

1 Russia's ultimate celebrity

VVP as VIP *objet d'art*

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Putin is the biggest celebrity in Russia today.

(Dmitrii Vrubel 2004)¹

He's good, he's strong, he's decent, he's ours and he's president now.

(Vladimir Ivchenko 2001)²

He is the only president I know with black belt and PhD in economics. [...] Go VVP!

(Don, blogger 2002)³

I want a husband who'd be like Vladimir Vladimirovich.

(Yulya Pipilova, 18, member of the 1,500-strong
VVP Fan Club in Moscow 2007)⁴

A man for all seasons, and possibly for all time⁵

In 2007, Vladimir Putin topped *Kommersant*'s annual list of Russia's elite for the seventh consecutive year, garnering 82 percent of votes among the 1,600 Russians polled (Alekseev 2007). That rating startled no one, for no Russian or Soviet head of state since Stalin has inspired the widespread hero worship that irradiated Putin's presidency and continues to thrive today, causing western pundits to speculate that, regardless of President Dmitrii Medvedev's de jure post, self-designated Prime Minister Putin remains the country's de facto leader.⁶ Revered at home as the savior not only of Russia's economy, but also of its national pride and international status, Putin as president enjoyed such extraordinary popular support, with approval ratings of 70–80 percent, that the impending expiration of his second, final term reportedly plunged some members of his constituency into melancholy at his departure, anxiety regarding the nation's future, and naïve concern about his professional options in the years to come.

Indeed, a controversial, sycophantic letter signed by four *éminences grises* of contemporary culture presumptuously claiming to speak for the entire culture establishment⁷ beseeched Putin to seek a third term, in flagrant violation of the constitution, “... blagodaria Vashim usiliyam byla dostignuta sotsial’naia stabil’nost’ i progress, neobychno povysilsia avtoritet nashei Rodiny vo vsem mire” [... thanks to your efforts, social stability and progress have been achieved; the authority of our Motherland in the whole world has increased extraordinarily] (Pis’mo 2007). The content of this highly publicized document,⁸ which evokes the visually memorable sequence in Sergei Eisenstein’s *Ivan Groznyi* [Ivan the Terrible] (part 1, 1944) of multitudes supplicating Ivan to return as ruler, coincides almost verbatim with the views espoused in an interview by the spokespeople for Nashi – a nationalistic youth group cum Putin fan club established in 2005, most probably funded by the Kremlin and impervious to any developments in twenty-first century Russia that counter its simplistic convictions: “Putin [...] has brought stability and the opportunity for modernization and development of the country” (quoted in Myers 2007). Such a convergence of opinion harbored by old and young generations about Putin’s accomplishments characterized *vox populi* throughout his presidency, which systematically ignored, discredited, or quelled the few dissenting voices virtually drowning in the sea of hosannas. As a media celebrity, Putin has no equals, and his celebrity status, unlike that of most personalities in the limelight, is ascribed (Yeltsin’s chosen successor), achieved (Russia’s perceived rescuer from international ignominy and financial disaster), and attributed (the hero relentlessly championed via Kremlin-controlled media) according to Chris Rojek’s taxonomy (Rojek 2001: 17–20).

Adulation of Putin during his presidency assumed not only ideological, but also sundry identificatory, romantic, and creative forms – all reported and disseminated in the media.⁹ Doting admirers in Siberia named a kebab house and bar after him (Bar Putin), selling “vertical power” kebabs and “when Vova was little” milkshakes (White and McAllister 2003: 388), while a Siberian native adopted his surname, maintaining, “Putin is the angel who educated me spiritually” (quoted in Toomey 2003). Since 2002, the main street in the Ingush village of Olgety, and since 2008, the main street in Grozny, capital of Chechnya, have borne his name (Volonikhin 2002; Let’s learn judo with Vladimir Putin 2008), as have lollipops, a vodka (Putinka), an ice cream, carpets, toys, and other products. Botanist Nikolai Egorov in Cheliabinsk even attempted to christen a frost-resistant tomato after Putin until the Kremlin curbed his horticultural exuberance (Bransten 2002; MacKinnon 2002; Toomey 2003). Rumors linked Putin romantically (and fancifully) with the Australian actress Peta Wilson (Putin’s Last Love 2003) and the controversial Russian police lieutenant Oksana Fedorova, Miss Universe in 2002, while in the city of Iaroslavl one of numerous moonstruck women publicly professing “mad” love for him had to be locked up in the city’s psychiatric ward owing to the uncontrollable nature of her passion.¹⁰ The tabloid *Moskovskii korrespondent* alleged that Putin had secretly divorced his wife in early 2008 so as to marry the then 24-year-old former gymnast and Olympic medalist Alina Kabaeva (a deputy in the State Duma) – a provocative item that predictably led to the paper’s closure (“Russia: Putin romance rumors keep public riveted” 2008). Though such items are standard fare for film and television stars, pop music icons, and sports heroes, political leaders rarely inspire such impassioned involvement in what is popularly called their love life. Even Putin’s KGB/FSB past,¹¹ which distressed those familiar with the organization’s activities, seemed to cast a haze of romantic mystery around him by analogy with Stirlitz, James Bond, and the actors who have portrayed them.¹² Such a perspective endowed a reportedly mediocre functionary treading water in Germany, who moved on to occupy his country’s chief executive position, with the glamorous aura of an international spy.

Romantic and erotic fantasies woven around Putin likewise proliferated when upscale confectioner Konfael created a 12” by 19” chocolate portrait of him, weighing over 3 pounds and priced at approximately \$700. Considered a work of art by Konfael personnel, this “limited edition” of the edible president (only two were manufactured) went on sale in 2003. Asked what they would do if they owned such an anomalous piece of confectionary, men claimed that they probably would hang it in their offices, whereas young women wished to kiss it, while their middle-aged counterparts dreamed of eating a chocolate Putin ear (BBC Monitoring 2003b). In a no less fantastic scenario, presumably as a therapeutic outlet for what she diagnosed as a widely shared sexual fixation on Putin, one female fan contributed to *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, a needlework pattern in crossstitch based on a widely disseminated photograph of a bare-chested Putin, sporting sunglasses and rain hat, fishing. In light of these and similar strategies for attaining virtual intimacy with Putin, it seems reasonable to conclude that the young blogger rhapsodically proclaiming her adoration of him as a “sex symbol, a real Man” [seks symbol, nastoiashchii muzhik] (“Tainstvennaia pop-gruppa poet osanny Putinu” 2002) summed up sentiments rampant among the female segment of the Russian population, irrespective of age or class (Figure 1.1). For countless women, Putin appears as a glamorous, elite sexual icon, whose image and name dominate the country’s landscape yet who remains elusive owing not only to the astronomical cost of high-end purchasable products imprinted with his visage, but also to the seductive remoteness of any national leader.

Eroticism played bedfellow to a mythology of ethics, for the Kremlin deployed the media for its indefatigable campaign of projecting Putin as a paragon of civic-minded commitment, intent not on consolidating personal power and accruing a sizable fortune, but on restoring Russia’s glory and its citizens’ economic and psychological health. According to Steve LeVine, Vladislav Surkov, Putin’s chief of domestic policy, masterminded “the transformation of the president’s visage into a savior-of-Russia icon, gargantuan and granite-faced, gazing from billboards, television screens, and newspapers throughout Moscow” (LeVine 2008: 34). Yet these modes of putinating the capital were only the tip of the iceberg, for Putin’s formidable virtual omnipresence during his presidency was not wholly engineered by the Kremlin.¹³ His face adorned *znachki* [pins], coins, cakes, countless T-shirts, salt shakers, posters, postcards, playing cards (Figure 1.2), notebooks, and calendars throughout the country, while his portraits in oil, Swarovski crystal, amber and semi-precious stones (Figure 1.3), copper, mosaics, and charcoal, as well as busts and full-figure sculptures, became a booming business.



