

BRAND PUTIN: AN ANALYSIS OF VLADIMIR PUTIN'S PROJECTED IMAGES

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Abstract

With popular discourse increasingly referring to Vladimir Putin's 'brand', this article seeks to apply the conceptual framework of branding to Putin in order to provide a richer interpretation of the composition and significance of Putin's projected images. By applying the concept of 'brand personality' to the existing literature and original source material, this article seeks to provide more comprehensive answers to the 'what, who, how, and why'. What are the images that Putin is trying to project? Who is he projecting these images to? How are these images projected? And why these images in particular? In doing so, it seeks to move beyond the West's one-dimensional understanding of Putin as simply a 'strongman' to reveal a range of representations that are far more complex and choreographed than often appreciated.

Keywords—*Putin, brand personality, discourse analysis, legal-rational legitimacy, strategic communications*

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Introduction

With politics becoming increasingly personalised, the projected images of international leaders have taken on a new significance.¹ This is particularly true in the case of Vladimir Putin's Russia—a state that derives its strength as much from the image of its leader as it does from its resources.² Yet, if the current Western discourse on Putin is anything to go by, the need to better understand Putin's projected images is greater than ever; we *sense* that Putin derives great benefit from them, but we cannot quite articulate exactly *what* he does, *how* he does it, and *why*.³ In essence, this article seeks to provide answers to the 'what, who, how, and why'. What are the images that Putin is trying to project? Who is he projecting these images to? How are these images projected? And why these images in particular?

Put simply, projected images are the representations and mental associations that are consciously promoted to an audience through communicative acts in order to generate a desired perception or response in the target audience.⁴ Whilst these representations and associations are generally 'positive',⁵ they can also be deliberately 'negative' in the sense of seeking to act as a deterrent to any domestic or international opposition.⁶

Popular discourse—and even Putin himself—increasingly refers to his 'brand'.⁷ This article seeks to provide a richer interpretation of these images by applying to Putin the concept of 'brand personality'. Leading brand theorist Jennifer Aaker⁸ analyses brands through a prism of human traits. For Aaker, a brand's personality is generally defined by a combination of five core characteristics:

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1 Gunn Enli and Eli Skogerbo, 'Personalized Campaigns in Party-Centred Politics' in *Information, Communication & Society*, 16:5, (2013), p. 758; Ian McAllister, *The Personalization of Politics* (The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior, 2007).

2 Brett Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World', *US News & World Report*, 6 November 2017, [accessed 10 July 2018].

3 Fiona Hill, 'Putin: The One-Man Show the West Doesn't Understand' in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72:3 (2016), pp. 140–44.

4 Valentina Feklyunina, *National Images in International Relations: Putin's Russia and the West* (Doctoral Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2009), p. 22–24; Jean-Noel Kapferer, *The New Strategic Brand Management: Advanced Insights and Strategic Thinking*, 5th ed. (London; Philadelphia: Kogan Page, 2012), p. 9.

5 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

6 Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'.

7 Clive Veroni, interview by Todd van der Heyden, CTV News, [Putin's Highly Controlled Image Sharply Contrasts the Chaotic Trump Brand](#), 2018, [accessed 30 July 2018]; Marc Stoiber, 'Putin and the Brand of the Authoritarian Strongman', *Marc Stoiber Brand Strategy*, 2018, [accessed 2 August 2018]; Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'; Helena Goscolo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity: VVP as VIP Objet D'art' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Goscolo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 13.

8 Jennifer L. Aaker, 'Dimensions of Brand Personality' in *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34 (1997), pp. 347–356.

sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness.⁹ This article will focus on the three most prominent characteristics projected by Putin's brand that have been identified through literature on the subject: competence, ruggedness, and sincerity. However, in keeping with Putin's reputation as a 'strongman', ruggedness will be redefined as 'strength'. Whilst these characteristics are by no means unique to Putin, they provide a solid analytical framework in which to analyse the unique *range* of images that Putin projects.

Given the vast array of material available for analysis, this article will pursue a process of triangulation by applying the concept of brand personality to both primary and secondary sources from Putin's time in office. Complementing a synthesis of insights from these sources, this paper will analyse a range of additional primary sources—including official biographies, photographs, and interviews, as well as a wealth of 'unofficial' materials from popular culture, such as merchandise, YouTube videos, and memes—using an interpretivist methodology modelled on Lene Hansen's approach to discourse analysis.¹⁰

As this article will demonstrate, the stability and legitimacy of Putin's regime depends upon his popularity,¹¹ which in turn rests on three pillars: economic prosperity, domestic order, and Russia's great-power status.¹² Whilst these pillars are in one sense 'performative', they are also highly 'perceptive' in that Putin must be *seen* as delivering them.¹³ There is a deeper motivation behind the 'what, who, how, and why' through which Putin's popularity is achieved. In the final section of the paper, Derek Hutcheson and Bo Petersson's analysis of the types of legitimacy of nations is considered together with Jean-Noël Kapferer's analysis of the five core functions of a brand to provide valuable insight into the rationale behind Putin's actions at home and abroad.¹⁴

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9 Aaker, 'Dimensions of Brand Personality'.

10 Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (New York: Routledge, 2006); 'Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17 (2011), pp. 51–74.

11 Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter, 'Is Putin's Popularity Real?', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 33 (2017); Derek Hutcheson and Bo Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy: Popularity in Putin's Russia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68 (2016), pp. 1107–26.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 1107.

13 Bo Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth?: Russia's Recognition as a Great Power and the Sochi Winter Games', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 61.1 (2014), p. 34.

14 Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, and Hitler—Propaganda and the Paternity of Pseudo Democracy', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 2 (2017), pp. 113–35.

Competence

The projection of competence is critical to any politician's overall image.¹⁵ However, Putin has not always successfully projected competence. In particular, Putin was heavily criticised for his handling of the *Kursk* disaster in 2000, refusing to receive foreign assistance, and failing to cut short his holiday in the belief that his intervention would make no difference.¹⁶ As Putin later admitted, the incident taught him a harsh lesson: perception trumps pragmatism.¹⁷ For Aaker, a brand's competence is defined by three core attributes—successfulness, reliability, and intelligence.¹⁸

Successfulness

The popularity of any political brand depends upon its being perceived as successful. In general terms, the sheer variety of Putin's publicity events is designed to create the impression that Putin succeeds in everything he does, from racing Formula One cars to singing *Blueberry Hill* to Hollywood stars.¹⁹ It is this apparent diversity of achievements that helps differentiate Putin. As one adoring blogger wrote, 'he is the only president I know with a black belt and PhD in economics'.²⁰

However, the most significant projections of Putin's success are deeply rooted in the context in which he came to power. The poverty, instability, and loss of superpower status that characterised Russia in the 1990s meant that the 'success' voters wanted to see was focused on an increase in living standards, the restoration of domestic order, and the restoration of Russia's status as a great power.²¹ A key purpose of the many different images of Putin projected by his PR team has, therefore, been to convince Russians that their president is successful in all of these fields. This section will focus on Putin's projected image of financial and international success, as the Russian public's perception of domestic order is related more to the image of 'strength'.

15 Shawn W. Rosenberg, Shulamit Kahn and Thuy Tran, 'Creating a Political Image: Shaping Appearance and Manipulating the Vote', *Political Behavior*, 13 (1991): 355.

16 Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (London : New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 60–61.

17 David Wastell, '[Putin Admits Regrets over Kursk Crisis](#)', 9 September 2000, [accessed 12 August 2018].

18 Aaker, 'Dimensions of Brand Personality'.

19 Goscilo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', p. 19.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

21 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'.

