

# TLS

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## Model citizens

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**Peter Pomerantsev**

**NOTHING IS TRUE AND EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE**

**The surreal heart of the new Russia**

**241pp. Public Affairs. \$25.99.**

**978 1 61039 455 0**



Ruslana Korshunova, New York, 2007 Photograph: © Fairchild Photo Service/Condé Nast/Corbis

Peter Pomerantsev has produced a Russia book both exasperating and enthralling, not unlike his subject. A child of Soviets who emigrated to London, he returned upon graduation to spend nine years in Moscow (2001–10), initially working at the lower end of think tanks and on absurdist EU development projects, later finding his *métier* in television. “TV is the only force that can unify and rule and bind this country”, he writes. “It’s the central mechanism of a new type of authoritarianism, one far subtler than twentieth-century strains.”

Pomerantsev’s privileged perspective came via employment at the network Your New Television (Tvoe novoe televidenie, or TNT). Aimed at the sixteen-to-thirty demographic, it introduced Russians to the so-called reality show, which is a metaphor, Pomerantsev decides, for what Russia has become. His first assignment, a documentary called “How To Marry a Millionaire (A Gold Digger’s Guide)”, drops him into the world of girls “without complexes”, as the Russian euphemism has it, who compete for men known as “Forbeses”. What draws us in is not always the analysis – “the girls who looked least like prostitutes, I noticed, were often the most successful” – but the acute scene-setting, desperate aspirations and moral atrocities.

From gold-diggers Pomerantsev segues to a documentary about self-made women, in which he exposes the ghoulishly corrupt political system. The heroine is Yana Yakovleva, whose chemical company sells an industrial cleanser and who is locked up when her product is secretly reclassified as a narcotic. Yakovleva, we learn, has been caught in the crossfire between a former KGB boss now charged with overseeing the lowly Drug Enforcement Agency, and his rival, the chief of the FSB (the KGB's successor). In the final cut, Pomerantsev explains, "all the high-level political stuff goes", leaving only the strong-woman angle. "It's a compromise . . . . But at least it's something. And the ratings are good."

His favoured subjects appear to be the models. Stunningly beautiful and seemingly childlike, they are in endless supply. "The Soviet Union occupied 20 percent of the world's land mass; its former states produce 15 per cent of the world's oil", Pomerantsev writes. "But over 50 per cent of the models on the catwalks of Paris and Milan are from the former USSR." (Are supermodels, therefore, a bigger story than hydrocarbons?) Deftly, he shows how the statuesque waifs are swept up by madam equivalents and fall prey to their own longing for love in a world of sexual transaction and New Age life trainers, who rip the girls off and rip apart their minds.

Pomerantsev wants to profile a woman from Kazakhstan, Ruslana Korshunova, who, like Anastasia Drozdova from Kiev, jumped off a high-rise to her death. His TNT bosses remind him that Russians need "positive stories". But he digs and digs until he unearths who the girls were and why they killed themselves. This leads, detective-style, to a profiteering cult, the Rose of the World, a derivative of the American training company Lifespring (the object of dozens of lawsuits for wrongful death and mental trauma). His exquisite rendering of mind-control techniques is chilling, though his television segment is never completed. "I think they think I've become obsessed", he writes of TNT management. "They're not altogether wrong. I've spent so much time deciphering what happens at the Rose, it's all I think and talk about."

Despite this failure, Pomerantsev receives a lucrative offer from Russia's biggest TV company for a true story glorifying Russia's role in the Second World War. He declines, moves back to London with his Kaliningrad-born wife, and gets a job on – what else – a "glitzy, trashy, documentary entertainment series for an American-English cable channel, *Meet the Russians*". He's diving into the *Forbeses* and gold-diggers and models all over again, even as he cannot forget the ones he left behind in Moscow. "'Come back!' my wife exclaims when she sees me with that distracted look. 'Look at your daughter. The real world. We're here'".

Not all readers will be gripped by the suicides of the 32-23-33 set, which are rampant in Russia but hardly unique to it, and which Pomerantsev jumbles together with stories of the mafia state and its relentless disinformation. Still, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, which will be published in the UK by Faber next month, is well written and fast paced, and deftly drives home a larger point:

The Kremlin has finally mastered the art of fusing reality TV and authoritarianism to keep the great, 140-million-strong population entertained, distracted, constantly exposed to geopolitical nightmares, which if repeated enough times can become infectious. But look underneath the Kremlin's whirligig, and don't you see the most precise, hard calculations? For if one part of the

system is all about wild performance, another is about slow, patient co-optation. And the Kremlin has been co-opting the West for years.

In London, Pomerantsev films Jamison Firestone, the American co-founder of Firestone Duncan, a Moscow-based law and audit firm whose employee, Sergei Magnitsky, uncovered a colossal fraud against the Russian state – which rewarded him with arrest and death in prison. Peter Pomerantsev's segment on Magnitsky, which includes Firestone's moral daggers hurled at London for profiting from fortunes stolen in Russia, gets cut from *Meet the Russians*.