Figure 1.1 Showcasing Putin's virility (presidential pecs), religiosity (Orthodox cross), and skill at reeling in Big Fish (rod at crotch level) while on vacation in Tuva, Siberia, 2007.

Source: Courtesy of the Presidential Press and Information Office, www.kremlin.ru, on Wikimedia Commons.

A muse for men as well as a far from obscure object of desire for women, Putin inspired a spy thriller by the Latvian author Alexander Olbik *Prezident* [The President] (see Chapter 6 by Andrei Rogatchevski), a headline-making pop song by the female duo called *Poiushchie vmeste* [Singing Together] (Leeds 2002; "Singing together" 2002),¹⁴ and an opera by the Saratov composer Vitalii Okorokov titled *Monika v Kremle* [Monica in the Kremlin], which features Monica Lewinsky's aspirations to non-political congress with him. Like Peter the Great before him, Putin also metamorphosed into a bronze monument: a bronze statue of him on horseback materialized in a Novgorod prison; in 2001, the St. Petersburg sculptor Aleksandr Palmin created a bronze bust of Putin as a tribute to his idol (Traynor 2001); and 3 years later a huge bronze tribute to the martialarts president in judo garb, executed by Zurab Tsereteli, was installed in the middle of a showroom at the Zurab Tsereteli Art Gallery ([Figure 1.4](#)). For several years, Putin's portraits covered a sizable part of one wall in the centrally located Moscow bookstore Biblio-Globus, across from Lubianka; in 2001, a Moscow gallery mounted an exhibition of presidential portraits titled *Nash Putin* [Our Putin] (Traynor 2001); and a best-selling loose-leaf calendar for 2002 captured a different expression on his face for each of the 12 months (skeptical in January, downcast in December), with a cover featuring Putin as "a genius of judo" in the lotus position (Sidlin 2001).¹⁵ His deadpan visage stared impassively at shoppers from watches sold to the tune of chimes and \$56 at a kiosk inside the Federation Council Building in Moscow (Goldman 2008),¹⁶ and a volume titled *Putinki: kratkii sbornik izrechenii prezidenta (Pervyi srok)* [Putinisms: A Short Collection of the President's Sayings (First Term)] (2004), wittily illustrated by Aleksei Merinov, comprised extracts from his inimitable words of wisdom uttered during the first 4 years "on the job," while a fan-club site enabled visitors to download songs mixing techno music with Putin's distinctive speech patterns ("The Putin cult 2007"; see Chapter 4 by Michael Gorham).¹⁷ As Putin's second term began, increasing numbers succumbed to the epidemic, which showed little sign of abating when that term expired in March 2008. Dissent represented a minority stance while hero worship was in full flower

(Figure 1.5).



Figure 1.2 VVP as the ace of hearts, having played his cards right.

Source: Photo by Helena Goscilo.



Figure 1.3 An earnest, idealized Putin in amber and pebble pieces, exhibited by Yantarny Dom Company in St. Petersburg at the seventeenth Junmex International Jewelry Forum, 2009.

Source: Photo by Aleksei Danichev, courtesy of RIA Novosti.



Figure 1.4 Russia's premier celebrity in bronze at the Zurab Tsereteli Art Gallery in Moscow, December 2004, photographed October 2005.

Source: Photo by Sergei Piatakov. Courtesy of RIA Novosti.

In its comprehensiveness, the official and populist campaign to instill Putinlove in the populace left no social category unscathed. Accordingly, in October 2000, as the academic year in primary schools started, children in St. Petersburg received a booklet with snapshots from the president's childhood (Traynor 2001), and in 2008, a large, luxury photo album of the adult Putin went on sale in several major bookstores. As dictated by the protocols of canonization, even the locations Putin visited became enshrined. Upon learning that approximately 6 years earlier Putin in his capacity as city official had planted a maple tree by St. Petersburg's Canadian consulate, a local businessman promptly affixed a brass plaque to the tree, with the solemn words, "Planted by V Putin 7 October 1995" (Traynor 2001). The village of Izborsk outside St. Petersburg, where the presidential motorcade made an unscheduled stop in August 2000, subsequently began peddling a walking tour marking the places "where Putin bought a cucumber," "where Putin took off his jacket and tried water from a spring," and "where Putin touched a tree and made a wish" (Traynor 2001). Similarly, Magnitogorsk's city museum exhibited the overalls Putin had worn during his visit (White and McAllister 2003: 388). Though no witnesses have sighted miracles in these venues, the best-known model for such an "itinerary," *mutatis mutandis*, is Christ's Stations of the Cross, with, however, a drastically different *terminus ad quem*. Given the narrative of salvation into which many Russians conscripted Putin's achievements, and their view of VVP as the incarnation of the New Word – Russia's unique path in a global framework – the perceived mapping of Russia's transformation requires few adjustments to conform to the Christological scenario.¹⁸



Figure 1.5 “Vladimir Vladimirovich – you’re God! You emanate radiance!” A court jester awed by Putin as His Omnipotence, illustrating the divine light of kings and, it seems, at least one Russian president. Aleksei Merinov’s illustration in *Putinki* (Moscow 2004), 68.

Source: Courtesy of Aleksei Merinov.

On the basis of celebrity conventions, one might expect this hagiographic cultural production to be occasioned by a glitzy, internationally fêted pop celebrity such as Elton John or by a Hollywood superhero along the hypertrophied lines of Arnold Schwarzenegger, but not by a short, balding, nondescript, middle-aged erstwhile KGB agent dubbed Vova Putin by the Cheliabinsk tomato pioneer. Normally reserved for media stars, the paroxysms of swooning adoration targeting Russia’s political leader throughout the 2000s bred the neologism Putin-mania and revived the ominously freighted term “cult of personality,” designating a phenomenon fostered by and inseparable from Stalin, but one allegedly disavowed by VVP, who reputedly tried to check the epidemic impulse to mythologize him. Less than a year into his first term, he publicly declared:

I understand that when somebody does such things, he or she is probably guided by the best of intentions, and that he or she thinks well of me. I would like to thank them, but ask them not to do this. [But] I cannot actively stop this.

(Cited in Traynor 2001)

Whether sincere or not,¹⁹ Putin’s explicit discouragement failed to subdue what created the impression of being a genuine, if frequently market-driven, love affair between the Russian population and the man it voted into office for a second time in 2004.²⁰ Why market-driven? Because “Putin” sells – sufficiently so for one Russian journalist, at least, to have called him “a trademark symbol of popular culture and language” (Shchuplov 2002). Fully aware of what an effective sales pitch entails, by 2003 Putin himself acutely observed, “Moe izobrazhenie i imia v sovremennykh usloviakh iavliaiutsia raskruchennym brendom, kotorym pol’zuiutsia vse komu ne len” [In contemporary conditions my image and name are a widely marketed brand used by anyone who feels like it] (*Putinki* 2004: 71). Thus the political propaganda of pro-Putinists, the stratagems of profiteering entrepreneurs, and the seemingly insatiable human need to create heroes dovetailed during a period when Putin’s statist ideology ensured that lucrative megabusinesses, such as Yukos

and Sibneft, reverted to the state (Aron 2006)²¹ and Russia's booming oil industry dramatically improved average Russians' buying power and sense of security. The Putin brand was a talisman, a symbol of the Good Life under VVP, and a sign of solidarity with his ambitious vision for the nation as a global power.

The processes set in motion were circular: the human penchant for hero worship and collective enthusiasm fueled Putin's popularity, which in turn intensified that enthusiasm, resulting in a yet greater popularity that whipped up more enthusiasm, etc.. This perpetual escalation not only catapulted Putin to iconic status, but united the population in the common cause of celebrification. If, as Rojek and other theorists of celebrity culture contend, fans of celebrities find affirmation in belonging to a group devoted to the adulation of a glamorous persona, Putin as Russia's symbol bonded Russians through their support of a United Russia – precisely the party he headed, however distanced he appears from it in 2011, when the withdrawal of support by many previous faithfuls has diminished the party's standing.²²

Cult or calculation?

