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Greg Simons

Vladimir Putin’s political image: an inside and outside perspective

Who is Vladimir Putin and what does he represent? Not so long ago, even in the year 1999, he was a relatively unknown political figure from Russia. Now, a question such as this will generate various and diverse responses, depending on whom it is posed. This short piece is intended to provide a brief glimpse and over view of the primary aspects that constitute the political image and brand of President Vladimir Putin, both positive and negative, Russian and international perspectives and projections.

After emerging from public obscurity and into the centre of political life in Russia, when the then President Boris Yeltsin named Putin as the Prime Minister, a campaign was launched to shape his reputation and brand image. The fact that he did not originate from the political circles and with a long history of service in national politics, actually counted very much in his favour. Public perception and stereotypes of Russian politicians is very low, and the fact that he did not come from this class was a distinct advantage, even though he was Yeltsin’s nominated successor.

Significant effort in terms of public relations and political marketing was invested in to shaping Russian public perception and opinion of Putin as being an opposite of Yeltsin and the chaotic years of his rule. Putin was projected as being young, energetic, non-smoker and abstaining from alcohol, being determined, decisive and serving the interests of Russia and its citizens (his KGB past was used as evidence of his loyalty to the state as this was known as one of the least corrupt institutions in the late Soviet period). These characteristics were intended to build the case that Putin was a man fit for the job as President of Russia, in spite of his relative political inexperience.

His tough rhetoric and statements concerning matters of state security, such as the renewed conflict in Chechnya, consolidated a tough and no nonsense brand. In addition, his pledge to distance oligarchs from political power resonated with many ordinary Russians after the excesses of Yeltsin and his inner circle, known as “the family”. These were popular pledges that were intended to attract the average voter, and also targeting women voters as a segmented audience. The projection was that he offered a complete opposite of Yeltsin and the years of chaos, igniting the emotions of the electorate through regaining Russia’s and Russians’ lost sense of pride and purpose. This is an effective political tool to mobilise a public that had become “lost”.

Although Putin initially met with success, there were also trials, such as the mismanagement of the submarine Kursk’s sinking in August 2000. The experience seemed to steer the new President towards the centralisation of power through the creation of the Vertical of Power. In relative terms, Putin’s ratings were and still are comparatively high. However, there were certain policies that began to erode some of his support base. In the midst of the focus of Western media headlines concerning the crackdown on media freedom and public expression, and Alexey Navalny became the face of public resistance, there were other factors at play too. One of these was the monetisation of social benefits, which saw middle class Russians taking to the streets during the unrest of the 2012 elections in order to protect their children’s rights and access to health, education and other social functions.

The public dissatisfaction necessitated some changes to the established Putin brand and reputation. Unlike in 2000, Putin was now an established political figure and not a newcomer, and seemingly there was no realistic rival to effectively challenge him. Domestic policy seemed to be his greatest weakness, which was offset by the use of ‘administrative resources’ (state bureaucratic machinery, including media assets). But even in difficult times, such as the current one with the conflict in Ukraine and the sanctions, Putin has managed a very difficult balancing game. As noted recently by Professor Martine Laruelle, “the current Russian regime is not static in terms of ideology. It was able to activate intense nationalist sentiment during the Ukraine crisis and calm it down later, without undermining Putin’s personal legitimacy and support.” The Putin brand and reputation is also very well known, but diverse, beyond Russia’s borders too.

In the mainstream media and political channels, Putin is projected as being: a murderer, anti-democratic, authoritarian/dictator, and according to one Pentagon funded ‘research’ project he had Aspergers (from looking at photos of Putin). There are numerous threatening and troubling characteristics that have been asserted – he is Stalin, he is Hitler, and manipulating/destroying democracy in the Western world. Not everyone holds a negative view of him though, cultural conservatives tend to view Putin as an upholder of traditional values and Western civilisation. Those on the other side of the political spectrum admire his challenge to the United States’ global hegemony.

In all, Putin has a very complex and seemingly contradictory brand and reputation. He is widely known in and beyond Russia, and means many things to different people – both hero and villain. This has been achieved in a very short space in time.