

Fantastic Mr President: The Hyperrealities of Putin and Trump

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In July 2016 – more than 15 years into his time in office – Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin’s [approval rating was at 82%](#), a figure made all the more remarkable by the fact that the country is experiencing a palpable and lengthy economic downturn. Some [commentators](#) have favoured an explanation that treats this as proof that a larger-than-life president is more in line with ‘what Russians want’, as Putin “satisfied a yearning for a strong leader who could make the Russian family proud”. However, concretising a Russian ‘national desire’ is less than helpful if we seek to understand the reasons behind Putin’s continued popularity. Equating a historical past with an inherent propensity to follow strong-men is an exercise in oversimplification, as it treats nations and groups as essentially static, prone to repeat the same historical patterns over and over again. Similarly, a focus on the more overt parallels with the earlier ‘Cults of Personality’ neglects the fact that the underlying ‘conditions of possibility’ that produced the two phenomena are different. Such comparisons also fail to explain the appeal of similarly larger-than-life politicians in countries with a longer democratic tradition. Clearly, an emphasis on national psychological propensities is not productive. Instead, an analysis of the appeal of such leader figures that taps into less conscious mechanisms is worthwhile. By simultaneously looking at the phenomenon of Donald Trump’s remarkable rise, a number of parallels pertaining to the creation of their public personae become apparent. In fact, such an analysis can serve to illuminate overarching principles structuring the successful creation of their outsized public personae.



The popular support these politicians attract demonstrates that they hold a kind of libidinal appeal that should not be underestimated, lest we render a large part, if not the majority, of a country’s population politically incompetent. While one cannot discount the real inequalities, as well as the real and imagined grievances that opened up the space for less established political figures to gain support, it is nevertheless worthwhile to examine why these particular *kinds* of candidates hold such appeal. Their reliance on spectacle and well-orchestrated exploits which combine the hypermasculine with the hyperreal enabled them to set in motion processes of identification that transcend the need for a coherent, well articulated political agenda. Instead, while seeming unsubtle to the point of being crass, they simultaneously operate on a more subliminal level, remaining oblique enough to become conduits for the electorate’s personal hopes and grievances. While this piece centres on the representational mechanisms employed by Vladimir Putin and his team of PR advisers, it is possible to identify a number of parallels with other contemporary leader figures – chief among them Donald Trump – each of whom appears to rely on a kind of hypermasculine charisma to suture a political field that is otherwise characterised by cynicism towards established politics.

Between hypermasculinity and hyperrealism

Political leaders of the 21st century are now relying on the mobilisation of libidinal energy to gain followers ever more openly. This is not to deny that the cults of personality of the 20th century did not feature a strong libidinal element. Now this appeal is no longer merely implicit; it is explicitly written on politicians’ bodies and entails more openly flirtatious behaviour. In attempts to woo the electorate, the public are positioned as partners in a flirtatious game of

'will we / won't we?'. Candida Yates argues that some – mainly Western – politicians now engage in traditionally feminine techniques of flirtation, emphasising their 'metrosexuality'. This is contrasted with the more paternal or patriarchal figures that dominated the political scene in the past. Concurrently with this first type exist more 'retrosexual' forms of masculinity. Examples she provides include Silvio Berlusconi, Nicolas Sarkozy, and Vladimir Putin – all politicians whose public appearances frequently involve machoesque posturing, placing much more emphasis on physical and sexual prowess. Donald Trump can easily be imagined as joining this peculiar clique.

Political flirtation, too, relies heavily on staged scenarios to achieve its full impact. It therefore serves observers especially well to pay attention to the fantasies inherent in the media spectacles devised and coordinated by politicians' advisers. Indeed, such fantasies are not always of a distinctly sexual nature: they can be interpreted as representations of the unconscious "wish to identify with narratives of mastery"^[1]. Some of the pseudo-events referred to earlier can even be identified as part of a tradition of entertainment *products* – the focus here being on consumption – such as Hollywood films that feature the US President either in danger and being freed by a heroic renegade, or the President himself becoming integral in efforts to save the country (such as 1996's *Independence Day* and 1997's *Air Force One*). The figure of the President then becomes a mere fantasmatic vehicle, representing masculinity, power, and altruism – a quality that is admired despite or because of the overt cynicism of much of the discourse on and around politics. In this vein, Putin's pursuit of physical fitness becomes symbolic of mastery of the self as much as of sexuality.

