The Politics of Marketing of Vladimir Putin to Global Audiences

Greg Simons
Researcher, Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University

ABSTRACT

• Much attention has been given to the domestic politics of the (un)popularity of Vladimir Putin, but there has been little systematic analysis of the international and foreign aspects.

• In spite of the largely negative characterisation of Putin by Western media and politics, there are individuals and groups – from both ends of the traditional left-right political spectrum – that like or admire him.

• Russian public diplomacy efforts are increasingly reaching out to international publics directly with their message.

Keywords: Russia, Putin, political marketing, media, public diplomacy

RESUMEN

• La (im)popularidad de Putin en política interna ha sido objeto de gran atención, pero se han realizado pocos análisis sistemáticos de sus aspectos internacionales y extranjeros.

• Pese a la caracterización negativa de Putin en los medios de comunicación y la política en Occidente, hay individuos o grupos en ambos extremos del espectro político izquierda-derecha que muestran simpatía o admiración por él.

• La diplomacia pública rusa está dirigiéndose cada vez más directamente al público internacional con su mensaje.

Palabras clave: Rusia, Putin, marketing político, medios de comunicación, diplomacia pública

In 1999, the relatively unknown Vladimir Putin rose from obscurity to become the chosen successor of the then sitting President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin. It came as a shock for many that someone could rise from nothing to become the political leader of the largest country on the planet. However, I would argue that he succeeded because of that obscurity rather than in spite of it. People were fatigued with the nature and style of established politics and politicians and Putin seemed to symbolically represent a change from these routines. He and those around him embarked upon a bold and new form of political marketing that was intended to shape new political relationships between the state and its people.

The political relationships with the international audiences were also radically altered, and these relationships have not remained constant, but evolved with time, circumstances and events. What started as warm or at least cordial relations between Putin and political leaders of the Western world began to sour. As Russia began to slowly recover from the effects of the Soviet collapse, the ambitions and ability to become a more active international actor became more realistic and reachable.

In a world that is increasingly divided along norm and value principles of a political divide, which pits the political establishment against the anti-political establishment, opportunities have been created to directly reach out to foreign publics. This has been witnessed through Putin’s media interviews, op-eds and interaction in the global information sphere.
**POLITICAL MARKETING, WHAT IS IT?**

Political marketing is a relatively young sub-discipline of marketing. The core notion around the concept and practice is to form mutually beneficial political relationships between a political messenger and a target audience. In this regard, it is both descriptive and prescriptive in nature. It is descriptive by providing a clear and systematic structure to explain and understand a given political environment. However, it is also prescriptive in nature too, owing to the belief of needing to follow a set of routines in order to achieve the winning formula.

The nature of political marketing has been traditionally seen and analysed in a narrower sense of elections – national, regional and local level – of a country, where political parties and candidates seek to win over voters in their constituency. But recently, as has been noted by some commentators, such as Bruce Newman, a revolution in political marketing has been taking place. Through the use of big data and digital communication, political actors are able to directly access and communicate with their target audiences without the need for an intermediary.

However, this does not mean that traditional mass media – newspaper, TV and radio – are now obsolete and redundant. Although social media enables a more “emotional” connection between the messenger and their publics, mass media are still an effective means in publicising the public’s awareness of someone or something. When it comes to branding and politics, no matter what the aspirations and perceptions of human beings as free and reasoned thinkers, the reality is that emotion trumps reason.

A central part of the interactive communication process between the messenger and the intended audience(s) is the use of norms and values in an attempt to strike the right note in order to form effective political relationships. Common sets of norms and values in a group help to form and bind that group through common visions and world views. The common resonating values are the basis of a political relationship that offers shared cultural and political interpretations of the human environment. Some apparent relationships between Putin and foreign political figures are based upon mutual cultural conservativism, however, this is not always the case as other reasons can emerge. The basis of the relationship can also be with a pragmatic aspect too, such as Marine Le Pen’s FN, which is embargoed financially by Western political and financial institutions and that paves the way for other actors to get involved with financial support in addition to the value and moral.

**END OF THE MAINSTREAM HONEymoon**

After his election victory in March 2000, the newly elected President Vladimir Putin enjoyed a brief honeymoon period with mainstream Western politics and mass media. President George Bush remarked, upon meeting Putin that “I looked the man in the eye. I was able to get a sense of his soul.” Putin was named by Time as person of the year in 2007, but there was already a sense of change coming by the stage. Time commented “His final year as Russia’s President has been his most successful yet. At home, he secured his political future. Abroad, he expanded his outsize – if not always benign – influence on global affairs.”

Subsequent events in Georgia and Ukraine, together with the escalating tensions between Russia and the West, have seen an increase in geopolitical competition and conflict. A brief “Russia Reset” did not last very long in arresting the general trends. Any positive references to Putin from Western mainstream politicians or mass media soon disappeared, instead resorting to a more subjectively skewed characterisation of Russia as being subversive to the global liberal democratic system, and outlandish claims such as Putin suffering a psychological condition. This has been symbolic and symptomatic of a world becoming increasingly divided.

