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Putin’s International Political Image

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This article concerns how publics perceive and relate to a foreign politician. There is no formal relationship between these groups as the publics have no ability to participate in national elections that could validate or detract the aura of legitimacy of the politician. Therefore the relationship could be more informal in nature and based upon perceived similarities and differences of held norms and values. President Vladimir Putin of Russia is a well-known (high profile) global political figure, which may mean a more intensely generated set of attitudes toward him as a political figure. There has been an overwhelmingly negative flow of information in mainstream mass media, especially after the Ukraine crisis. The question posed in the paper sets out to answer, given the negative coverage and associations, could any foreign (non-Russian) publics still like or admire him? The answer found is yes, there are in fact diverse sets of foreign publics like or admire his actual/perceived values and norms – for example his conservative values or his conflict with the US-led West.

KEYWORDS political brand, political image, political marketing, President Vladimir Putin, Russia, values and norms

INTRODUCTION

Political marketing is normally associated to the relations cultivated between politicians and political organizations with domestic voting
publics (Newman 1999; Lees-Marshalment 2009). It is normally considered as a deliberate and conscious process, i.e. political entities actively seek to influence and persuade target publics. What happens if the political entity consciously or unconsciously communicates with an audience, which happens to be a foreign one and therefore lacking the ability to cast a vote?

A lot of literature focuses on President Vladimir Putin and his effect upon the domestic politics of Russia (Shevtsova 2005; Sakwa 2008; Dugin 2014). Other literature may focus upon Russian public diplomacy or international propaganda (Feklyunina 2009). A gap exists between the two, where Putin’s political image and reputation is communicated to and among international audiences. Although, the beginnings of research into national leaders communicating to international audiences is evident (Mogonsen 2015). This present article seeks to begin the debate and address his direct and indirect political influence on international publics. The contribution to political marketing can be found in analyzing the relationship between a foreign political leader and international publics.

Putin is a controversial figure in international politics. He has cultivated a very specific image for the Russian publics, a no nonsense leader and man of action, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and a patriotic guardian of Russia. Mainstream international media have some overlapping, but also less positive aspects and attributes assigned to the political brand of Putin. He is characterized as being anti-democratic, wanting to recreate the Soviet Union, a KGB thug, leading Russia into a more nationalistic and militaristic state with some religious overtones. Thus, there are contradictory sets of projected norms and values that bombard the information space simultaneously, capturing the attention of different publics, depending on the language, format, and type of mass medium used.

The aim of this article is to begin to explore what some Western/international publics think of Putin. Do they agree with the projections or have another opinion? Foreign publics have no tangible means of formally expressing their opinion by formal voting (such as through participating in Russian elections), but they are able to reflect upon their reaction and feelings through expressed opinions in the public information space, such as viewer comments on media articles or Putin fan groups in social media.

Given the overwhelmingly negative characterizations of Vladimir Putin in the mainstream Western mass media (such as comparisons with Hitler and Stalin), it should theoretically be easier to find negative opinions and stereotypes of the Russian president than positive ones. Therefore, are there any foreign publics that hold a positive opinion and perception of Putin? If so, what aspects about Putin’s political persona appeal to those groups and individuals?

As a first step the theoretical concepts are defined, such as personality and political communication and then political marketing. Although these
are divided, the division is an artificial one as there is a significant amount of overlap between the two. For the sake of simplicity and clarity of argument the division has been made. A background section concerning the attempts at projecting Putin’s persona, positive and negative, are then briefly dealt with. Different materials are used in the research, including media articles and books.

The final section seeks to narrow down the different foreign publics that like or admire Putin. It seeks to identify what norms and values do those groups feel attracted to and the reasons for the attraction. Material from this section has been generated by reading reader comments in media articles and from surveying different Putin fan club sites on Facebook. Questions were posed to members of these groups by pasting on the wall of the group.

**PERSONALITY AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

Political communication is a very difficult, and at times, vaguely defined concept. It includes many different aspects. McNair (2007, 4) provides a comprehensive definition of the term and practice of political communication as being “all political discourse is included in our definition. […] not only verbal or written statements, but also visual means of signification such as a dress, make-up, hair style, and logo design, i.e. all those elements of communication which might be said to constitute a political “image” or identity.” Another view of the term is “political communication as the central mechanism in the articulation, aggregation, production and implementation of collectively binding policies. To them, political communication is not only an instrument of politics; it is politics” (Esser and Pfetsch 2004, 386).

A brand is a symbolic entity, it is a name and logo used to identify a manufacturer or service provider that is instantly recognizable within a marketplace; leading out of this, the process of branding is the development of the logo, symbols, and names and ensures that which it stands for is recognized within the market. (Lilleker 2006, 41)

As seen above, a brand is a multi-varied construct that is built around visual and emotional variables. These observations have also been expressed by others. “A brand is a multidimensional construct involving the blending of functional and emotional values to match consumers’ performance and psychosocial needs” (Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman 2011, 24). The aspect of brand is critical to shaping and defining an image. What is image and why is it important?