Throughout the 2000s, those eager to court Putin's favor and express their veneration recognized few restraints in wooing the president. In addition to the luxurious Konstantin Palace just outside St. Petersburg renovated for his use and the \$1 billion ski-slope in Sochi masterminded for his sporting self, the extravagant gifts marking his fiftieth birthday in October 2002 staggered the wildest imagination. They did so not only because of Russia's publicized economic hardships before the petrodollars rolled in, but also because of one gift's symbolic implications. Sixty jewelers in the Ural mountains spent 6 months producing the item, insured for \$10 million, which consists of an exact replica of the Cap of Monomakh [*Shapka Monomakha*],²³ the ancient ceremonial gold crown, encrusted with jewels and lined with sable, used at the coronation of Russian tsars, including Ivan the Terrible and Putin's much-admired Peter the Great. A symbol of Russian autocracy and "the succession of power from the Byzantine emperors to the Russian monarchs" (Walsh 2002c), the crown figured in newspaper caricatures of Boris Yeltsin, dubbed "Tsar Boris" for his excesses – a detail apparently forgotten or overlooked by VVP's devotees, who surely must have realized his determination to dissociate himself from his predecessor. Ever the opportunist, then Moscow Mayor Luzhkov joined the ingratiatory birthday well-wishers by proposing to restore the statue of Feliks Dzerzhinskii, founder of the Cheka, on Lubianka Square, presumably to please the ex-KGB president (Abdullaev 2002), who, according to various estimates, during his years in office filled 25–50 percent of the top positions in Russia's governmental structures with his former KGB colleagues.²⁴

In their own way, more evocative of the Stalin cult were the \$500 carpets with Putin's face emblazoned on them, produced in Turkmenistan, and a Kostroma textile manufacturer's undertaking of what the pertinent linen mill's chief weaver called "very responsible and labor-consuming work": the profitable business of manufacturing tapestries with Putin's portrait, based on a photograph that showed what the head of the mill's art department trustfully described, *à la* George Bush, as "his open look [... which] convey[s] the openness of his soul"²⁵ ("Russian textile mill making Putin tapestries" 2003). The allegedly high demand for the tapestries persuaded the manufacturer to follow up with bedspreads, towels, and rugs likewise bearing the Putin image – thereby enabling enthusiasts to sleep, shower, and socialize, however indirectly, with their icon. In short, not unlike Stalin, "*Putin [vezde/vsegda] s nami* " [Putin is (everywhere/always) with us]. The frequently iterated

comparison between the two inspired one tongue-in-cheek “artist,” Avi Abrams,²⁶ to revise Vasilii Efanov’s painting *Nezabyvaemoe* [An Unforgettable Meeting] (1936–7) along anachronistic lines, replacing a female delegate at the Kremlin with Putin, thus altering the significance of the momentous handshake from what under Stalin represented achievement of the ultimate goal (contact with The Leader) to a union of kindred spirits. An issue of the Russian *Newsweek* (February 13–19, 2006) similarly remastered for its cover Aleksandr Gerasimov’s painting *Stalin i Voroshilov v Kremle* [Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin] (1938) by substituting Putin as Stalin’s stroll-mate, both men symbolically joined under one umbrella. The Kremlin’s determination to control the portrayal of history, its withdrawal of various archives declassified during the 1990s, and its promotion of a study guide for high-school teachers that characterizes Stalin as “one of the most successful leaders of the USSR” (Levy 2008b) rightly or wrongly strengthen the perceived parallel between the two authoritarian rulers.

What interests me here, however, is not Putin’s policies or politics, but a concrete aspect of his remarkable visual celebrification: sundry images reproducing him in genres ranging from “aestheticized” photographs and paintings to carpets, bedding, busts, toys, balloons, graphics, and performances – whether in an idolatrous, satirical, or ambiguous vein. The tradition of depicting deified leaders in twentieth century Russia charted an uneven course. Inaugurated under Lenin, it culminated with Stalin, relentlessly mythologized on canvas and posters by Brodskii, Gerasimov, Nalbandian, Klutskis, Deni, and a host of less memorable artists. As mere mortals, Khrushchev, Andropov, Chernenko, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin were largely bypassed in that respect, and Brezhnev, despite his famous Honecker kiss, similarly inspired few painters during his lifetime and virtually none later, with the notable, ironic exception of Dmitrii Prigov in his *Bestiary* series (1985) and prisoners who tattooed leaders’ faces on their bodies as *sui generis* bullet-proof vests, in the apparently correct assumption that no one would dare shoot at an image of the country’s leader.

That for some observers the obsession with pictorially immortalizing Putin implied a parallel with Stalin²⁷ explains why wary commentators resorted to the red-button, historically fraught label of “cult of personality” (see Chapter 2 by Cassidy *et al.*) (Figure 1.6). Disclaimers voiced by Putin or leaked to the press by members of his entourage insisted on the Russian president’s distaste for the diffusion of Putiniana throughout the country – a disavowal that repeatedly made news, adding modesty to the virtues constituting his public profile – and thus far no mammoth statue of him looms over the Volga-Don Canal.²⁸ The sheer volume and diversity of his iconographic dissemination, nonetheless, eerily recalls the artistic production of the Stalinist era, sparking exaggerated fears of political regression to fatally jollier times [“zhit’ stalo luchshe, zhit’ stalo veselee...”] – fears buttressed by the reinstatement of several Soviet practices and the Kremlin’s virtually complete control of the media. Moreover, the Internet facilitates broad access to those images, just as YouTube enables those outside Russia to sample clips featuring Putin as the protagonist of imaginary narratives, such as the ironic mini-video, now no longer available, showing VVP as a cool, daring, Stetsoned cowboy riding the range, with music from Sergio Leone’s *Man with No Name* series, starring Clint Eastwood as the fearless gunslinger even more inscrutable and macho than Putin. The visual analogy projected Putin as the strong, silent man of action engaged in manly pursuits – and the numerous shots of him on horseback, in helicopters, and in judo poses only consolidated that glamorous image of intrepid (self-)mastery conventionalized by Hollywood and advertisements in print and on television.²⁹ Putin’s celebrity status, in short, rests on his mediated image of an intelligent, reserved, sober patriot of indomitable will and physical prowess, one wholly dedicated to Russia and Russians.



Figure 1.6 “Mirror, mirror...” – an ironic, admirably pithy version of the Putin-as- Stalin-legatee perspective. Caricature by John Deering, cartoonist at the Arkansas Democratic Gazette.

Source: Courtesy of John Deering.

Especially during his first term, Putin undeniably exuded and cultivated an aura of recessiveness or modesty – of a reluctance to attract particular attention. His media-hyped kiss planted on a small boy’s stomach on Red Square (2006) aside, for much of his presidency he lacked dramatic flourishes, favored a brisk and occasionally opaque manner of interaction, and operated by steady, even plodding, accretion and scrupulous concern for details, often behind the scenes. His famed abstinence from alcohol and his physical appearance – not his pale basilisk gaze and uncanny resemblance to Dobby, but his compact, athletic slightness – suggest the discipline and control constantly touted as his signature traits (Figure 1.7).³⁰ His verbal tic of preceding official statements by a promise of laconism matches his physical shortness. Admired for his sporting skills (judo, skiing, swimming, horseback riding) and his dependability, in contrast to his predecessor’s fabled expansiveness, self-indulgence, thoughtless off-the-cuff statements, and paraded emotionality, he sooner has impressed by an *absence* of qualities, as the song “A Man Like Putin” unwittingly attests,

Moi paren’ snova vlip v durnye dela, podralsia, naglotalsia kakoi-to muti. On tak menia dostal–
ia ego prognala, i ia khochu teper’ takogo, kak Putin! [Priпев:] Takogo, kak Putin–polnogo sil,
takogo kak Putin–chtoby *ne pil*, Takogo, kak Putin–chtob *ne obizhal*, takogo, kak Putin–chtob *ne
ubezhal*.³¹

(Singing Together 2002)



Figure 1.7 “... but how do you manage to be everywhere, Vladimir Vladimirovich?” Putin as the Dobby-double, here, there, and everywhere. Aleksei Merinov’s irreverent illustration in Putinki (Moscow 2004) 70.