Putin's economic 'success' is largely the product of favourable circumstances—shrewdly exploited by his brand. By most objective measures, the economy under Putin appeared to have miraculously recovered.²² From near bankruptcy in 2000, during Putin's first two terms Russia experienced a 70% growth in GDP, with real incomes and pensions more than doubling, and the poverty rate being halved.²³ Whilst Putin certainly implemented economic reforms, in reality, this dramatic growth was largely due to the soaring price of oil, which had gone from an average of \$14 a barrel under President Yeltsin to \$90 a barrel by 2008.²⁴

However, Russian voters linked this dramatic increase in living standards directly to Putin, with survey responses such as, 'before Putin we were poor',²⁵ reflecting how these tangible improvements in living standards benefitted Putin's brand by association. In that sense, Putin's financial 'success' didn't need to be communicated to his target audience; it appeared self-evident. However, to ensure Putin received maximum credit, the perceived connection between Putin and prosperity was encouraged through explicit repetition in official discourse. During a major speech in 2008, Putin claimed, '[under Yeltsin] wealthy Russia had turned into a country of impoverished people. In these conditions we started to implement our programme to take the country out of crisis'.²⁶ Whether the rise in living standards was because of—or in spite of—Putin's policies is irrelevant; in the minds of Russians, the improvements they saw on the ground, combined with the consistent messages they received from above, helped establish the image of Putin as delivering economic success.²⁷

In foreign affairs, the Kremlin has long cultivated the image of Putin as a master geopolitical strategist, reviving Russia's great-power status. Indeed, Putin's appearance as *Time* magazine's Person of the Year in 2007 was as much the result of extensive lobbying as it was for his 'extraordinary feat of leadership in imposing stability [...] and [bringing] Russia back to the table of world power'.²⁸ To a large extent, this image has been projected through Putin's asser-

22 Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), p. 144.

23 Vladimir Putin, 'The Putin Interviews: Episode 1', by Oliver Stone, produced by Showtime, 2017, [accessed 3 August 2018]; Stephen White and Ian McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon' in *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 24 (2008): 622–23; Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, pp. 216–17; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 144–46.

24 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 216.

25 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 617.

26 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 216.

27 Alexander Lukin, 'Russia's New Authoritarianism and the Post-Soviet Political Ideal' in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 25:1 (2009): 77.

28 *Time*, 'Person of the Year 2007', [accessed 16 December 2018]; O'Shaughnessy, *Putin, Xi, And Hitler*, p. 115.

tive foreign policy, with his annexation of Crimea and continual frustration of Western ambitions in Syria leading to record high approval ratings of 89% in 2015.²⁹ Prestigious international events such as the Sochi Olympics and FIFA World Cup are also used to communicate Putin's restoration of Russian power to both domestic and international audiences.³⁰ Such high-profile events provide an excellent platform through which to advertise Putin's personal dynamism—images of Putin energetically driving construction forward were brought home to domestic screens.³¹ Putin's highly publicised involvement in both successful events ensured that they became seen as his achievements domestically and internationally.³²

The impressiveness of these domestic and international successes is deliberately enhanced for domestic audiences through Putin's continual evocation of the past through his speeches. 'The last four years were not easy years [...]. In 2000, it seemed that we were facing a great number of simply irresolvable problems. [...] Together we have achieved a lot and we have achieved it through only our own efforts.'³³ Whilst this speech ostensibly serves to bind the people to Putin through the repetition of 'we', it reflects a deeper purpose: to remind Russians of a nation without Putin.³⁴ The message that only Putin has the competence to bring success underlies many of Putin's projected images, as seen in Putin's response to the question of why he doesn't follow Reagan's habit of delegating: 'there is a great difference between us [...] his difficulties in the U.S. were not comparable to those we faced in Russia.'³⁵

Just as important as these apparent achievements are to Putin's brand, so too is the demonstration that he possesses the qualities needed to keep delivering results for the Russian people. A consistent feature of Putin's brand is the idea that he possesses an almost superhuman capacity to work. As the authors of Putin's official biography *First Person* noted, 'sometimes he arrived exhausted, with drooping eyelids, but he never broke off the conversation'.³⁶ This trait is

29 Michael Birnbaum, 'Putin's approval ratings hit 89 percent, the highest they've ever been', *Washington Post*, 24 June 2015; Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', pp. 1113–14.

30 Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth?'

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Vladimir Putin, '[Address to the Nation at the Presidential Inauguration Ceremony](#)', 7 May 2004, [accessed 17 December 2018].

34 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', p. 1114.

35 Putin, '[The Putin Interviews](#)'.

36 Vladimir Putin, Nataliya Gevorkyan, and Natalya Timakova, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President Vladimir Putin*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), pp. vii–viii.

most commonly communicated through Putin's televised (and heavily mediated) question and answer sessions with audiences, such as the annual broadcast *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*. One common rhetorical technique is for audience members to compare Putin's workload with his ability to follow other pursuits. One such question posed during the 2007 *Direct Line*—'seeing how busy you are, with a really packed work schedule, how do you manage to learn languages?'—serves to accentuate the impressiveness of Putin's work ethic by implying that he has both the energy and the self-discipline to manage even more work.³⁷ Putin's answers serve to project other qualities too, with his constant use of phrases such as, 'I'm certain', combined with iterated modal adverbs such as 'without fail', projecting an image of extreme confidence.³⁸

Visual projections of Putin as a lone figure, tirelessly working for the welfare of the Russian people, reinforce this rhetoric.³⁹ One image on Putin's presidential website shows a determined looking Putin working at his desk.⁴⁰ In the background we see multiple phones, with stacks of paper piled high. Yet it is the figure of Putin on which the picture is centred, his features alert and focused. That his telephones and paperwork are slightly out of focus is significant; rather than drowning in a sea of work, Putin is visually projected as dominating it. Such images highlight how Putin's very body is effectively used to project desired traits, with his confident appearance and manner frequently eliciting approval in voter surveys.⁴¹

Reliability

Phrases such as 'we'll do that without fail' also point to another key feature of Putin's brand: reliability.⁴² Given the uncertainty of the Yeltsin years, it was important for Putin to quickly establish an image of himself as a leader who could be counted on to deliver. As Putin stressed during his first inauguration, 'I understand that I have taken on a great responsibility [...] in Russia the head of state has always been and will always be the person who is responsible for everything in the country.'⁴³ To achieve this image, Putin understands the importance of the need for his words to *appear* to match his deeds. For example, Muscovites surveyed in

37 Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The discourse of a spectacle at the end of the presidential term' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Goscilo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 123.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 117–18.

39 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 129.

40 [Presidential Press and Information Office](#), 2018.

41 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 618.

42 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', p. 118.

43 Vladimir Putin, '[Speech at the Inauguration Ceremony](#)', 7 May 2000, [accessed 10 August 2018].

2001 noted how despite the criticism Putin received for his handling of the *Kursk* disaster, 'he said he would raise the submarine and he did', which they viewed as proof that he was 'a man of his word'.⁴⁴

This congruence between word and deed is not limited to national tragedies. The Russian media, supported by online activists, frequently publicise occasions where Putin keeps his word to ordinary Russians, such as the video titled 'Putin KEEPS HIS PROMISE and visits Izhevsk family's home as promised during *'Direct Line'*'.⁴⁵ Putin further cultivates this image of reliability through his speeches and interviews, subtly differentiating himself from the popular image of politicians making empty promises.⁴⁶ 'I am very pleased that as a result of my work the perception of me has been changing. And we have a saying: you should judge someone not by what he says about himself but by what he does.'⁴⁷ In one heavily publicised incident in Pikalyovo, Putin personally flew in to resolve a dispute between factory workers and their management, famously demanding an oligarch sign the agreement before growling, 'Give me back my pen!'⁴⁸ Whilst the dramatic scene delighted viewers, in reality the event was carefully staged to make an already agreed settlement appear as the result of Putin's intervention.⁴⁹ On the international level, Putin has cultivated a more sinister reputation of reliability; namely, that he will follow through on any threats he makes.⁵⁰ As ex-Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili discovered to his cost when Russia invaded in 2008: 'Unlike many of his Western counterparts, Putin does not bluff.'⁵¹

Intelligence

Putin has cultivated an image of intelligence and an almost infallible judgment, unlike the alcoholic antics of his predecessor.⁵² During Putin's first election, official biographies provided a useful means to establish his intelligence, using

44 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 618.

