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How Vladimir Putin's Divorce Story Was Constructed and Received, or When the President Divorced His Wife and Married the Country Instead

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A politician's political and personal selves have been in the spotlight of academic scholarship for hundreds of years, but only in recent years has a political 'persona' obtained new modes of mediation via networked media. New advancements in politics, technology, and media brought challenges to the traditional politics and personal self-representation of major leaders. Vladimir Putin's divorce announcement in June 2013, posed a new challenge for his political self-mediation. A rather reserved leader (Loshak), he nonetheless broadcast his personal news to the large audience and made it in a very peculiar way, causing the media professionals and public to draw parallels with Soviet-era mediated politics and thereby evoke collective memories. This paper studies how Vladimir Putin's divorce announcement was constructed and presented and also what response and opinion threads—satirical and humorous, ignorant and informed feedback—it achieved via media professionals and the general Twitter audience. Finally, this study aims to evaluate how Vladimir Putin's political 'persona' was represented and perceived via these mixed channels of communication.

According to classic studies of mediated political persona (Braudy; Meyrowitz; Corner), any public activity of a political persona is considered a part of their political performance. The history of political marketing can be traced back to ancient times, but it developed through the works of Renaissance and Medieval thinkers. Of particular prominence is Machiavelli's *The Prince* with its famous "It is unnecessary for the prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them" (cited in Corner 68). All those centuries-built developments and patterns of political self-representation have now taken on new forms as a result of the development of media industry and technology. Russian mediated politics has seen various examples of new ways of self-representation exercised by major politicians in the 2010s. For instance, former president Dmitry Medvedev was known as the "president with an iPad" (Pronina), as he was advocating technology and using social networks in order to seem more approachable and appear to be responsive to collecting feedback from the nation. Traditional media constantly highlighted Medvedev's keen interest in Facebook and Twitter, which resulted in a growing public assumption that this new modern approach to self-representation may signify a new approach to governance (see Asmolov).

Goffman's classic study of the distinction between public and private life helps in linking political persona to celebrity persona. In his view the political presentation of self differs from the one in popular culture because politicians as opposed to entertainers have to conform to a set of ideals, projections, social stereotypes and cultural/national archetypes for their audience of voters (Goffman; Corner). A politician's public persona has to be constantly reaffirming and proving the *values* he or she is promoting through their campaigns. Mediations of a political personhood can be projected in three main modes: visual, vocal, and kinetic (Ong; Mayhew; Corner). Visual representation follows the iconic paintings and photography in displaying the

position, attitude, and associative contexts related to that. Vocal representation covers both content and format of a political speech, it is not only the articulated message, but also more important the persona speaking. Ong describes this close relation of the political and personal along with the interrelation of the message and the medium as "secondary orality"—voice, tone and volume make the difference. The third mode is kinetic representation and means the political persona in action and interaction. Overlapping of different strategies and structures of political self-representation fortifies the notion of performativity (Corner and Pels) in politics that becomes a core feature of the multidimensional representation of a mediated political self.

The advancement of electronic media and interactive platforms has influenced political communication and set the new standard for the convergence of the political and personal life of a politician. On its own, the President Clinton/Monica Lewinsky affair raised the level of public awareness of the politician's private life. It also allowed for widely distributed, contested, and mediated judgments of a politician's personal actions. Lawrence and Bennett in their study of Lewinsky case's academic and public response state that although the majority of American citizens did not expect the president to be the moral leader, they expressed ambivalence in their rendition of the importance of "moral leadership" by big politicians (438). The President Clinton/Lewinsky case adds a new dimension to Goffman and Corner's respective discussions on the significance of values in the political persona self-representation. This case proves that values can not only be reinforced by one's public persona, but those values can be (re)constructed by the press or public opinion. Values are becoming a contested trait in the contemporary mediated political persona. This view can be supported by Dmitry Medvedev's case: although modern technology was known as his personal passion, it was publicised only with reference to his role as a public politician and specifically when Medvedev appeared with an iPad talking about modernisation at major meetings (Pronina).

However, one can argue that one's charisma can affect the impact of values in public self-representation of the politician. In addition, social networks add a new dimension to personified publicity. From Barack Obama's 'Yes We Can' networked campaign in 2008 and through many more recent examples, we are witnessing the continuing process of the personalisation of politics (Corner and Pels). From one point of view, audiences tend to have more interest and sympathy in political individuals and their lifestyles rather than political parties and their programmes (Lawrence and Bennett; Corner and Pels). It should be noted that the interest towards political individuals does not fall apart from the historical logics of politics; it is only mediated in a new way. Max Weber's notion of "leadership democracy" proves that political strategy is best distributed through the charismatic leadership imposing his will on the audience. This view can be strengthened by Le Bon's concept of emotive connection of the leader and his crowd, and Adorno's writings on the authoritarian personality also highlight the significance of the leader's own natural and mediated persona in politics. What is new is the channels of mediation—modern audiences' access to a politician's private life is facilitated by new forms of media interactivity (Corner and Pels). This recent development calls for the new understanding of "persona" in politics. On one hand, the borderline between private and public becomes blurred and we are more exposed to the private self of a leader, but on the other hand, those politicians aware of new media literacy can create new structures of proximity and distance and construct a separate "persona" online, using digital media for their benefit (Corner and Pels).

