

Putin's International Supporters

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About the author

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Introduction

President Vladimir Putin is a controversial figure in international politics. He has cultivated a very specific image for the Russian public, a no-nonsense leader and man of action, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and a patriotic guardian of Russia. Mainstream international media have some overlapping, yet also less positive aspects and attributes assigned to the political brand of Putin. He is characterised 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 understand what 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 sights in social media.

Given the overwhelmingly negative characterisations 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?

Putin's International Reputation: Image and Values of Attraction

The following 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.

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.¹

Interestingly, Pavel Andreev from RIA Novosti, described Russia's conservatism as being "progressive conservatism."² 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 organised 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.³

The above demonstrates the importance of values and norms within the contemporary political environment. 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 defence 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 vs. 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."⁴ The article drew 112 reader responses, the many of them expressing their feelings towards Putin in favourable 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 favourably upon him." This is in keeping with other conservatives, such as Matt Drudge who declared that Putin is the leader of the free world.⁵ Putin has been transformed into someone that actually defends Western civilisation 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.⁶

Thus there is a grudging respect shown by Dreher towards Putin, especially his resolve in the culture wars that are unfolding. The blame for the demise of Western civilisation is blamed on the rise of individualism and a specific form of capitalism. In addition to links to US paleo conservatism and cultural conservatism, similarities to neo-conservatism have been noted too. Three points of convergence were noted – “Putin is obsessed with the threat of appeasement,” “Putin is principled – so long as those principles enhance national power,” “Putin does not understand economic power.” The article notes that “In his approach to foreign policy, Vladimir Putin has a lot in common with those very American hawks (or “neocons” in popular parlance) who revile him most.”⁷ In an article appearing in *Renew America*, Donald Hank looks at Putin through a neo-conservative lens. “The reason many traditionally minded Americans warm up to Putin is that he supports Middle East Christians. Say what you want, but Russia is the only world power that does this.”⁸ 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.

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,⁹ a number of article commenters noted attributes, such as patriotism, as a favourable value. A selection of comments includes: “Like him or not. Putin has a sense of commitment, a love of his country, and has more honour 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 favourable to Putin, referring to him as a patriot, putting his country first and politically contextualising 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.”¹⁰ 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;” “Ol' 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.”¹¹ In another article, where Putin criticises 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.”¹² 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.

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.”¹³ 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 characterised as an effective leader that gets the job done. The boosting of Russian pride is seen as an important aspect, which may be linked to the issue of the then upcoming Scottish referendum. As seen from the above, there are a variety of different reasons given by those liking or admiring Putin in media outlets. Now to turn attention to social media and specific pro-Putin groups which have been created communities in this space.

Qualitative Research in Social Media Environments

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* (10719 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* (46812 members); and *Vladimir Putin: A Fighter Against USA/EU/NATO Imperialism* (23142 members).¹⁴ A total of seven thematic areas were investigated and analysed.

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.

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 (for example, 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.

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 case 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.

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 mobilising 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 humour 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, humour, 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 towards the freedom of religion. His endeavour 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 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.

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 (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. This has not been achieved the local media environments, which were mostly hostile and carrying a negative projection of Putin. The communities are rather insular, the information posted confirms the 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. The information streams are diverse with competing images and brands available and accessible. There is a lot of negative information and news concerning Vladimir Putin, his personality and his actions. 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 a definite yes.

There is a definite element of subjective reality displayed by the groups identified as having some kind of affinity with Putin. There are aspects, such as shared norms and values or common desired policy, which were focussed upon. 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 towards terrorism as well as his masculine public persona is seen as being attractive.

Another group that expresses an affinity with Putin are those with a more leftist 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. 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.

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. Putin can be seen as a champion in a cultural war or as a champion against a sinister global force.

Endnotes

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