45 *Russia Insight*, 'Putin KEEPS HIS PROMISE and Visits Izhevsk Family's Home as Promised during "Direct Line"', YouTube, 2017, [accessed 12 August 2018].

46 Michael Gorham, 'Putin's language' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Gosciolo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 86.

47 Vladimir Putin, 'Putin remarks on his public image', YouTube, (November 2001).

48 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 276.

49 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 196.

50 Hill, *Putin*.

51 Mikheil Saakashvili, 'Ex-Georgian President: Mr. Trump, Putin Does Not Bluff but You Have the Upper Hand—Use It', *Fix: News*, 16 July 2018, [accessed 17 August 2018].

52 Helena Gosciolo, 'Putin's performance of masculinity: The action hero and macho sex-object' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Gosciolo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 5.

interviews with figures such as Putin's old teacher to deliver the message in a way that seemed more authentic. 'He had a very good memory, a quick mind. I thought: this kid will make something of himself.'⁵³

Surveys during Putin's first presidency also highlighted the importance of his business-like appearance, with respondents noting that he 'always conducted himself in a dignified way' and was 'always neatly dressed'.⁵⁴ This image of professional competence is reinforced by Putin's speech patterns. He has mastered the language of the competent technocrat,⁵⁵ deploying what Petersson refers to as 'the Soviet rhetorical tradition of quoting figures' to demonstrate progress and proficiency.⁵⁶ 'Growth was 7.7%—much higher than the parameters that were in the plan [...] but the supply of new housing will be even bigger, 34.5%'.⁵⁷ Putin's ability to recite precise numbers across a range of subjects without notes is a commonly deployed technique designed to communicate a commanding knowledge on any and every topic.⁵⁸

The format of events such as *Direct Line* is designed to portray Putin as the leading source of knowledge in the country, with audience members passively reinforcing this image by providing the illusion of authentic dialogue.⁵⁹ Publicly broadcasting Putin's meetings serves to emphasise the image of the all-knowing leader, with Putin lecturing deferential ministers on governmental matters, correcting planned pipeline routes for embarrassed oil executives, and translating German perfectly in front of a delighted audience.⁶⁰ Putin's intelligence is also projected through less direct means. In 2015 every Russian politician received a compilation of Putin's speeches published by the pro-Kremlin youth group Network, titled *Words That Change the World*. One of the authors claimed 'it turns out basically everything he said has either already come true or is in the process of coming true at this very moment'.⁶¹

53 Putin, et al., *First Person*, p. 17.

54 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 618.

55 Gorham, 'Putin's Language'.

56 Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth', p. 36.

57 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', pp. 117–22.

58 'The Propaganda of the Putin Era: Part One', *Institute of Modern Russia*, 12 November 2012, [accessed 10 July 2018].

59 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', p. 106.

60 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 320; Julie Cassidy and Emily Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', *The Slavonic and East European Review* Vol. 88 Iss 4 (2010): 685; RT, [Putin shows German skills, unexpectedly steps in as translator at forum](#) (2016).

61 Shaun Walker, 'Collection of Vladimir Putin's Most Notable Speeches Published', *The Guardian*, 28 December 2015, [accessed 6 August 2018].

Putin's ability to speak the language of the diplomat is key in presenting him as both competent and reasonable. For example, during a diplomatic ceremony in 2018, Putin stated, '... we still hope that common sense will eventually prevail, and international relations will enter a constructive course [... . Russia will fully adhere to its] international responsibilities and develop cooperation with our partners on a constructive and respectful basis.'⁶² Russia's state-owned broadcaster RT was quick to contrast this speech with Trump's tweet, warning Russia to 'Get ready' for 'nice and new and "smart!"' missiles targeting Syria.⁶³

In less controlled media engagements, moments where Putin appears more knowledgeable than his counterpart are seized upon by Russian media and online activists alike; RT's video '*Putin Schools Megyn Kelly*' received over 900 000 views.⁶⁴ The manipulation of video to frame Putin in a favourable light appears to be a common technique. A basic YouTube search reveals countless videos of Putin apparently 'destroying', 'owning', and 'humiliating' his opponents.⁶⁵ In projecting the desired image of Putin's competence both domestically and internationally, these supposedly spontaneous communications attempt to create the impression of credibility because they appear unofficial. Indeed, the use of unofficial communicators is one of the Kremlin's key methods for projecting the desired image of Putin.

Projections of success and competence are therefore key to Putin's brand. Putin's consistently high approval ratings also serve to reinforce the image of his competence.⁶⁶ Yet with the Russian economy no longer booming, Putin must increasingly turn to images based on other qualities, such as strength and sincerity.

Strength

Whereas the propaganda of the post-Stalin Soviet Union focused on the strength of the state, the propaganda of Putin's Russia revolves around the strength of

62 RT, '[Putin: The world is getting more chaotic, but we hope that common sense will prevail](#)', 11 April 2018.

63 Ibid.

64 Greg Simons, 'The Politics of Marketing of Vladimir Putin to Global Audiences', *ANALISIS GEURASIA* № 5, 26 June 2017, p. 4; RT America, '[Putin schools Megyn Kelly on Syria, chemical weapons & terrorism](#)', YouTube, 2 June 2017.

65 *News Heist*, '[Vladimir Putin Utterly Destroys BBC Reporter](#)', YouTube, 27 December 2016; *Russia Insight*, '[OWNED! Putin Owns Macron In Under One Minute—CHECKMATE!](#)', YouTube, 28 May 2018; *Russia Insight*, '[LIKE A BOSS: Putin Humiliates Oligarchs 'Cockroaches' For Closing Down a Factory in 2008 Fin Crisis](#)', YouTube, 22 April 2017.

66 Greg Simons, 'Stability and Change in Putin's Political Image During the 2000 and 2012 Presidential Elections: Putin 1.0 and Putin 2.0?' in *Journal of Political Marketing* 15 (2016): 156.



Putin swimming in a lake in Southern Siberia's Tuva region, 21.09.2012, Reuters

its leader.⁶⁷ Strength has been vital to Putin's brand from the outset for two reasons. First, voter studies have confirmed the old adage that Russians are generally attracted to an authoritarian leadership, desiring strength and toughness above other traits.⁶⁸ Second, Putin had to be seen as successfully restoring domestic order, yet he lacked the realities of a strong state apparatus.⁶⁹ According to Putin's former political strategist Gleb Pavlovsky, the purpose of projecting Putin's strength so intensely was to help compensate for the state's weakness, by 'creating an image of power' concentrated in Putin himself.⁷⁰ If Yeltsin's personal weakness was a metaphor for the state's weakness, Putin would become a metaphor for its strength. Early statements such as, 'many people decided that the president was no longer the centre of power. I'll make sure that no one ever has such illusions any more', helped foster Putin's image of strength, relying more

67 Bruen, '[Putin Flexes His Brand to the World](#)'.

68 E.B. Shestopal, T.N. Pishcheva, E.M. Gikavyi, and V.A. Zorin, 'The Image of V.V. Putin in the Consciousness of Russia's Citizens', in *Sociological Research*, 43 (2004).

