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(2001-2017)

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ABSTRACT

Even people who are not experts on contemporary Russia have heard about the annual phone-in programme *Pryamaya Liniya*, when Russian citizens may ask their president a question. This event draws attention of the main international mass-media every year. The show itself is a complicated media and political undertaking. This article analyses this programme in its complexity and how it changed through the years (2011-2017) in order to show the changes in Vladimir Putin's public appearance. *Pryamaya Liniya* is approached as medium which allows to observe subtle socio-political dynamics characteristic for contemporary Russia. Over 15 editions, the programme has acquired numerous roles. It is a tool to project the leader's image coherent with tradition, and also a tool to project an image of Russian society. It's a political ritual which creates/strengthens a sense of national unity (e.g. after the annexation of Crimea). It can also serve as a means of communication with the external environment. Last but not least it is a method of disciplining local elites.

Despite consistent high results in polls for popularity and social trust (since the annexation of Crimea, again exceeding 80%)¹ Vladimir Putin does not leave his public image to chance. In this article I focus on one of the tools used to shape and promote the attractive image of a political leader—Vladimir Putin's annual phone-in “conversation” with Russian citizens, which has become an identifiable feature of the post-Soviet Russian landscape. The annual show is commonly called *Pryamaya Liniya* or *Telemost*² (literally “TV-bridge”, i.e. a live video connection between two locations). Between 2001, when the first programme aired, and 2011 ten were organized. During this time Vladimir Putin served two presidential terms and became prime minister. Despite the fact that he left the Kremlin for the Russian White House in 2008³ he continued with the programme.⁴ After a year's pause and newly elected to his third presidential term, Putin decided to reboot the format in 2013. In this article I will analyse the content of the programmes between 2001-2017.

From 2001-2011 Putin's legitimacy remained stable, despite the fact he changed his political office. This is reflected in the coherence and continuity which can be observed in the programme's format and overall tone. The third presidential term marked at first by anti-regime protests and then by the annexation of Crimea created new circumstances for Vladimir Putin's mandate. Considering the year 2013 a dividing line, I will analyse the *Telemosts* in two parts, i.e. 2001-2011 and 2013-2017.

The annual show is usually labelled a propaganda tool and this can hardly be contested.⁵ Neverthe-

1 In 2017 82% of respondents declared their trust in Vladimir Putin, while almost 57% expressed the opinion that things in Russia were going in the right direction. Oktyabr'skiye reytingi, 2017, available at <https://www.levada.ru/2017/10/26/oktyabrskie-rejtingi/>, accessed 12 December 2017.

2 Hereinafter, when referring to the programme in general, the name *Telemost* is used in order to avoid confusion (the exact title of the programme has changed over the years).

3 The headquarters of the Russian government.

4 Dmitry Medvedev tried to develop his own mode of mass-communication with citizens by using a video-blog. Dmitry Yagodin. 2012. “Blog Medvedev: Aiming for Public Consent”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64, 8: 1415-1434.

5 Some participants of *Telemost* admitted that they asked questions which were given to them by the programme's organisers. See: *Telemost s Prezidentom Putinyim – kommentarii ekspertov*, available at: <http://www.demos-center.ru/comments/6585.html>, accessed 10 August 2013. *Telemost v Kazani proshel pod grifom «Sekretno»*, 2007, available at: <http://kp.by/daily/23987/75785/>, accessed 10 August 2013. *V obstanovke strogoj sekretnosti*, 2007, available at http://www.ng.ru/politics/2007-10-19/3_topsecret.html, accessed 10 August 2013. In 2017 a piece of information was leaked that the guests in the studio were being trained two days before the show was held in a special wellness place managed by presidential administration. *S uchastnikami pryamoy linii s Putinyim proveli instruktazh*, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/06/2017/594012e89a79472052f8b7fa>, accessed 14 June 2017. Another piece of information about the ways to manage the flow of questions during the broadcast was revealed by the Russian section of BBC. *SMI:*

less, *Telemost* merits closer examination. The transcripts⁶ of these programs provide information on what kind of image of political leadership is being promoted. *Telemost* serves as a tool for projecting an image of Vladimir Putin that fits the traditional Russian vision of power.⁷ Furthermore, the programme reaffirms two aspects of this vision, i.e. not only that of an (almost) omnipotent power holder but also that of a weak and vulnerable society. Finally, the evolution of the programme's format reflects how the regime itself has changed. The main goal of this article is to analyse the *Telemost* programme in its complexity and how it changed through the years (2011-2017) in order to show the changes in Vladimir Putin's public appearance. *Pryamaya Liniya* is approached as medium which allows to observe subtle socio-political dynamics characteristic for contemporary Russia. By analysing the evolution of the program I aim at reconstructing the evolution of the image of Vladimir Putin as well as at indentifying socio-political roles (functions) acquired by the programme during its 15 editions.

Today experts admit that Vladimir Putin has a strong appeal.⁸ During his first presidential campaign in 2000 his biggest advantage was the contrast with Boris Yeltsin – Putin presented himself as a young, energetic, competent (also due to the career in the KGB/FSB) and – last but not least – abstinent technocrat.⁹ However, Putin was not a natural born charismatic leader. In the beginning he had difficulties earning Russians' trust. It can be well observed in the results of the project conducted by Russian sociologist Elena Shestopal and her team on the image of the political leadership in Russia.¹⁰ Shestopal

neudobnyye voprosy dlya pryamoy linii odobrili v Kremle, <http://fedpress.ru/news/77/policy/1807046>, accessed 21 June 2017.

6 All references made in the article to Putin's performance in *Telemost* are based on transcript records which are available on-line:

2001: http://www.v-v-putin.ru/dialog_with_people_year2001.html, accessed 20 August 2012.

2002: <http://www.linia2002.ru/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

2003: <http://www.linia2003.ru/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

2005: <http://www.linia2005.ru/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

2006: <http://www.linia2006.ru/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

2007: <http://www.president-line.ru/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

2008: <http://2008.moskva-putinu.ru/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

2009: <http://2009.moskva-putinu.ru/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

2010: <http://2010.moskva-putinu.ru/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

2011: <http://www.moskva-putinu.ru/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

2013: <http://www.moskva-putinu.ru/>, accessed 27 May 2013.

2014: <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/20796>, accessed 10 May 2014.

2015: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49261>, accessed 10 November 2016.

2016: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51716>, accessed 10 November 2016.

2017: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54790>, accessed 10 December 2017.

7 See Per-Arne Bodin, Stefan Hedlund, Elena Namli, eds. 2012. *Power and Legitimacy - Challenges from Russia*. London-New York Routledge. Andrzej Walicki. 1979. *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press. James Billington. 1966. *Icon and Axe: An Interpretative History of Russian Culture*. New York-Toronto: Knopf. Larisa Andreyeva. 2007. *Sakralizatsiya vlasti v istorii khristianskoy tsivilizatsii*. Moskva: Lodomir. Dmitri Slizovskiy, Natalia Shulenina. 2006. *Politicheskoye liderstvo v Rossii: istoriya, opyt, problem*. Moskva: IRUDN. Robert Thucker. 1988. *Political Culture and Leadership in Soviet Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev*. New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company. Seweryn Bialer. 1980. *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability and Change in the Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. George Breslauer. 2002. *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

8 Richard Sakwa. 2008. "Putin's Leadership: Character and Consequences". *Europe-Asia Studies*. 60, 6: 879-897. Helena Goscilo, ed. 2012. *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London-New York: Routledge. Alexander Pravda, ed. 2005. *Leading Russia: Putin in Perspective: Essays in Honour of Archie Brown*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.

9 Andrew Wilson, 2005. *Virtual Politics. Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*. New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 101-102. Daniel Treisman. 2011. "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin". *American Journal of Political Science*, 55, 3: 594.

10 Elena Shestopal, ed. 2009. *Obrazy rossiyskoy vlasti. Ot El'tsina do Putina*. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 212, 328-354. See also Elena Shestopal, ed. 2012. *Psikhologiya politicheskogo vospriyatiya v sovremennoy Rossii*. Moscow: ROSSPEN. Nelli Romanovich. 2009. *Formirovaniye i vsproizvodstvo obraza vlasti v rossiyskom obshchestve*. Voronezh: Vo-

distinguished three main dimensions of a leader's image, namely: strength, activity, attractiveness.¹¹ Strength is associated with political impact, efficiency, authority, might and omnipotence. Activity is manifested in initiatives, decisions, deeds. Attractiveness is based on four features – physical (e.g. age, height, health, appearance), psychological (e.g. character, personality, capacity for emotional communication), moral (e.g. views, coherence of views and deeds) and competence (e.g. rhetoric skills, public appearance). Research conducted in 2000-2003 by the team lead by Elena Shestopal confirmed that Putin's parameter of attractiveness was high, especially its physical and psychological aspects.¹² He was also perceived as active. However, in evaluating Putin's strength, some respondents expressed doubts about his real independence from Yeltsin's coterie.¹³ Vladimir Putin's greatest weakness was emotional communication – he seemed cold, non-empathic, distant and was often characterised as a “Teflon guy” which referred to his unsympathetic and cold bearing. People were not sure if he could relate to them, understand their needs and share their worries.¹⁴ He seemed neither to fit the image of a tsar nor a *gensek* (general secretary), neither an “everyman” nor an “extraordinary personality”. He gave an impression of being a reserved, Western-style technocrat.¹⁵ The format of *Pryamaya Liniya* – an exclusive channel of communication between the leader and citizens turned out to be useful in overcoming these initial weaknesses of Vladimir Putin's public appearance.¹⁶

ronzh University Press. Sergei Kapterev 2005. *Autoritet gosudarstvennoy vlasti i protsessy transformatsii v sovremennoy Rossii*. Nizhniy Novgorod: INGU, 292.

