011). As his popularity slipped after 2011, so too did talk about the cult. On Putin and celebrity, see Goscilo (2013).

35. On 23 November 2013, at the Association for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies conference via Skype, freed Pussy Riot performer Katya Samutsevich confirmed that Putin had been trying to discredit Pussy Riot by associating them with teenage hooliganism.

36. Aleksei Navalny is a lawyer and blogger known for his crusade against the corruption that allegedly pervades Russian business and government.

37. The reports in May and October 2012 from the Center for Strategic Development are particularly revealing in this regard. Russians increasingly question the relationship between Putin's actions and the language and images of highly theatrical public relations events like the *Direct Lines* (Center for Strategic Development 2012a, 2012b).

against bee-keepers; and 11th grade students asked whether their school could drop its physical education requirement. Inserted among these softballs were two serious questions: What shocks you when you travel around Russia; and, Why do the citizens of Cyprus enjoy an interest rate of less than 4 percent while Russians pay 20 percent? One viewer offered a provocative comment and question: “At the beginning of the program, you claimed that our people believe in the Russian court, but survey data indicate that only 20 percent of Russians trust the judiciary. What do you intend to do to make the courts genuinely independent?” (Putin 2014b).

## It’s Morning in the Russian Federation!

### A Television President and His Audience

Reliable evidence of audience response to the annual Putin media spectacular isn’t readily available. The Western press reports little of substance about the productions and the increasingly authoritarian mood in Russia seems to discourage the kinds of reviews that accompany US political performances, such as town hall meetings, campaign debates, and State of the Union addresses. In Putin’s Russia, the state controls television, as well as most radio stations and print media, a situation that thwarts the production, collection, and interpretation of data. The scarcity of reviews of the *Conversations* and *Direct Lines*—even by opposition newspapers like *Novaya gazeta* and by the Levada Center—suggests either that self-censorship has returned to independent media (such as it is) or that viewers, including media pundits, don’t entirely grasp the nature of the genre to which the post-2007 *Conversation* and *Direct Line* shows belong. In the absence of post-performance reviews, punditry, interviews, or large-scale audience polling by independent media organizations,<sup>38</sup> my approach to audience response must necessarily be oblique. Viewer percentages and Putin’s general approval ratings can help to piece together a picture of outcomes and effects of the *Direct Line* and *Conversation* broadcasts over 13 years.

Putin’s general approval ratings peaked at over 75 percent in his second term, hovered in the low 60s after the 2012 elections, and in September 2014 were in the 80s.<sup>39</sup> Early in the Medvedev interregnum, the bare-chested mountain man, the sexy celebrity, and the deep-sea diver captured attention internationally and seemed to resonate positively among some Russians.<sup>40</sup> By 2012, however, many in his domestic audience were visibly exhausted by and exasperated with such stunts, citing them as the cause of both confusion and dissatisfaction. Indeed, in the wake of Putin’s ill-starred flight with the orphaned cranes, a Levada Center poll discovered—perhaps unsurprisingly—that “Russians are sick of Putin’s PR” and that “They No Longer Watch His Movie” (Osipov 2012; see also CSD 2012a). Russians, after all, have long looked askance at *reklam*—a term now synonymous with PR, but that retains the pejorative connotations it acquired in the imperial period when it signified narcissism and shameless

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38. Let me offer a brief disclaimer. There’s plenty of punditry about Putin, but little about *Direct Lines* and *Conversations* as acts of substantive political performance. The Levada Center releases monthly surveys of “the people’s” attitude toward Putin and his government (usually expressed in terms of trust for the president) and the Center for Strategic Development conducts relatively regular focus groups, but the *Conversation* and *Direct Line* programs are referenced only obliquely. Well after the 2013 *Direct Line*, a friend suggested that I research responses to it on Facebook, which is easier said than done. Although increasingly common among well-educated urban youth, Facebook still has a limited presence in Russia.