69 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'.

70 Anton Troianovski, '[How the Kremlin Crafted a Popular Brand: Putin](#)', *Washington Post*, [accessed 30 July 2018].

on personal power than presidential authority.⁷¹ However, Putin's projection of strength is far more multifaceted than is often recognised. Indeed, scholars and commentators have identified numerous characterisations of Putin's strength—the tough guy, the commander-in-chief, the sportsman, the action hero, the sex symbol—all of which are deeply rooted in projections of masculinity.

The Tough Guy

One of the more unusual if implicit presentations of Putin's strength is the image of him as a 'tough guy'.⁷² Putin even explicitly refers to himself as 'a hooligan', when discussing his younger years.⁷³ Official biographies frequently point to the alleged lessons Putin learned growing up on the tough streets of Leningrad. 'I had to be strong [...] to fight to the finish in every fight'.⁷⁴ By presenting Putin's youth in this way, these official representations differentiate Putin from the Moscow elite,⁷⁵ and imply that he has lost none of his toughness. This thuggish image has also been enthusiastically promoted in the public imagination through memes and merchandise.⁷⁶ Such unofficial presentations enhance this image of strength and power, giving Putin's brand an almost menacing edge that encourages fear and respect.

The Commander-in-chief

Associating his brand with military power is crucial to the projection of Putin's strength. This was particularly true in his first term, when public trust in the military was more than double that of its trust in Putin.⁷⁷ Arguably, it was the Chechen conflict that established strength as an essential characteristic of Putin's brand. While Russians celebrated the new millennium, Putin's first act as President was to go to the Chechen front. This sent a clear message of determination and solidarity with Russian troops.⁷⁸ One of Putin's most infamous quotes is his reply to a question about the intensity of his campaign: 'We will pursue the

71 Maria Lipman, 'The Media' in *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, Stephen K. Wegren (ed.), 6th edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 130; Elizabeth Wood, 'Hypermasculinity as a Scenario of Power: VLADIMIR PUTIN'S ICONIC RULE, 1999–2008', in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 18 (2016): 334.

72 Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (Granta Books, 2012), quoted in Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 131.

73 Putin, et al., *First Person*, p. 18.

74 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 93.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

76 Adrian Campbell and Elena Denezhkina, 'From Project Putin to Brand Putin', in *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 8 Issue 2 (2017): 321; '[Putin Likes Your Joke | Vladimir Putin](#)', *Know Your Meme*, [accessed 21 August 2018].

77 Hutchesson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', p. 1115.

78 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 1.

terrorists wherever they are. [...] So, you will excuse me, if we catch them in the toilet, we'll whack them in the outhouse [...].⁷⁹ Whilst some found such language to be beneath the office of president, many Russians were electrified by it.⁸⁰ It distinguished Putin from other politicians, emphasising his determination and decisiveness while simultaneously making him appear more relatable to ordinary Russians.⁸¹ Putin's vigorous prosecution and PR exploitation—of the war transformed him from an unknown bureaucrat into a strongman overnight, taking his projected 2% of the vote in August 1999 to 52% by the election in March 2000.⁸²

Putin's brand also carefully exploits symbolic events. One English language YouTube video titled '*Putin ignores pouring rain to lay wreath on Day of Memory and Sorrow*' shows Putin at a wreath-laying ceremony commemorating the Great Patriotic War.⁸³ Putin stands still and resolute, his suit completely drenched as the wind and rain lash against his unsheltered body (all captured by the media). Praise such as, 'this is why Russians love President Putin', 'he is like the alpha of all alphas', and, 'Western leaders should learn from this man!!!' fills the comments section in real or state-sponsored admiration.⁸⁴ A linked video, 'I am not made of sugar—Putin shrugs off his badass downpour video' shows Putin explaining how, 'it never even occurred to me that it was necessary to stand under the umbrella. [...] I am not sugar; I won't melt.'⁸⁵ Whilst such gestures ostensibly display Putin's respect for the military, in reality they serve to project his personal strength while linking him with powerful national narratives and institutions for the domestic audience.⁸⁶

The Sportsman

One trait that surveys have found consistently praised by Russians is Putin's love of sport.⁸⁷ From the outset, Putin's athleticism has been exploited to promote

79 Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 335; Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 23.

80 Gorham, 'Putin's language', p. 87.

81 Ibid.

82 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 612.

83 *Russia Insight*, '[Putin ignores pouring rain to lay wreath on Day of Memory and Sorrow](#)', YouTube, 22 June 2017.

84 Ibid.

85 *Russia Insight*, '[I am not made of sugar—Putin shrugs off his badass downpour video](#)', YouTube, 22 July 2017.

86 Elizabeth Wood, 'Performing memory: Vladimir Putin and the celebration of World War II in Russia', in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 38:2 (2011) quoted in Alexandra Novitskaya, 'Patriotism, sentiment, and male hysteria: Putin's masculinity politics and the persecution of non-heterosexual Russians', in *NORMA*, 12, 2017), p. 305.

87 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 50.

an image of virility that distinguishes him at home and abroad. Whereas other leaders are seen playing golf, the Kremlin has consistently promoted official images of Putin engaged in a range of high intensity activities.⁸⁸ For example, Putin doesn't just swim; he performs the butterfly—the hardest of all strokes—in icy Siberian rivers.⁸⁹

Putin, a decorated judo black belt, released *Let's Learn Judo with Vladimir Putin* in 2008. It was less an instructional DVD and more an opportunity for Putin to demonstrate his prowess as a fighter at a time of increasing tensions with the West.⁹⁰ Judo's discipline and physicality underlie perhaps the most commonly projected representation of Putin's strength: Putin as 'action hero'.

The Action Hero

Judging from polls and popular culture, it appears that for many of his supporters Putin's brand has successfully satisfied a desire for a charismatic hero-as-leader.⁹¹ Images of Putin flying fighter jets and saving film crews from charging tigresses closely mirror the aesthetic of the Hollywood hero.⁹² Pavlovsky reveals that this Hollywood model was consciously followed by Putin; 'The main thesis was that Putin corresponds ideally to the Hollywood image of a saviour-hero. [...] The world watches Hollywood—so it will watch Putin.'⁹³ Pavlovsky's admission suggests that Putin's 'action hero' image—like many aspects of his brand—is deliberately designed to overcome the boundaries of language to appeal internationally.⁹⁴ Images of Putin alone on horseback echo the aesthetics of the Marlboro Man poster that once dominated international billboards.⁹⁵ Such images offer plentiful opportunities for supporters and commentators to contrast his rugged masculinity with the 'weakness' of Western leaders—as on the popular FOX programme *Hannity*, which juxtaposed Putin's topless horse riding with Obama riding a bicycle whilst wearing a helmet.⁹⁶

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88 Gosçilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 184.

89 Maeve Shearlaw, '[Let Putin be your fitness inspiration hero](#)', *Guardian*, 9 September 2015.

90 Shearlaw, '[Let Putin be your fitness inspiration hero](#)'; Gosçilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 184.

91 Helen Gosçilo, 'Introduction' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Gosçilo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 2; Gosçilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 182.

92 Gosçilo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', pp. 15–16.

93 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

94 Ibid.

95 Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 339.

96 *Fox News Insider*, '[Hannity: Why For the First Time I'm "Humiliated" for My Country](#)', 7 March 2014. [Accessed 19 August 2018].