Image is the outward representation of a political leader, candidate or organization. It is largely a construct that exists in the mind, but is based on the audience’s power to decode the way that those individuals or organizations behave, combined with what audience members take away
from those individuals or organizations have been portrayed in the media and the manner and style in which they communicate. (Lilleker 2006, 95)

Within the political sphere, image, and brand are the elements that can make or break a career. As noted above, image is not something that is solely derived from the communications of the political actor, but also media coverage and the target audience’s processing of the different information streams. Political “reality” can be viewed from at least three different perspectives. The first is objective political reality, meaning political events as they actually occur. Second, subjective reality that refers to how political events/personages are perceived by the audiences. And third, constructed reality that refers to how those political events/personages are covered in the mass media (McNair 2007, 11). The mass media are influential in shaping public perception of the political actors, which can have the effect of isolating an individual from the contexts of public discussion and exchange of ideas (Johansen 2012, 44). A number of key observations have been made concerning the nature of media input into the political marketing process.

In essence, the media cannot assumed to be neutral: while the media might not display partisan bias in the strict sense of the word – although some media in some countries do – they are structurally biased in the sense that the media is shaped by circumstances of news production, commercial news values, journalistic norms and values, and the competition for people’s attention. (Lees-Marshment, Strömbäck, and Rudd 2010, 286)

Media coverage is determined by a complicated set of different values, norms and practice. However, they are an essential element that is required to help project a candidate’s political profile into public space. A political actor may choose or by circumstances have chosen for them, a specific role or part to play in the political character spectrum. The values and basis of political power determines or projects their political specialization. In other words, it forms the basis of the political profile that they project to the publics. For example, there are a variety of personalities such as an “empire builder,” a “restorer” (after time of troubles), “national father,” and a “moderniser” (Lasswell 2009, 22–26). The particular political persona that is taken is based upon the projections of the actor’s brand and image. Creating an emotional bond with the target public is a necessary step, which often involves the use of strong emotions to influence the opinion and behavior of the audience. Newman notes that “emotions such as fear and hope pervade modern life” (1999, 89). These specific emotions affect the basic human motivations of avoidance and attraction.

Political power and personality are very contextually based and situational in their reception by an audience. A political actor that is able to adapt to the political environment bases their characteristics on “the accentuation of power in relation to other values within the personality when
compared with other persons” (Lasswell 2009, 22). A political actor can base their profile/brand identity upon one or more values. Within the business environment area of research, it has been found that companies that performed very well had a well-defined set of shared values, in particular ethical values. These values formed a basis for lasting psychological bonds between the organization, its work force and customers. The effect was to create a more loyal and committed work force that ultimately resulted in a greater sense of customer satisfaction (Johansen 2012, 85). How can this be related to the political environment, and especially the specific focus of this present article?

In this particular political environment – Russian president and foreign publics – there is the element of the Russian nation as the work force (its people, policies and lifestyle/functioning – the politico-social “construction blocks” of the society) that act in the capacity as active shapers of the image and brand of the country and its leadership. The Russian leader determines the nature and quality of the internal and external relationships through their words and actions (real and perceived). Foreign publics form the customer base. Although having said that, it does not necessarily imply that all words and deeds are directed at cultivating a relationship with these groups, and sometimes a message may be received by the public without the sender intending any form of deliberate communication. The foreign publics are likely to make subjective evaluations of the Russian leader that are premised upon perceived shared values and norms between them and President Putin.

POLITICAL MARKETING

The definition and practice of political marketing is not something that has stood still, but it evolves with time, experiences and demands of the political environment. In 1999 (xiii), Newman defined political marketing as “the application of marketing principles and procedures in political campaigns by various individuals and organizations.” Another definition adds a number of different elements and context.

Political marketing refers to the use of marketing tools, concepts, and philosophies within the field of policy development, campaigning, and internal relations by political parties and organizations. It is seen as a reaction to the rise of political consumerism, and the collapse of partisanship, in Western democratic societies as well as emergent democracies. (Lilleker 2006, 151)

Both of the above-mentioned definitions speak of the application of marketing principles to politics. They also both allude to its use by different groups, organizations, and individuals. The second definition places
the issue in the context of an evolving political environment and culture. A more recent attempt provides one final definition of the term.

The processes of exchanges and establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships among objects in the political market (politicians, political parties, voters, interest groups, institutions), whose goal is to identify and satisfy their needs and develop political leadership. (Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman 2011, 17)

The last quote adds the issue of creating mutual relationships (where both sides benefit) with audiences and in maintaining a permanent campaign. As noted in the above definitions, and as observed by Ormrod, Henneberg, and O’Shaughnessy (2013, 13), “are unified in that they all focus on the exchange of value as a fundamental concept in political marketing.” Namely, it is seen as a two-way exchange within the frame of an established relationship. So far there has been a focus upon the individual and organizational considerations, which has left out the issue of the offer or the product.

One of the key issues of political marketing is the nature of the political product that is on offer. Often this “product” is not something that is tangible and it cannot simply be placed in storage for later retrieval. Also, as noted by Lees-Marshment, the political product is something that is achieved by a government. It is an outcome, which is the policy objective and a process (the method and means of achieving the objective) (2009, 31). Therefore, the offer is contingent upon the candidate gaining political power. A political offer or product is situated within an interconnected framework of different elements.

One of the elements retained from marketing in a business environment and has been used in a political environment is the marketing mix of the 4Ps (price, place, product, and promotion). This has caused a debate over whether there needs to be a revamping of this concept and adapt it (Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman 2011; Johansen 2012) or whether something new should be created instead (Savigny 2008). Johansen (2012, 176) contends that the intangible nature of politics has tended “to turn all of the 4Ps of the marketing mix into issues of mass communications.”