11 See Shestopal. *Obrazy rossiyskoy vlasti...*, 241.

12 Ibid., 328-354. The team of researchers led by Elena Shestopal continued the project until 2011. For the entire period of 2003-2011 the three aspects of Putin's image (attractiveness, activity, power) did not change significantly. One of the few new tendencies was that after 2003 respondents focused more on Putin's activity than his individual features. Elena Shestopal, ed. 2012. *Psikhologiya politicheskogo vospriyatiya...*, 287-294, 303-304.

13 Shestopal. *Obrazy rossiyskoy vlasti...*, 175-179.

14 Ibid., 330-351.

15 Elena Shestopal, Tatiana Pishcheva, Yevgeny Gikavy, Vasily Zorin. 2004. ‘The Image of V.V. Putin in the Consciousness of Russia's Citizens’. *Sociological Research*, 43, 6: 22-56.

16 The takeover of private mass-media in 2003 was instrumental for the Kremlin in shaping and promoting a coherent image of the president. See Tina Burrett. 2010. *Television and Presidential Power in Putin's Russia*. New York-London: Routledge. Julien Nocetti. 2011. “Digital Kremlin”: Power and the Internet in Russia”. *Russie.Nei.Visions*, 59. Alexei Sidorenko. 2011. “Russian Digital Dualism: Changing Society, Manipulative State”. *Russie.Nei.Visions*, 63.

1. THE EVOLUTION OF THE FORMAT OF *PRYAMAYA LINIYA* (2001-2011)

What makes *Telemost* so interesting is that it has become a ritualised situation of direct and recurrent contact between the leader and citizens. Other PR actions associated with the leader usually have an incidental character (e.g. reports from his “spontaneous” visits to the supermarket¹⁷, him giving a watch to an ordinary worker¹⁸ etc.).¹⁹ The programme is special, firstly, because of its scale and impact in Russia (and arguably in all of the post-Soviet space)²⁰; secondly, (despite the obvious manipulations) due to the participation of society cast in a double role of participants and viewers.

The programme is a complicated media and political undertaking. Although the show is commonly termed *Telemost* (literally, a live, televised connection between the president in the studio and citizens from specific, preselected locations) this form of connection is in fact just one of the many elements of the programme. Questions are also posed via the Internet (a few days before the broadcast a webpage is set up to collect questions from citizens; the president chooses a few of these questions and answers them at the end of the show), by telephone during the programme, and (since 2005) by text message. The programme is broadcast live on state-TV channels and radio stations. The length of the show increased yearly – the first one lasted two and a half hours, while the one in 2011 took up four and a half hours. Citizens from all of the Russian Federation were included in the programme in accordance with the principle of the geographical representation of Russian regions (e.g. the Far East, Siberia, the Caucasus). Since 2002 there has practically always been at least one question from a village and from a military base. Interestingly, from 2002-2007 (and again in 2014) a *telemost* was established also with cities outside Russia.²¹

On average, two million questions were addressed to the president during each programme between 2001-2011. They were dominated by domestic issues (pensions, housing, unemployment, corruption, health care, social issues, interethnic tensions), with about six times as many on this subject as those related to foreign policy.²²

17 In 2009 Vladimir Putin visited a Moscow supermarket and scolded the manager for the excessive profit margins on pork meat. Putin's pork price chop, URL: <http://www.euronews.com/2009/06/25/putin-s-pork-price-chop> (3.05.2013).

18 While visiting a factory in 2009 Putin gave his luxurious Swiss watch as a gift to one of the workers. *Vladimir Putin hands over Swiss watch to astonished factory worker*, 2009, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/16/putin-swiss-watch-factory-worker>, accessed 3 May 2013.

19 Helena Goscilo. 2012. “Russia’s Ultimate Celebrity: VVP as VIP Objet d’art”, in: *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. Helena Goscilo, 10-29.

20 Other leaders of the post-Soviet republics tried to imitate Vladimir Putin’s annual conversation with the nation, e.g. Mikhail Saakashvili and, on a local scale, Viktor Yanukovich.

21 See Table No. 1. In the post-Crimea’s annexation geopolitical reality it might be hard to imagine but in 2004 (24 October) three Ukrainian TV channels (UT-1, Inter, 1+1) organised a similar in format phone-in program with Vladimir Putin in Kiev. The citizens of Ukraine could present their questions to the Russian president either by calling or posting them on the website www.vopros-putinu.com. The name of the programme was “Vladimir Putin. Pryamoy Efir” (*Владимир Путин. Прямой Эфир*). *Interv’yu ukrainskim telekanalam «UT-1», «Inter» i «1+1»*, 2004, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/32015>, accessed 16 October 2016. The program lasted for one hour and Putin answered 33 out of 140 000 questions. According to the data provided by the Kremlin, 22 million people watched this show. *V khode pryamogo efira trekh ukrainskikh obshchenatsional’nykh kanalov Vladimir Putin otvetil na voprosy telezriteley*, 2004, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/32015>, accessed 16 October 2016.

22 The programme in 2014 was an exception to this routine.

Most questions came from pensioners, students and the intelligentsia (scientists, teachers, doctors). Usually there was also a farmer, a soldier, a manual labourer, and a representative of the arms industry. It is worth noting that representatives of groups important for a modern state, i.e. legal experts, businessmen, representatives of NGOs, etc. only rarely appeared in the programme.

All in all, from 2001-2011, the programme was shown every year (ten shows all together) except for 2004, when Putin instead answered questions put to him by journalists during a press conference²³. In general, each programme in this period had three phases: the opening, in which Putin presented a panoramic overview of state affairs, the main phase, when questions from different sources were answered, and the closing phase, in which Putin answered questions he had handpicked before the beginning of the programme. The format of *Telemost* evolved during these years.

Table No. 1. An overview of the evolution of the programme's format (2001-2011)

Year	Changes
2002	Villages
2002 - 2007	Cities from outside Russia: Dushanbe (Tajikistan), Kant air-base (Kyrgyzstan), Riga (Latvia), Sevastopol (Ukraine)
2005	text message-questions
2006	Additional broadcasters: Rossiya 24, RTR Planeta, Mir, Russia Today
2008	Studio audience
2008	Live video connections with selected places visited earlier by Prime Minister Putin
2009	Questions from representatives of local government
2009	Monogoroda
2011	Electoral campaign show

(Author, based on transcripts)

During the first meetings, the focus was on a direct video connection with selected cities (*telemost*). Initially telephone calls to the studio were featured less prominently, but over time their share in the show gradually increased. In order to expand the reach of the programme, in 2006 additional TV channels were engaged (e.g. Russia Today). A major change took place when Putin became prime minister in 2008. Then a new important element was added – guests in the studio (previously Putin had been accompanied only by two journalists). This prolonged the format and reduced the number of direct connections with cities: from 2007 to 2011 they dropped from 13 to 5. Since 2008 the cities featured were the ones which Putin, acting as prime minister, had visited earlier the same year. What is more, questions were asked by the people gathered not out of doors in the city but indoors, e.g. in closed, more easily controlled environments such as a factory, university, military base. Each session started with greetings and praise for the prime minister, giving him the opportunity to present himself as an efficient host. In comparison to President Putin, Prime Minister Putin formulated his answers in the wider context of the activity of United Russia, made declarations on behalf of the party, and referred to its initiatives, legislative projects etc.²⁴

²³ *Ezhegodnaya press-konferentsiya Vladimira Putina*, 2004, available at: <http://lenta.ru/russia/2004/12/23/putini/>, accessed 15 August 2013.

²⁴ For instance, Putin expressed his conviction that deputies for the State Duma from *Yedinaya Rossiya (Единая Россия)* would vote to reform the bill on medical insurance in 2008. There were also a few questions asked by the viewers about the party, its functioning, structures etc. Available at: <http://2008.moskva-putinu.ru/> accessed 10 August

Table No. 2. *Telemost* in numbers (2001-2011)

Year	Duration	Number of questions (in millions) ¹	Number of answers	Number of live video connections with cities (telemosts)
2001	2 h 30 min	400 000	46	9
2002	2 h 43 min	1.4	51	10
2003	2 h 50 min	1.5	68	11
2005	2 h 53 min	1.15	60	11
2006	2 h 54 min	2.33	55	11
2007	3 h 6 min	2.5	68	13
2008	3 h 8 min	2.2	72	7
2009	4 h 2 min	2.27	80	7
2010	4 h 25 min	2.06	88	7
2011	4 h 32 min	1.8	over 90	5

(Author, based on transcripts)

The reduction of live video conversations with citizens affected the style of the programme. Although the meetings on previous shows were staged to a great extent, they nevertheless gave the programme a certain interactive quality. With the introduction of studio guests the show lost some of this quality and evolved towards a talk-show like format. Another symptom of this evolution was the shift in the profile of president's collocutors – during first shows he talked to “common citizens”, who seemed as if they had spontaneously gathered in the city centre to talk to the president. After 2009, with the onset of the international financial crisis, Putin increasingly talked to employees of a specific company, most often from *monogorods* (*моногорода*, towns where the economy is dominated by one industry as a result of Soviet era planning) which suffered due to the decreased demand.²⁵ As a result of this, the video connection was no longer with the population of the location but with carefully selected representatives of social groups. The effect of the programme, which in the beginning was meant to give the impression of providing all Russian citizens with a chance to speak with the president, was thus lost.