President Putin on vacation in Tyva, Russia, 05.08.2018, Alexey Nikolsky/TASS

Hollywood's hero blueprint also requires another 'higher' quality: self-control.⁹⁷ Though often manifested in his controlled body language, this quality is also communicated by pulling rhetorical punches: 'When you look at this, you feel you could strangle them with your own hands. But that's emotions [getting in the way].'⁹⁸ Such statements communicate both primal power and self-mastery in language that distinguishes Putin from other leaders and endears him to ordinary Russians.⁹⁹ Putin's psychological strength is also emphasised; *First Person* even claims that Putin's KGB superiors were disconcerted by just how calm Putin was under pressure.¹⁰⁰ Focus groups suggest these messages have achieved their intended effect; voters often attribute psychologically 'strong' characteristics such as determination, confidence, and strength of will to Putin.¹⁰¹

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⁹⁷ Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 188.

⁹⁸ Gorham, 'Putin's language', p. 88; Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 188.

⁹⁹ Gorham, 'Putin's language', p. 88.

¹⁰⁰ Putin, et al., *First Person*, pp. 36–37.

¹⁰¹ Shestopal, et al., *The Image of V. V. Putin*, p. 50.

Putin's KGB past also fuels the image of him as Russia's 'James Bond'.¹⁰² Indeed, in 2011, posters of Putin as Bond inexplicably appeared in Moscow, captioned with '[Putin] will protect.'¹⁰³ In reality, Pavlovsky claims that this 'secret agent' image is consciously modelled on the fictional KGB character Stirlitz, whom secret Kremlin polling revealed as the ideal of Russian heroism in the popular imagination.¹⁰⁴ Given their shared KGB background, a deliberate campaign to recast Putin as the modern Stirlitz was undertaken.¹⁰⁵ 'We intensified Putin's mystery on purpose', deliberately exploiting the lack of visibility into Putin's KGB past to romanticise what was likely a relatively unexceptional desk-based career.¹⁰⁶ This glamourised image reflects how the excitement of Putin's brand largely derives from a heady combination of mystery and adventure.

Like much of Putin's brand, the image cultivated by the Kremlin of Putin as an action hero has been enthusiastically embraced in the popular imagination. As Putin himself noted, 'the public loves to see some "hot stuff", and so they created this image'.¹⁰⁷ Putin-as-hero is an established part of Russian popular culture, with fiction books such as *Prezident* portraying Putin as personally hunting down Chechen terrorists.¹⁰⁸ Even satirical works like the comic series *Superputin*, whilst seemingly mocking Putin's projected heroism paradoxically help reinforce the image by repeating it.¹⁰⁹

This representation of Putin as an 'action hero' through both official and unofficial channels is remarkable for its sheer depth and diversity. Key to this image is one of the brand's most notable assets: Putin's physique. Carefully choreographed presentations of Putin's body, such as his topless Siberian holiday pictures in 2007, have achieved iconic status.¹¹⁰ In a country where the life expectancy for men is 64, a 66-year-old Putin is deliberately presented as the epitome of health and vitality.¹¹¹ Surveys confirm that Putin's activeness is overwhelmingly considered a key component of his brand.¹¹²

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102 Andrew Foxall, 'Photographing Vladimir Putin: Masculinity, Nationalism and Visuality in Russian Political Culture', *Geopolitics* 18:1 (2013): 134.

103 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 191.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

106 In Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*.

107 Vladimir Putin, *Putin remarks on his public image* (November 2001).

108 Andrei Rogatchevski, 'Putin in Russian Fiction', in *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24:4 (2008): 631.

109 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 188; O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, And Hitler'.

110 Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 329.

111 Simons, 'Stability and Change', p. 158; Ian Bremmer, 'What the "Tough Guy" Era Means for Global Politics', *Time*, 14 May 2018, [accessed 18 June 2018].

112 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 53.

Putin's muscular body manifests the strength of his brand. Official images of Putin lifting weights broadcast this image.¹¹³ Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov's jibe that if Trump could walk around bare-chested he would, reflects how conscious Putin's brand managers are of the opportunities his muscular frame presents in positioning him against other leaders.¹¹⁴ Suggestions for exercises that can help you achieve a body like Putin's have appeared in domestic publications,¹¹⁵ and articles such as the *Guardian's* 'Let Putin Be Your Fitness Inspiration'¹¹⁶ reflect how this idea of Putin-as-role model has international appeal.

The Sex Symbol

Images of a topless Putin were also crucial for the construction of Putin as a national sex symbol. Newspapers reported that female readers, 'were screaming with delight and showering [Putin] with compliments'.¹¹⁷ In a country with ten million more women than men, sexual appeal has been a domestically important aspect of Putin's projected image.¹¹⁸ The noticeable absence of Putin's then-wife in early official images¹¹⁹ suggests the possibility of Putin believing that a visible partner would undermine a leader's erotic appeal. However, the Kremlin—and by extension the Russian media—have been careful to ensure that in sexualising Putin, he is always the object and never the subject of sexual desire, creating a paradoxical yet powerful impression of availability and unattainability.¹²⁰

The 2002 chart-topping song *Man Like Putin* publicly amplifies this notion of desirability, giving it credibility by presenting the song as a spontaneous reflection of widespread female admiration (despite being produced by a government official and used heavily during elections).¹²¹ Lyrics such as, '[I want] a man like Putin, who's full of strength. A man like Putin, who doesn't drink', both idealises and differentiates Putin from the ordinary Russian male.¹²² Putin's brand has inspired other forms of sexualisation in popular culture, such as special edition

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113 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

114 Ibid.

115 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 194.

116 Shearlaw, '[Let Putin be your fitness inspiration here!](#)'

117 Foxall, *Photographing Vladimir Putin*, p. 148.

118 Simons, *Stability and Change in Putin's Political Image*, p. 158.

119 Tatiana Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation: His Family and Other Animals', in *Putin As Celebrity*

and *Cultural Icon* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 68.

120 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 195.

121 Cassidy and Johnson, *Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality*, p. 690; Wood, *Hyper-masculinity*, p. 337.

122 Cassidy and Johnson, *Putin*; Foxall, *Photographing Vladimir Putin*, p. 148.

magazines devoted to his virility.¹²³ Even reputable newspapers occasionally reported on incidents of ‘Putin hysteria’, such as the story of a hospital creating a, ‘new category of patients—women who are madly in love [with Putin]’.¹²⁴ Such statements reflect how the media and popular culture can be used to reinforce and amplify the Kremlin’s intended images of Putin in ways not possible officially, giving them the appearance of legitimacy and genuine popularity.

Masculinity

The importance of masculinity for Putin’s brand can be inferred from the harsh reprisals aimed at those perceived as emasculating him, such as the arrest and beating of Aleksandr Shednov for his portrait of Putin in a dress.¹²⁵ The purpose of Putin’s exaggerated displays of masculinity is to present him as the ‘ultimate man’ in a deeply patriarchal society.¹²⁶ In one official holiday photograph from 2007 we see a bare-chested Putin in military gear walking purposefully along a river, looking confidently into the distance, his square shoulders emphasising his alpha-male gait.¹²⁷ The image is framed so as to draw the eye to Putin, the dimensions of the river and rugged mountains being subordinate in focus and detail; this image symbolises Putin’s dominance over the Russian landscape.¹²⁸

Putin’s interactions are also carefully choreographed to emphasise his masculine dominance.¹²⁹ Publicly broadcast meetings invariably present Putin as being in complete control, his subordinates listening in deferential silence.¹³⁰ Public castigations further assert Putin’s dominance and image of decisiveness: ‘After the journalists leave, I will tell you what failures to meet the deadlines will amount to.’¹³¹ International confrontations are also used to reinforce Putin’s masculinity. Putin’s warnings to the West not to push the Russian ‘spring’ lest it ‘snap back hard’,¹³² as well as his infamous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference (‘This conference’s structure allows me to avoid excessive politeness [...] and] will

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123 White and McAllister, *The Putin Phenomenon*, p. 609.