At the same time, this more traditional form of masculinity does not preclude the existence and occasional highlighting of a softer, more family-oriented side. In the case of the Russian president, his actual family has remained out of the spotlight almost completely, marking a difference to Trump, whose family has become an integral part of his media campaign and business. However, the virtual public absence of his family makes Putin a better fit for a more paternal role vis-à-vis the nation, while much media attention is devoted to Putin's public displays of affection towards animals, which include him playing with, as well as feeding a series of baby animals. There are also several incidences of him publicly administering kisses to animals and little children. These kisses can be read as symbolic acts, serving to cement an image of "Father of the Nation", albeit as a tender rather than stern patriarch. An alternative interpretation, however, is that despite the seemingly excessive masculinity of the presidential persona, it incorporates masculine and feminine aspects. One analyst concludes that for his leadership style "the best comparison now may be a transgender cross between the former Argentine leader Juan Perón and his legendary wife, Eva ("Evita")". While masculinity is therefore a central facet of the national vision as it is performed by Vladimir Putin, his ambition to stand for, and speak on behalf of all of Russia cannot neglect the nation's 'maternal characteristics'. In Trump's case, a seemingly more brazen celebration of masculinity (and fecundity) seems to manifest. However, some have argued that the prominent role his children, and especially his daughter play in his campaign and business, is meant to soften his image and detract from his frequent bouts of misogyny, making her prominent role strategic – after all, how can a man be contemptuous of women if he has such a close relationship with his daughter?

The President as Spectacle

It is almost forgotten now that the current Russian president was initially perceived to be something of a **technocrat**, which was made apparent by his discourse and general demeanour. But by Putin's second term as President of the Russian Federation, his administration had displayed a remarkable penchant for newsworthy occasions highlighting the President's singular determination and prowess. It is in part Putinism's ability to orchestrate PR-events that have secured him so firm a position in the national and international imaginary.

A typology of events featuring the president would demonstrate that all of them aim to highlight a certain skill or positive facet of his character, often one that falls into the broad category of traditional masculinity (on which more will be said later on). They usually involve the accomplished handling of a prop, or, perhaps more curiously, interaction with animals. Their political or strategic necessity is not always immediately apparent, while their staged nature is either transparently obvious or revealed to be so later on. Past 'scripted events' – that is, events that do not

occur spontaneously and have been planned with the media in mind – include the President singing and playing the piano at a charity gala, flying a plane to help extinguish the devastating forest fires in the summer of 2010, driving a Russian-made Lada across Siberia, shooting grey whales with a crossbow, finding a pair of ancient amphorae on a diving trip in the Black Sea, and catching a pike weighing 21 kg. While it emerged later that on his journey across Siberia he was in fact accompanied by a large entourage and had changed cars several times, that the amphorae had been placed there prior to his entering the water, and that the pike's reported weight may have been grossly exaggerated, this did not diminish his public standing.

In fact, a blurring of boundaries between reality and entertainment product in what one could broadly delineate as the arena of political communication, and in many cases a replacement of the former by the latter, is characteristic of the late 20th and early 21st century. This has led to the creation of numerous 'pseudo-events', some of which the public may no longer discern as such. As is the case with any type of 'pseudo-event', its success is "measured by how widely it is reported...The question, "Is it real?" is less important than "Is it newsworthy?...Its relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous. Its interest arises largely from this very ambiguity...." (Notably, Richard [Waterman's](#) quote refers to strategies employed by US politicians.) One consequence is the normalisation of spectacles such as the press conference, or more elaborate events such as Putin's annual 'telethon', during which he responds to (vetted) questions by the general public, sometimes for a duration of up to 4 hours. The case of Donald Trump is in many ways an even starker illustration of the power of spectacle, as his forays into television and film precede his entry into politics. Indeed, through his appearances in films and TV shows – always as 'himself', until finally cementing his brand in 'The Apprentice', Donald Trump the character was already a household name long before his move into politics. While the Trump brand's biggest supporter seems to be Donald Trump himself, closely followed by his immediate family, Putin himself assumes a somewhat more modest public persona, instead letting his deeds speak for themselves. At the same time, the amount of Putiniana, or cultural output and commodities featuring the Russian president – from [toothpicks](#) to [songs](#) and [calendars](#) – is not too far from the manner the Trump name is used as a trademark, lending it to products such a [steaks](#) and [cologne](#) and turning a profit at the same time.