One of the most symbolic changes in the programme was the change of its name. In 2001-2008 it was officially called “Direct Line with the President of the Russian Federation” (*Pryamaya Liniya z prezidentom Rossiyskoy Federacyi*), while in 2009 it changed to “Conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continuation...” (*Razgovor s Vladimirom Putinom. Prodolzhenie...*). This change – the stress on continuation and replacing the title with the name of an actual person – symbolised the fact that the format was not a ritual connected to the post of the head of state, but a tool to reinforce the personal connection between Vladimir Putin and Russian society, and as such serving the personalisation of power and strengthening the charisma of the leader.

2013.

25 For example: Naberezhnye Chelny, Pikalyovo, Tolyatti, Nizhny Tagil.

2. VLADIMIR PUTIN'S APPEARANCE AND IMAGE IN *PRYAMAYA LINIYA* (2001-2011)

Although the format evolved, the purpose of the programme stayed the same – to create, strengthen and promote the desired image of the political leader. Putin was quick to learn how to use *Telemost* in order to improve on his biggest deficit, that being, emotional communication. This weakness was apparent in the first transmission in 2001, during which, e.g. he still addressed citizens as sir and madam, and reacted to comments, questions and complaints in a rather dry, emotionless manner and in short, technical answers (I understand, I got it, etc.). He then continually improved his performance and by the end of his first term managed to convey a much more authentic image, e.g. by often expressing his understanding for those he was talking to (in 2005: I share your doubts, I understand your pain, etc.)²⁶. His improvement is evident also in his newly acquired directness and familiarity – he started talking with citizens as to his peers, e.g. by using short forms of a name (e.g. Katya instead of Ekaterina).²⁷ Another example of how he overcame the initial impression of stiffness are certain seemingly spontaneous reactions, e.g. he would request a question from an audience member different than the one the journalist wanted (in 2010). However, although he managed to cast off the bureaucratic aura of a technocrat, this did not interfere with the general feeling of competence and self-confidence of the “CEO of Russia”. Commentators recognise his good factual preparation²⁸ – Putin consistently managed to create an impression that he knows about every tiny detail of what is going on in Russia.

On the basis of the analysis of transcripts, I distinguish the five following characteristic aspects of Vladimir Putin's appearance in *Telemost*. Firstly, Putin's language – his way of expressing himself is his great strength.²⁹ Michael S. Gorham distinguishes five styles of Vladimir Putin's oratorical performance. Depending on the audience he is talking to, the president can present himself as a technocrat, *delovoi* (no nonsense, practical), a *silovik* (strong man), a *muzhik* (good ol' boy) and a patriot. The technocrat style underlines competence; *delovoi* – activity; *silovik* – the character of a strong man and *muzhik* refers to a man who is “one of us”, somebody with common sense.³⁰ During *Telemost* Putin is provided with an opportunity to present all his styles. Putin in *Telemost* is sharp, confident, ironic and witty. Participants from the ranks of state or local administration must tread carefully, as Putin is swift in rebuking them. After the programme some of his comments or *bon mots* become popular among the general public.³¹ Putin skilfully employs colloquial language to convey an atmosphere of familiarity and

26 Responding to Ekaterina from Golovchino.

27 This strategy has sometimes backfired, e.g. he was rebuffed in 2012 by a journalist who, upon being addressed Masha, answered the president with “thank you, Vova” (I owe this remark to one of the reviewers). However, it's important to stress that no such situation has ever occurred during *Telemost*.

28 Even if Putin happened to have weaker moments during programmes, the comments afterwards were positive. *Vladimir Putin hints at return to presidency*, 2009, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/dec/03/vladimir-putin-return-president-tv>, accessed 15 August 2013. *Vladimir Kara-Murza - o telemoste Putina*, 2010, available at: <http://www.svobodanews.ru/articleprintview/2250507.html>, accessed 15 August 2013. *Telemost mezhdru prezidentom Putinyim i stranoy*, 2005, available at: <http://www.svobodanews.ru/articleprintview/106523.html>, accessed 15 August 2013.

29 Michael Gorham. 2012. “Putin's Language”, in: *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. Helena Gosciolo, 82-103.

30 Ibid., 83-96.

31 In 2011 a collection of Putin's quotations was published, including some from *Telemost*. See *Tak govoril Putin: o*

relaxedness.³² He uses comparisons – often in the unique Russian context³³ – and rhetorical questions. Moreover, when answering a question or addressing an issue he usually moves from the general to the particular level, which creates the impression that he is well informed about the general state of affairs but at the same time understands the drama of an individual. He underlines that each case is different and deserves his attention.³⁴

Secondly, Putin's sense of humour is another strong point. Perhaps the most illustrative for this point are anecdotes he has told on the programme about his time at the KGB. A good example of this is his answer given at the 2001 *Telemost* – when asked about his impression of the time spent together with George W. Bush on his private ranch in Texas, Putin replied that the American president showed great courage in deciding to welcome a former Soviet spy into his house. This anecdote – implying that Putin is so skilful and even dangerous as to be able to exploit even a simple visit – illustrates Putin's use of humour to portray himself as a man of competence, experienced in dealing with difficult tasks in demanding circumstances.

Putin's sense of humour is especially well employed in the closing phase of the show, when he answers brief, personal questions which he picks out earlier himself. e.g., asked about who governs the Russian Federation, when they (the power authorities) sleep, he said: "We sleep in shifts". His beaming self-confidence is reinforced with his self-deprecation, e.g. he admitted that despite the efforts to learn ice hockey he still skated with the grace of a cow (2012); or when one citizen asked whether he suffered from depression, as all outstanding personalities do, and how he dealt with it, Putin answered, "I don't consider myself outstanding and therefore I don't have problems with depression" (2009).

This leads us on to the third characteristic – during transmissions Putin relatively successfully conveys the impression that he is a person who common Russians can relate to; that he is just an everyman like all his other fellow citizens whose worries he is well familiar with. He shows empathy and often refers to his personal experience (e.g. that he also had a low income when he was starting his carrier³⁵; he owned an old *zaporozhets* – a Soviet era subcompact car³⁶ etc.) – both of these elements have been of crucial importance for overcoming his previous problems with the "Teflon guy" image. How successful Putin was in projecting the image of "just an ordinary guy" is evidenced by a phenomenon which first appeared in the 2009 *Telemost*—citizens who introduce themselves as Putin's friends ("*drug Vladimira Vladimirovicha*"). These are usually people who met Putin during one of his visits in their town or place of work. They always underline Putin's openness ("we had some tea together, we chatted") and efficiency (they claim that his visits changed things for better).³⁷

Lara Ryazanova-Clarke states that during *Telemost* Putin's authority is constructed from three roles deeply rooted in the Russian political tradition. These roles are: military commander, competent tech-

sebe, o narode, o Vselennyi. 2011. Moscow: Eksmo. The same year another book was published – a guide on how to talk like Putin. Gennady Ogibin. 2011. *Govorit' kak Putin? Govorit' luchshe Putina!* Moskva: EKSMO.

32 "Colloquial" might mean that Vladimir Putin also uses unprintable words. In 2010, he used the term "scoundrel" (*skotina*) to describe the Russian agent who changed sides and disclosed the Russian spy network working in the US. *SMI: Putin vo vremya "pryamoy linii" zabyl o Medvedeve i udivlyal gruboy leksikoy*, 2010, available at http://txt.newsru.com/russia/17dec2010/putin_2.html, accessed 1 December 2016.

33 For instance, in 2009 he compared the consumerist zeal of so called new Russians to the fashion from Brezhnev's time to get golden teeth.

34 For a detailed analysis of how the discourse is constructed during the program (on the example of *Telemost* -2007) see Lara Ryazanova-Clarke. 2012. "The Discourse of a Spectacle at the End of the Presidential Term", in: *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. Helena Goscilo, 104-125. For an analysis of the non-verbal elements of Putin's performance during *Telemost* see Weronika Schmidt. 2013. *Die Putin-Show - Ein Blick hinter die Kulissen: Strategien positiver (Selbst-)Darstellung am Beispiel Wladimir Putins*. Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag.

35 In 2001 he sympathized with a young soldier who complained about his low income.

36 In conversation with a pensioner who complained about her expensive car insurance in 2003 Putin recalled having similar problems with his old *zaporozhets*.

37 For instance, in 2009 Aleksander Astrakhantsev from the shipyard in Komsomolsk on Amur, Yevgeni Denk from Novokuznetsk, in 2010 a woman from Aksinovo-Zilovsk etc.

nocrat, cult figure.³⁸ Importantly, these roles are skilfully combined with the popular impression that Vladimir Putin is *chelovek kak vse* (a man like us). However, Putin has also been careful not to let this image erode his aura of uniqueness. Quite the opposite: each *Telemost* is a testimony to Putin's extraordinary potential and indispensability – he never leaves a question unanswered, he takes bureaucrats to task,³⁹ he is strong and uncompromising.⁴⁰

The aura of virtual omnipotence is connected to the fourth characteristic – Putin's personal interventions in favour of citizens wronged by bureaucrats. For instance, during the first show a 10-year old boy, Pasha from Ust-Kut, complained to Putin about the lack of heating in his school. The president answered, "I can't imagine that the governor wouldn't help [...]. I'm sure he is listening now to our conversation and will do whatever is necessary to restore the heating as fast as possible". After the programme the mayor of Ust-Kut was dismissed.⁴¹ Such personal interventions are a very important element of the programme. This is the way Putin proves his power and efficiency in front of all the viewers in real time and a feeling is created that there is nothing he could not do, change or fix – he just needs to be informed about it by the citizens. This image fits perfectly with the traditional scheme of "good tsar, bad boyars". Interventions not only allow Putin to create a buffer between himself and the inefficient bureaucracy⁴² but also help create an image that he is a man of his word. Illustrative of this is an example from the 2001 show: a caller, Tatyana Desyuk, wanted to know the plans for installing gas pipelines in her town – Putin promised to have it checked and at the end of the show he announced that Gazprom had just informed him that it would be completed in the following two months. Obviously, this remarkably swift reaction of Gazprom was not a coincidence.