124 *Ibid.*, p. 608.

125 Novitskaya, *Patriotism, sentiment, and male hysteria*, p. 307; Goscilo, *Putin’s performance of masculinity*, p. 199.

126 Goscilo, ‘Putin’s performance’.

127 Foxall, ‘Photographing Vladimir Putin’, pp. 143–44.

128 *Ibid.*; Wood, ‘Hypermasculinity’, p. 331.

129 Wood, ‘Hypermasculinity’, p. 329.

130 Sky News, ‘[Vladimir Putin’s Action Man Persona Is No Mistake - It’s a Carefully-Crafted Image, Says Body Language Expert Peter Collett](#)’, Twitter, 13 March 2018, [accessed 16 December 2018]; Foxall, ‘Photographing Vladimir Putin’, p. 144.

131 Petersson, ‘Still Embodying the Myth’, p. 37.

132 Hutcheson and Petersson, ‘Shortcut to Legitimacy’, p. 1114.



President Putin on Holiday in Tyva, Russia, 27.08.2018, Alexey Nikolsky/TASS

allow me to say what I really think’),¹³³ projects Putin’s aggressive masculinity internationally. This ‘tough talk’ is given credibility through Putin’s willingness to use force in Ukraine and Syria; a careful balance is struck between avoiding conflict with the West whilst simultaneously presenting it as comparatively weak.¹³⁴ The purpose of Putin’s words and actions on the international stage is to communicate to domestic and international audiences that he is a leader to be reckoned with, and with British journalists questioning British politicians whether they were ‘tough enough’ to face Putin, it appears this image has been effective.¹³⁵

Putin’s projection of strength is therefore much richer than the title of ‘strongman’ suggests. Yet, the ageing process means that those images that are rooted in Putin’s physical strength are becoming increasingly vulnerable. In addition, the intensity with which Putin’s strength is projected creates the potential for it to backfire spectacularly. When asked what had happened to the *Kursk*, Putin’s blunt reply that, ‘it sank’, infuriated Russians who viewed it as deeply insensitive.¹³⁶ As

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¹³³ Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 197.

¹³⁴ O’Shaughnessy, ‘Putin, Xi, and Hitler’, p. 119.

¹³⁵ Gosilo, ‘Putin’s performance’, p. 186; Channel 4 News, ‘*Hell yes, I’m tough enough: Ed Miliband to Jeremy Paxman | Battle For Number 10*’, YouTube, 26 March 2015.

¹³⁶ Gosilo, ‘Putin’s performance’, pp. 180–81.

a result, qualities such as his ‘sincerity’ must be projected in order to help counteract the weaknesses of Putin’s ‘strongman’ image.

Sincerity

Russia’s tendency to deny, divert, and distract from its aggressive actions has made the notion of Putin as an honest and wholesome leader seem farcical to most Western audiences.¹³⁷ Yet domestically, Putin’s sincerity is a carefully calibrated component of his brand. After *Kursk*, the president’s advisors have been diligent to ensure that his visits to disaster victims are prompt and heavily publicised, taking care that Putin will not be confronted by angry crowds, and deflecting any blame away from the President.¹³⁸ More generally, as with most aspects of Putin’s brand, projections of sincerity are carefully curated to provide the public image of Putin with the specific traits revealed as desirable by voter research.¹³⁹ These can best be described as honesty, humility, and compassion.

Honesty

This image was initially communicated through Putin’s rhetoric and actions, though it appears to be increasingly dependent upon ‘spin’ via state-controlled media. During his first inaugural address, Putin pledged to work solely for the interests of the state, declaring that whilst he may make mistakes, ‘what I can promise and what I do promise is that I will work openly and honestly’. His frank appraisal of Russia’s problems and professed commitment to democratic freedoms gave the impression that he was both honest and in touch.¹⁴⁰ To avoid Putin’s KGB past tarnishing this image, biographies were published that included an account of Putin refusing to provide his former KGB colleagues with documents entrusted to him by his new employer, the liberal Mayor of St. Petersburg.¹⁴¹ Putin’s early economic reforms and his manner of presenting himself were crucial to his initial cultivation of good relations with the West. President Bush’s (in)famous claim that he had sensed Putin’s soul and, ‘found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy’, gave this image of Putin as honest great—if short lived—credibility internationally.¹⁴²

137 Mark Molloy, ‘[Deny, divert and distract: Russia’s denials over spy poisoning claims have a familiar ring](#)’, *Telegraph*, 6 April 2018.

138 Goscolo, ‘Russia’s Ultimate Celebrity’, p. 19; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, pp. 197–98; Daily Mail, [Putin visits hospital and talks to patients injured in mall fire](#), 27 March 2018.

139 Mikhailova, ‘Putin as the Father of the Nation’, p. 68.

140 Putin, ‘Speech at the Inauguration Ceremony’; Simons, ‘Stability and Change’, pp. 155–56.

141 Putin, et al., *First Person*, p. 90.

142 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 35.

Honouring his pledge to obey the constitution and stand down after his second term—despite various ‘spontaneous demands’ from the public that he seek re-election¹⁴³—was also designed to reinforce this image. As 70% of Russians ‘completely trusted’ Putin when he stood down, it appears to have worked.¹⁴⁴ Yet the protests in response to Putin’s third candidacy suggest that his domestic image was briefly tarnished by this apparent breach of the spirit of the constitution; many viewed Medvedev’s presidency as a sham.¹⁴⁵

Putin’s control over the media is increasingly important as he strives to maintain his image of integrity. For example, in 2008, reported rumours that Putin had divorced his first wife to marry a gymnast led to the closure of the offending publication.¹⁴⁶ More recently, RT has been used to frame Putin’s unworkable proposals of ‘assistance’ to Western authorities investigating alleged Russian interference in Western politics as ‘fair and unbiased’.¹⁴⁷ Broadcasting endless statistics in support of the points Putin makes in speeches and interviews is also designed to convey a sense of transparency and truth (‘I’m pleased to note that not once have I massaged any figures or facts.’)¹⁴⁸ Given the high levels of public trust Putin continues to enjoy, it seems this image of honesty remains strong, at least domestically.¹⁴⁹

Humility

Balancing the image of Putin’s omnipotence is the projected image of his humility. Putin’s brand has consistently tried to portray him as a ‘man of the people’.¹⁵⁰ Official narratives stress Putin’s humble origins in a communal flat; an experience shared by many Russians:¹⁵¹ ‘No hot water, no bathroom [...] Putin spends much of his time chasing rats with a stick.’¹⁵² A well-established aspect of the Putin myth, his humble background differentiates him from elite politicians while making his achievements appear all the more impressive.

143 Goscilo, ‘Russia’s Ultimate Celebrity’, pp. 6–7; Wood, ‘Hypermasculinity’, pp. 339–40.

144 White and McAllister, ‘The Putin Phenomenon’, p. 615.

145 Petersson, ‘Still Embodying the Myth’, p. 34.

146 Roland Oliphant, ‘Fifteen years of Vladimir Putin: in quotes’, *Telegraph*, 7 May 2015.

147 Robert Bridge, ‘Guilty until proven innocent: US rejects Putin’s joint “interrogations” plan to end Russiagate’, *RT*, 20 July 2018.

148 Ryazanova-Clarke, ‘The Discourse of a Spectacle’, p. 117.

149 Levada-Centre, *Approval Ratings for Government Institutions*, 26 September 2017.

150 *The Propaganda of the Putin Era: Part One*.

151 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 15.