39. The data on Putin’s approval ratings that have appeared widely in Russian and foreign presses are drawn largely from Levada Center polling, which often publishes data critical of the regime. Articles like “The Nature of Putinism” by Lev Gudkov (2011), the Center’s current leader, confirm its independence. Since 2013, three events have pumped up Putin’s numbers again: the Sochi Olympics, the seizure of Crimea, and the war with Ukraine. A Levada Center poll conducted from 21–24 March 2014, for example, gave him an 80 percent approval rating—up from 63 percent in March 2013 (Levada 2014a). Another conducted in September 2014 revealed that it had risen to 86 percent (Levada 2014b).

40. A 2009 BBC video offers fascinating insights into this support (Rodgers 2009).

self-promotion (charges often flung at celebrity actresses).<sup>41</sup> As Putin's PR stunts became sillier and more transparent, Russians increasingly recognized their roots in both reklam and Soviet propaganda. In 2001, however, when Putin staged the first *Direct Line*, Russians, many of whom understood late-Soviet-era propaganda perfectly, knew little about actor-presidents and political PR as they have evolved in Western democracies in the media age (CSD 2012a). Thus an event like the *Direct Line* that seems patently contrived to politician-weary Western eyes, may have felt—indeed may still feel—bold, spontaneous, and genuinely democratic to Russians with little experience not only of Western-style democracy, but also of PR-inflected political performance. Many factors conspire to produce Putin's enviable approval ratings, and while the *Direct Line* and *Conversations* shows alone don't account for them, evidence suggests that the image they create of a thoughtful, fair-minded, fundamentally democratic Putin has been both affective and effective—perhaps more so than the elaborate fabrications invented by his PR handlers.

Against all odds and expectations, Putin projects a seductive aura in a medium that remains central to the Russian political imagination. Indeed, despite the internet's increased presence in Russian politics, society, and culture, Russia remains a television nation. Perhaps that accounts for the growing resemblance after 2008 between Putin, Russia's first presidential "media hero," and Ronald Reagan, our own celebrity actor-president. In 1999, few suspected that the once invisible "operative in the Kremlin" (Hill and Gaddy 2013; Gaddy 2013) had such a talent for dissimulation on the small screen; more than a generation after Reagan (and thanks to a stable of European and US PR firms in the Kremlin after 2007) he has become post-Soviet Russia's "president electric" (Raphael 2009).<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the *Direct Line* has evolved into a kind of carefully choreographed, dramatically structured, high-tech town hall meeting at the center of which stands Russia's first unwaveringly upbeat celebrity president. In 2001, an authentic (though clearly ambivalent) impulse toward democracy seemed to motivate *Direct Line*, but since then the event has gradually transmogrified into pure simulacrum.

If the state's media monopoly complicates the task of discovering the precise nature of audience response to the *Direct Lines* and *Conversations*, official percentages of viewers across the nation are readily available (Borodina 2013).<sup>43</sup> According to *RIA Novosti*, in 2001, 75.3 percent of all Russians watched the first *Direct Line*; in 2007, 66.3 percent tuned in for his final performance as president; in 2013, however, he drew only 49 percent of the audience. Among the more politicized inhabitants of Moscow, only about 25 percent watched the five-hour marathon.<sup>44</sup> Despite Putin's efforts to draw young Russians to his agenda, the majority (almost 25 percent) of all viewers were aged 59 to 61. In Moscow, 21 percent of men aged 25 to 55 watched, while around the country, the program drew only 15.3 percent of men in this age group. Between 15 and 16 percent of women aged 25 to 55 watched. His ratings among viewers 18 to 30 and 14 to 25 varied by channel, thus between 9.6 percent and 20 percent of 18 to 30 year olds and between 11 and 16 percent of 14 to 25 year olds watched the program. Finally, according to pundit Arina Borodina, official statics reveal that among young people, women constituted the most receptive audience (Borodina 2013).