Source: Courtesy of Aleksei Merinov.

Consonant with Putin’s widespread reputation of ideal masculinity (see Chapter 8), by contrasting him with the presumed “average male,” the lyrics reveal contemporary’s Russia’s ongoing crisis in gender identity, especially men’s disorientation and instability as vestiges of the blighted 1990s.

Media and celebrification

That not all Russians sang hosannas to VVP as a model of indomitable probity is clear from one blogger’s vehement counter-version of the song’s lyrics. Slyly interpolating some of Putin’s less euphemistic vocabulary (see Chapter 4), it symptomizes the oppositional view, which enjoys appreciably narrower circulation:

takogo kak putin nuzhno dushit’
 takogo kak putin nuzhno ubit’.
 takogo kak putin nuzhno mocht’.
 takogo kak putin nuzhno udavit’
 takogo kak putin nuzhno zastrelit’
 Takogo kak putin nuzhno ebat’,
 takogo kak putin nuzhno strelyat’,
 takogo kak putin nuzhno vzorvat’,
 takogo kak putin nuzhno zakopat’

(bucovin 68)

Such an irreverent attitude toward Russia’s major contemporary icon, however, represented a minority attitude and could not be articulated on television or in the press, but only on the Internet, which to this day remains the sole channel of communication relatively free of the Kremlin’s control. As one commentator notes, Russians impatient with “the absence of criticism and debate on television” increasingly have turned to the Internet, which the Russian (unlike the Chinese)

government does not censor (Kovalyova 2009). For instance, a television contest in December 2008 intended to identify Russia's greatest historical figures inspired a web site (www.badnameofrussia.ru) asking visitors to vote for public figures who are "the disgrace of Russia" [*pozor Rossii*]. By December 3, 2008, Putin reportedly topped the list with 18,155 votes – more than twice the number cast for the second most "disgraceful" figure, Boris Yeltsin.³² Astonishingly frank comments by bloggers explain the reasons for their disgust with the former president and now prime minister.³³ More recently, the Ekaterinburg group Rabfak posted a clip on ura.ru in which free-style as well as loosely choreographed dancing accompanies the group's satirical song "Our Loony Bin Is Voting for Putin" [*Nash durdom golosuet za Putina*]. In imaging Russia as an insane asylum, Rabfak revives the master trope of Andrei Konchalovskii's film *House of Fools* [*Dom durakov* 2002].³⁴ Probably a response to the huge billboard in the capital announcing "Moscow is voting for Putin" [*Moskva golosuet za Putina*], the song, according to the group's front man, Aleksandr Semenov, has no oppositional intent: "[W]e aren't battling anyone. We simply photograph [*sic*] reality and laugh at what's funny." Such a disingenuous disclaimer from a group famous for such sardonic videos as "A new song about Stalin" and "A new song about the police" can only compound the irony of the current performance, which has taken the Internet by storm. Though clearly many Russians' celebrity hero, Putin is more controversial than suggested in other, more traditional forms of communication and media.

Yet, paradoxically, the Putin cult has benefited immeasurably from the Internet and other technologies, which have documented his high-profile, mediaconscious international and domestic activities. In fact, Putin is the first and thus far only Russian head of state to realize the enormous potential of technology to promote a painstakingly elaborated self-image through its dissemination around the world.³⁵ International access to Russian state-controlled television channels and to YouTube makes available to millions of viewers in the west (and beyond) the "immediacy" of Putin as Russia's revered "icon in action," in scenarios that repeatedly confirm his status as an omnipotent, charismatic star. Moreover, items posted on his web site and the tradition he established while president, of annually spending several hours in telephone dialogue with Russian citizens, who call in to pose questions, seek aid or advice, and complain about their problems (see Chapter 5 by Lara Ryazanova-Clarke), create the impression of a demotic leader invested in the everyday life of "his subjects" – all, of course, captured on camera. As prime minister, Putin has maintained this annual ritual, the continuity reinforcing the general conviction that he remains the chief power in the Kremlin, reinforced by Dmitrii Medvedev's public endorsement in October 2011 of Putin as the United Party's candidate in the March 2012 presidential election. That announcement surprised only the naïve and credulous.

In recent years, photographers have accompanied not only Putin's visits to war zones, factories, schools, museums, and cultural events, but also his vacations in Siberia, where a bare-chested Putin fishing, riding, and climbing trees became immortalized as a sexual commodity when snapshots of his leisurely self flooded the Internet ([Figure 1.8](#)). Putin's increased sexualization in recent years via discarded shirts, rumors of liaisons with women less than half his age, and reports of his decisive action in the midst of allegedly dangerous situations have dramatically magnified his image as the post-Soviet exemplar of seductive, reassuring virility (see Chapter 8). Reassurance also derives from Putin's projection of a dispassionate, authoritative self-confidence in his recorded confrontations with foreign heads of state and journalists, as well as Russia's incompetent regional managers and defanged oligarchs, such as Oleg Deripaska, whom he recently humiliated in public for deviousness and lack of professional responsibility (2009) – to the delight of Russian television viewers and

YouTube aficionados.

Putin's acquired sophistication in public relations may be measured by the contrast between his dilatory reaction to the *Kursk* disaster in 2000 and his handling of the blast at the Saiano-Sushenskaia hydroelectric plant in Siberia in 2009: his prompt personal visit to the latter site, his expressed concern for victims of the tragedy, and above all the video conference he organized to discuss the emergency reinforced his populist image, prompting bloggers to vent their anger not at the Kremlin, but at local authorities. In doing so, they imitated Putin's strategy of faulting regional administrators for problems that reflect national inadequacies. If retrograde in his attachment to sundry Soviet-era institutions and values, Putin could hardly be more "modern" in his exploitation of technology. What other world leader in the 2000s matched his celebrification engineered through cyberfication?

Lack as luster?

If, as one western commentator observed, during the early 2000s "Putin's popularity [... was] the result of anti-politics [...], non-engagement" (Lavelle 2003) – after the 2004 election, he grew markedly less laconic and more imperial. Indeed, by the second half of the 2000s, Putin's star status and his resultant self-confidence made him less passive and decidedly more authoritarian in front of the cameras. Tellingly, a former KGB master once described Putin as a "nonentity" (Toomey 2003), while the journalist Steve LeVine (2008: 64) noted the "complicity of his inaction" in questions of crime. Lack, in short, was (and perhaps remains) Putin's strong suit, his outstanding features comprising a stylistic anodyne impassiveness and above all a certain "emptiness"; even his contradictory pronouncements ("managed democracy," a strong [i.e., imperialist and controlling] yet humanistic Russia) erase one another. Several years ago Georgii Satarov, a political analyst and former aide to Yeltsin, maintained, "Lack of a position is part of the political style and strategy for Putin."³⁶ Pollster Iurii Levada nicely summed up the dynamic when he characterized Putin as a "mirror in which everyone, communist or democrat, sees what he wants to see and what he hopes for" (White and McAllister 2003: 385). Indeed, Putin's ability to seem everything to everyone raises the question of what precisely he endorses or represents. Veterans are reassured by his announced regret for the loss of the Soviet Union and his adherence to several familiar Soviet principles; representatives of the Church applaud his seeming commitment to Russian Orthodoxy; the intelligentsia and *Kulturarbeiter* appreciate his ideological and financial support of film, art, and literature as central to Russia's cultural standing in the world, publicly displayed in ritualistic ceremonies during which Putin presents awards, congratulates successful figures, and even takes part in staged events; women thrill to his physical vigor and athleticism as well as his publicized speeches on International Women's Day; children reportedly find his regular visits to schools exciting; his telephone marathons with the public assure the "man on the street" that they can get a fair hearing and help from "the man in charge"; even animals (ranging from goats to fish), with whom Putin frequently has been photographed – feeding, stroking, or kissing them – must feel safeguarded by the apparently protective affection of the nation's leader (see Chapter 3 by Tatiana Mikhailova). In other words, Putin "gives the public what it wants" – a stratagem guaranteed to gain popularity. Yet, apart from his iterated passion for a strong Russia and his hostility toward the United States (and, more recently, the United Kingdom), one would be hard put to define Putin's profoundly held beliefs.