The 4Ps need to be adapted to political marketing as there are differences that make a direct application problematic, such as the aspect of political culture – i.e. how the business of politics is conducted. For example, an adapted variation could include the aspects of political brand, policy, positioning, and public persona. It is necessary to look at each aspect in more detail in order to get a clearer definition and context.

Political brand concerns the element of political party associations and affiliations of political candidates, and the resulting brand implications for both party and candidate that result from those relationships. Brand not only concerns the messenger aspects of creation and projection, but also
about audience perception and awareness (Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman 2011, 24–27). The aspect of policy is more clearly defined in established political figures, owing to a sense of a more developed track record concerning what kind of policy is favored through the policy that is proposed and voted (for or against). Public persona is the sum of the projected political profile by the candidate and their team, the projected values and traits by the media and the perceived qualities held by the public. Newman (1999, 93) observes that “a citizen’s image of a politician consists of the person’s subjective understanding of things or what that person likes or dislikes about the politician.” A final aspect to consider is positioning. This refers to how a candidate places/contextualizes themselves in the political market in relation to other competing candidates. It provides a sense of context and orientation for the publics.

The discipline and practice of political marketing is evolving with time and experience. A number of different trends and patterns have been identified as emerging, and therefore require consideration. Six developments in political marketing management have been observed in the last two decades.

- “Increased sophistication of communication and spin;
- Emphasis on product and image management, including candidate positioning and policy development;
- Increased sophistication of news management, that is, the use of free media;
- A more coherent and planned political marketing strategy development;
- An intensified and integrated use of political market research;
- An emphasis on political marketing organization and professionalization of political management” (Ormrod, Henneberg, and O’Shaughnessy 2013, 23).

These developments are based upon competitive politics (involving elections) and in a Western liberal democratic political environment. How do they compare and look when transferred beyond these political environmental constraints?

METHODOLOGY

A very broad search across all sources in English language was initiated via a Google search (using key words such as “Putin” and “image”), which had the effect of gradually striking some key websites and groups of interest. After some additional background searches and reading, elements within the US conservative movements were identified as being one such international public. Therefore, there was a decision made to identify the media that are used by such individuals, which led to the Washington Times as
being one such media environment. Of particular interest were the viewer comments on articles, rather than the articles themselves as political opinions (often in terms of norms, values, and political context). A word of caution should be issued when using user generated comments though, the real identity of the commentator may not be known and they may possess a partisan political agenda (e.g. to be part of the official Russian public diplomacy and propaganda efforts). Other conservative media where key conservative figures published and expressed their views, such as Pat Buchanan, were also identified. The main concern in this instance was the nature and content of the article, through the use of critical discourse analysis. Media material from no more than 2 years ago was examined in order to gather recent comments and opinions. The selection of articles from the *Washington Times* was done by looking at articles concerning Russia or controversial issues of US foreign policy or events (such as Syria and the Benghazi crisis, i.e. slaying of the US Ambassador). Another means of identifying such sources were Russian media reports concerning positive opinions expressed, such as the case of the GQ magazine interview with the Scottish political figure, Alex Salmond.

The background search also found other international groups, which were very active in social media. In this case, the participants are prosumers, they both consume and produce the content of the groups where they have membership. A selection of the groups was undertaken as there were many different groups of this nature. Those groups that had larger membership or more active posts were chosen. In addition to examining the material that appeared in these sites (and the member comments on that material), the author posted questions (please see Appendix A for the questions asked) on the walls of selected Facebook groups in order to try and better understand the nature of the groups and what motivates them.

In the autumn of 2014, qualitative research was conducted by contacting members of Putin and Russia fan sites that are located on the social media site Facebook. A large number of such pages existed, with some apparent interactions by these groups and individual members. Sites were chosen on the basis of those most likely to contain individuals possessing positive views of Vladimir Putin. The sites that were visited and interacted (through posing questions) with included: *International Friends of Russia* (10,719 members); *President Vladimir Putin Fan Club* (451 members); *American Vladimir Putin Fan Club* (2915 members); *The Power of Russia* (1033 members); *Vladimir Putin Fan Club* (46,812 members); and *Vladimir Putin: A Fighter Against USA/EU/NATO Imperialism* (23,142 members). This material was widely circulated and shared by members within the groups, but there was a certain element of suspicion of a group outsider asking such sensitive questions. There were still a sufficient number of qualitative responses to start generating a tentative picture.
The aim of the research was to explore different media environments in order to answer the primary questions of the work – which non-Russian groups express support or affinity with Putin, and why (the motivations)? This was done through exploring different types of media, consumers that inhabit the traditional media environments and prosumers that occupy spaces in social media. Only material that appeared in English language was sought. The underlying motivation for this is that English language is an international medium of communication and the information is more accessible and comprehensible than other international languages, such as Russian.

These above-mentioned considerations (in traditional mass media and social media) combined shall be used to test the observations of Ormrod, Henneberg, and O'Shaughnessy (2013, 23) on the developments in political marketing management, especially with regard to the development of specific information niches and the creation and use of alternative media sources (from mainstream media). The focus shall be on the aspects of increased sophistication of communication and spin, emphasis on image and product management, and the increased sophistication of news management.