One special "subcategory" are Putin's promises made to children who very often address him as "Uncle Vova". In 2008 the president invited a girl from Buryatia with her family to spend New Year's Eve in Moscow. One year later he promised another girl that each pupil of her school would be provided with a computer. Such interventions are aimed at underlining Putin's sensitiveness, kindness and care for the most vulnerable members of the society. The impression is conveyed of a good-hearted man who will not hesitate to make a child's dream come true.⁴³

Lastly, the fifth characteristic I would like to underline is the praise and acknowledgment which Putin receives from participants during the programme.⁴⁴ This was particularly emphasised during the show in 2011, which preceded the elections for the third presidential term. The programme was in fact a huge election rally in support of Putin. The number of live connections with different locations was strongly reduced and replaced by studio guests who represented the Russian elite.⁴⁵ The guests,

38 Ryazanova-Clarke. "The Discourse of a Spectacle...", 120-123.

39 According to popular conviction, the governor of Irkutsk Boris Govorin lost his post due to the complaints which had been made during *Telemost* in 2001 and 2002. This was even suggested live on air by the journalist hosting the *Pryamaya Liniya* in 2005.

40 The importance of the feature of "indispensability" is well illustrated by the example of the social perception of Dmitry Medvedev during his presidency. He was attributed with youth, intelligence and competence. Respondents described him as "an ordinary man" but, in contrast to Putin, they denied him the feature of *tsarskaya groza*. Medvedev's image was contextualised in the image of the tandem with Putin and seriously flawed by the fact that he was perceived as weak, soft and dependent. Shestopal. *Psikhologiya politicheskogo vospriyatiya v sovremennoy Rossii...*, 276-279.

41 During the *Priamaya Liniya* the following year (2002), the plot of Ust-Kuta re-emerged because of another complaint about the heating. This was the case which purportedly cost the governor Boris Govorin his post.

42 Another good example of this is from the 2005 show—after reading the letter of a pensioner Ludmila Karashentsova from Stavropol with complaints about the broken water supply system, Putin assured her that until the system was fixed he would not approve the appointment of the new governor Aleksander Chernogorov.

43 A similar function is fulfilled by manifestations of Vladimir Putin's tenderness with animals. Tatiana Mikhailova. 2012. "Putin as the Father of the Nation: His Family and Other Animals", in: *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. Helena Goscilo, 69-78.

44 However, it's important to notice that there are always two or three critical voices and "difficult" questions allowed in each programme (e.g. in 2011: about the accusation of rigging elections to the Duma or the fact that Putin got booed during the MMA event in November 2011), which adds to the semblance of credibility.

45 There were 28 special guests, including: Olga Budina (actress), Andranik Migranyan (political scientist), Tatiana Ustinova (writer), Nikita Mikhalkov (film director), Valery Gergiev (conductor), Vladimir Solovyov (journalist), Natalia

together with ordinary citizens, kept expressing their gratitude to Putin, recalling his achievements, successes and criticising the ministers. The best example of this support is probably the case of Igor Kholmanskikh, a worker at a tank factory in Nizhny Tagil, who offered help in dealing with protests in Moscow. During a live connection with his factory he said: “If the police aren’t able to deal with [the protests], then we, me and my colleagues, we are ready to fix it, naturally with respect to the law”. For this Kholmanskikh was subsequently rewarded by the newly elected President Vladimir Putin with a senior government post.⁴⁶

Narochnitskaya, Yevgeny Primakov (former prime minister) and Aleksei Venediktov (Echo of Moscow radio station).

⁴⁶ Igor Kholmanskikh, *Man Who Threatened Protesters, Given Top Job*, 2012, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/18/igor-kholmanskikh-putin_n_1526902.html, accessed 15 August 2013.

3. *PRYAMAYA LINIYA* IN THE THIRD PRESIDENTIAL TERM: FROM THE BOLOTNAYA SQUARE PROTESTS TO “CRIMEAN” PATRIOTISM (2013-2017)

During Putin’s third presidential term, from 2013-2017 five *Telemosts* were organised. In this relatively short time it was possible to observe significant dynamics in social attitudes towards the programme due to the geopolitical and domestic changes in Russia. The *Telemosts* in 2013 and 2014 represent two *sui generis* cases, with the former ranking the lowest and the latter the highest in terms of popularity among Russian citizens. Three subsequent programmes in 2015, 2016 and 2017, held in the “post-Crimean reality”, already show a certain continuity, which allows old patterns to be observed as well as new tendencies in *Telemost*. Throughout this time Vladimir Putin’s performance is the most stable element of the programme and it does not differ from the 2001-2011 period.

GENERAL CHANGES IN THE FORMAT (2013-2017)

The third presidential term started with the programme being renamed—“Direct Line with Vladimir Putin”. The new title references the original name, but substitutes the name of the post with the name of the person. Thus, it’s been made clear (again) that the show is about Vladimir Putin regardless of his official post. Other changes in the format come down to introducing new technical means of conveying citizens’ questions to the president. Apart from calling or emailing him, Russians can now also send a MMS, a video-message, make a video-call, or post a question on the most popular Russian social networks – *Vkontakte* and *Odnoklasniki*, also through the service OK LIVE. What’s more, since 2017 due to the use of the platform SN Wall (*#СмтпорюЛинию*) already during the programme journalists quoted comments about the on-going show posted in real time on the main social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, *Vkontakte*). The general tendency is to broaden the ways of asking questions, partly to encourage young people to watch *Pryamaya Liniya*. Including social media on a bigger scale has created opportunity for people living outside Russia to post their questions as well. In 2017 for the first time appeared questions of “ordinary foreigners” - a video posted by Jeremy Bowling from Arizona and Dmitri’s call from Kiev.

In 2013-2016, the main structure of the programme remained unchanged. Through most of the air-time viewers saw Vladimir Putin in the studio among guests – public figures, experts and ordinary Russians. The live video connections (5-6 per programme) were limited to a specific group of people (selected social targets). A change in this routine came in 2017. This time guests in studio asked only 10 questions, while over twice as many questions were raised during 12 live video connections.⁴⁷ As it was explained in the beginning of the show already within the process of collecting citizens’ questions (twelve days ahead of the programme), some issues were selected for the live coverage. Later on report-

⁴⁷ These live connections allowed to cover the whole spectrum of problems: a dangerous garbage dump in Balashikha (in the suburbs of Moscow) and dwellers of the Olkhon island (Baikal) complaining about too strict ecological regulations; a single mother living in a substitute accommodation (village Krasnokumskoe) and similar cases in Izhevsk and Nyagyan; proud engineers of the largest existing icebreaker “Arctic” in the Baltic Shipyard (Sankt Petersburg) as well as equally proud builders of a football stadion (in Kaliningrad) and a new airport Platov (Rostov on Don); a suffering from cancer young girl complaining about the state of medical service (Apatity) and an excited young father from the Centre of Mother and Child Care (Ufa); soldiers taking an oath at the Mamayev Kurgan (Volgograd) and teachers with their pupils from a provincial school in a village Krasnopolka.

ers were sent to meet with the people who posted the selected questions in order to give a live broadcast of this matter. Hence in 2017 the programme went back to its roots when live video connections played the main role.

Table No. 3. Changes in the format of the programme (2013-2017)

Year	Change
2013	New name "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin"
2014	Questions can be posed by video-message
2014	Simultaneous translation into sign language
2014	City outside Russia: Berlin (Germany)
2015	Questions via MMS
2016	Video-calls, questions through VKontakte
2016	Ecological issues raised for the first time
2017	Questions through Odnoklasniki and the service OK LIVE
2017	two questions from "ordinary foreigners" outside Russia (Ukraine and US)
2017	the use of the platform SN Wall (#СмтoрюЛинию)

(Author, based on transcripts)

PRYAMAYA LINIYA OF 2013

The main part of the almost 5-hour long (a so far record) *Telemost* in 2013 was dedicated to the studio guests. Most of them who actively took part in the show were not ordinary Russians but experts and representatives of the elites.⁴⁸ There were six live connections with different locations⁴⁹ However, they were very brief (two questions at most) and, as mentioned above, narrower in their social representation.⁵⁰ There was less humour and little in the way of anecdotes (and no references to KGB times either). The final impression was, as Tatiana Stanovaya observed⁵¹, that of a greater distance between the leader and the people.⁵² It is important to note that the programme received its worst audience ratings ever.

48 Among the prominent guests were: Aleksei Kudrin (former finance minister), Aleksei Venediktov (Echo of Moscow radio station), Aleksandr Prokhanov (writer) and Konstantin Remchukov (editor of *Nezavisimaya*).

49 Novoshakhtinsk, Prokhorovka, Lipetsk, Saint Petersburg, Sochi, Novosibirsk.

50 A large family from a village Novoshakhtinsk, war veterans from Prokhorovka, pilots from the Airforce Academy in Lipetsk, sportsmen in Sochi, a company of the Saint Petersburg Mariinsky Theatre and scholars from Novosibirsk *akademgorodok* (academic quarter).