Figure 1.8 Posing and exposing the ‘charismatic’ chest on a holiday in Tuva, 2007.

Source: Courtesy of the Presidential Press and Information Office, www.kremlin.ru, on Wikimedia Commons.

The tidal wave of cultural objects and gestures designed to immortalize Putin attest the rich potential of his vacuity, which allowed not only for the ascription of multiple traits and the projection of myriad desires onto his persona, but also for his transformation into an art object depicted from diverse perspectives – in such genres as the official portrait, graphics, photo collage, logo, greeting card, cartoon, handicrafts, sculpture, and Internet caricatures. Moreover, the register of these visuals spans the gamut from solemnity and pomp to irony, playfulness, and satire. If, as Michel Foucault contends, we should create ourselves as a work of art (Foucault 1984: 351), others perform that task for Putin (“svita igraet korolia” [literally, the entourage plays the king]) and by constantly maintaining the spotlight on his activities, statements, and mere presence at various functions, fortify his celebrity status as the nation’s White Knight.

Visualizing VVP

Aiding in the creation of the Putin myth, folklore genres include a sketch of his frowning, almost chinless face by St. Petersburg Gavriil Lubnin, accompanied by the sort of school verses that traditionally treat Russia’s famous (for instance, Lev Tolstoy) in a familiar, informal mode, such as the pseudo-naïve rhyming *chastushka* quatrain, “Krasivyi muzhik Volodia/Svityi iz krepkikh zhil/Ezdit v Moskve i khodit/A ran’she v Pitere zhil” [The handsome guy Volodia/ Formed from strong sinews/Rides and walks round Moscow/But earlier lived in Piter].³⁷ Another folk genre, Russian stacking or nesting dolls (matryoshki), which for almost a century functioned as portable national ideology primarily targeting tourists with a weakness for souvenirs, has “embodied” virtually all Russian and Soviet heads of state, as well as its cultural luminaries, and in this regard Putin was no exception. Nor were the VVP matryoshki exceptional. One of them merely featured a facsimile of his face atop the national colors, with “Rossiia” splashed across them below the two-headed eagle of the Russian empire that replaced the hammer and sickle after the demise of the Soviet

Union. Banal and sketchily executed, during the early 2000s these matryoshki symbolically equating Putin with Russia nonetheless sold for 500 rubles/\$17 on the Old Arbat.³⁸ That equation of country and its symbol partly explains the new century's Putinmania, for a glamorous, strong leader implies Russia's recovered identity as a world power with its sui generis allure.

Equally conventional though more revealing is the portrait in oil of *Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation* (2000) by Nikas Safronov (b. April 8, 1956), a "society painter" who shares Zurab Tsereteli's penchant for courting famous subjects in the world of international politics and entertainment.³⁹ Numerous copies of the portrait, with the original (costing 38,400 rubles/\$1,280) exhibited at the art salon on Petrovka, overran offices and Moscow's largest bookstores. Unlike another, lesser known portrait of Putin that Safronov painted the same year, this one captured a formally attired, solemn-faced Putin in a classic ruler pose, elevated above the background of his dominion, visible from a window behind him: the Kremlin and the Moscow River, winding into the distance alongside the vast expanses that merge with the sky ("infinite Russia"). The preponderance of various shades of blue – in iconography, a color associated with tranquility – infuses the portrait with calm reassurance, which Russians in fact attributed to their leader. In other words, the portrait consolidates the image of Putin as confident and capable ruler of a huge realm.

If this rendition simultaneously conveys the salient features of self-restraint and power associated with the president, Safronov's many other portraits of Putin sooner showcase the artist's fawning flights of fancy. Following the current fashion for recasting a sitter as a notable figure from the past,⁴⁰ Safronov variously reincarnated VVP as Napoleon on a rearing steed, with uplifted hand pointing, presumably, to the field of battle; as merchant (links with capitalism), cardinal (religious orthodoxy), youthful prince (imperial but romantic leader), and the sixteenth century monarch Francis I, generous benefactor of the arts (Fleishman 2007a). Finally, Safronov's Cubist Putin implies the latter's modern/ist credentials as reformer, patron of culture, and so forth. As any visitor to Moscow can verify, portraits of Putin invade any and all spaces (Figure 1.9).

Analogies with historical rulers of empires likewise clearly operated in several sculptures of Putin, less obviously in that by St. Petersburg's Aleksandr Palmin, who declared that his bronze 10-inch Putin was not a memorial, but "a tribute" to "a historic figure" (Traynor 2001), than in a bust costing 22,032 rubles/\$734 at the Salon on Varvarka gallery, modeled on ancient sculptures of Roman emperors – moreover, in ancient ceremonial garb. And when not incarnating state power, VVP appeared in the "uniform" of a judo master, as in Tsereteli's huge bronze statue (2004) and in a doctored photograph, hawked on the Old Arbat for 150 rubles/\$5, of a stern Putin in a clinch with a faceless opponent – presumably alluding to VVP's readiness to "take anyone on." The 2008 DVD *Let's Learn Judo with Vladimir Putin*, as well as his "heroic" rescue of a television crew from an escaped Siberian tiger (Faulconbridge 2008), has "enhanced his macho image" (Walker 2008), emphasized by the camouflage and desert boots Putin sported in the taiga while performing his publicized "rescue" (Faulconbridge 2008).



Figure 1.9 The face that launched a thousand sighs and schemes. A pen, a pencil, or a president – numerous official portraits as part of essential “Office Supplies” displayed in a Moscow bookstore, June 5, 2006.

Source: Courtesy of Vladimir Menkov on Wikimedia Commons.

More ambiguous, though a Kremlin best-seller, was the 2001 calendar by Dmitrii Vrubel and Viktoriia Timofeeva *Dvenadtsat' nastroenii prezidenta* [The President's Twelve Moods], which bordered on caricature, made no effort to idealize Putin's face, and even captured a pouty, sullen VVP with huge, protruding lips. Similarly, the couple's *Putin i chernyi kvadrat* [Putin and Black Square] (2002) depicted Putin in a deliberately crude light evoking a huckster or thug in an ill-fitting suit beneath one of the most enigmatic paintings by arguably the foremost representative of the Russian avant-garde.⁴¹ And an unusual caricature on sale for 500 rubles/\$17 on the Old Arbat condensed a fascinating complex of ominous references: Putin's lower body and ears are those of a dragon or serpent, *à la* Russian fairy-tale illustrations and iconography depicting the enemy in World War I and II; the truncated middle part of his body evokes typical folkloric images of Koshchei Bessmertnyi, who repeatedly seizes defenseless women and incarcerates them; on his head Putin wears the historical *Shapka Monomakha* that was recreated for his fiftieth birthday. While the woman gripped in his right fist probably alludes to Putin's masculinist reign and stranglehold on the country, the newspaper crumpled in his left suggests the media censorship characterizing his years in office (Figure 1.10). This far from flattering depiction challenges the homogenizing idealization of canonical Putin portraits.