Of course, the transformation of politics into entertainment products can also generate a greater cynical distance from politics in general, creating the impression that "in the entertainment industry when there is a sign it seems there isn't one, and when there isn't one we believe there is", as Umberto [Eco](#) observes. Symptomatic of this disorientation is the media speculation that surrounded a [walk](#) the President took in St Petersburg following the funeral of his first judo coach. He ostensibly wished to spend time alone – without bodyguards or the press – in his old neighbourhood, but pictures of Putin on his solitary walk soon flooded the Internet, often accompanied by the question of whether this was actually staged, perhaps to imbue Putin with greater emotional depth, which would link it to several later occasions during which he was seen shedding tears in public. However, it is usually the newsworthiness of an event that trumps (pun inevitable) any such speculations. The fact that Donald Trump's campaign often seems to be less reliant on a coherent action plan than on his ability to tap into American voters' ids, also points to the fact that spectacles do not need to rely on terribly intricate strategies, their crudeness instead lending them further appeal.



Populist rhetoric and identification

It has also been observed that Putinism lacks a series of coherent signifiers that could enable the production of a more rigorous set of tenets to form or produce its ideology. It relies on the figure of Putin – a figure that is itself 'empty', consisting of a series of attributes that are modified to adapt to changing times. Elements of Putinism have

ranged from imperial notions of all-Russian greatness which hark back both to pre-revolutionary Russia as well as to Cold War rhetoric, to authoritarianism as well as to elements of Western-style democracy; from regret and nostalgia for the Soviet Union to an endorsement of neoliberal forms of capitalism. Similarly, Trump's eclectic agenda ranges from virulent anti-immigration legislation to drug legalisation, and from defunding Planned Parenthood to decreasing taxes for low-income families. In the eyes of some commenters, a strong leader such as Putin is, in its very idiosyncrasy, seen as the only potential figure capable of suturing this incoherent ideological field. Indeed, his larger than life-public persona resonates strongly with the figure of the 'charismatic leader' and his ability to mobilise mechanisms of identification as described by Sigmund Freud in his *Group Psychology*.

Journalist Peter Pomerantsev has claimed that the Kremlin's ultimate ideology is that of cynicism, or postmodernism incarnated in a political project. He [characterises](#) this as a deliberate "strategy of power based on keeping any opposition there may be constantly confused, a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it's indefinable". However, this obliqueness has also been interpreted in somewhat less Machiavellian terms by [some commentators](#), who feel that Putin acts as "a mirror in which everyone, whether communist or democrat, sees what he wants and hopes to see". [Others](#) that "Putin stands in for the void in an attempt to conceal the non-identity of the postcommunist order", that, "if Putinism can be assigned anything like a set of determinate predicates, it could be summed up in terms of an unlimited valorization of capitalism" (ibid.).

However, Putin has also been described as a populist leader – another feature he is seen to share with figures like Silvio Berlusconi. Examples of his forays into obscene and vulgar language include the promise to 'finish (*Chechen*) terrorists in the crapper' in his days as Prime Minister, to a more recent instance, again evoking unorthodox ways of punishing Chechen rebel fighters:

When, a couple of years ago, a Western journalist asked him an awkward question about Chechnya, Putin snapped back that, if the man wasn't yet circumcised, he was cordially invited to Moscow, where they have excellent surgeons who would cut a little more radically than usual. (Žižek, 2009)

These outbursts – recruiting the Russian 'national other' of the Muslim separatist, and combining it with sadistic and darkly sexual imagery – occur very sporadically, but always attract media attention – the other type of incident being that of Putin [publicly telling risqué jokes](#). While the presence of such rhetoric may be partially related to past violence that has remained unexorcised from contemporary Russian discourses, it sometimes appears to be employed with strategic intent. But why would the Russian president need this 'obscene supplement' to his speech? And again extending the obvious comparison, why have Trump's forays into the crass and the obscene seen such positive resonance among many Americans? The presidential candidate is notoriously thin-skinned, but even his public obsession with the perceived size of hands and what this might imply has receives less negative attention among his supporters than expected.