This article seeks to begin to identify foreign (i.e. non-Russian) publics that are most likely to like/identify with/support Vladimir Putin and his policies. It is an exploratory pilot study that seeks to identify some of those international publics, who they are and what motivates their positive views. The purpose of the analysis of media content and the qualitative research is to understand how publics create and form brand and image relationships (as noted by Lilleker 2006; Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman 2011) with foreign political figures. It also seeks to explore the extent to which Newman’s observation holds (1999, 93), which notes that peoples image of a politician is based upon subjective understandings of the person in question. Therefore this article should be seen as a first step in initial research of the topic, and not as a product of definitive research.

**PUTIN’S INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION: IMAGE AND VALUES OF ATTRACTION**

The following section deals with those foreign publics that like or admire President Putin. It is divided into two subsections, one that samples mass media content (in the forms of articles and commentary on articles) and the other subsection is the result of qualitative research undertaken in social media (namely Putin and Russia fan sites). This section seeks to identify the different norms and values of attraction to foreign publics, and to identify those particular publics. Even though there is no ability for these
publics to engage formally (in terms of voting rights, for example), how do they view the brand and image of Putin, and what is their understanding/perception of him within the context of the political market?

Commentary Appearing in Western Media

One of the publics that are attracted to the perceived and projected image and values of Vladimir Putin are found within conservative elements in the Western world, and especially the United States. One observer delivered a note of caution regarding any assumptions that all conservatism being regarded in the same light. “English and American conservatism are very different to Russia’s variety, which is historically authoritarian and statist. Burkean conservatism is based on limited power, the little platoons and maintenance of social and moral capital, as well as civic virtue.” The author also noted that the moral capital and the level of trust have fallen, and the inequality risen in a politically divided system. Interestingly, Pavel Andreev from RIA Novosti, described Russia’s conservatism as being “progressive conservatism.”

Debates exist within the US conservative movements as to what type of conservative Putin may most likely be. An article that appeared in late 2013 stated that Putin has a lot in common with US conservatives. The piece came up with some interesting views on the points of convergence, in terms of policy and values, between Putin and US conservatives.

In many ways, Putin really looks a lot like a US-style conservative. On the social side, he supports organized religion (in particular the Orthodox Church) and doesn’t support Russia’s LGBT community, while fiscally he seeks a balanced budget and low taxes. He is hard on terrorism but steadfast in his opposition to military intervention in Syria, which places him far more in the Republican camp than the Democrat camp.

The above demonstrates the importance of values and norms within the contemporary political environment. It seems to create a Putin brand as a symbolic entity as outlined by Lilleker (2006), and to go further toward Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman (2011, 24) of constructing the brand by mixing functional and emotional values that fulfill the psychosocial needs of the public concerned. This debate surfaced when Pat Buchanan wrote a column that posed the question is Vladimir Putin a paleo-conservative? In particular “the destruction of traditional values” in the west is brought up, which is initiated “from the top.” The article contains many quotes from Putin and in particular his Defense of traditional values. Buchanan notes, “nor is he without an argument when we reflect on America’s embrace of abortion on demand, homosexual marriage, pornography, promiscuity, and the whole panoply of Hollywood values.” The author states that there
needs to be a move from the Cold War paradigm to a new one. “As the decisive struggle in the second half of the 20th century was vertical, East versus West, the 21st century struggle may be horizontal, with conservatives and traditionalists in every country arrayed against the militant secularism of a multicultural and transnational elite.” The article drew 112 reader responses, the many of them expressing their feelings toward Putin in favorable terms. One response in particular warrants quoting. “There is the likelihood that Putin has evolved in his thinking and his ways, and may have experienced a change of heart. Right now, I see him defending historic Western civilization and culture. There are few other leaders in the West who are doing likewise, and that makes him stand out. Whatever his motivations might be, that he is standing up for the historic values of Western civilization is good enough for me to look favorably upon him.” This is in keeping with other conservatives, such as Matt Drudge who declared that Putin is the leader of the free world. Putin has been transformed into someone that actually defends Western civilization against those Western leaders that are seen as destroying it.

Rod Dreher, also a conservative joined in on the developing discussion. He viewed the issue from cultural conservatism point of view.

Putin may be a cold-eyed cynic, but he’s also onto something. I don’t think Buchanan is correct in his column statement that America has been de-Christianized from above. I agree with him to a limited extent, but our all-American individualism and mode of capitalism have done far more to eliminate cultural conservatism and Christianity than elites have. The real question is whether or not Russia — or any nation — can modernize without liberalizing.
he supports Middle East Christians. Say what you want, but Russia is the only world power that does this." 9 Other conservative cultural and social values and norms are used to support the thesis of Putin being equated with neo-conservatism. Some mainstream media also show some liking or admiration of Putin. The personality type is not constructed according to the typologies offered by Lasswell (2009), although the process of accentuating certain values in comparison to another figure is used. The projected political personality of Putin is that as an Upholder (of conservative values), and is viewed as a potential ally by some of the community against the liberal values (seen as destructive and corrosive) being imposed by the political elite in the US.