Russian official politics has developed a cautious attitude towards social networks in the post-Medvedev era - currently, President Vladimir Putin is not known for using social networks personally and transmits his views via his spokesperson. However, his personal charisma makes him overly present in digital media - through the images and texts shared both by his supporters and rivals. As opposed to Medvedev's widely publicised "modernisation president" representation, Putin's persona breaks the boundaries of limited traditional publicity and makes him recognised not only for his political activity, but looks, controversial expression, attitude to employees, and even personal life. That brings us back to Goffman, Corner and Lawrence and Bennett's discussions on the interrelation of political values and personal traits in one's political self-representation, making it evident that one's strong personality can dominate over his political image and programme. Moreover, an assumption can be made that a politician's persona may be more powerful than the narrative suggested by the constructed self-representation and new connotations may arise on the crossroads of this interaction.

Russian President Divorce Announcement and Collective Memory

Vladimir Putin's divorce announcement was broadcast via traditional media on 6 June 2013 as a simple news story. The state broadcasting company *Vesti-24* sent a journalist Polina Yermolayeva from their news bulletin to cover Vladimir Putin and Lyudmila Putin's visit to a ballet production, *Esmeralda*, at the state Kremlin theatre. The news anchor's introduction to the interview was ordinarily written and had no hints of the upcoming sensation. After the first couple and the journalist had discussed their opinion of the ballet ("beautiful music," "flawless and light moves"), the reporter Yermolayeva suddenly asked: "You and Lyudmila are rarely seen together in public. Rumour has it that you do not live together. It is true?" Vladimir Putin and his wife exchanged a number of rather pre-scripted speeches stating that the first couple was getting a divorce as the children had grown old enough, and they would still stay friends and wished each other the best of luck. The whole interview lasted 3:25 minutes and became a big surprise for the country (Loshak; Sobchak).

When applying the classification of three modes of political personhood (Corner; Ong) to Vladimir Putin's divorce announcement, it becomes evident that all three modes—visual, vocal, and kinetic—were used. Television audiences watched their president speak freely to the unknown reporter, explain details of his life in his own words so that body language also was visible and conveyed additional information. The visual self-representation harkens back to classic, Soviet-style announcements: Vladimir Putin and Lyudmila Putina are dressed in classic monochrome suit and costume with a skirt respectively. They pose in front of the rather dull yet somewhat golden decorations of the Kremlin Theatre Hall, the walls themselves reflecting the glory and fanfare of the Soviet leadership and architecture. Vladimir Putin and his wife both talk calmly while Lyudmila appears even more relaxed than her husband (Sobchak). Although the speech looks prepared in advance (Loshak), it uses colloquial expressions and is delivered with emotional pauses and voice changes.

However, close examination of not only the message but the medium of the divorce announcement reveals a vast number of intriguing symbols and parallels. First, although living in the era of digital media, Vladimir Putin chose to broadcast his personal news through a traditional television channel. Second, it was broadcast in a news programme making the breaking news of the president's divorce, paradoxically,

quite a mundane news event. Third, the semiotic construction of the divorce announcement bore a lot of connotations and synergies to the conservative, Soviet-style information distribution patterns. There are a few key symbols here that evoke collective memories: ballet, conservative political report on the government, and the stereotype of a patriarchal couple with a submissive wife (see Loshak; Rostovskiy). For example, since the *perestroika* of the 1990s, ballet has been widely perceived as a symbol of big political change and cause of public anxiety (Kachkaeva): this connotation was born in the 1990s when all channels were broadcasting *Swan Lake* round the clock while the White House was under attack. Holden reminds us that this practice was applied many times during major crises in Soviet history, thus creating a short link in the public subconscious of a ballet broadcast being symbolic of a political crisis or turmoil.

Vladimir Putin Divorce: Traditional and Social Media Reception

In the first day after the divorce announcement Russian Twitter generated 180,000 tweets about Vladimir Putin's divorce, and the hashtag #развод ("divorce") became very popular. For the analysis that follows, Putin divorce tweets were collected by two methods: retrieved from traditional media coverage of Twitter talk on Putin's divorce and from Twitter directly, using Topsy engine. Tweets were collected for one week, from the divorce announcement on 6 June to 13 June when the discussion declined and became repetitive. Data was collected using Snob.ru, Kommersant.ru, Forbes.ru, other media outlets and Topsy. The results were then combined and evaluated.

Some of those tweets provided a satirical commentary to the divorce news and can be classified as "memes." An "Internet meme" is a contagious message, a symbolic pattern of information spread online (Lankshear and Knobel; Shifman). Memes are viral texts that are shared online after being adjusted/alterd or developed on the way. Starting from 1976 when Richard Dawkins coined the term, memes have been under media scholarship scrutiny and the term has been widely contested in various sciences. In Internet research studies, memes are defined as "condensed images that stimulate visual, verbal, musical, or behavioral associations that people can easily imitate and transmit to others" (Pickrel, Jorgensen, and Bennett). The open character of memes makes them valuable tools for political discourse in a modern highly mediated environment.