51 Tatiana Stanovaya, *Kakiye novyye cherty Putina raskryla «Pryamaya liniya»*, 2015, available at: <http://carnegie.ru/2015/04/16/ru-59805/i79r>, accessed 10 November 2016.

52 *Virtuoz «pryamoy linii». Vladimir Putin provel odinnadtsatuyu «pryamuyu liniyu» s narodom, dobrodushno otvetiv na 85 loyal'nykh voprosov*, 2013, available at: http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/04/25_a_5280321.shtml, accessed 15 August 2013. *"Pryamaya liniya" Putina vylilas' boleye chem v 20 porucheniy*, 2013, available at: <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=1080581&tid=102954>, accessed 15 August 2013. *M.Prokhorov o pryamoy linii s V.Putinyim: Srezhissirovannoye shou*, 2013, available at: <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/25/04/2013/855789.shtml>, accessed 15 August 2013. *Chto ne tak s «Pryamoy liniyey» Putina?*, 2013, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=269&uid=114176>, ac-

Among 39% who watched it, only 54% found the president's answers satisfying, while 15% thought the programme was either boring or disappointing/irritating.⁵³

Table No. 4. *Telemost* in numbers (2013-2017)

Year	Duration	Number of questions (millions)	Number of answers	Number of live video connections with external locations
2013	4 h 47 min	over 3	85	6
2014	3 h 54 min	2.5	81	5
2015	3 h 57 min	3	74	6
2016	3 h 40 min	3	80	5
2017	3h 56 min	2,6	86	12

(Author, based on transcripts)

Commentators, however, underlined that this had been (so far) the sharpest programme in terms of the questions asked.⁵⁴ Putin used the programme to demonstrate his openness to dialogue. That is why people labelled as Putin's critics such as Aleksei Venediktov⁵⁵ or Konstantin Remchukov⁵⁶ were invited to the studio. On many occasions during the show Vladimir Putin supported the critical comments and allowed Medvedev's government to draw public dissatisfaction. He patronised other politicians, e.g. he publicly called Aleksei Kudrin (former finance minister, who was one of the guests in the studio) "a slacker" (*сачок*) and the mayor of Omsk, Vyacheslav Dvorakovsky "such a little pig!" (*вот, поросенок!*). In contrast, Putin referred to himself as "your humble servant"; again, he was "one of ordinary Russians" – he stressed his blue collar background and his father's veteran status.⁵⁷

Table No. 5. Viewers' impressions, VCIOM (2013-2017)

Respondents answers	2013 ²	2014 ³	2015 ⁴	2016 ⁵	2017 ⁶
I watched the show (in whole or just parts)	39%	46%	55%	54%	66%

cessed 15 August 2013.

53 *Boleye poloviny rossiyan sledili za «pryamoy liniyey» s Putinyem*, 2013, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=269&uid=114150>, accessed 15 August 2013.

54 *Na «pryamoy liniy» s Putinyem razreshili polemiku*, 2013, available at: <http://lenta.ru/news/2013/04/22/line/>, accessed 15 August 2013. Akram Murtazayev. 'Liniya Putina vedet k Kudrinu', 28 April, available at <http://rabkor.ru/opinion/2013/04/28/direct-line>, accessed 10 August 2013.

55 The editor-in-chief and host at the Echo of Moscow radio station.

56 The editor of the *Nezavisimaya* newspaper.

57 In general, the programme had an anti-establishment tone with Putin presenting himself as the defender of the working class, farmers and pensioners (the hard core of his electorate). When journalist Mikhail Leontyev criticised Aleksei Miller (the head of Gazprom) and Aleksei Kudrin, Putin wittily commented: "Thank you Misha, we have succeeded in giving Kudrin his comeuppance, we have given Miller an earful, and we have even bashed Chubais around".

Putin's appearance was	interesting ⁷	60%	87%	73%	69%	75%
	boring	13%	3%	7%	8%	6%
	disappointing and irritating	12%	-	4%	7%	5%
I'm satisfied by Putin's answers		54%	84%	81%	76%	88%

Considering the low popularity of the show, it seemed that with the 2013 *Telemost* the programme reached its limits. The effectiveness of *Telemost* in its present form in terms of reaffirming the bond between the leader and society became increasingly doubtful. In the course of the show, it seemed that this televised ritual had lost much of its appeal. However, a year later the surge in president's popularity caused by the annexation of Crimea (21 March 2014) saved the programme from falling victim to Russians' indifference.

PRYAMAYA LINIYA OF 2014

His popularity soaring, Putin started the annual conversation with the Russian nation on 17 April in a frenzied atmosphere sparked by the Ukrainian crisis. Apart from a few details⁵⁸, the format stayed practically unchanged. Nevertheless, as is evidenced by the reports in the mainstream media, many thought that it had been "the most exciting" show so far.⁵⁹ This opinion coincided with a significant rise in audience ratings. According to the VCIOM's estimations almost every second Russian (47%) watched the show.⁶⁰ The overwhelming majority (87%) found it interesting and were satisfied with the president's answers (83%).⁶¹ Never before had so many viewers so strongly identified with the president's words. The obvious reason for this success was the vehemently debated case of Crimea and the situation in Ukraine. Most questions raised during the almost four-hour long programme (this time the Kremlin apparently resisted the temptation to set another time-record) were dedicated to these two issues. Well aware of this, the organisers even opened a separate phone line just for the residents of Crimea. As a result, for the first time topics related to foreign policy clearly dominated the show, marginalising hitherto crucial domestic concerns. There was relatively little talk of the government and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Foreign policy re-emerged as a crucial source of the leader's legitimisation.

The focus on foreign affairs was also reflected in the live connections with five locations. Two of them were related to Crimea – one was Sevastopol and the other one Sochi whose residents wanted to be assured that the annexation would not have negative repercussions for the development of their region. Furthermore, the questions asked by representatives of the Valdai Discussion Club from the studio in

⁵⁸ See table no. 3.

⁵⁹ *Khorosho pogovorili*, 2014, available at: http://www.trud.ru/article/17-04-2014/1311452_xorosho_pogovorili.html, accessed 7 May 2014. *Psikhoterapevt Putin. Pryamaya liniya s prezidentom proshla v ideal'nom mire*, 2014, available at: <http://www.mk.ru/politics/article/2014/04/17/1016219-psihoterapevt-putin-pryamaya-liniya-s-prezidentom-proshla-v-idealnom-mire.html>, accessed 7 May 2014. *Vladimir Putin provel upryamuyu liniyu*, 2014, available at: <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2454577>, accessed 7 May 2014.

⁶⁰ *PRYAMAYA LINIYA S VLADIMIROM PUTINYM»: VPECHATLENIYA ZRITELEY*, 2014, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=114808>, accessed 10 May 2014. According to the Levada Center's polls, the number of the citizens who either watched the programme or learned of its content from other sources (Internet, newspapers) reached 59%. *"Pryamaya liniya" s Vladimirom Putinyem*, 2014, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/30-04-2014/pryamaya-liniya-s-vladimirom-putinyem>, accessed 10 May 2014.

⁶¹ *PRYAMAYA LINIYA S VLADIMIROM PUTINYM»: VPECHATLENIYA ZRITELEY*, 2014, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=114808>, accessed 10 May 2014.

Berlin were to prove that the Russian president was not isolated in the international arena.⁶² Only the *telemost* with two villages from the Far East (Novoye and Belgo), which suffered from floods, was related to the domestic scene.

In 2014 the studio was filled with prominent people whose allegiance to Putin was obvious, such as Ramzan Kadyrov, Dmitry Kiselyov⁶³ or Karen Shakhnazarov.⁶⁴ However, in another attempt to maintain a certain degree of credibility, there were a few guests associated with more critical positions, such as Konstantin Remchukov and Irina Prokhorova.⁶⁵ Although the latter tried to ask more “uncomfortable” questions, all in all the show delivered the impression of unstirred national unity and unanimous support for Putin’s policy. This was sealed especially by Irina Khakamada who, after being introduced by the host journalist as member of the opposition, named Vladimir Putin a “victor” and congratulated him on the bloodless “re-conquest” of Crimea.

No doubt for the purposes of strengthening support for the government’s handling of the situation in Ukraine, the 2014 *Telemost* attempted to project a consolidated and unified vision of society. The specific geopolitical context of the Ukrainian crisis also meant that this particular *Telemost* aimed at delivering certain messages to international audiences in Ukraine, the US, the EU and China⁶⁶. That said, the programme did not fail to deliver the standard message of the good leader and incompetent/corrupt officials.

By virtually unanimous consent among domestic commentators⁶⁷, the performance of Vladimir Putin during the 2014 show was perhaps his best so far.⁶⁸ As usual, the president was well prepared and focused, made a few promises and twice referred to his KGB past.⁶⁹ The most important element of Putin’s appearance was the sense of his rationality. In contrast to many viewers and studio guests whose comments sounded quite emotional, the president displayed a cool-headed attitude. He convincingly

62 There were five members of the Valdai Discussion Club: Alexander Rahr (Germany), Nicolai Petro (USA), Gabor Stier (Hungary), Gerhard Mangott (Austria), Arnaud Dubien (France). One of the participants from the Berlin Studio, Alexander Rahr praised the programme for “a unique mode of communication”. *Eksperty v FRG nazyvayut unikal’nym format “pryamoy linii” s Putinyem*, 2014, available at: <http://ria.ru/politics/20140417/1004348237.html>, accessed 7 May 2014.