Although the content of the articles in newspapers, such as the Washington Times, do not contain praise for Putin, a number of the viewer commentaries do. In a Washington Times article on Putin,10 a number of article commenters noted attributes, such as patriotism, as a favorable value. A selection of comments includes: “Like him or not. Putin has a sense of commitment, a love of his country, and has more Honor than Obama (granted that is not hard to do, even for a former KGB guy).”;

“Putin uses nationalism, his ability to deal with reality and his confidence in his power to build his leadership. Obama uses national guilt and a staff that uses the social intellect over reality to balkanize the image of his leadership in order to cover the incompetence. Putin is obligated to Russia. Obama is obligated to tokenism by issues of sex, sexual preference, race, religion, culture and class and it isn't working globally.”;

“Putin is not blinded by partisan ideology – unlike Obama – it's Russia first with him. Whereas, Obama puts himself and the interests of his party first... Big difference.”;

“Very good assessment of Putin. He just wants his country to be powerful again. The man obviously loves his country and the people even if you do not like him – this you cannot deny.” There were many more similar comments that were favorable to Putin, referring to him as a patriot, putting his country first and politically contextualizing him as an anti-thesis to the attributes assigned to Barack Obama.

Among conservative and disillusioned (with domestic politics in their country) commentators often perceive the values and norms of Putin within a conservative lens and then project these as a desired state in their country. In an article about Putin wanting to restore the Soviet Union, one commenter noted that they “wish Putin would restore America.”11 This seems to indicate somewhat of a sense of dissatisfaction with the state of politics in the United States. Commentators on another article noted that: “Putin loves his country. Hillary and Obama do not love theirs. Putin is a man. Hillary and Obama are not;” “O! Vlad the Sloucher doesn't mince words. An awful lot of people in this country would do well to copy him;” “Putin may be an arrogant SOB, but he's not weak;” “I wish we had a
president who loved his country as much as Putin loves Russia.” In another article, where Putin criticizes Obama for judging Russia on Ukraine drew some 214 comments, a sample of them are shown here. “Sad day when Russia has a better leader;” “That land grab of Putin’s was a good decision for Russia;” “The individual currently occupying the oval office is seen as the butt end of a joke the world over, while Putin is seen as a great leader and has the respect of all. It is very sad that we don’t have a leader, like Putin, that watches out for the best interests of his nation;” “Putin is decisive and makes strong powerful decisions. Obama has to make sure he offends no one in the PC crowd before he utters a word. It also helps the POTUS when they turn on the teleprompter;” “As much as I may dislike Putin, you can't help but admire his ability. Under his leadership, Russia takes no crap from anyone. He takes what he wants, from whom he wants, when he wants. He acts from a position of strength and power. That used to be how America worked before the Obama regime took over;” “Putin has a point: don’t American liberals preach tolerance and diversity above and say things like who are you to judge? Obama does not judge abortionists, homosexuals, lifelong welfare recipients, juvenile delinquents, people who kill American Ambassadors, terrorists at Gitmo, VA bureaucrats who lied about the medical service that veterans receive." Various norms and values emerge from the given quotes – conservative political and family values, Putin as an effective and able leader, Putin as a “straight talker,” love and working for the good of one’s country. These perceptions are made more vivid when these are juxtaposed against Obama, who is projected as lacking those “essential” qualities. These quotes illustrate the role of strong emotions in modern life as outlined by Newman (1999, 89). In this instance, the emotions of fear of the Obama regime and the hope that US politicians could be more like Putin in some respects. This drives the motivation of avoiding the Obama regime (and liberals in general) and the attraction of the values that they perceive/interpret Putin possesses.

Former spokesman for British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell revived his career in journalism. He conducted an interview for GQ Magazine in August 2014 with First Minister of Scotland Alex Salmond. When asked about his opinion of Putin, Salmond gave a straight answer. “Well, I don’t approve of a range of Russian actions, but he is more effective than most and you can see why he carries support in Russia.” This led to a follow-up question as to whether he admired him. “Certain aspects. He’s restored a substantial part of Russian pride and that must be a good thing. There are aspects of Russian constitutionality and the inter-mesh with business and politics that are difficult to admire.” The quotes illustrate the nuance that is necessary to distinguish, between “liking” and “admiring” someone. It is possible to admire, but not to like them. But
Putin is characterized as an effective leader that gets the job done, which is related to the 4Ps – political brand, policy and public persona. The boosting of Russian pride is seen as an important aspect, which may be linked to the issue of the then upcoming Scottish referendum. This hints at the aspect of positioning being taken into account subjectively, where Putin’s importance in restoring pride to Russia is perhaps seen within the context of how Salmond would like to envisage his role in Scotland and among the Scottish people. As seen from the above, there are a variety of different reasons given by those liking or admiring Putin in media outlets. Now attention shall be turned to social media and specific pro-Putin groups which have been created communities in this particular communication space.

Pro-Putin Support in Social Media Environments

A total of seven thematic areas were investigated and analyzed. Country of origin was the first thematic issue assessed in the research. The countries of origin of the respondents were quite diverse and included: Australia, New Zealand, Nepal, Netherlands, United States, United Kingdom, India, and Norway. Respondents were equally divided between those that live only in their country of origin and those that had lived in different countries. A respondent from Nepal had lived in Russia and received university education there.