Figure 1.10 An impudent caricature of Putin's wriggly power, sold on the Old Arbat in the early 2000s.

Source: Photo by Helena Goscilo.

Equally irreverent images focused on Putin's omnipotent ubiquity, satirizing the perceived conviction that "everything is Putin" and "Putin is our all." Thus in the series of witty caricatures titled *Putin Birthday Greetings* issued by polit. ru on October 7, 2004, which include VVP as Superman and medieval despot, one "greeting" features comprehensive putination in a domestic setting: Putin sits at a table reading the book *Putin*, while his dog Connie/Koni, the king and queen on the chessboard, the cactus, and the goldfish in a bowl all have VVP's face (Elkin repet., [Figure 1.11](#)). Though realized in another medium, the same concept animates another series: the four photographs collected under the rubric *Rebiata s nashego dvora* [Kids from our Block] (2004) by the subversive, hilariously parodic duo of Viacheslav Mizin and Aleksandr Shaburov, known as Sinie Nosy [Blue Noses] ([Figure 1.12](#)). A typical Soviet group photograph of youths united solely by living on the same street is transformed into a series of casually dressed, close-knit male bodies, each topped by Putin's face. Exposing the political edge of the visuals, the subtitle reads "Bezlikie rossiianie v maskakh prezidenta RF Putina, ktoromu oni investirovali svoe doverie" [Common⁴² Russians in masks of President Putin, whom they have invested with their trust] (Sinie Nosy 2006: 160–161). Likewise criticizing unthinking glorification of Putin and other cultural icons, a kitschy, colorful, highly controversial "montage" titled *Gori-gori moia svecha*,⁴³ produced by Blue Noses the same year, bears the subtitle "Tri glavnykh polozhitel'nykh geroia rossiiskoi gosudarstvennoi mifologii – poet Pushkin, Iisus Khristos i prezident RF Putin – ne daiut pogasnut' sveche russkoi dukhovnosti"⁴⁴ (Sinie Nosy 2006: 16–17) and depicts a haloed Christ holding a lit candle, flanked by a T-shirted Pushkin with a cigarette lighter and Putin in a bright red T-shirt warming his hand at the candle's flame ([Figure 1.13](#)).⁴⁵ Indeed, VVP's sacred status, like Pushkin's and Christ's, is protected by the powers that be in Russia, and those criticizing him, religion, and specifically Russian culture do so at their own considerable risk.



Figure 1.11 Sergei Elkin's marvelously sardonic take on Putin's voracious omnipresence.

Source: Courtesy of Sergei Elkin.

The painter Aleksandr Shednov, known as Shurik, learned as much when he attempted to beam a portrait of Putin onto the main administrative building in his home town of Voronezh on June 12, 2009 – Russian Independence Day. Charged with inappropriate behavior after his arrest and interrogation by the FSB, Shednov acknowledged that the portrait constituted a protest against Putin's return to the Kremlin for a third presidential term. Posted on the Internet, the image consists of Putin's face superimposed on the body of a woman with long, dark hair, in a tight, low-cut dress, huge hoop earrings in her ears, her coquettish pose matching the coyness of the words in the upper left corner supposedly spoken by him or her: "... oi, nu ia dazhe ne znaiu... tretii prezidentskii?... nu eto uzh slishkom, khotia Bog liubit 'Troitsy'" (Stewart 2009).⁴⁶ Shednov's aesthetic in this instance coincided with that of Blue Noses.



Figure 1.12 All are Putin, having submitted to the cult and united in shared idolatry, as envisioned by the Blue Noses duo in the series *Rebiata s nashego dvora* [Kids from Our Block], 2004.

Source: Courtesy of Aleksandr Shaburov of Blue Noses.



Figure 1.13 The sacred trinity of contemporary Russian culture, in a multi-media work by the irrepressible Blue Noses, titled *Gori-gori, moia svecha* [Keep on Burning, My Life-Candle], 2004.

Source: Courtesy of Aleksandr Shaburov of Blue Noses.

Like most works by Blue Noses, those portraying Putin ironize dogma and cultural conventions; their incendiary potential accounts for protests by conservative groups and for the artists' consequent reputation as hooligans. Reactions to Blue Noses' polemical depictions of VVP peaked in 2006, when Russian customs officials at Sheremet'ev Airport confiscated, among other items, their series of photographs titled *Maski-shou* [Mask show] (2000) being exported for a gallery exhibit in London. Collating images of Bin Laden, Bush, and Putin in underwear cavorting on a couch, the works elicited outrage at their "derogatory manner" of portraying "heads of state." The widely reported incident paralleled the scandal around Vladimir Sorokin's novel *Goluboe salo* [Blue lard]⁴⁷ and leaves no doubts that Russian airport officials, though hardly affronted by the trivialization of Bin Laden and Bush, were outraged by a less than respectful concept of their Leader.

Similarly, the incisive, tongue-in-cheek images by Sergei Elkin, an inspired cartoonist associated with polit.ru, epigrammatically debunk the specifics of Putin's self-presentation, exposing Putin's promotional stratagems and situating him in a political Imaginary or Wonderland. In their entirety, Elkin's wide-ranging Putin-cartoons create a satirical, illustrated map of Putin's career and aspirations, as well as the populace's perceptions of, and responses to, that unfolding melodrama. Only the Internet allows for such an "anti-genuflectional" stance, accessible at illustrator.livejournal.com.

In January 2009, Putin turned the tables on his "representers" by assuming the role of artist and submitting his (doctored) painting to a charity auction of art works by celebrities in his home town. Now in its third year, the auction featured as its theme a story by Nikolai Gogol intended to mark the bicentennial of the writer's birth, and required that each painting represent each letter of the Russian alphabet. Putin's simple watercolor of a window with red-patterned curtains, titled *Uzor* [Pattern], "will go for the most," predicted Nadezhda Anfalova, chief artist at the auction, "The buyers look at the name" (O'Flynn 2009). Indeed, at the auction in the Grand Hotel Europe that followed the exhibit, the painting, allegedly executed in 20 minutes and "filled in" by a professional artist, sold for the equivalent of \$1.15 million, making it "the most expensive painting sold in Russia" ("Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's sketch sells for \$1.15 million at auction" 2009). Natal'ia Kurnikova, owner of Moscow's Our Artists art gallery, admitted that she purchased it for its uniqueness, "This

picture shows an interesting side of a prominent personality. Maybe it will be the first and the last picture of its kind” (Titova 2009). Clearly, the glamorous Putin brand still sells and rules.

The most striking aspect of the Putiniana generated during the 2000s, however, is neither its obsequiousness nor its iconoclasm – or even its ludic nature, but the sheer wealth and diversity of Putin images, many of them as “managed” as the “democracy” during his presidency. Proliferating at an accelerated rate as the decade wore on, these museum holdings of Putiniana catapulted him from the realm of history to that of myth. Mining his reputation for unique charisma, as high-powered self-nominated prime minister he has continued to build on his mythological status through media performances, spotlighted participation in photo-op events, and high-profile meetings (“high” being singularly appropriate for the chief advocate of the “power vertical”). In May 2011, sundry postings on YouTube captured Putin’s debut as the Russian Fats Domino of the post-Soviet era as, at a charity event in St. Petersburg attended by several Hollywood stars, Putin crooned the popular Fats Domino hit *Blueberry Hill* in heavily accented English after picking out the notes on the piano. The performance evoked a storm of applause.