63 Journalist from Russia Today.

64 Film director who signed the Letter of Support issued by Russian artists for Putin’s decision on annexing Crimea.

65 When the show took place, Irina Prokhorova was the leader of the party Civic Platform. During the show in 2014, ten people from the studio asked questions, among them: Karen Shakhnazarov, Andrei Norkin, Irina Khakamada, Irina Prokhorova, Sergei Lukyanenko, Dmitry Kiselyov, Yevgeny Artyukh, Irina Gromova, Konstantin Remchukov, Viktor Baranets.

66 Among two video-messages presented on air, one was posted by Edward Snowden, who asked Putin if Russia spied on its society on the Internet (Putin, of course, denied this). Snowden’s appearance in the show was commented on as the US getting a ticking-off from the Kremlin. Andrei Kolesnikov, *Vladimir Putin provel upryamuyu liniyu*, 2014, available at: <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2454577>, accessed 1 December 2016.

67 Aleksei Mukhin stated that Putin was in fantastic political shape and showed “Kremlin’s judo style”. Vladimir Slatynov admitted that president Putin had mastered the format of *Telemost*. In Pavel Svyatenkov’s opinion Putin proved that he had reached the climax of his personal control over domestic affairs as well as foreign policy and confirmed his status as the leader of the whole nation who speaks in the name of all the national community. *Politologi o “pryamoy linii”: Putin pokazal “kremlevskoye dzyudo”*, 2014, available at: <http://ria.ru/politics/20140417/1004359752.html>, accessed at 7 May 2014.

68 However, it can be argued that Putin could have managed certain situations better. The most obvious example in this context was the question regarding “a new first lady”. Putin awkwardly answered that he first needed to marry off his ex-wife, thereby exposing a potential vulnerability in his image (being a divorcee), while at the same time displaying a sort of ultra-paternalistic attitude (wielding control over his ex-wife’s life even after separation). The question had a somewhat embarrassing fallout when a rich pensioner from Novosibirsk offered to marry Lyudmila Aleksandrovna. *Siberian Pensioner Offers Hand in Marriage to Putin’s Ex-Wife*, “The Moscow Times” 2014, April 21.

69 Once, Putin referred to KGB as a breeding ground for true patriotism. Asked if he would have done the same as Viktor Yanukovich, if he had been in Ukrainian president’s shoes, Putin answered: “You know that my first job was KGB, espionage, and there we were taught total devotion to our nation and Homeland”. The second occasion was when Putin responded to Edward Snowden’s video-message. Putin said “let’s talk agent to agent”.

repeated that he would make decisions exclusively in regard to the pragmatically defined Russian national interest and carefully curbed outbursts of patriotic overexcitement by the audience. For instance, he ridiculed voices calling for Alaska to be retaken⁷⁰ and successfully convinced the writer Sergei Luky-anenko to keep publishing books in Ukraine despite the ongoing crisis. Last but not least, he defended the so-called liberals, whom a reporter of the *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Viktor Baranets, called “hamsters with rotting teeth”. Summon the whole, the final result of the 2014 *Telemost* could have hardly been any different: covered in glory as the man who bloodlessly reincorporated Crimea into the Russian state, Vladimir Putin had little difficulty in presenting himself with an extraordinary aura.

PRYAMAYA LINIYA 2015-2017

The content of the programmes in 2015, 2016 and 2017 reflected how Russia is coping with the sanctions and struggling economy which could not be so easily compensated by the early “Crimean” enthusiasm. After the focus on foreign affairs in 2014, three subsequent *Telemosts* dealt mostly with domestic issues, e.g. the rise of prices, low pensions, expensive medicine, taxes, corruption. Questions about the Minsk peace process or Russia’s involvement in Syria appeared briefly. Never before has so much attention been paid to entrepreneurs and farmers. Representatives of these two professional groups were present in the studio⁷¹ and also took part in live connections.⁷² It is important to note that businessmen and farmers consistently expressed their satisfaction with sanctions, which they feel have provided a boost to Russian domestic production. On his end, Putin used programmes to tackle inconvenient questions, such as the murder of Boris Nemtsov, his offshore accounts (the Panama papers), criticism of Ramzan Kadyrov or doping in Russian sport. While answering questions, Putin made noticeably fewer jokes⁷³, told fewer anecdotes⁷⁴ and stopped referring to his KGB times. His long disquisitions started to resemble more a lecture than a conversation⁷⁵. All in all, the programme gained a more technocratic character.⁷⁶

Although the programmes of 2015, 2016 and 2017 were in general similar, there is one feature which distinguishes the two recent shows. Vladimir Putin did his best to create the impression of spontane-

⁷⁰ To the pensioner’s inquiring about Alaska, Putin replied warmly: “Dear Fayna Ivanovna, what would you need this Alaska for anyway?”

⁷¹ Among the VIPs and experts in studio in 2016 were: Nikita Mikhalkov, Aleksei Mukhin (political commentator), Konstantin Khabensky (actor), Irina Yarovaya (member of the Duma, United Russia) Yuriy Borzakovskiy (sportsman), Andrey Bystritskiy (Valdai club); 2015 – Vsevolod Chaplin (ROC), Aleksei Venediktov (Echo of Moscow), Konstantin Remchukov (Nezavisimaya), Irina Khakamada, Sergei Shargunov (writer), Anatoly Torkunov (MGIMO), Aleksei Kudrin (former minister of finance). In 2017 - Konstantin Remchukov (Nezavisimaya), Aleksei Uchitel (film director), Sergei Bezrukov (actor), Vladimir Urin (director of Bolshoi Theater), Yelena Isinbayeva (athlete), Alexander Ovechkin (hockey player), Aleksei Bakulin (the CEO of the VOLGABUS Company).

⁷² In 2015, there were six live connections with Stepanovo village (a creamery), Gukovo (a hostel in which refugees from Ukraine were living), Albino (a military base), Irkutsk (an airplane factory), Crimea (Artek summer camp), the Vostochny cosmodrome (still under construction). In 2016 there were five live connections – Tuzla Island (at the construction of a bridge which would join Russia and the Crimea peninsula), Ozorskoye village in Sakhalin (a fish processing factory), Arkhangelskoye village (a creamery), Tomsk (State University of Tomsk), Tula (a Rostec office – the representative of the Russian military industry).

⁷³ One which stood out was his answer in 2016 to the question about his attitude to buckwheat for breakfast. He said: “I like buckwheat in general. The fewer teeth one has, the more one likes buckwheat.”

⁷⁴ Among those few anecdotes, one in 2015 was about Putin’s enjoying a *russkaya banya* with Gerhard Schroeder.

⁷⁵ In 2015 Putin interacted with journalists for almost 30 minutes before guests in the studio could ask the first question. See other comments on Putin’s performance in 2015-2016. *Pressa podvela itogi pryamoy linii: Putin - “samyy krutoy patsan v mire” i sovershenno inoy prezident*, 2015, available at <http://www.newsru.com/russia/17apr2015/line.html>, accessed 10 November 2016. *V politike. Master-klass ruchnogo upravleniya stranoy*, 2016, available at http://www.ng.ru/week/2016-04-17/11_politics.html, accessed 17 April 2016.

⁷⁶ Gleb Pavlovski, previously one of the spin-doctors of the Kremlin, after watching the *Pryamaya Liniya* of 2017 went even so far to announce the “death of the genre”. G. Pavlovski, *K kontsu pryamoy linii Putin sovsem ischez*, available at: <https://snob.ru/selected/entry/125838>, accessed 15 June 2017.

ity. In 2016 immediately upon entering the studio he did not know where to turn. On a few occasions he asked journalists what would happen next as if he was unfamiliar with the routine of the show. He wrote down viewers' requests and picked questions from the screen.⁷⁷ He gave voice to people in the studio who raised their hands but were not approached by the journalists.⁷⁸ After the programme Dmitry Peskov, the president's press secretary, proudly emphasised that the show was not staged.⁷⁹ In 2017 during the live video connection with the Centre for Mother and Child Care in Ufa Putin interrupted the doctor who was just about to ask his question, and suggested the journalist to approach a man passing by. The man at first surprised by the camera proudly informed that for the second time in his life just few minutes ago he became a father. The viewers of *Pryamaya Liniya* saw even the newborn baby. Also in 2017 for a moment the live video connection was lost with one of the locations (Nyanyan, Khanti Mansiysk) – something which has not happened ever before during fifteen rounds.

77 For instance, he noticed on the screen a complaint about unpaid salaries to the workers of the hydroelectric power plant. Since no address was given of the power plant, he asked journalists to locate it.

78 He asked for a microphone to be given to Avdotia Smirnova – from a foundation helping children with autism.

79 Peskov *zayavil, chto "pryamuyu liniyu" s Putinyem ne srezhissirovali zaraneye*, available at: <http://ria.ru/politics/20160417/1413530033.html>, accessed 17 April 2016. However, one of the guests present in the studio, farmer Vladimir Melnichenko revealed that the guests two days before the show trained their questions in a spa resort. However, Melnichenko admitted that during the programme Putin did in fact act on his own initiative and did not always follow the script. *Ural'skiy fermer rasskazal o repetitsii "Pryamoy linii" Putina*, 2016, available at <http://www.ng.ru/news/539393.html>, accessed 16 April 2016.

4. THE ROLES OF *PRYAMAYA LINIYA* (2001-2017)

Over 15 editions, the programme has served numerous purposes. It is a tool to project the leader's image coherent with tradition, and also a tool to project an image of Russian society. It's a political ritual which creates/strengthens a sense of national unity (e.g. after the annexation of Crimea). It can also serve as a means of communication with the external environment (the show of 2014). Last but not least it is a method of disciplining local elites.