152 Putin, et al., *First Person*, p. 1.

Calculated displays of modesty are also used to connect with ordinary Russians. This was particularly evident during his first term, when he assiduously cultivated the image of a publicity shy man who simply wanted to perform his duty.¹⁵³ Putin repeatedly stated that he had initially refused Yeltsin's offer of the Presidency for fear of the impact it would have on his family's ability to lead ordinary lives, and because, '[leading] Russia back then was a very difficult thing to do'—again, combining humility with achievement.¹⁵⁴

Carefully managed interactions with the public are also broadcast to reinforce Putin's connection with ordinary people. From the outset, Putin has adopted an all-inclusive approach, from riding with commuters on Moscow's trains to sharing meals with shepherds in Tuvan huts.¹⁵⁵ Dramatically staged 'interventions' such as the Pikalyovo incident are coupled with displays of selflessness to create the impression that Putin is firmly of and for the people.¹⁵⁶ His televised response to a father asking how best to explain who the President is to his daughter—'He is a person who works so that you can be happy.'—is a good example.¹⁵⁷

Stage-managed public forums such as *Direct Line* are crucial to Putin's brand, because they create the impression of a dialogue that is simultaneously national and very personal.¹⁵⁸ Putin's frequent use of Russian sayings ("come down off the bottle", as the common folk say) associates him with a folksy style of speaking that resonates with ordinary Russians.¹⁵⁹ Callers from across Russia are shown thanking Putin for taking interest in them,¹⁶⁰ to which Putin replies that he is 'duty-bound to communicate with his people'.¹⁶¹ In another televised forum, after being reminded of how hard his job is, Putin tells students 'I consider myself an ordinary person, albeit it's hard to call my job ordinary.'¹⁶² However, the effectiveness of such attempts to portray Putin as 'one of the people' is questionable. Independent polls suggest that only 17% of Russians view Putin as representing the interests of 'everyday people'.¹⁶³

153 Goscolo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', p. 16.

154 Putin, [The Putin Interviews](#).

155 Simons, 'Stability and Change', pp. 154–55; Foxall, 'Photographing Vladimir Putin', p. 146.

156 Oliphant, 'Fifteen years of Vladimir Putin'.

157 Inessa S, "[I work so that you could be happy" - Putin](#)", YouTube, 9 December 2016.

158 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, pp. 192–93.

159 Gorham, 'Putin's language', pp. 89–90.

160 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', p. 123.

161 In Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 193.

162 Inessa S, "[Putin: I'm just an ordinary person](#)", YouTube, 26 July 2017.

163 Levada-Centre, *Vladimir Putin's Work*, 11 December 2017.



President Putin feeding a baby elk, 05.06.2010, AP

Compassion

Using animals to symbolise a brand's personality is a well-recognised technique, and this is particularly true for brand Putin.¹⁶⁴ Whilst surveys indicate that Putin is overwhelmingly associated with 'strong' animals in the Russian imagination, in marketing the president's image animals are primarily used to project his 'softer' side.¹⁶⁵ Images of Putin cuddling puppies are used to demonstrate his compassion, whilst subconsciously associating him with the positive emotions generated by viewing 'cute' animals in a format that has the potential to go viral internationally.¹⁶⁶ Such displays of tenderness do not just counteract displays of Putin's strength and masculinity; the contrast accentuates their impressiveness by demonstrating Putin's self-confidence and apparent indifference at being perceived as having a gentler side.¹⁶⁷ However, it is interesting that the more notable displays of tenderness, such as his kissing animals, appeared only after his 'macho' image had been firmly established.¹⁶⁸

164 Kapferer, *The New Strategic Brand Management*, p. 168; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation', p. 71.

165 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 53; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation'.

166 RT, *A Dog's Heart: Pet lover Putin needs name for fluffy puppy*, 17 November 2010.

167 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', pp. 199–200.

168 Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation', p. 77.

As well as providing opportunities for displays of compassion, animals and children also function as symbolic surrogates for Putin's conspicuously absent family in portraying him as 'father of the nation'.¹⁶⁹ One notable incident occurred in the Kremlin in 2006, when Putin spontaneously lifted up a child's shirt and kissed his stomach. This ostensibly affectionate act has a deeper symbolic message.¹⁷⁰ The Russian word for 'belly' is also an old word for 'life', and by kissing this intimate part of a child's body without permission in the centre of Russian power, Putin symbolically asserted himself as the 'father of the nation' in a post-modern display of power.¹⁷¹ Animals and children, then, are a powerful medium through which the brand Putin's desired traits and symbolic representations can be communicated.

All politicians seek to display traits such as honesty and sincerity, as these are characteristics voters universally desire.¹⁷² However in Putin's case, visual and rhetorical displays of sincerity are designed to both counteract and compliment his projection of strength. In particular, they serve to present Putin as matching the Russian ideal of the leader as a strong but caring 'father of the nation'—critical to his domestic appeal.¹⁷³

Significance for the Brand

By cross-referencing these images with studies of political legitimacy in Russia,¹⁷⁴ a compelling explanation emerges as to their purpose. The lack of legal-rational legitimacy as a basis for trust in modern Russian state institutions means that the stability of Putin's regime is entirely dependent on his popularity, which rests upon three pillars: economic prosperity, domestic order, and Russia's great-power status.¹⁷⁵ These pillars are crucially and inextricably linked with three national myths within the collective imagination.¹⁷⁶ First, the myth of the 'Good Tsar': a strong but caring 'father of the nation' who protects his people.¹⁷⁷ Second, the 'Times of Troubles' [*Smuta*], where Russia experiences cyclical periods of instability, only to be saved by a great leader.¹⁷⁸ And third, that it is

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169 Ibid., p. 75.

170 Ibid., p. 76.

171 Ibid.; Goscilo, *Introduction*, p. 3; Goscilo, *Putin's performance of masculinity*, p. 200.

172 Wojciech Cwalina and Andrzej Falkowski, 'Morality and Competence in Shaping the Images of Political Leaders', *Journal of Political Marketing* 15:2-3 (2016): 220-39.

173 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 32; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation'.

174 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'.

175 Ibid., p. 1107.

176 Ibid.; Alexander Lukin, 'Russia's New Authoritarianism and the Post-Soviet Political Ideal', in *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25:1 (2009); Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin'.

177 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 133; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation'; Wood, 'Hypermasculinity'.

178 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', p. 1110; Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth', pp. 33-35.

Russia's destiny to be a great power.¹⁷⁹

This is the core purpose of Putin's brand: to compensate for his regime's lack of legal-rational legitimacy by ensuring his personal popularity, projecting him as delivering on all three pillars through the invocation of national myths. Again, the concept of the brand can be particularly illuminating for our understanding of how this is accomplished. Consider Jean-Noël Kapferer's five core functions of a brand: differentiation, reducing risk, increasing attractiveness, establishing relationships, and cultivating identities.¹⁸⁰

Differentiation

In a system dependent entirely upon the legitimacy of one man, it is vital that Putin be seen as unique. Images of strength and competence were crucial for differentiating Putin from the discredited Yeltsin when he first assumed the presidency,¹⁸¹ and though the integrity of his subsequent elections remains questionable, they still required Putin to competitively differentiate himself from rivals.¹⁸² The *Hannity* show's visual comparison of Putin with Obama demonstrates how these images can be used to differentiate Putin on the international stage, evoking Russian pride and international envy.¹⁸³ The idea that Putin is uniquely different is a large part of his appeal, with his novel public relations events attracting widespread attention, which, in the age of celebrity politics, equates to political influence.¹⁸⁴

Yet the novelty of Putin's images also distinguishes him from politics itself, elevating him above the discredited state apparatus he manages and deflecting popular criticism of its shortcomings onto others. This differentiation serves to protect the popularity upon which the entire system depends.¹⁸⁵ By saturating Russia's political discourse with Putin's brand, it becomes a form of political 'repression', replacing democracy and serious political dialogue with entertainment and spectacle.¹⁸⁶

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179 Ibid.