41. Interestingly, Gleb Pavlovskii, Putin's friend and handler, calls his former boss "narcissistic" (in Masuk 2012:3).

42. As Timothy Raphael points out, Reagan was the first to put a PR office in the White House; likewise, Putin was the first to put one in the Kremlin (see also Shneiderov 2011; Hill and Gaddy 2013).

43. Of course, as one respondent to Borodina's column asks: "Who gave these numbers to this woman?" And "As far as ratings go, no one's believed them for a long time." Because only one channel broadcast the programs between 2008 and 2011, when Putin was Prime Minister, Borodina omits those numbers. (Between 2001 and 2007 and again in 2013, both state channels broadcast the program, making it easier for viewers to tune in. Or perhaps making it more difficult for viewers to tune out.)

44. In 2006, NEWSru.com reported that 52 percent of Muscovites watched in 2001 and, although ratings fluctuated in the years that followed, by 2006 the number of viewers in Moscow had dropped by half (NEWSru.com 2006).

The visible (to television and studio audiences) tracking of calls, text messages, and emails by gender was new in 2013, but the Kremlin's concern for the gender of viewers and voters is not. Indeed, as early as 2004, an assumed gender binary is evident in all performance genres mobilized by Putin and his handlers. A tiny sampling includes a music video, "Someone Like Putin" (*takogo kak Putin*), produced in 2004 by Putin's Young Guard (*Molodaia gvardiia*) and targeted toward young women supposedly in need of protection from a strong, paternal president; Putin's menacing 2007 *Time Magazine* cover photograph; his highly eroticized, muscularly masculine makeover in 2008; his highly publicized "fellowship" with the Night Wolves, a black leather biker gang; the seemingly endless succession of sports and outdoorsman photo ops; and the bizarre, brazenly sexualized campaign ads directed at young female voters in 2012. If his *Direct Line* and *Conversation* programs are more nuanced, they are no less gendered. Images and topics that allegedly appeal to women—family, children, and the maternal capital program that pays mothers to have more children—prevail in the first half of the program; while stereotypically masculine topics—guns, fighter jets, veterans, enormous construction projects, monumental buildings, and new technology parks—predominate in the second half. Meanwhile, in the studio and call center, only Sittel' plays an authoritative role; the other women on the set are eye candy. Indeed, judging by the *Direct Line* on-air staff, all chubby or unattractive women over 25 have been shipped to Chechnya.

The idea that Putin appeals to women as their surrogate husband, father, or lover gained traction before the 2004 elections, accelerated in 2008, and is now commonly accepted electoral wisdom. Between 2008 and 2012, Putin often appeared on the pages of fan magazines, and in 2010 Russia's *Tatler* characterized him as one of the "15 married men women dream about" (*Tatler* 2010). Sergei Belanovskii, in "Lock young women in the house on Dec. 4, election day," wrote that support for Putin and United Russia had fallen among every social group except women aged 18 to 34. He offered several reasons: Putin's machismo; Putin's television appearances, which project the image of a decent, regular guy with a firm moral foundation; and the explanation favored by the author, Putin's PR machine. The assumption is that young women are bored with and don't follow politics, so when they vote (if they vote), they cast their ballot for the most familiar brand, and because the state controls television, Putin is Russia's most familiar political brand (Belanovskii 2011). Even the otherwise sober Levada Center not only insists that women (and some young men) are Putin's primary constituency, but also contributes to the myth of presidential eroticism by polling women about Putin's marriageability.