One explanation sees the deployment of populist rhetoric as a way of strengthening bonds with the community; that it is in fact tailored to appeal specifically to its 'ordinary' members, "prepared in advance in conformity with the Russian 'national character'", [Žižek](#) notes. In the case of Putinism, however, and in contrast with Ernesto [Laclau's](#) more optimistic take on the phenomenon of populism as serving to create new political identities, the President's tightly choreographed publicity stunts and linguistic 'mishaps' in fact serve to encourage a move away from politics, as a way of continuing and maintaining the [late Soviet period](#). Populism can attach itself to any number of demands – in fact its reliance on 'empty signifiers' is one of Laclau's core assumptions, but in Putinism, this demand emanates from the presidential administration itself, and represents an attempt to discourage political participation and potential dissent. Thought of in this vein, the potpourri of values drawn upon by Putin and his administration is not intended to represent a coherent set of tenets, but chiefly aims to create an emotional effect, discouraging further analysis, which is easily achieved in a rhetorical move such as that of enunciating what cannot be said, in a manner that is normally taboo in political discourse.

Russian observers have noted that Putin's regime is in fact becoming more openly populist with time, following a disenchantment with the elites that Putin was previously able to rely on. First indicators were an increased recourse to Soviet symbolry, by which he is seen to be appealing to those that hanker after the 'glory days of yonder' – those citizens who had lost the most with the breakup of the Soviet Union. In Perry [Anderson's](#) words, "the losers below, 'the silent majority of Russians', who are 'mostly atomised, middle-aged individuals, beaten-down, unheroic philistines trying to make ends meet as decently as they can', after twenty years of betrayed expectations." This again echoes in interesting ways with how the Trump campaign has instrumentalised the disappointments of what is often portrayed as the white working- and middle-class losers of globalisation, even though [some](#) would argue that "their grievances were more theoretical than actual, more media-induced than experience-related".

According to Slavoj [Žižek](#), "the popular movement *needs* the identificatory figure of a charismatic leader". However, if all of a 'popular movement's' coherence and content are provided by its leader figure, then this also proves to be its weakest point. Putin may be the 'master signifier' that brings together the disparate, at times haphazard elements of Russianness and fuses them into the (non)ideology of Putinism, but a potential public rejection of Putin then also leads to the disintegration of this vision. Similarly, the distancing by many republicans from Trump's candidacy show the lack of support 'Trumpism' experiences from established political figures even within his own party. Besides the construction of the infamous wall between the US and Mexico and his demand to have Hillary Clinton imprisoned, his populist melange of ideas and slogans are given only a semblance of coherence by Trump's persona. However, the centrality of his supposed integrity and prowess also make his campaign singularly lopsided. With everything intentionally hinging on the figure of the President, a turn to theories of identification therefore seems apt.

"A composite of King-Kong and the suburban barber"

Taking as its starting point the Freudian account of identification and its role in group formation and –coherence, Laclau goes on to assert that a leaderless society is in fact impossible; a conclusion echoed by Žižek's earlier comment. At the same time, [Laclau notes](#), a group or community cannot sustain its existence through leader-love alone: "a durable group whose only libidinal tie is love for the leader, is equally impossible". The leader needs to find ways of appealing to the group that will put him both in charge and in the midst of its members, so as to be both *of* and *above* them. How might one understand this dual identity? In [Laclau's words](#), "his identity is split: he is the father, but also one of the brothers". One easy manifestation of this is the (usually) red baseball cap Donald Trump wears at his rallies:

With his red cap on, the glossy billionaire living in a gilt Manhattan apartment appears to have something in common with the rest of the country, who wear caps when they're actually at baseball games, when they're driving tractors through wheat fields, when they're barbecuing in their backyards. And maybe because he looks so ridiculous in it, Trump's hat is something of an equaliser.
([Eggers, 2016](#))

