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THE UNEXPECTED ROMANCE.
VLADIMIR PUTIN AS THE EMBODIMENT
OF (THE CONSERVATIVE VERSION OF)
THE AMERICAN DREAM

[O]ur prissy elites spent the last decade and a half mocking Putin. He spent those years enriching his country, reviving its military, expanding its territory, extending its influence abroad – and humiliating the United States of America.¹

When reflecting upon the American relationship with Russia, the term *complicated* as used in social media might seem the most appropriate. That relationship has been, to a large extent, a focal point of US foreign policy since WWII. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and its leaders seemed to have been the central rule for the foreign policy discourse and action of the USA.² The policy of containment meant it was necessary for the USA to construct and maintain the position of power when establishing both the relationship with the *enemy*, and the image of the United States of America as the country of democracy and freedom. The American reality of the Cold War was, to a large extent, built on the *Us vs Them* opposition, where the in-group stood for the humane values of the modern world, freedom, democracy, individuality and the out-group – communism – for oppression, inhumane treatment of a country's citizens, authoritarian power and lack of respect for human rights.

¹ R. Peters, *Obama dismisses Putin, but Czar is getting better of us again and again*, <http://nypost.com/2016/04/23/obama-dismisses-putin-but-czar-is-getting-better-of-us-again-and-again/> (12.06.2016).

² T.M. Cole, *Avoiding the quagmire: Alternative rhetorical construction for the post-Cold War world*, "Rhetoric and Public Affairs" 1998, no. 2, p. 367–393.

According to Schatzman and Strauss³ power exhibits itself not only via the usage of discourse but as a force behind it. Thus, discourse is actually a direct manifestation of power. The symbolic elites, i.e. academics, journalists etc., and other people/social groups possessing the ability/aspiring to establish/enact social power, use the symbolic capital⁴. They are in power to set the agendas of public discourse, manage information, select and censor the arguments and create a hierarchy of importance in the realm of topics discussed, and to control the nature of rhetorical information. “Hence their symbolic power is a form of ideological power.”⁵ As the selection of appropriate/relevant values and the establishing of opposition towards the Others (Us versus Them) are fundamental when constructing ideologies which, in turn, organise, monitor, manage and control their followers’ attitudes and behaviors, especially the social opinions of the group’s members, and influence their personal cognition and the mental models⁶ they form. Models, i.e. mental representations of people’s experiences, both personal, such as events, actions or individual situations they take part in, and those they watch, hear or read about, are unique for every social actor. Thus, the very existence of the enemy is often indispensable for a given ideology, political party or organization to exist, and the mental model of that enemy constitutes an effective tool of exercising control.

During the Cold War, the dominant image of the USSR was that of containment of aggressive Soviet power attempting at spreading communism over the world. In the American media, the Soviet Union was constructed as the “evil empire” i.e. “the focus of evil in our time,”⁷ a “monolithic and ruthless conspiracy” committed to world domination.⁸ The mental representation of the Soviet Union and its government for an average American citizen would be that of “historical Soviet expansionism and zero-sum thinking about international politics [...] [and] Soviet Stalinist domestic institutions [using]

³ L. Schartzmann, A. Strauss, *Social Class and Modes of Communication*, in: S. Moscovici (ed.), *The Psychosociology of Language*, Markham, Chicago 1972, p. 206–221.

⁴ T. Van Dijk, *Power and the news media*, in: D. Paletz (ed.), *Political Communication and Action*, Cresskill, Hampton Press, New York 1995, p. 9–36.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ T. Van Dijk, *Structures of Discourse and Structures of Power*, 1989, [http://www.discourses.org/download/articles/\(06.06.2016\)](http://www.discourses.org/download/articles/(06.06.2016)).

⁷ T. Paterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat*, Oxford, New York 1988.