My own petite poll in 2011 of three middle-aged and two young female St. Petersburgers did not reveal any passionate desire for intimacy with Putin. The two giggly 20-somethings squealed in dismay when I asked for their opinions of Putin's hotness. The more serious 40-somethings, all of whom earned decent, middle-class incomes, were sanguine about Putin's management of the economy, but showed little enthusiasm for his physical appeal. That some women vote for Putin is certain: a poll conducted in November 2013 by the Levada Center indicates that they favor Putin by 10 percentage points more than men (Levinson 2013).<sup>45</sup> Evidence suggests that the Kremlin hopes to attract young women to Putin and United Russia, but a quick survey of Putinesque genres of performance indicates that the Kremlin PR office pursues young men and women with equal vigor. Campaigns are, however, carefully targeted and differently gendered (Levada Center 2013b).<sup>46</sup>

45. Levinson cites political wisdom in Russia that claims women tend to be more conservative than men, thus their preference for maintaining the status quo.

46. A Levada Center paper notes that young men admire Putin's success and machismo: "He's a leader who has achieved everything and can engage in all kinds of pastimes and pleasures that young men can only dream of" (2013b).

## Performing (an Illusion of) Democracy

Kachkaeva maintains that Putin's PR handlers invented the format of the live call-in show especially for him. If so, it was a bold step because little in Putin's career before 2000 suggested an aptitude for performing democracy on the small screen. Indeed, when Boris Yeltsin appointed him to serve as Prime Minister and shortly thereafter anointed him heir, few in the Kremlin expected much of anything from Putin (Shneiderov 2011). Trained as a KGB operative, Putin's job was to blend in, to be inconspicuous, to disappear in a crowd. His appearance is remarkably unremarkable and yet, through a process that began in 2000, his public image has become the antithesis of the Brezhnev-like mumbling, monochromatic Soviet bureaucrat Western observers expect. Whether self-fashioned or fashioned by handlers, he now looks like "us": in other words, like a celebrity politician in a Western democracy. Clifford Gaddy's claim that Putin is not a politician strikes me as absurd (Gaddy 2013). If he's not, he certainly plays one on TV.

There were few models in the Soviet Union for the kind of image-making infotainment exemplified by *Direct Line/Conversation* programming. Image-making of this sort does not necessarily correlate with a cult of personality and although some believe this is Putin's endgame, Putin claims that no Stalinesque apparatus for creating such a cult exists in post-Soviet Russia. Some Putin critics have suggested that the President's personality is insufficient to give rise to such a cult, but what has the Kremlin's post-Soviet, postmodern, Reaganesque PR apparatus created if not a cult of personality?<sup>47</sup>

The truth is that Putin learned by watching us. During trips to the West early in his presidency, he and his handlers experienced the performance of Western democracy directly, including live call-in shows, webcasts, and televised forums. Larry King says that Putin performs spectacularly in the media. Allegedly allergic to television before landing the presidency, against all expectations (Roxburgh 2012:50), Putin, like Reagan, has mastered the medium.<sup>48</sup> The power of television to shape public discourse and opinion was not, of course, lost on the Soviets, but after the demise of the USSR, the state lost control of the media and with it, the national narrative. An urgent need to regain and then to maintain control of the narrative surely motivates the *Direct Line/Conversation* efforts.

Like post-Soviet elections, *Direct Lines* and *Conversations with Vladimir Putin* cannibalize the look of democracy in order to create the illusion of direct, personal contact between a powerful, but responsive government (*vlast'*) and the "people" (*narod*). In a country with so little experience of and therefore clarity about democracy, the first *Direct Line* shows must have been very seductive. For skeptics like Kachkaeva, however, the democratic look belies a function that is consistent with an "eternal myth about the just tsar, the wise father, the protector" (2011:73). No doubt she's right—but based on the evidence, I believe that Putin's annual open line to the Russian people does have some exceptional qualities. If, as Kachkaeva claims, the effect relies on promises made to a frustrated, angry people, their affect arises from tele-techno spectacle and the protagonist's performance.

In the immediate post-Soviet era, many Russians might genuinely have wanted a democrat in the Kremlin, but the Yeltsin years demonstrated the futility of importing Western democratic practices into the former Soviet Union. Yeltsin's incompetence and drunken clownishness embarrassed Russians, many of whom wanted a charismatic leader who would show well internationally, especially in the West, although neither Putin nor any of the opposition leaders

47. "Putin portrayed as Hercules in art exhibition," a recent story by the BBC, indicates that far from receding in the wake of war with Ukraine and economic sanctions, enthusiasm for Putin's cult has grown (BBC News 2014).