In [Laclau's take](#), group membership makes the leader accountable to the community, so that identification in fact suppresses authoritarian impulses and creates "a far more democratic leadership than the one involved in the notion of the narcissistic despot". Theodor W. [Adorno](#), too, argues that the bond underlying group identification centres around the figure of the leader, but rather than seeking to exonerate the populist leader from the accusation of despotism, his focus is on the fascist leader. In his analysis, the primary identification with a powerful, authoritarian father figure that takes place in fascist regimes is linked to a kind of regression or return to more archaic or 'primitive' state. The paternal leader figure here resembles the primal father for whose murder the 'primal horde' is then forever trying to make amends. The group members' commonalities with the leader then do not serve to quell the dictatorial tendencies in him – they are merely evidence of the narcissistic aspects of group identification: "While appearing as a superman, the leader must at the same time work the miracle of appearing as an average person, just as Hitler posed as a composite of King-Kong and the suburban barber". In fact, a highlighting of the leader's heroic,

superhuman qualities can therefore never fully bypass the rivalrous aspects of identification: “for the sake of those parts of the follower’s narcissistic libido which have not been thrown into the leader image but remain attached to the follower’s own ego, the superman must still resemble the follower and appear as his “enlargement””. Roland [Barthes](#)’ analysis of the techniques employed to secure voter appeal in electoral photography confirms as much: the politician needs to be both familiar, and “exalted, superbly elevated”. Nevertheless the leader figure, in [Adorno](#)’s analysis, is not impervious to historical contingency: while the authoritarian element may be more pronounced under fascism, it decreases in importance in a less repressive society. What remains is the need to convey an “impression of greater force and of more freedom of libido” than the rest of the community.

Thought of in terms of theories of identification, a somewhat exaggerated identity therefore becomes necessary if the leader is to be accepted as such. However, the amalgam of ordinary and extraordinary components needs to be prepared carefully to suit current national tastes, as these tastes are subject to change. The constant attempts by Putin and his advisors to present new impressive facets of his persona implicitly demonstrate an understanding of this fact. However, they also give evidence of how much the President continues to search for means to secure his appeal. Similarly, the changes that Trump’s campaign team has undergone recently demonstrate that, despite an instinctive grasp of how to attract attention and popularity, he is still looking for means to secure a broader, more stable support base.

In the case of Russia, it appears that a classical panacea to this dilemma has been found. To achieve this, the government relies less on the President as sole master signifier, and more on ways of turning Russia’s inherent tensions outward. Indeed, the surge of patriotism that followed the annexation of Crimea and subsequent armed conflict in Ukraine may have secured Putin’s reign for another term. The newly drafted social contract no longer merely agrees to provide relative economic stability to enable consumption for obedient, apolitical subjects. Rather, it gratifies the longing for moments of national greatness and unity by literalising the notion of a “theft of enjoyment”: the beautiful peninsula that assumes such a symbolic place in Russian national imagination had been ‘given away’ by Khrushchev in 1954, only to be returned to its rightful owners – the Russian people – by Putin’s government in 2014. [Lev Gudkov, together with colleagues from Levada-Center](#), illustrates how the antagonisms of Russian society have been effectively channelled in a process of ‘negative mobilization’, whereby dissenters of that vision are branded as traitors, and members of the opposition press designated as belonging to the ‘5th column’.

The ways in which the Trump campaign has similarly relied on nationalistic ideas – chiefly through a vilification of immigrants and the prelapsarian idea of ‘making America great again’ – as well as the schizophrenic relationship it maintains with the media, simultaneously accusing it of lying while also relying on it to gain as much publicity as possible, demonstrates that the primer on how to win followers and influence people relies on certain perennial and transnational principles, such as the ones discussed in this essay. These include a presence both above and among one’s electorate, by combining superiority – be it physical or psychological – with the right amount of populist rhetoric or folksy demeanour. Internal tensions are best channelled outward, or in the direction of select minority groups. Originality is no strong requirement. In fact, relying on existing symbols and narratives is a plus as they enhance recognisability and serve to produce comfortable and comforting nostalgia. A coherent political agenda is similarly optional – personal charisma will most likely outshine sensible policies. Most importantly, the power of spectacle and especially of the well-managed photo opportunity are to assume a central place in one’s political toolbox.

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