The next theme area to be addressed is the perceived nature of the respondents’ information environment. The questions posted on the sites quickly gathered a lot of attention and reaction, not all of it positive and welcoming. For example, one commentator wrote on the positing (International Friends of Vladimir Putin) on 10 October 2014 – “please just copy your CIA books and fucking Carl Bildt.” In another group (Vladimir Putin – a Fighter Against USA/EU/NATO Imperialism) a member commented “your research is welcome, but don’t go on Western politics if true results get you, thank you” (10 October 2014). This seems to be an expression or indication of a perceived hostile information environment directed against Putin and/or Russia. Therefore, it drew a sharp defensive reaction to questions posed by an outsider to the group. This reaction seems to be linked to the observation by Ormrod, Henneberg, and O’Shaughnessy (2013, 23) concerning news management and use of communication environments in free media, which has the effect of creating an echo chamber that supports and reinforces existing world views of the users.

All but one of the respondents answered that media coverage of Putin and Russia was negative. A respondent from Nepal stated that the coverage was neutral to negative. All of the respondents that answered, stated that this coverage has been constant and unchanging. An Indian respondent,
however, stated that media coverage of Putin was positive. The respondent was not sure why it was positive, offering a guess that this may be tied to the strategic partnership that exists between India and Russia. Some respondents stated that they did not read local media as it was of “low quality” or contained “political biases.” There were various reasons that were offered for the state of media coverage, such as media (use of the term Mainstream Media or MSM, is often used) projecting the views of the “power elite,” countries being aligned to the United States (e.g. New Zealand being within the “five eyes”) and the dependence on of other media on Western media (especially US and UK media sources). The mass media environment was mostly seen as a hostile and dishonest environment that serves insidious political and economic interests. Two observations are apparent from the responses. The first is that most respondents regarded there media as having significant bias, along the lines explained by Lees-Marshment, Strömbäck, and Rudd (2010, 286). In the interpretation of these respondents this had the effect of “isolating an individual from the contexts of public discussion and exchange of ideas” (Johansen 2012, 44). As a reaction, the second element is the subjective reality (noted by McNair 2007, 11) demonstrated by the respondents’ interpretation of mainstream mass media content or their isolation from it.

A third theme involves ascertaining whether respondents liked and/or admired Vladimir Putin. Respondents were given the option of liking or admiring Putin (or not), all but one of them liked (in one cased liked him “a lot”) and in some cases liked and admired him. One respondent from Norway stated that he did not like Putin, but did admire him. A variety of different reasons were given, although a somewhat central theme or point of understanding emerges from these. A US respondent stated he is “an excellent statesman, prefers negotiation to war, does not stoop to US-type name calling, not afraid to hold his ground, not afraid to say no.” “I really admire him, although I do not know him personally. It seems he has great principle and very wise in decisions and making his move, that’s why I admire him” was the response from an Indian source. Another (from New Zealand) explained that “he is a straight and honest leader, when most of the world’s leaders are crooked or bribed by America, especially those in NATO.” There were also responses that spoke of what he had done for Russia and Russians – namely removing oligarchs from power, resurrecting the economy, working for Russians and Russian interests. A Nepalese respondent stated that “I admire VV Putin. I lived in Russia when Putin came to power, when Russia was facing a default in their economy. I have felt the rise of the Russian economy and Russian nationality after the Soviet Union collapse and years of humiliation by the West. What Russia is today is due to one man – Putin!” There are seemingly two sets of reasons for liking/admiring Putin. One is related to what he has done for Russia and
Russians, the other is linked to him being perceived as a challenge to US global hegemony. These responses confirm the observation by Newman (1999, 93) that the “image of a politician consists of the person’s subjective understanding of things or what that person likes or dislikes about the politician.”

The fourth research theme involved locating aspects about Putin’s personality and/or character that respondents found appealing. In the group Vladimir Putin – a Fighter Against USA/EU/NATO Imperialism, one member, wrote on the wall (without answering the questions posed) – “Vladimir Putin is the bravest world leader followed by Shri Narendra Modi” (9 October 2014). Two members of the Vladimir Putin Fan Club wrote a comment on my post (9 October 2014) – “Putin is the greatest leader in the world today, I don’t need to fill out a survey to tell you that!” This seems to be a deflection strategy and an attempt at mobilizing the group against the possible perceived unwelcome intrusion by someone unknown. Putin was perceived as a bold and decisive as well as being intelligent and thoughtful figure by the respondents. “He has a bold character. He thinks and researches before he speaks. He is confident. He is the President and an ordinary citizen at the same time” (Nepal). Putin is seen simultaneously as being a great leader, yet able to relate to ordinary people. One (Norway) found “his lack of superfluous emotionality” appealing. A New Zealand respondent replied “he appears to be doing his best for his country and for peace. He did his best to stop Syria being attacked and likewise, under intense provocation from the US and EU in the current Ukraine crisis.” “His humor and his intelligence. The popular image of grim visage, gun totting, bear riding dude is male/female fantasy” (Australia). “He refuses to be bullied and resists the idea that American hegemony should dominate the world” (New Zealand). The given reasons cross personal and professional spheres – his intelligence, humor, popular public images, professional business-like approach and standing up to the United States.