Where can Putin as adulated leader, savior of the nation, sportsman, martial arts expert, charity supporter, painter, and singer go from here? One obvious answer is – to the 2012 presidential election as its most popular “star” candidate. His formation of the new All-Russia People’s Front, “with 400,000 members and massive resources” (Roth 2011), suggests preliminary preparation for the ‘obvious’ as the career move of choice. With recent defections from the United Russia party and a drop in its approval rating to 53 percent in April 2011 and 51 percent in November,⁴⁸ his attempt to create a broad coalition of supporters through the Front has led journalists, political analysts, and scholars such as sociologist Ol’ga Khrystanovska to speculate about the initiative as a “signal of returning” – or, more precisely, a bid to reprise his former post (Meyer and Arkhipov 2011). Shurik, in other words, was prescient in discerning a third (term). It seems highly unlikely that any other candidate would present a threat to Putin’s re-election, for Putin’s own rating currently holds steady at 61 percent, which doubtless is why the newly constituted Front, according to his press secretary, Dmitrii Peskov, will operate “above the party” and “will be based around Putin, who came up with the idea” (Meyer and Arkhipov). Putin, in other words, looms as the top presidential candidate of two parties, in the spirit of excess that characterizes celebrity. The perceived need for this safety net, nonetheless, suggests that not even the Putin brand and the mythology inseparable from it suffice to guarantee the future.

Notes

¹ Cited in Osipovich (2004).

² Cited in Traynor (2001). Ivchenko is a sculptor in St. Petersburg.

³ The epigraph is from the blog appended to “Tainstvennaia....”

⁴ Simon Osborne, “We love Putin: Meet the Russian president’s teenage fan club.” *The Independent* (July 21, 2007).

⁵ My gratitude to Serguei Oushakine for generously sharing numerous Putin visuals with me over the years. A short, preliminary version of this chapter appeared in Russian as “VVP kak *objet d’art*,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* [62] 6 (2008). [Online]. Available at: <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2008/6/go8-pr.html> (accessed December 27, 2009) and a more recent version in Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov, eds. *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic*, London: Routledge, 2011. 29–55.

⁶ BBC correspondent Steven Eke (2008) has speculated that Putin’s appointment of two former Kremlin aides “suggests he wants to strengthen his powers at the expense of the new presidency.” Putin’s live 3-hour question-and-answer session on December 4, 2008, which continued the tradition of his call-in show as president, suggested that he is “the man Russians should

look to in tough times,” particularly since Medvedev has not orchestrated such exchanges with the public. Asked during the show what he loved most, Putin, predictably, answered, “Russia” (Isachenkov 2008b).

7 Sculptor Zurab Tsereteli and artist Takhir Salakhov, as, respectively, President and Vice President of the Russian Academy of Art, and Nikita Mikhalkov as President of the Russian Cultural Foundation, trailed by Albert Charkin, Rector of the Repin St. Petersburg State Academic Institute of Art, Sculpture, and Architecture. The institute falls under the authority of the Academy of Fine Arts, headed by Zurab Tsereteli.

8 The letter, published in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, prompted an instant disclaimer from those it purported to represent; 775 cultural “workers,” led by Marietta Chudakova, sent their own appeal to Putin, criticizing the foursome’s letter, “Takoe obrashchenie brosaet ten’ ne tol’ko na tekhn, kto ego podpisal, no i na Vas kak prezidenta, za gody pravleniia kotorogo vosstanovilis’, k sozhaleniiu, mnogie proiavleniia stol’ kharakternogo dlia sovetskikh vremen kul’ta liubogo kremlevskogo vlastitelia” [Such an appeal casts a shadow not only on those who signed it, but also on you as President, in the course of whose rule, unfortunately, have appeared many signs of the cult of any and all Kremlin rulers so characteristic of Soviet times] (Chudakova *et al.* 2007).

9 Stephen White and Ian McAllister cover some of the same terrain and rely on many of the same sources, but only up to 2003 (White and McAllister 2003).

10 Bransten (2002), citing a report in *Pravda*.

11 Under Putin, the FSB has enjoyed enormous power, unhindered in its coercive, intimidating, and obstructionist activities, such as raiding offices of media and businesses, threatening voters, denying access to security archives, and so forth. See the series of articles in *The New York Times* punningly titled “Kremlin Rules” by Clifford J. Levy (Levy 2008a, 2008b).

12 In fact, in 2003 Putin presented Viacheslav Tikhonov, who played the cool-headed Soviet double agent (Stirlitz) operating in Nazi Germany during World War II in the TV series *Semnadtsat’ mgnovenii vesny* [Seventeen Moments of Spring] (1973) with the Order of Service to the State, third degree, commending the actor for having shaped an entire generation of Soviet youth. The recent parody of *Semnadtsat’...* by Marius Balthans/Weisberg, titled *Gitler Kaput!* (2008), reportedly prompted Communists in St. Petersburg to request that the Ministry of Culture prevent the film from opening in theaters, but without success (Barry 2008).

13 The extent to which the Kremlin orchestrated the Putin cult is impossible to determine.

14 According to several sources, rumors – a mainstay of Moscow life and journalism – indicate that the song was generated by Kremlin propaganda, for no stores carried the record, radio stations were ignorant of its provenance, and a promoter of Singing Together (a faceless duo until the song caught on) is a press secretary at the Russian Supreme Court (The Putin Cult 2007).

15 Printed in 1,000 copies, the calendar apparently became the most sought-after Christmas gift in the Kremlin that year. The husband-and-wife team of Dmitrii Vrubel’ and Viktoriia Timofeeva used photographs to produce Putin’s face, varying in mood according to the month. The President’s office reportedly bought the original of the calendar’s cover (Owen 2001) and an exhibition titled *Putin’s Twelve Moods* was arranged in downtown Moscow (Sidlin 2001). Capitalizing on his widely advertised reputation as a martial arts expert, in 2008 Putin released an instructional judo DVD, *Let’s Learn Judo with Vladimir Putin*, which indubitably bolstered his public persona of intrepid “fighter” endowed with rigor and self-control. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/07/russia1> (accessed August 23, 2009).

16 *Ot pervogo litsa* [First Person] (2000), Putin’s quasi-(auto)biography in interviews, also came out in a sizable run; a biography (2003) printed in 200,000 copies by the Lanrusinvest holding company was distributed by the publishers for free to the Russian public (BBC Monitoring; NTV). Among the ever-increasing Russian volumes devoted to VVP are Roi Medvedev’s *Vladimir Putin: Chetyre goda v Kremle* [Vladimir Putin: Four Years in the Kremlin] and the collection titled *Chetyre goda s Putinyim* [Four Years with Putin], both issued by Vremia publishers in 2004. See also the irreverent three-volume collection of reports by the Kremlin correspondent Andrei Kolesnikov, *Ia Putina videl!* [I’ve Seen Putin!], *Uvidel’s Putina i umeret’* [See Putin and Die], and *Menia Putin videl!* [Putin’s Seen Me!] (Moscow: EKSMO 2005), the first and last titles unambiguously evoking the syrupy socialist realist painting by Dmitrii Mochal’skii, *Oni videli Stalina* [They’ve Seen Stalin 1949] of schoolchildren and adults beatified through having laid eyes on the post-war, hence deified Stalin.

17 The site, with its URL signaling Putin’s Soviet-era allegiances, still exists, its owner now Prime Minister instead of President. It contains photos of a physically active Putin (occasionally topless), a family photo album, and two shots of his Labrador, Koni, who figured in ads for his second presidential campaign.

18 This scenario recalls the public image of Stalin, whom propaganda portrayed as tirelessly working in the Kremlin, even at night, on behalf of the people of the USSR. See, for example, the poster by V. Govorkov’s *O kazhdom iz nas zabotitsia Stalin v Kremle* [Stalin in the Kremlin Is Concerned about Each of Us] (1940). Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn ridicules this image in the eighteenth chapter of *V krughe pervom* [The First Circle].