180 Kapferer, *The New Strategic Brand Management*.

181 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 5.

182 Simons, 'Stability and Change', p. 149; Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, pp. 305–06.

183 *Fox News Insider*, 'Hannity'; Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'.

184 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'; Andrew F. Cooper, Hugo Dobson, and Mark Wheeler, 'Non-Western Celebrity Politics and Diplomacy: Introduction', *Celebrity Studies*, 8 (2017).

185 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', p. 118; White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 618; Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 51; Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 331.

186 O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, and Hitler', p. 129; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation', pp. 77–78; Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 331.

Reducing Risk

Because Russians equate a strong government with domestic stability, Putin has had to compensate for the state's inherent weaknesses by creating the image of personal power and restored order.¹⁸⁷ By rhetorically positioning his rule in contrast to the preceding 'dark periods', and by leveraging public displays of power as he did in Pikalyovo, Putin invokes the *Smuta* myth to present himself as the saviour of the Russian people.¹⁸⁸ In a society prone to uncertainty, Putin's brand fosters the belief that he—and he alone—can provide stability, offering the psychological and emotional reassurance voters crave.¹⁸⁹ However, for Putin's rivals, these images actually accentuate risk. Domestically, they both generate and re-communicate Putin's popularity, serving to discourage any opposition.¹⁹⁰ Internationally, the image of Putin as a sinister and omnipotent 'tough guy' acts as a deterrent by instilling both fear and respect.¹⁹¹

Increasing Attractiveness

As a political unknown in 2000, Putin offered a blank canvas upon which his advisors—informed by voter research—could present whatever Russians wanted in an ideal leader.¹⁹² If Putin is presented as a strict but caring 'father of the nation', it is because that is what voters want him to be.¹⁹³ Indeed, the variety of brand Putin images is designed to appeal to the widest possible audience—a key factor in Putin's popularity is that he can be everything to everyone.¹⁹⁴

To a lesser extent, these images also make Putin attractive to international audiences. For some, the image of Putin outmanoeuvring the West and reasserting Russia's position resonates with their own national desires.¹⁹⁵ For others, it is Putin's populism and strength that appeal.¹⁹⁶ Indeed, the 'attractive' qualities of

187 Campbell and Denezhkina, 'From project Putin to brand Putin', p. 319; Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'; Lukin, 'Russia's New Authoritarianism'; Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 53.

188 Vladimir Putin, [Vladimir Putin Has Been Sworn in as President of Russia](#), *President of Russia*, 7 May 2018.

[Accessed 7 August 2018]; Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', p. 1114.

189 Simons, 'Stability and Change'; E. A. Rees, 'Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions', in *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, (Basingstoke, 2004) cited in Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', p. 685.

190 Frye et al., 'Is Putin's Popularity Real?', p. 5.

191 Bruen, ['Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'](#).

192 Simons, 'Stability and Change'.

193 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 32; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation'.

194 Goscolo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', pp. 20–21; Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', p. 686; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*.

195 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

196 Khatya Chhor, ['Trump, Farage, Le Pen: Why Western conservatives love Vladimir Putin'](#), *France 24*, 15 November 2016; Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

Putin's brand give it the potential to be a weapon in Russia's information war by persuading part of the global audience that Putin and his Russia deserve admiration and support.¹⁹⁷

Establishing Relationships

Putin's brand also produces a fantasised relationship of dependency, binding the Russian people to the 'Good Tsar'.¹⁹⁸ Incidents such as Pikalyovo are designed to exploit the culturally ingrained myth that only the Tsar can protect the people from the 'evil boyars', helping justify Putin's concentration of power.¹⁹⁹ From solving mundane issues on *Direct Line* to fighting forest fires, Putin is presented as the 'Omnipresident', able to solve all his people's problems, creating a sense of dependency whilst simultaneously discouraging political activism 'from below'.²⁰⁰ Therefore, these images create a mutually beneficial—if unequal—relationship, where the people get the fantasy of their ideal leader in exchange for acquiescing to the realities of his autocratic rule.²⁰¹

Cultivating Identities

'Russians say Putin, military power & unique spirit make them glorious nation.'²⁰² This RT headline encapsulates how his brand is designed to link inextricably Putin with Russia's identity as a great power, framing him as the 'hero' within national mythology.²⁰³ Putin—through his projection of personal strength and vitality—has become the symbol of a renewed Russia.²⁰⁴ By making him appear as the source of national strength and pride, the presidential brand makes a Russia without Putin seem almost unthinkable.²⁰⁵ As well as masking the fragilities of his state domestically, Putin's projection of strength also serves to mask them internationally.²⁰⁶ If Putin appears strong, so too does the country he leads.

197 O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, and Hitler', p. 124.

198 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*.

199 'Anna Arutunyan Explains the Putin Mystique', NYU Jordan Center, November 14th 2014; Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, pp. 63–65.

200 Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth', p. 36; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*; Goscilo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', p. 19; Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The discourse of a spectacle', p. 120.

201 O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, and Hitler', p. 118.

202 RT, '[Russians say Putin, military power & unique spirit make them glorious nation](#)', 21 May 2018.

203 Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth', p. 31; '[The Propaganda of the Putin Era: Part Two](#)', *Institute of Modern Russia*, 5 December 2012 [Accessed 10 July 2018]; Goscilo, *Putin's performance of masculinity*,

204 Campbell and Denezhkina, 'From project Putin to brand Putin', pp. 320–21.

205 Bruen, '[Putin Flexes His Brand to the World](#)'.

206 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

Conclusion

The images associated with the brand of President Vladimir Putin are remarkably diverse. So remarkable, in fact, that the West's fixation on Putin's 'strongman' image is both one-dimensional and analytically limiting.²⁰⁷ Whilst the diversity of Putin's images is undoubtedly a source of strength, it is a diversity borne from the need to mask vulnerability — the vulnerability of his political system domestically, and the vulnerability of his nation internationally.²⁰⁸ This diversity of images reflects the diversity of audiences targeted and methods used. Putin's words, deeds, and even his very body have been choreographed and exploited to such an extent that he is the most 'manufactured' actor in international politics today, the product of voter research more than genuine personality.

Through his dominance of Russia's media, Putin is able to saturate the market with images that are managed to a degree that would otherwise be impossible, providing a consistency and credibility that is crucial to the brand's strength. Through the active manipulation of social media, spontaneous content is produced to amplify official images, manufacturing the illusion of their authenticity for domestic and international audiences alike.²⁰⁹ By reproducing images inspired by the top, ordinary people play a role in their creation and communication from the bottom as well.²¹⁰

By branding himself as competent, strong, and sincere, Putin has successfully projected images of himself that take advantage of a uniquely Russian context in the most effective way. The primary aim of the brand is to compensate with his own personal popularity for the Russian political system's inherent weakness and lack of legal-rational legitimacy.²¹¹ Whereas most political brands are managed to secure survival within a political system, Putin's brand is managed to ensure the survival of the system itself. With his approval rating never dropping below 61%, it appears that, at least for now, brand Putin is achieving its intended effect.²¹²

207 Bremmer, 'What the "Tough Guy" Era Means for Global Politics'.

208 Campbell and Denezhkina, 'From project Putin to brand Putin'; Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'; Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'.

209 O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, And Hitler', p. 116.

210 Cassiday and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality'; Goscilo, 'Introduction'.

211 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'.

212 Levada-Centre, *Putin's Approval Rating* (2018).

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