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# HOW THE VIRGIN BECAME A WHORE

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**T**his is a TV series about Russia. But it could have been about Israel. Or about the United States. It is entitled “The Oligarchs” and is now being screened on Israeli television.

Some of its episodes are simply unbelievable – or would have been, if they had not come straight from the horses’ mouths: the heroes of the story, who gleefully boast about their despicable exploits. The series was produced by Israeli immigrants from Russia.

The “oligarchs” are a tiny group of entrepreneurs who exploited the disintegration of the Soviet system to loot the treasures of the state and to amass plunder amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars. In order to safeguard the perpetuation of their business, they took control of the state. Six out of the seven are Jews.

In popular parlance they are called “oligarchs” – from the Greek word meaning “rule of the few”.

In the first years of post-Soviet Russian capitalism they were the bold and nimble ones who knew how to exploit the economic anarchy in order to acquire enormous possessions for a hundredth or a thousandth of their value: oil, natural gas, nickel and other minerals. They used every possible trick, including cheating, bribery and murder. Every one of them had a small private army. In the course of the series they are proud to tell in great detail how they did it.

But the most intriguing part of the series recounts the way they took control of the political apparatus. After a period of fighting each other, they decided that it would be more profitable for them to cooperate in order to take over the state.

At the time, President Boris Yeltsin was in a steep decline. On the eve of the new elections for the presidency, his rating in public opinion polls stood at 4%. He was an alcoholic with a severe heart disease, working about two hours a day. The state was, in practice, ruled by his bodyguard and his daughter; corruption was the order of the day.

The oligarchs decided to take power through him. They had almost unlimited funds, control of all TV channels and most of the other media. They put all these at the disposal of Yeltsin’s reelection campaign, denying his opponents even one minute of

TV time and pouring huge sums of money into the effort. (The series omits an interesting detail: they secretly brought over the most outstanding American election experts and copywriters, who applied methods previously unknown in Russia.)

The campaign bore fruit: Yeltsin was indeed reelected. On the very same day he had another heart attack and spent the rest of his term in hospital. In practice, the oligarchs ruled Russia. One of them, Boris Berezovsky, appointed himself Prime Minister. There was a minor scandal when it became known that he (like most of the oligarchs) had acquired Israeli citizenship, but he gave up his Israeli passport and everything was in order again.

By the way, Berezovsky boasts that he caused the war in Chechnya, in which tens of thousands have been killed and a whole country devastated. He was interested in the mineral resources and a prospective pipeline there. In order to achieve this he put an end to the peace agreement that gave the country some kind of independence. The oligarchs dismissed and destroyed Alexander Lebed, the popular general who engineered the agreement, and the war has been going on since then.

In the end, there was a reaction: Vladimir Putin, the taciturn and tough ex-KGB operative, assumed power, took control of the media, put one of the oligarchs (Mikhail Khodorkovsky) in prison, caused the others to flee (Berezovsky is in England, Vladimir Gusinsky is in Israel, another, Mikhail Chernoy, is assumed to be hiding here.)

Since all the exploits of the oligarchs occurred in public, there is a danger that the affair might cause an increase in anti-Semitism in Russia. Indeed, the anti-Semites argue that these doings confirm the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, a document fabricated by the Russian secret police a century ago, purporting to reveal a Jewish conspiracy to control the world.

Moving from Russia to America – the same thing happened, of course, in the US, but more than a hundred years ago. At the time, the great “robber barons”, Morgan, Rockefeller et al., all of them good Christians, used very similar methods to acquire capital and power on a massive scale. Today, it works in far more refined ways.

In the present election campaign, the candidates collect hundreds of millions of dollars. George W. Bush and John Kerry both brag about their talent for raising enormous sums of money. From whom? From pensioners? From the mythical “old lady in tennis shoes”? Of course not, but from the cabals of billionaires, the giant corporations and powerful lobbies (arms dealers, Jewish organizations, doctors, lawyers and such). Many of them give money to both candidates – just to be on the safe side.

All of these expect, of course, to receive a generous bonus when their candidate is elected. “There is no such thing as a free lunch”, as the right-wing economist Milton

Friedman wrote. As in Russia, every dollar (or ruble) invested wisely in an election will yield a ten- or hundred-fold return.

The problem is rooted in the fact that presidential candidates (and all other candidates for political office) need ever increasing amounts of money. Elections are mainly fought out on TV and cost huge sums. It is not a coincidence that all the present candidates in the US are multi-millionaires. The Bush family has amassed a fortune from the oil business (helped by its political connections, of course.) Kerry is married to one of the richest women in America, who was once the wife of the ketchup king, Henry John Heinz. Dick Cheney was the chief of a huge corporation that has garnered contracts worth billions in Iraq. John Edwards, candidate for Vice President, has made a fortune as a trial lawyer.

From time to time there is talk in America about reforming election finances, but nothing worthwhile ever comes of it. None of the oligarchs has any interest in changing a system that enables them to buy the government of the United States.

In Israel, too, talk about “Money and Power” is now in vogue. Ariel Sharon and one of his two sons have been suspected of accepting bribes from a real estate magnate. An indictment was blocked by the new Attorney General who happened to be appointed by the Sharon government at the height of the affair. Another investigation into Sharon and his sons is still pending. It concerns millions of dollars that reached his election coffers by roundabout routes, crossing three continents.

Shimon Peres’ connections with multi-millionaires are well-known, as are the huge sums poured out by American Jewish multi-millionaires for extreme right-wing causes in Israel. One of the Russian oligarchs is the part-owner of the second biggest Israeli newspaper.

A political scandal concerning the Israeli Minister for Infrastructure has mushroomed into an affair involving giant multi-national corporations competing for contracts for supplying natural gas to the Israeli Electricity Company, an affair of billions in which underworld figures, politicians and private investigators play their parts. This disclosure has made it clear to Israelis that here, too, politicians of the highest rank have long ago been acting as mercenaries for powerful financial interests.

These facts must alarm everybody who cares about democracy – in Israel, Russia, the United States and elsewhere. Oligarchy and democracy are incompatible. As a Russian commentator in the TV series said about the new Russian democracy: “They have turned a virgin into a whore.”