Understanding the aspects about his political leadership style that were found appealing formed the fifth theme in the research. Someone from the Netherlands wrote on the wall of the group Vladimir Putin Fan Club that “Putin will not join the New World Order and does not want Monsanto GMO food in his country. They can put the pressure on to join in but he will not” (9 October 2014). Commenting on Putin’s leadership qualities, an Australian respondent noted “he is decisive, independent (does not bow to any other world leader), listens to advisers and acts on principle.” A New Zealand respondent answered that “he is a master diplomat and a very insightful person and loves people as well as animals. He only fights wars that need to be fought unlike America who fight them to extend their geopolitical interests.” An American respondent noted that “many of his policies offer confidence in leadership – something that can
no longer be said about the narcissistic EU and US.” Putin’s use of media was compared by an Indian respondent, “like the Western leaders he also knows the power of media and how to make good use of media.” “His faithfulness to conservatism in ethical questions. His tolerance toward the freedom of religion. His endeavor to defend Russian security interests. His realism when it comes to foreign policy questions, like Syria, Middle East” was the response received from Norway. One respondent from New Zealand noted “he is clear and logical [...] I am only au fait with his foreign policy, not his domestic policy, but it is based upon peace and reason.” Putin’s tough and no nonsense approach to politics, especially foreign policy, are seen as attractive. His independent (of the US) actions on the global stage and refusal to back down are also popular aspects concerning his leadership style and policy. The fourth and fifth aspects analyzed, through the responses supplied, fit the aspects noted by Ormrod, Henneberg, and O’Shaughnessy (2013, 23) of an emphasis on product and image management, inclusive of policy development and the positioning of the political figure. A very specific and positive image and brand of Putin has been created and maintained in these very specific information environments. The profile and persona of Putin in these information spaces differs greatly from those projected in mainstream Western media sources.

The sixth issue was to ask if respondents perceived any negative aspects to Vladimir Putin’s character/personality. This drew some less detailed responses. The respondent from Nepal answered “I don’t think so” and a similar response from one of the New Zealand respondents. The US respondent replied that “a smile or two would be nice.” Some respondents answered that they felt he was too trusting of the West and its intentions. Another New Zealand respondent gave a detailed answer. “I am sure there are, for example I don’t know why he divorced his former wife and I don’t fully understand what happened with the loss of the Kursk submarine. But, in virtually every other area, I totally approve of what he has done. It would have been good if he could have given more direct assistance to Donbass and Novorussia but he understands that America is looking for a “casus belli” and he has to tread carefully.” Those negative points seem to be that he has not gone far enough in challenging or being too trusting of the West. The subjective construction of brand and identity of Putin by the respondents seems to minimize any perceived negative aspects. A number of the criticisms, in fact, seem to hint that he is too soft or trusting in relations with the West.

A final thematic issue concerned asking respondents, if they had the possibility to vote, would they vote for Putin? None of the respondents stated that they would not vote for him, if they had the opportunity to do so. The decision was based upon the answers that were given above. When posed with the question whether this would change after the
Crimean annexation, some answered yes, but this meant that they were more likely to vote for him after the action. Some of the respondents also took exception to the use of the term “Crimean annexation” – arguing that this was not an annexation at all. One reply (Australia) going as far as to say “unlike the poor Scots who are stuck with the UK, Crimeans choice to re-join Russia was successful.” The respondent from Nepal gave an enthusiastic answer. “Of course I will vote for Putin. Every country needs a leader like him. If there would have been an election covering the whole world, Putin would have won overwhelmingly!”

Their decision to vote for Putin was motivated by Putin’s perceived personality, his politics and foreign policy, his assumed personal characteristics, which have been crafted into an image and brand. The interpretation and perceptions expressed by the respondents show a subjective process of constructing a brand and image of Putin that meets their psychosocial needs. In this instance, the requirement for an alternative influence in international affairs and a challenge to US global hegemony. All 4Ps are evident – political brand, policy, positioning, and public persona. The political brand is tied to the idea of Putin representing an alternative form of more positive politics in international affairs. Policy and positioning are tied to the idea that Russia is positioned as a challenger to US global hegemony, which is, for example, expressed in the 2013 Russian foreign policy concept. Putin’s public persona is regarded as being a touch, professional, no nonsense approach, which are necessary characteristics required to fulfill the political positioning and policy of challenging the US-led West.

The communities are rather insular and the information posted in these specific political communication environments tends to confirm their inner held beliefs. More importantly these groups feel alienated from Western politics and policy (especially foreign policy), they do not trust or believe in the system. As with the observations from the US conservative movements, they feel that Putin best represents and serves their interests, but this is decidedly within a policy and politics contextual basis as being against the interests and policies of the US and EU as opposed to a more contextual norm/value/culture basis among the conservatives.

CONCLUSION

Two questions were posed at the beginning of this paper. Are there any foreign publics that hold a positive opinion and perception of Putin? If so, what aspects about Putin’s political persona appeal to those groups and individuals? Political communication helps to define the political world and those actors located within it. From the publics that were examined, the observation by Esser and Pfetsch (2004, 86) that “political communication
is not only an instrument of politics; it is politics” holds. The information streams are diverse with competing images and brands available and accessible. There is also a lot of negative information and news concerning Vladimir Putin, his personality and his actions in mainstream Western media. This perception was confirmed in the conservative discussions and noted by the respondents. It is clear though that there are in fact foreign publics that hold a positive view and opinion of Vladimir Putin. Therefore, the answer to the first question posed is definitely, yes.