**A WORLD DIVIDED**

Some observations have noted that there is an increasing number of states that are shunning liberal democracy, which is indicative of a wider pattern in politics. The geopolitical drift between what can be loosely termed as the liberal political order – US and EU-led – and the illiberal political order – including China and Russia – that can be seen in processes and events in international relations is also observable in the global information sphere. There are different realities being projected by the different sides involved; these actors also attack each other’s communications with allegations of fake news, propaganda and such assertions. Commentators have noted the tone within the mainstream media sphere in the West and have noted with caution an emergence of a liberal-led era of “New
McCarthyism.” Some renowned geopolitical thinkers, such as Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, have gone as far as to agree that a New Cold War has already begun.

However, the world is more divided than merely along the lines of national borders between liberal and illiberal states, but also at the level of liberal and illiberal groups that compete for attention and influence through their public communications. This situation has been noted as the process of decay of the liberal political order, coming under threat and pressure from different actors, both internal and external to the system.

The liberal-illiberal order divide is based upon competing and diametrically opposing sets of norms and values that define how they project an “ideal” society. Thus, liberals favour a globalist view where multiculturalism and liberalism are central to their worldview. The conservative elements are strongly opposed to those ideas, and seek a more culturally conservative basis to societal order. The current split can be seen in this manner, and to be in the other camp is seen as being an unworthy “other” – for example in the United States after Trump the divide is highlighted by the derogatory labels of “Snowflakes” for liberals and “the Deplorables” for Trump supporters.

There are strong rhetorical defence mechanisms that are forming a narrative intended to convey and project a strong and attractive Western model of the global political order. One part considers the notion of attraction, namely that the ‘Western’ values of liberalism and multiculturalism are superior to the illiberal and/or conservative values of such actors such as Russia. In essence, it is characterised as a competition between a positive force of attraction against a negative force of coercion and subversion – with Putin as one of the leaders of the second one. Interestingly enough, in spite of the alleged advantages over Russia, the outcome is framed with the use of pathos or fear that Russia is winning this conflict. How does this situation affect the dynamics of international politics, diplomacy and relations?

NEW TIMES, NEW AMBITIONS AND NEW CAPABILITIES: RUSSIA ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

After the chaotic years of President Boris Yeltsin’s rule, the Russian public was receptive to a more stable and disciplined form of governance. The Kosovo War of 1999 had amply demonstrated the lack of capability and power of Russia to influence or shape key international events. An intention to try and convey Russia was back on the international stage backfired in the largest naval exercise held since the Soviet period, when the submarine Kursk sank in August 2000.

The many weaknesses, hazards and risks faced by Russia were considered. In terms of the international dimension, one of the problems was how to “correct” what was seen as false or misleading information about the country. An initiative that grew from this was the Doctrine of Information Security adopted in September 2000, which was intended to address such issues. An updated version of the doctrine developed those concerns about how to manage the informational streams more effectively and efficiently. A result of this process has been a more active presence on the global information sphere through the creation and utilisation of internationally broadcasting mass media assets – such as Russia Today (RT) – and a more innovative approach to public diplomacy in order to move past the formal state-state diplomatic impasse.

Russian approaches to the concept and practice of public diplomacy have undergone rethinking in terms of the structure, message and approach. It has moved away from the old Soviet ideological practice to a more issue and interest-based model. The ideological aspect of foreign policy has been dropped some time ago, in favour of a more pragmatic foreign policy approach, and lately this has been directed towards the accumulation of soft power. There has also been innovation and colonisation of new communication spaces, such as greater presence on Internet and social media, which gives direct access to foreign publics and opinions. A gradual development and reorganisation of international broadcast media have been a high priority in order to reach as broad an audience as possible. The foreign policy priorities are demonstrated in the languages being used: for example, RT is broadcast in English, Arabic, Spanish and other global languages.

In spite of the current attempt to characterise Russian international media as being solely propaganda outlets that have a sinister goal, they do occupy a specific niche in the global media environment. As some knowledgeable commentators have noted, Russian media have become much more subtle and professional in their approach to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, especially in comparison to international broadcasting, 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war, where both sides are accusing each other of fake news, and where the mistakes of the opponent are regularly highlighted in order to discredit them. It should be remembered that media outlets, such as RT are involved in public diplomacy rather than journalism – as are the BBC and Al Jazeera. The battle for influence is defined by those Western instruments aimed at “exposing Russian propaganda” and Russian efforts at undermining the credibility of mainstream Western media and politics by exposing weaknesses in the Western system. This is seen in RT’s slogan “Question More.” At times, the efforts to “expose Russian propaganda” have come under attack for resorting to propaganda too.