48. Putin's discomfort with television emerged, at least in part, from the medium's privatization and temporary independence after the Soviet Union's fall in 1991. Television coverage of the *Kursk* nuclear submarine accident, for example, showed Putin in a very bad light. Shortly after that incident, Putin began cracking down on the media (see Roxburgh 2012, esp. chapt. 4).

have fulfilled this fantasy, according to a 2012 survey (CSD 2012b). Russians value their image and this, I think, is the function of the *Direct Line/Conversation*: to make Putin *look like* a charismatic, modern, democratic leader genuinely capable of listening and responding to “the people.” As one St. Petersburg explained to me in 2011, Putin “puts a good face on Russia.” But is the face democratic? Do Russians care? And is there any there there? Pavlovskii, Putin’s former handler, says no; Putin, he asserts, is a blank screen onto which people project their needs and desires (in Masuk 2012).

As early as 2001, Putin may already have concluded that in Russia, democracy is better performed than implemented. Although *Direct Lines* and *Conversations* have the look of high-tech town hall meetings, they are not staged debates or even dialogues, but rather spectacular one-person shows designed to create the illusion of an exchange of opinions and ideas between electorate and elected government. Questions are asked and answered, but their selection and arrangement allow Putin’s narrative to unfold largely unchallenged. Regular citizens do not ask follow-up questions, Putin’s fiercest critics are invisible, and although some in the studio audience ask difficult questions, such questions provide opportunities not for discussion, but for soliloquy.

The form and content of this image-driven event are apparently democratic *enough* for an audience weary of post-Soviet dispossession. Verbal reassurances of support for lawful demonstrations, freedom of the internet, and free and fair elections are marked by sincerity of tone and gesture: neither Putin nor his audience worry about contradictions.<sup>49</sup> In a setting and manner designed to inspire trust and impart gentle, paternalistic authority, he spins and sells a narrative of *Russian* democracy: i.e., sovereign democracy managed vertically by a wise, charismatic ruler, who is cosmopolitan, confident, competent, stylish, and sober — and very, very smart.

Despite early promise of long-term viability, evidence began to accumulate as early as 2008 that the *Direct Line/Conversation* programming had already lost considerable audience share (perhaps owing to cognitive dissonance, as the gap between word and deed grew larger). Paradoxically, increased theatricality seems to have alienated Putin’s audience: a survey of audience share for *Conversations* and *Direct Lines* produced between 2001 and 2013 indicates that dropping percentages and increased theatricality seem to correlate inversely. Theatricality, after all, goes hand-in-glove with “truthiness” rather than truth, and Russians are learning to distinguish between the two.<sup>50</sup>

## Postscript

Perhaps motivated by low ratings, in fall 2013 the Kremlin announced the demise of the *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin* and their intention to replace it with an extended press conference (Agence France–Presse 2013). In a Russia where even the performance of democracy has been canceled, one might well ask what democracy means for Russia today, if anything at all. Apparently, however, like a Broadway musical, the performance of democracy can be revived: a new production of the *Direct Line* appeared in April 2014 in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and ensuing skirmishes with Ukraine. Although structurally similar to the 2013 *Direct Line*, this one seemed hastily produced: the meticulously choreographed off-site scenarios were largely absent, much of the conversation focused on Crimea, and the whole event lasted less than four hours. The objective of the 2014 *Direct Line* — to justify Russian aggression and pump national patriotism — felt obvious.

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49. For example, foreign adoption: in 2011, Putin defended it, but by 2013, it had become an abomination in his eyes.

50. Comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term “truthiness” to describe statements — mostly by politicians — that seem true, are only sort of true, or perhaps include elements of truth, but aren’t technically true.

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