The purpose of *Telemost* is to project, in a live broadcast, an idealised vision of a leader, in order to strengthen the emotional aspect of the bond between the holder of power and society. Its goal is to give viewers the feeling that they are the centre of their leader's attention. The programme thus also creates an illusion of direct democracy and of the accountability of the country's highest ranking politician. One of the biggest achievements of the programme is that it managed to maintain the aura of *tsarskaya groza* around the leader while at the same time sustaining the illusion that the leader is accessible to virtually any citizen.⁸⁰ However, the leader in fact keeps himself isolated from the society for the whole year (the exception being occasional PR-stunts) and it is only on this one day that he "descends" to "his people". Taking this aspect into consideration, it could be argued that *Telemost* includes an element of the carnival, when social roles and statuses can – exceptionally – be reversed. Also, the show creates the impression of a community of viewers participating in the show.⁸¹ It needs to be admitted that *Telemost* keeps up the illusion of viewers' agency in an effective manner. According to VCIOM's (a government polling institution) surveys – people, while watching the show, identify with the questions posed,⁸² and perceive the programme as their chance to influence the government and even the state. If the programme were to be cancelled, they could feel deprived of their rights. During *Telemost* 2013 and 2014 some viewers even suggested that in order to strengthen democracy in Russia this programme should also be held by local governors and ministers.

Table No. 6. Viewers' impressions, VCIOM (2005-2011)

Respondents' answers	2005 ⁸	2006 ⁹	2007 ¹⁰	2008 ¹¹	2009 ¹²	2010 ¹³	2011 ¹⁴
I watched the show (in whole or just parts)	66%	72%	64%	63%	55%	60%	53%

⁸⁰ The mechanisms of *Telemost* resonate with the remarks by Julie A. Cassidy and Emily D. Johnson who noticed that, "The Putin phenomenon differs from both the Stalin cult and the great leader cults of the Soviet era [...]. Most importantly, it does not appear to exist primarily as a result of official coercion". Julie Cassidy, Emily Johnson. 2012. "A Personality Cult for the Post-Modern Age: Reading Vladimir Putin's Public Persona", in: *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. Helena Goscilo, 48.

⁸¹ Boris Dubin controversially exaggerated this aspect with his remark that "Russians aren't a nation, not even an electorate, they are just an audience". Boris Dubin, 2011. *Rossiya nulevykh: politicheskaya kul'tura, istoricheskaya pamyat', povesdnevnaya zhizn'*. Moskva: ROSSPEN, 230. Lara Ryazanova-Clarke refers to Guy Debord's notion of the society of the spectacle, in which genuine social life is replaced with a representation of it. Ryazanova-Clarke. "The Discourse of a Spectacle...", 104.

⁸² See Table no. 4.

Putin's appearance was	interesting ¹⁵	50%	55%	49%	48%	43%	46%	54%
	boring	7%	5%	4%	4%	5%	5%	11%
	disappointing and irritating	5%	3%	3%	3%	5%	6%	10%
I'm satisfied with Putin's answers		49%	56%	50%	48%	40%	40%	51%

* For the data for 2013-2016, see table No. 5.

Within Eric Rothenbuhler's conceptual framework, *Telemost* should be viewed as an example of a ritual communication. American anthropologist of culture defined ritual as a "voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically affect or participate in serious life".⁸³ Furthermore, the form of ritual behaviour consists of the symbols relevant for social relations. In case of *Telemost*, the ritual refers to the traditional Russian vision of contacts between the power/leader and society. The efficiency of the programme is increased due to the concentration of symbols, which – as Rothenbuhler argues – is the key to a political usage of rituals.⁸⁴ Finally, *Telemost* is a media ritual as its participants escape their daily routine and celebrate this special moment while watching (participating) in it. As a ritual of communication *Telemost* aims at sustaining the socio-political order.

Telemost as a political ritual of contemporary Russia is not connected to the political post but to a specific person (additionally symbolised by the subsequent change of the programme's name). It is hard not to notice a coherence between the traditional vision of power rooted in Russian culture and the image of Vladimir Putin as projected by *Telemost* – in fact the programme reinforces these traditional images. The strong personalisation of power is only one of the few traditional features which can be traced in *Telemost's* PR-message. Two others are centralisation and strict hierarchy—Putin is presented as the head of all the lower, obviously less capable, ranks of politicians and bureaucrats, while at the same time – due to this uniqueness and the weight of responsibility – separated and distanced from them. *Telemost* thus preserves the traditional scheme "good tsar, bad boyars". Putin's political leadership, as projected by *Telemost*, also has a moral dimension – his promises and indignation over injustices portray him as a man of principles and high moral stature. He often underlines his sense of duty and dedication to public service.⁸⁵ Despite the familiarity and relaxed nature, he also manages to convey the image of a hard but fair father-figure. He cares for the worries of the citizens and helps them, but also keeps an eye on them, brings justice and, if necessary, punishes. It can thus be concluded that each programme provides Putin with an opportunity to manifest three crucial aspects (as discerned by E. Shestopal) of leader's image: strength, activity and attractiveness.

An analysis of *Telemost* can reveal not only the image which the government wishes to project into the public sphere—it also offers insight into how they want society to perceive itself. Society, as portrayed by the regime in *Telemost*, is vulnerable, passive, seeking help and support from the state or, more specifically, the leader. The content of the programme suggests a simplified division of roles in society – the people Putin speaks with are mostly people with a clearly defined social status (i.e. a soldier, a worker, a pensioner, a student). *Telemost* conveys a static vision of the social order.

An analysis of the transcripts from 2011-2015 reveals another tendency, namely that data such as the gender or profession of viewers-participants were frequently omitted. Furthermore, the proportional geographic representation of the participants was not as strongly emphasised as it used to be. As

83 Eric W. Rothenbuhler. 1998. *Ritual communication: from everyday conversation to mediated ceremony*. Sage Publications, 27.

84 Ibid. 18.

85 Putin is not afraid to sometimes let in a bit of pathos, e.g. when he declared that his homeland is everything to him in a response to Sergei Dolgov in 2009.

a consequence, the image of society became blurred. The participants have been gradually losing their individuality vis-à-vis the state strongly personified by Vladimir Putin. A reverse of this trend could be observed only in 2016, when again organisers of the show paid more attention to the personification of the audience.

Through the years *Telemost* has become a means of communication not only between the president and ordinary citizens but also between the president and local officials. With his third presidential term, the number of Putin's orders given during the programme grew rapidly. For instance, during *Telemost* 2013 Vladimir Putin gave 11 orders addressed to the administration, e.g. establishing the Day of Polar Workers, making a film about (the legendary Soviet goalkeeper) Lev Yashin's life, and checking the supposedly discovered ancient ruins in Derbent. Crucially, local authorities often react immediately to Putin's announcement and start acting while the programme is still on air. For instance, in 2014 the Attorney General of Saint Petersburg launched an investigation on behalf of a complaint made by a nurse regarding the lowering of her wages.⁸⁶ In 2016, the Omsk local authorities declared that they would fix the road which was the object of a viewer's complaint.⁸⁷ During the same show the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation looked into unpaid salaries in the Shikotan factory.⁸⁸ Although the extent to which such interactions with the local authorities were staged is a subject of debate⁸⁹, this kind of relation – i.e. in which subordinates, without waiting for official orders, try to anticipate their superior's wishes – nevertheless testifies to the strength of Putin's authority and confirms his status and image. During the programme in 2017 journalists who hosted the show admitted that already in the process of collecting questions from the Russians citizens (twelve days before the day the programme was held) some local authorities took pre-emptive actions and reacted to the complaints posted by the residents of their districts. These events show that *Telemost* plays a role in Putin's micromanaging of Russian politics.⁹⁰ Significantly, local authorities' reactions prove that the purpose of this is not only symbolic, but has a palpable effect on their behaviour. It should be also stressed that Vladimir Putin is well aware of this function of the programme. In 2013, in response to a question by a participant Putin remarked that “the general prosecutor, who, I'm sure, is watching our programme, will have a look at it”. While closing the show in 2015 the journalist expressed his hope that the local authorities had watched the programme and would react to the requests. Putin answered, “We will make sure they will take action”. In 2017 listening to Valentina Sakovskaya, one of the victims of the floods who complained about no material help from the federal government Putin turned directly to the governor of Stavropol, Vladimir Vladimirovich Vladimirov with a telling question: “Vladimir Vladimirovich, where is the money?”

In order to serve the above mentioned purposes, *Telemost* must keep a minimum of credibility. In this context it is significant that VCIOM only once (in 2005) decided to ask Russians about their judg-

86 *Prokuratura ne nashla narusheniy v poliklinike, otkuda zhalovalis' Putinu*, 2014, available at: <http://ria.ru/society/20140418/1004500183.html>, accessed 7 May 2014.

87 The journalist provided information about the swift reactions of the officials while the show was still on air.

88 *Zamgenprokurora otpravilsya na Shikotan posle "Pryamoy linii" Putina*, 2016, available at: <http://www.ng.ru/news/539385.html>, accessed 16 April 2016.

