

"How to (not) Kill the Truth: Inside the Dictators' Playbook of Propaganda, Censorship, and Manufactured Hatred".

Successful and unsuccessful cases of propaganda, the fight for independent media, and the power of documentary films to expose the truth.

Vera Krichevskaya

My story:

I was fortunate to begin my career in media during a transformative period in history. It was 1990, and Mikhail Gorbachev had just introduced Perestroika, paving the way for unprecedented changes in the Soviet Union. I started working for the first independent newspaper in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and experienced firsthand the transition from Soviet propaganda to the new and unknown realm of independent journalism—a force that had the power to lead the people and change history.

In 1997, I moved to Moscow and joined NTV, the most influential private news TV channel at the time. It wasn't long before this media company became the first trophy for Vladimir Putin when he came to power in 2000. From that moment, I witnessed the systematic dismantling of independent media in Russia, as Putin's regime slowly but steadily crushed the freedom of the press.

In 2005, just after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, I relocated to Kyiv, where I launched the "Freedom of Speech" political talk show. This show played a pivotal role in transforming the TV landscape in post-revolution Ukraine.

In 2008, I co-founded a new media startup in Moscow: Dozhd TV (TV Rain), an independent news TV station that remains, even today, the only independent television outlet in Russia—now operating in exile in the Netherlands since 2022. The story of TV Rain is one of resilience and innovation, a dramatic battle spanning 14 years between a group of independent reporters and the powerful state censorship machine. Throughout this journey, we have managed to stay one step ahead.

Since 2012, I've also been making current affairs documentaries, all centered on politics. My previous film, "**F@ck This Job**," will serve as an illustration of some of the key themes in this course.

Synopsis

Over the past two decades, Russia has become the undisputed leader and trendsetter in restricting civil rights, freedoms, and independent media. Every new Russian law designed to suppress freedoms and expand propaganda is quickly copied by countries like India, China, Belarus, Georgia, Venezuela, and others.

This is why studying Russia's (unfortunately successful) experience in building a dictatorship seems both crucial and fascinating to me. It's as if I've compiled a step-by-step guide on what a dictator must do to eliminate freedoms in their country and lead their people to war with a neighbour.

Our task is to recognize the earliest signs of dictatorship and act before it's too late.

The main theme of this course is the examination of how autocratic regimes seek to control the media. We will delve into the tools, tricks and tactics these regimes use, exploring both the technological means and the human factors involved. We'll discuss the different forms of censorship, paying particular attention to two often underestimated types: self-censorship and what I refer to as "party" censorship. Together, we will explore how the relentless battle against state censorship can push journalists to the brink, transforming them from reporters into political activists.

Intro:

"Tell me what you read, who you follow, and I will tell you what you believe."

In today's world, media functions like a modern religion, shaping beliefs, values, and worldviews. Algorithms act as priests, curating our daily doctrines, while influencers and journalists become prophets of their respective ideologies.

This session will examine how media consumption defines individual and collective identities. We'll explore how loyalty to certain media sources creates echo chambers, how belief systems are reinforced, and how media narratives can become as dogmatic as traditional religions.

How do we break free from these digital congregations and regain critical, independent thinking? And how do we recognize when media is shaping not just our opinions, but our entire worldview?

Session #1:

A dictatorship can crumble in just a few years—or even in a matter of days—without the need for a revolution.

Take 1991, for example: the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. It marked the abolition of censorship and a brief period of absolute freedom for the newly independent media. In these sharp transitional moments of history, information and communication played a critical role in shaping the outcome.

We'll explore how and why the KGB, a seemingly invincible institution, was defeated—if only once—in Russia. Even Vladimir Putin, then a young KGB officer, famously resigned from his post, symbolizing a moment of genuine loss of power for the Soviet security apparatus. This victory was won by journalists and citizens, and this is precisely what the KGB will never forgive them for.

Session#2:

(From NTV case, the first private national wide independent news TV network, to TV Rain, the last independent news TV station).