Qualitative analysis of the most popular and widely shared tweets reveals several strong threads and themes round Putin's divorce discussion. According to Burzhskaya, many users created memes with jokes about the relationship between Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. For instance, "He should have tied up his relationship with Dmitry Anatolyevich long ago" or "So actually Medvedev is the case?" were among popular memes generated. Another collection of memework contained a comment that, according to the Russian legislation, Putin's ex-wife should get half of their wealth, in this case—half of the country. This thread was followed by the discussion whether the separation/border of her share of Russia should use the Ural Mountains as the borderline. Another group of Twitter users applied the Russian president's divorce announcement to other countries' politics. Thus one user wrote "Take Yanukovich to the ballet" implying that Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich (who was still a legitimate president in June 2013) should also be taken to the ballet to trigger changes in the political life in Ukraine. Twitter celebrity and well-known Russian actress and comedian Tatiana Lazareva wrote "In my opinion, it is a scam", punning

on the slang meaning of the word "razvod" ("divorce") in Russian that can also mean "fraud" or "con". Famous Russian journalist Dmitry Olshansky used his Twitter account to draw a historical parallel between Putin and other Russian and Soviet political leaders' marital life. He noted that such Russian leaders as Tsar Nikolay the Second and Mikhail Gorbachev who loved their wives and were known to be good husbands were not successful managers of the state. In contrast, lone rulers of Russia such as Joseph Stalin proved to be leaders who loved their country first and gained a lot of support from their electorate because of that lonely love. Popular print and online journalist Oleg Kashin picked up on that specific idea: he quoted Vladimir Putin's press secretary who explained that the president had declared that he would now spend more time working for the prosperity of the country.

Twitter users were exchanging not only 140 symbol texts but also satirical images and other visual memes based on the divorce announcement. Those who suggested that Vladimir Putin should have divorced the country instead portrayed Lyudmila Putina and Vladimir holding candles and wearing funereal black with various taglines discussing how the country would now be split. Other users contributed visual memes jamming the television show *Bachelor* imagery and font with Vladimir Putin's face and an announcement that the most desirable bachelor in the country is now its president. A similar idea was put into jammed images of the *Let's Get Married* television show using Vladimir Putin's face or name linked with a humorous comment that he could try those shows to find a new wife. One more thread of Twitter memes on Putin's divorce used the name of Alina Kabaeva, Olympic gymnast who is rumoured by the press to be in relationship with the leader (Daily Mail Reporter). She was mentioned in plenty of visual and textual memes. Probably, the most popular visual meme (Burzhskaya; Topsy) used the one-liner from a famous Soviet comedy *Ivan Vasylyevich Menyayet Professiyu*: it uses a joyful exclamation of an actress who learns that her love interest, a movie director, is leaving his wife so that the lovers can now fly to a resort together. Alina Kabaeva, the purported love interest of Putin, was jammed to be that actress as she announced the "triumphal" resort vacation plan to a girlfriend over the phone.

Vladimir Putin's 2013 divorce announcement presented new challenges for his personal and political self-representation and revealed new traits of the Russian president's interaction with the nation. As the news of Vladimir and Lyudmila Putin's divorce was broadcast via traditional media in a non-interactive television format, commentary on the event advanced only through the following week's media coverage and the massive activity on social networks. It has still to be examined whether Vladimir Putin's political advisors intentionally included many symbols of collective memory in the original and staid broadcast announcement. However, the response from traditional and social media shows that both Russian journalists and regular Twitter users were inclined to use humour and satire when discussing the personal life of a major political leader. Despite this appearance of an active counter-political sphere via social networks, the majority of tweets retrieved also revealed a certain level of respect towards Vladimir Putin's privacy as few popular jokes or memes were aggressive, offensive or humiliating. Most popular memes on Vladimir Putin's divorce linked this announcement to the political life of Russia, the political situation in other countries, and television shows and popular culture. Some of the memes, though, advanced the idea that Vladimir Putin should have divorced the country instead. The analysis also shows how a charismatic leader can affect or reconstruct the "values" he represents. In Vladimir Putin's divorce event, his personality is the main focus of discussion both by traditional and new media. However, he is not judged for his

personal choices as the online social media users provide rather mild commentary and jokes about them. The event and the subsequent online discourse, images and texts not only identify how Putin's politics have become personified, the research also uncovers how the audience/citizenry online often see the country as a "persona" as well. Some Internet users suggested Putin's marriage to the country; this mystified, if not mythologised view reinforces Vladimir Putin's personal and political charisma.

Conclusively, Vladimir Putin's divorce case study shows how political and private persona are being mediated and merged via mixed channels of communication. The ever-changing nature of the political leader portrayal in the mediated environment of the 2010s opens new challenges for further research on the modes and ways for political persona representation in modern Russia.

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