19 Astute enough to realize that popularity increases power, Putin reportedly monitored his public image on television on a daily basis and was adept at using the media, especially television, to foster his persona of a self-confident and reliable national leader. Manifestly, he was far from indifferent to Russians’ perception of him.

20 In a highly critical item on Putin, Albats referred to that presidential election as a contest “between those who love Putin more than life and those who love him not quite that much” (Albats 2003).

21 According to Marshall Goldman, “Russian state control over energy assets rose from 10 percent in 2000 to 50 percent in 2007” (Goldman 2008).

22 Defectors from the United Party include its former glamorous pinup, the ballerina Anastasiia Volochkova. See “Vladimir

Putin's poster girl, Anastasia Volochkova, dances out of party," (2011) *Bucharest Herald*, 5 February. Available at: <http://www.bucharestherald.ro/worldnews/43-worldnews/19527-vladimir-putins-poster-girl-anastasia-volochkova-dances-out-of-party> (accessed Feb 15, 2011). Also see Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov's, "Russian celebrities at home and abroad: united under Putin, March 2011," (2011) *Celebrity Studies* 2, 2 (July): 190–194.

23 For the historical and symbolic significance of the crown, see Kollmann (2008).

24 The estimated percentage differs, depending on the source: for example, Glasser cites 25 percent; Kasparov, 50 percent. According to Ol'ga Kryzhtanovskaia, Russia's premier specialist in scholarly study of the elite, during Putin's tenure, military officers and the FSB (formerly KGB) leadership have accumulated substantial wealth, including shares of ownership in Russia's biggest companies (reported in LeVine 2008: 5). Yet it would be simplistic to make automatic assumptions about the reasons behind Putin's choices in personnel, for, as Lilia Shevtsova contends, he "chose his team, not on the basis of professional allegiances or ideological or political affiliation, but simply because these were the people he knew" (2007: 44).

25 The words uncannily recall George Bush's gushing confession of having looked into Putin's eyes and recognized his inner worth.

26 Avi Abrams is the founder and editor of Dark Roasted Blend, a site teeming with irreverent images and much more.

27 Other developments under Putin susceptible to such an interpretation include the rise of the FSB, the elimination of a free/alternate media, Putin's iterated emphasis on the need for a strong, nationalistic Russia, the reprisal of the Soviet national anthem and classes devoted to military strategy at schools, and the policy introduced several years ago of paying neighbors to spy and report on one another.

28 In fact, it is surprising that Tsereteli has not followed the example of Evgenii Vutetich, whose colossal monument of Stalin was completed in 1952.

29 Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIPCAI55JCc> (accessed October 13, 2008). The numerous Putin videos on YouTube include "Putin 'the legend,'" "Terminator 2 (Putin)," and a rich assortment of often hilarious parodies.

30 The perceived resemblance between Putin and the elf from the film *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* triggered an impassioned protest from Putin's staunch defenders, who felt offended by what they denounced as a vulgar attempt to trivialize a "world leader." In fact, a Moscow law firm reportedly planned to sue the makers of the film. See Karush (2003) and Smith (2003), who reported that in a BBC poll more than 7,000 stated that Dobby looked like Putin and the sly illustration by Aleksei Merinov in *Putinki* (2004: 70).

31 Emphasis added. For a translation of the entire song, see Leeds (2002). "My guy got into some bad deal again, got into a fight, snorted some junk. / I've had it with him, I kicked him out, and now I want someone like Putin! [Refrain:] Someone like Putin, who's really strong, someone like Putin, who *won't* drink, / Someone like Putin, who *won't* do me wrong, someone like Putin, who *won't* run off."

32 See <http://www.badnameofrussia.ru> (accessed January 17, 2009).

33 See <http://www.badnameofrussia.ru/Putin-Vladimir.html#comments> (accessed Jan 17, 2009). What motivated those who established the web site (congratulated for their "daring" [smelost'] by several bloggers) and whether the numbers genuinely reflect visitors' responses is uncertain, but there can be no doubt that such a phenomenon could not appear in print, on television, or on the radio.

34 "Davaite otpravim pesniu 'Nash durdom golosuet za Putina' na Evrovidenie," (2011) *ura.ru*, 20 October. Available at: <http://www.ura.ru/articles/1036257210.html> (accessed October 31, 2011).

35 A firm advocate of new technology, Medvedev uses the Internet extensively, but not for self-promotion.

36 Ol'ga Kryzhtanovskaia noted, in the dispassionate tone that is her trademark, "Putin is accused of lacking an ideology, but ordinary citizens themselves do not have any." Quoting a politician who claimed "Putin is neither red nor blue [...]. He is colorless," she contended, "That is what so many Russians like about the president" (Kryzhtanovskaia 2003).

37 The verses about Tolstoy run as follows, "Graf Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi, / Pisatel' dvorianskogo klassa, / Khodil po derevne bosoi, / Ne kushal ni rybu ni miasa. / Zhena ego, Sofia Tolstaia, / Naprotiv, liubila poest'. / Ona ne khodila bosaia, / Khranila d'vorianskuiu chest'. / I plakal velikii pisatel' / I kushal varenii oves, / I roman ego *Voskresenie* / Chitat' nevozmozhno bez slez. / Ego inui knigu pro Annu / Ty na noch' ee ne chitai. / Ot zhizni takoi, ot paskudnoi/Popala ona pod tramvai," etc. My thanks to Nadezhda Azhgikhina and the group of women journalists who recited these verses for me many years ago.

38 Conversion into dollars of all prices in rubles reflect the exchange rates at the time of the relevant works' appearance on the market.

39 Safronov's flattering portraits include those of Yuri Luzhkov, Alla Pugacheva, and Nikita Mikhalkov (who on Safronov's web site lauds the artist's Talent [*sic*]), many foreign heads of state, as well as George Clooney, Clint Eastwood, Mick Jagger, Sophia Loren, and Madonna.

40 See the various photo exhibits of Vladislav Mamyshev, known as Vlad Monroe, and the *Private Collection* of Ekateriana Rozhdestvenskaia, as well as the Polish Michał Pasich's *Pejzaż z portretami* [Landscape with Portraits] (Kraków: The Czartoryski Museum, Conspero Foundation, 2006) and the American Eve Sussman's *89 Seconds at Alcatraz* (2004), inspired by Diego Velázquez' *Las Meninas*.

41 White and McAllister report that Putin had been called "a dark horse," "an unidentified object," and "a Malevich black square" (2003: 386).

⁴² *Bezlikie* would be bettered translated as “faceless” or “anonymous.”

⁴³ Translated as *The Candle of Our Life* (Blue Noses/Sinie Nosy 2006: 16), the title literally means *Go On Burning, My Life-Candle*.

⁴⁴ The three main positive heroes of Russian state mythology – the poet Pushkin, Jesus Christ, and President Putin – will never let the candle of the Russian spirit go out (English text edited for accuracy and idiomatic usage).

⁴⁵ Part of the first Russian Biennale, this work was included in a criminal complaint against Marat Guelmen, the gallery owner who regularly exhibits their works, as well as that of their “mentor,” Oleg Kulik, who is perceived by some as the “ultimate agent provocateur” (FitzGerald 2006a, 2006b).

⁴⁶ Oh, well, I don’t know... a third presidential term?... well, that’s a bit much, though God does love the “Trinity”/three’s lucky.

⁴⁷ The gallerist Marat Guelman, a former political consultant for both Yeltsin and Putin, has been attacked verbally and physically for exhibiting what may be interpreted as contemporary anti-religious and anti-establishment art.

⁴⁸ The first rating nonetheless still topped Medvedev’s, which had dropped to 46Percent. Those polled numbered 3,000 (Meyer and Arkhipov). The more recent rating of 51Percent was reported by the independent Levada polling center, which also listed Putin’s popularity at 61Percent (Barry 2011).

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