9-year old democracy, how strong it is? How many years would it take to be destroyed completely?

We will explore the systematic regression from independent media back to controlled media, using the first two terms of Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin as our case study. I refer to this period as "pseudo-democracy" (2000-2010), where each step in the erosion of freedom can be seen as a blueprint for any autocracy. We'll delve into the common patterns that autocratic regimes follow to suppress independent media. But there's a twist in this session: we'll also discuss strategies for turning the tables, fighting back, and starting a race against the state to reclaim journalistic freedom. We'll also focus on the creation of a new independent media outlet amid a transition from democracy to autocracy, particularly in a new technological era. I'll share insights from my own experiences, discussing the challenges and strategies involved in establishing a media platform that can withstand the pressures of an increasingly authoritarian environment while leveraging modern technology to reach and engage audiences in innovative ways.

Session #3:

Seizing the Last Window of Opportunity: Launching an Independent Media Institution – TV Rain (Dozhd TV).

This session examines the last decade of Russia's pseudo-democracy, a period when the country's leader had already shifted policies toward authoritarianism, yet most citizens, along with the external political and business elite, failed to recognize the change. The state maintained a façade of democracy, but the laws and reality had already diverged significantly from democratic principles.

Using a case study, we will explore the profound awakening that occurs when it is already too late to act. The discussion will focus on the creation of an independent media outlet during a transition from pseudo-democracy to autocracy, particularly in the context of a new technological era.

Drawing from my personal experiences, I will share insights into the challenges and strategies of establishing a resilient media platform capable of enduring the pressures of an increasingly authoritarian environment. We'll also discuss how modern technology can be leveraged to innovate, reach, and engage audiences in such challenging times.

Session #4:

How long does it take for "the frog in boiling water" to realize the danger? Is it possible to transform a democratic regime into a dictatorship in just four years? What about eight years?

In this session, we will explore the step-by-step roadmap of a hidden dictator gradually reshaping a country. How are seemingly "light" laws and restrictions introduced, followed by harsher amendments year after year?

Dictators thrive on fear and chaos. Terrorists, wars, and viruses provide the perfect conditions for them to tighten their grip on power, suppress dissent, and justify extreme measures under the guise of "security" or "public health."

We'll discuss strategies used to pressure journalists and editors into abandoning their roles, and how media owners are made to appear "toxic." You'll learn how entertainment can be weaponized to distract and lull the public into political apathy.

Most importantly, we'll examine how to recognize the early warning signs of authoritarianism and prevent the "boiled frog" syndrome from taking hold in society.

Session #5:

In this session, we'll delve into dictators' techniques for promoting hatred and inciting war. We will explore every stage of crafting a war narrative within a group or nation: preparation, identity creation, establishing distinctions between groups, the "good vs. evil" formula, newspeak, dehumanization, and legitimizing violence.

We will compare two cases: the Rwandan genocide narrative and Russian propaganda targeting Ukraine and Ukrainians. We will learn how the Russian propaganda front of our eyes looks for new and new narratives that would bring more hate and fear.

Session #6:

In this session, we'll explore the art of current affairs documentary filmmaking and distinguish it from traditional reporting, where emotional impact plays a crucial role. We'll cover essential techniques for crafting compelling documentaries, including: spotting a story ahead of its time, securing access to key subjects, mastering the art of becoming invisible behind the camera, and knowing when to conclude your story. How to build an Arc of your protagonist, how to build an Arc of context. Access under false flag. You'll learn how to present the most frightening stories in the most "unfrightening" ways, leveraging a lighter portrayal to enhance emotional impact. The goal is to find universal elements in your story that resonate with all viewers, regardless of their perspectives, because ultimately, a story that captures life's inherent interest is the most powerful. We will watch and discuss films by Errol Morris, Dror Moreh, Mads Brügger, Joshua Oppenheimer, Asif Kapadia, Claude Lanzmann.