REACHING OUT TO THE GLOBAL PUBLICS

As a leader with a high public profile in the international arena during a period of much tension, Putin is both an often misunderstood politician and highly newsworthy. He is a controversial figure surrounded by myth and legend, which contributes to further cloud understanding at a time when a clear assessment is increasingly demanded. There has been some analysis of the political marketing of Vladimir Putin to a domestic, Russian constituency, together with the specific logics that drive it. However, when taken outside of the national context, different factors come into play.

When relations between the West and Putin began to sour, there was an assertion that he would find very little support from people living beyond the Russian borders. This seemed to be partly a reflection on the self-belief of the liberal political model being superior to the Russian model, which Putin was the public face of. However, research conducted on the premise of negating this hypothesis revealed that in fact there were supporters and admirers of Putin from around the world, and from both sides of the political spectrum. Those from the left liked the challenge to US global hegemony that Putin represented, while those from the right admired the cultural conservatism that they saw in Russia and its leader.

Although the above seems to reflect a presumed shared world vision by individuals and groups beyond direct official Russian public diplomacy outreach, they do consume Russian international media content. However, there are examples where Putin has engaged directly with mass media content in the West through the use of op-eds and interviews with Western journalists and cultural celebrities. Some of these media events included the narrative of a civilizational choice that challenged the wisdom of the liberal political system’s superiority over the Russian system. A number of high profile “defections” by Western cultural celebrities were shown, each of them being greeted by Putin in front of the cameras. Some of the examples include Gerard Depardieu’s temporary living in Russia as a result of conditions in the West or Steven Seagal being granted Russian citizenship by Putin.

Putin has penned op-eds in an attempt to reach foreign public audiences on key aspects of Russian foreign policy. One particular example of this was an op-ed on Syria penned under his name in the New York Times, after a chemical weapons attack that was timed on the 12th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. This was a plea to the international public for caution in their reactions to events in Syria. There was a strong emphasis on the role of the United Nations, on humanitarian values, international law, the need for an objective investigation and not drawing premature conclusions, to be wary of the unforeseen consequences of rushing to act, and the subversive role and actions of the United States in its regime change policy. The New York Times was chosen as the medium of communication owing to its brand, reputation, and public outreach potential. This serves as an ideal platform with which to publicise Russia’s foreign policy to an audience not necessarily familiar with the Russian perspective, and it increases Putin’s public profile among Western audiences.

A couple of recent public interviews of Vladimir Putin by journalist Megyn Kelly and film director Oliver Stone have attracted much attention. In the case of the Kelly interview, Putin was questioned on NBC on the topic of allegations of Russian interference in the US presidential elections of 2016. During the course of the interview, Putin seemed to be a more consistent and knowledgeable communicator that Kelly – who stayed on the narrow mainstream script – resulting in a much more convincing and coherent performance. Putin made skilful use of the double standards of the West narrative in deflecting the accusations brought up by Kelly. This interview can be characterised as being “hostile”; however, not all of them have been like that.

The famous filmmaker Oliver Stone spent some 20 hours over a two-year period interviewing Vladimir Putin on different topics, which include...
the dangers of another Cold War, Ronald Reagan, cyber warfare and others. After the film that was made from the interview was released, Stone received a lot of criticism for being too "soft" on Putin, but he claimed his motivation was born from his desire to better understand the Russian leader. The content of the interviews contradicts the narratives of the Western mainstream media and politics; in some quarters it has been interpreted as being a counter to Putin’s demonization. However, the documentary and the publicity surrounding it have shown a much more personal and human side to Putin than would ordinarily be available. That insider's perspective, and the personal touch it gives, create an environment where empathy through understanding can be developed; which in turn is conducive to the creation of a more positive reputation and brand of Putin among foreign audiences.

These interviews and media events – the celebrity "defections" – are a medium that permits the possibility of getting to know, like or empathise with Putin whether in an atmosphere of conflict – as with the Kelly interview – or respect – as with the Stone interview –, communicating the personal side of the Russian President to a wider international audience. This material competes and contrasts with the generally negative projections of mainstream Western media and politics. Of course, the quality and nature of the resulting – if any – political relationships are dependent upon how individuals decode and interpret the values and norms expressed. International audiences are drawn on a value and norm-related basis according to their particular worldview – whether it be challenging global US hegemony or championing a cultural conservatism that questions the liberal and multicultural values espoused by the global liberal political order.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Simons gained his doctoral degree from the University of Canterbury in New Zealand in 2004. In 2015 he was named docent (Associate Professor) in Political Science at Uppsala University, Sweden. His current research is on how journalists and mass media react to sensitive issues, such as terrorism and other types of crisis situations, the use of public diplomacy, and soft power in international relations. He is currently based at the Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University. In addition to this, he occasionally teaches PR at Turiba Business College in Riga. A selection of his published works can be found on Academia.edu.
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