89 It seems safe to argue that local authorities are often taken by surprise by the programme and they do react to Putin's commands. However, this does not mean that Putin's interventions are always successful. The level of complication in the relationship between Putin and the local elites is reflected by the case of Anton Tyurishev, a worker of the Pacific Bridge Building Company (*Тихоокеанская мостостроительная компания*). In 2015 he represented his company during the live connection with the Vostochny cosmodrome. At the time he complained about unpaid salaries and Putin promised to supervise the matter together with Tyurishev. As a result, a criminal investigation was launched against the previous and current heads of the company, Viktor Grebenev and Igor Nesterenko. Eventually, both were arrested. This would prove Putin's efficiency. However, a year later, a day before *Telemost* of 2016, Tyurishev was detained by the local police as he supposedly planned to organise a protest and inform the president about new problems with unpaid salaries. On the one hand, Putin's personal intervention did not manage to solve the problem in the long term. On the other hand, the pre-emptive action of local authorities show that they are concerned by *Telemost*. *Zadavshiy vopros Putinu v 2015 godu stroitel' kosmodroma administrativno arestovan*, 2016, available at <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/504479>, accessed 20 November 2016.

90 See Nikolay Petrov, Maria Lipman, Henry E. Hale. 2013. “Three dilemmas of hybrid regime governance: Russia from Putin to Putin”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30, 1: 1-26.

ment on *Telemost's* credibility. Almost one in every four respondents doubted the spontaneous character of the programme.

Table No. 7. Credibility of *Telemost*, VCIOM (2005)

Do you agree with the opinion that the people who asked questions had been selected and prepared by the authorities?	%
It's possible but concerns probably only a few cases	29
No, it seemed to me that people asked the questions they wanted	27
Yes, I agree with this opinion	24
It's too difficult to say	20
* 1,542 people, from 153 locations from 46 different districts	

Source: *PRYAMOY EFIR S PREZIDENTOM: OTSENKI GRAZH DAN*, 2005, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=1838>, accessed 1 August 2012.

Widespread awareness of the propaganda character of the show could seem contradictory to *Telemost's* popularity. However, these two elements, i.e. the knowledge that the programme is staged and the its popularity, can be combined.⁹¹ *Telemost* is a political ritual which gives viewers a certain feeling of security, stability and predictability. Russian citizens realise that *Telemost* is not a spontaneous conversation with their leader but it is nevertheless comforting for the viewers to watch Putin's personal interventions, his capacity to correct malfunctioning Russian reality with a single word. The image/spectacle can be comforting even if one knows it is just an image/spectacle. This effect is not unlike that of Bollywood productions—the portrayed reality does not resemble the average Indian viewers' everyday life but still they enjoy it.

In 2015-2016 the Levada-Center asked Russians what, in their opinion, are the main reasons for organising the show. The majority of respondents (66%) believed that *Telemost* was a means of communication between the political authorities and the citizens. A minority (31%) thought that the programme was broadcast primarily to improve Putin's image and raise his popularity.⁹² After the programme in 2017, 92% of respondents who knew the content of the show did not doubt the sincerity of the president's answers.⁹³ Thus, after so many years, the credibility of the official purpose of the programme (i.e. to citizens' benefit) has not been overshadowed by its propaganda content.

Table No. 8. Why is *Telemost* organised?, the Levada Center

Answers	2015 (%)	2016 (%)
So the government can find out what worries citizens	44	38
So the president can inform society about the political agenda	34	28

⁹¹ *«Pryamaya liniya» ne vliyayet na reyting*, 2016, Available at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/04/18/pryamaya-liniya-ne-vliyaet-na-rejting/>, accessed 20 November 2016.

⁹² *«Pryamaya liniya»: vnimaniye i zapomnivshiyesya temy*, 2016, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/04/28/pryamaya-liniya-vnimanie-i-zapomnivshiesya-temy/>, accessed 20 November 2016.

⁹³ *Press-vypusk № 3399 2017. «Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinym»: pervyye vpechatleniya*, 2017, available at: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=116276>, accessed 20 June 2017.

To improve Putin's popularity	20	31
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Source: *Pryamaya liniya*: *vnimaniye i zapomnivshiesya temy*, 2016, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/04/28/pryamaya-liniya-vnimanie-i-zapomnivshiesya-temy/>, accessed 20 November 2016.

5. CLOSING REMARKS

There are certain parallels between *Telemost* and the dynamics within the political system established in Russia during Vladimir Putin's years in power. The changes of the programme's format reflect the regime entering into a new phase. In the beginning (2001-2003), the regime was still in its formational phase and treated *Telemost* as a certain innovation, a new form for communicating with society and influencing it – an experiment. In the second phase (2005-2008), when the regime's popularity and self-confidence peaked, the programme developed on a grand scale. In the third phase, marked by Medvedev's succession (2008-2011), the programme started to resemble a talk-show and its propagandistic nature became (almost) ostentatious. This tendency strengthened in the 2011 program, which turned into one big support rally. The fourth and, for the time being, the last phase, started with the show in 2013. The Kremlin realised the risk of Russian viewers "overdosing" on *Telemost* but nevertheless kept the format basically unchanged. The programme in 2013 was obviously staged and carefully directed. In fact, it seemed that the main goal was not to win Putin new supporters but to close the ranks of the hard-core electorate, which was indicative of the regime's faltering legitimacy. Due to geopolitical reasons, the 2014 *Telemost* was unique. In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, it served as a tool for manifesting a united front comprised of the Russian citizens and the government in the face of possible sanctions from the West. The euphoria connected to the annexation of Crimea momentarily turned the attention of Russian citizens away from the stagnant economy and provided a boost for Putin's approval ratings. Two difficult years under Western sanctions brought domestic problems back to Russians' attention. However, although this was a period of a great uncertainty for society as well as for the state apparatus, there was one factor of stability which remained strong – the personal popularity of Vladimir Putin. His high ratings help to explain why *Telemost* in 2015-2017 looked like a comeback to a good old routine (established around 2008). With over 80% of social support, Putin could feel comfortable with playing the traditional role of a strong leader. After the programme in 2017, 82% of respondents who knew the content of the show were convinced that the majority of tasks mentioned by Putin during this *Pryamaya Liniya* would be accomplished with no delay.⁹⁴

At the end of 2016, according to polls carried out by the Levada-Center, 63% respondents stated that they wanted Vladimir Putin to stay on for a fourth term. The number of people looking for an alternative decreased from 40% (2012) to 19%. Only 26% (in 2012 – 49%) believed that it is still possible to find another candidate in 2018 (i.e. when the new presidential elections will take place).⁹⁵ One year later, at the end of 2017, already 75% of respondents said they would vote for Vladimir Putin.⁹⁶ *Pryamaya Liniya* continues to play its part in sustaining the attractive image of the Russian leader.

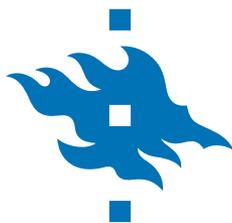
94 *Press-vypusk № 33992017*. «*Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinym*»: *pervyye vpechatleniya*», 2017, available at: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=116276>, accessed 20 June 2017.

95 *Nezamenimyy u nas est*», 2016, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/16/nezamenimyy-u-nas-est/>, accessed 27 November 2016. Experts explain Vladimir Putin's popularity by way of the lack of a true alternative, political inertia, and propaganda. *Doveriye k prezidentu byvayet raznoye*, 2016, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/17/doverie-k-prezidentu-byvaet-raznoe/>, accessed 20 November 2016.

96 *Reyting vozmozhnykh kandidatov v prezidenty*, available at: <https://www.levada.ru/2017/12/13/17249/>, accessed 12 December 2017.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Data available at: <http://moskva-putinu.ru/#page/history>, accessed 1 December 2016.
- 2 *DIALOG VLADIMIRA PUTINA S GRAZHDANAMI ROSSII: OTSENKA ZRITELEY*, 2013, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=114138>, accessed 15 August 2013.
- 3 *PRYAMAYA LINIYA S VLADIMIROM PUTINYM»: VPECHATLENIYA ZRITELEY*, 2014, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=114808>, accessed 10 May 2014.
- 4 *Press-vypusk Nr 3090. PRYAMAYA LINIYA S VLADIMIROM PUTINYM»: PIERVYE VPECHATLENIYA*, 2016, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115666>, accessed 20 November 2016.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 *Press-vypusk № 33992017. «Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinyom»: pervyye vpechatleniya*”, 2017, available at: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=116276>, accessed 20 June 2017.
- 7 The whole programme or just some questions.
- 8 *PRYAMOY EFIR S PREZIDENTOM: OTSENKI GRAZHDAN*, 2005, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=1838>, accessed 15 August 2013.
- 9 *V.PUTIN V PRYAMOM TELEEFIRE: OTSENKI ROSSIYAN*, 2006, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=3510>, accessed 15 August 2013.
- 10 *PRYAMAYA LINIYA» S VLADIMIROM PUTINYM*, 2008, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=12913>, accessed 15 August 2013.
- 11 *PRYAMAYA LINIYA» S VLADIMIROM PUTINYM*, 2008, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=11103>, accessed 15 August 2013.
- 12 *RAZGOVOR S VLADIMIROM PUTINYM-2009: CHTO USLYSHALI ROSSIYANE*, 2009, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=12913>, accessed 15 August 2013.
- 13 *RAZGOVOR S VLADIMIROM PUTINYM: PRODOLZHENIE: V TSENTR VNMANIYA - SOTSIAL'NAYA POLITIKA*, 2010, available at: <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=111208>, accessed 15 August 2013.
- 14 *RAZGOVOR S VLADIMIROM PUTINYM»-2011: OTSENKA ROSSIYAN*, 2011, available at: <http://vybory.wciom.ru/index.php?id=566&uid=112217>, accessed 15 August 2013.
- 15 The whole programme or just some questions.



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