There is an element of subjective reality displayed by the groups identified as having some kind of affinity with Putin. The commonly shared values of the publics analyzed create lasting psychological bonds within the organizations, which result in a sense of loyalty and purpose among the members (as noted by Johansen 2012, 85), and made the communication spaces of these publics somewhat insular. The debate among US-based conservatives focused upon traditional and family values, where they saw commonality and common interests within the context of a cultural struggle with their own political elites. Putin is perceived as being, in terms of political positioning, as an upholder of conservative and traditional norms and values, a natural ally against their own “corrupt” national political leadership. The political brand of Putin is being projected as being one of “us” (a conservative). His seemingly benevolent attitude toward religion (in particular Orthodoxy), anti-gay stance and tough attitude toward terrorism as well as his masculine public persona is seen as being attractive.

Another group that expresses an affinity with Putin are those with an alternative political orientation, which feel somewhat dispossessed and alienated from the current political system. This group is more focused upon aspects pertaining to Putin’s foreign policy (challenging US global hegemony) and his leadership style. Putin is seen as being a more principled political actor, more decisive and more honest as opposed Western politicians. This is in keeping with Lasswell’s (2009, 22) statement on the role played by the values of one person compared to another defines and shapes the relations of political power. He is politically positioned and branded as being a challenger to US hegemony. Therefore his track record of policies viewed within this particular frame and context. Putin is seen as representing this groups interests through a confrontational stance with the US and EU. All of the publics examined demonstrate the relevance of symbolism and emotions, as noted by various researchers (such as Newman 1999; Lilleker 2006; Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman 2011), in defining attitudes and relationship between them and Vladimir Putin.

Political marketing is normally associated as being something that is deliberate and conscious, a relationship that is developed by interaction between the messenger and the public. The above observed groups seem to show that political marketing may in fact occur without it being a
deliberate and conscious effort by different parties. Both of the groups, in their perspective, have a relationship based upon the notion of some shared aspect. This relationship appears to be contextually based, an absence of something in their environment is seemingly found elsewhere, in other words to satisfy the specific psychosocial needs of the group(s) concerned. Putin can be seen as a champion in a cultural war or as a champion against a sinister global force. Interestingly, the projected image and brand of Putin seems to possess a similarity with that projected by Putin’s image-makers (see Simons 2016). But this seems to be a residual effect of those efforts and not necessarily an indication of a more elaborate intention and effort by Russian public diplomacy toward international publics. The Western mainstream mass media’s constructed political reality is rejected by these groups held subjective political reality.

The political contexts are quite different (a foreign versus a domestic political figure), which means that an ability to actively and formally participate in the political process is a hindrance for the various publics that are the subject of this paper. However, the processes of the creation and formation of political brand and image have many similarities. This is especially evident in the symbolic and emotional aspects that have been outlined.

According to contemporary definitions of political marketing, this involves a two-way process and interaction between the political figure and publics (Cwalina, Falkowski, and Newman 2011; Ormrod, Henneberg, and O’Shaughnessy 2013). Do the publics examined here demonstrate this aspect of two-way interaction? It is difficult to conclusively answer and there definitely needs to be more research into this issue to prove or disprove the element of interaction. At best, this effort can be seen as a very initial point on which to start investigating the issue of the formation of international political relationships. A more comprehensive approach needs to be undertaken in terms of an additional quantitative dimension to the research, in order to explore the hints revealed in this current research. Emphasis should be placed on questions such as how these relationships begin and what is the level of interaction between the political actor and foreign publics (if any)?

FUTURE RESEARCH

This article hints at the presence and role played by negative politics across national borders. There are publics that are disappointed with their national politics, feel threatened in some way by politics and policy or seek an alternative to some element of politics and/or policy. The publics identified in this article, in their understanding, have developed a relationship with a foreign political figure. This is based upon an emotional
understanding or desire, and there is nothing to suggest that Putin maintains any direct connection or relationship with these groups. However, the findings suggest some connection to the trends observed by Omrod, Henneberg, and O’Shaughnessy (2013, 23). For example, an increased sophistication of communication and spin, this is often based upon notions of shared values or norms. The groups also place great emphasis upon Putin’s political positioning and his policy development. An increased sophistication of news management is evident as the groups tend to congregate in specific mass media and social media spaces.

Further study is needed on the aspect of how international publics relate to and project relationships with foreign political actors. The underlying notions and motivations of these relationships needs to be explored in greater detail and in more depth, quantitative research would go some way toward addressing the current knowledge deficiency. Is this phenomenon driven by the attractiveness and merits of the foreign political figure? Or is it a reflection of the wariness or disappointment with or feeling of detachment from domestic politics?

NOTES

1. The membership statistics were accurate as of 9 October 2014.


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REFERENCES


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**APPENDIX. QUESTIONS POSED ON FACEBOOK**

(1) What is your country of origin?  
What country do you currently live in?  
How long have you spent living in this/these countries?

(2) Is the media coverage in your country of residence positive, negative or neutral when it covers President Vladimir Putin of Russia?  
Can you explain the reason of this coverage?  
Has the coverage remained constant or changed (if changed, when did this occur)?

(3) Do you like Vladimir Putin?  
Do you admire Vladimir Putin?  
Why?

(4) What aspects about his personality and/or character do you find appealing?  
What aspects about his political leadership style do you find appealing?  
What aspects about his political policy do you find appealing?  
Why?

(6) Are there any negative aspects to Vladimir Putin? Please name.

(7) If you were able, would you vote for Putin? Why/why not?  
Would that intention have changed before and after the Crimean annexation?  
Please explain why.