⁸ Ibid.

their militant ideology”⁹ to destroy and control the world. After the end of the Cold War, the sharp feeling (and very often consciousness) of the Russian civilizational alienation from the West, its otherness, when combined with the fact that the USA had lost one of its most important enemies (which meant a loss of one of the organizing principles of the country’s foreign policy¹⁰) resulted in a necessity for a new vocabulary and a different, perhaps softer, representation of Russia. While the post-Cold War times of the relationship between the two powers seemed to have improved, with the US media adopting Washington’s narrative that almost everything Gorbachov and Yeltsin were doing was presented and defined as a transition from communism to democracy, Putin’s presidency and policy resulted in constructing the image of the contemporary Russian president in the American media to a large extent consistent with that of Joseph Stalin, the infamous Soviet leader from the mid-1920s until his death, in fact effectively the dictator of the state, commanding an authority unprecedented since the death of Stalin in 1953,¹¹ a man “indifferent to democratic principles and practices, perhaps believing that Russia might have to sacrifice democracy in the short run to achieve *more important* economic and state building.”¹²

Thus, the overwhelmingly negative representation of Vladimir Putin in the mainstream American mass media is that of an anti-democrat working towards re-establishing the Soviet Union, or — at least — its power over other countries, a homophobe leading his country into a nationalistic state. As the construction of the enemy is inseparably connected with the concept of power and dominance, the latter being the indispensable tool of the administration of mental control, which, in turn, creates possibilities of managing the existing reality, it appears natural for the American media to elaborate on the profoundly negative image of the very existence of the ultimate enemy, *the Other* the United States of America and its values, similarly to Western Europe, need to be defended against. With the growing body of evidence finding that the media has real

⁹ J. Snyder, *International Security*, Harvard University, Cambridge 1978–79.

¹⁰ Y. G. Shemyakin, *The Dynamics of Perception of the Image of Russia in the Minds of Western Civilization*, “Social Sciences and Modern Times” 2009, no. 2, p. 19–20.

¹¹ B. Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, Chatham House Papers, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Oxford, Blackwell 2003, p. 2.

¹² M. McFaul, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, “Journal of Democracy” 2000, vol. 11, no. 3, p. 30.

political, economic and social consequences¹³ one might expect that this image of the Russian leader would be universal for the US media and citizens.

While the majority of mainstream media seem to defy and make fun of the reestablishment of a personality cult of the sort that had long been forgotten since the days of Brezhnev and to object to all the policies and decisions of the Russian President, the conservative part of the country appears enchanted with and jealous of the person they perceive as the strong, manly Russian leader capable of reestablishing the right world order. The American conservatives seem to have changed their agenda — and the represented world order. In the new version, it is no longer Vladimir Putin who is the ultimate enemy but he remains an indispensable part of the Conservative constitutive rhetoric. His new position and alternative image within the American media seems to stem from the deep pessimism about the country, its economy and morals, and the disappointment and the Republicans' hatred towards Barack Obama. The above-mentioned factors seem to contribute to the reestablishing of the opposition *Us vs. Them* but now it seems not to be the USA against its Soviet enemy — the Russian President is an honorable member of the in-group. Traditionalism and hostility to social innovation were central to Mannheim's sociological analysis of conservatism. Historically, conservatism as an ideology or a system of values and beliefs has embodied a number of phenomena, with the most important ones being the desire for order and stability, preference for gradual (if any at all) rather than revolutionary change, adherence to preexisting social norms, idealization of authority figures, punishment of LGBT representatives, and the consequent endorsement of social and economic inequality, especially concerning women's or minorities' rights.¹⁴

The constitutive rhetoric of the US conservatives, i.e. that of war, of a world where the good and honorable *we* must fight or, perhaps, defend *our* lives, homes and values against *them*, in tune with the political and social views of its supporters, creates a hostile version of reality in which the Party's existence is indispensable. Republican views concerning concepts such as family, tradition, the position of women, LGBT rights in the society and its structure, when viewed

¹³ D. McQuail, *McQuail's Communication Theory*, SAGE Publications Ltd, Washington DC 2010.

¹⁴ K. Mannheim, *Conservatism: A contribution to the sociology of knowledge*, trans. D. Kettler, V. Meja, N. Stehr, Routledge & Kegan Paul, New York 1986.

as rhetorical case studies, provide insight into specific formulae applied in order to express dissent against less conservative ideology and, by means of persuasion into action, to change (amend?) the existing world order.¹⁵ Republicans, via the media, often — consciously or not — attempt at creating ideographs which, triggering the desired reaction, would establish the vision in which the enemy is embodied by the representatives of the liberal world views. The leader of Russia becomes, in that context, a member of the in-group, one of *Us*, and, simultaneously, an ideograph used by the Conservative media to enhance their version of reality. “An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse.” It is a high-order abstraction that can “signify and contain unique ideological (collective) commitment”¹⁶, a one-term-sum of an orientation. Ideographs epitomise the normative, collective commitments of individuals or collective identities and fulfil their functions as the indispensable justifications or motivations for actions committed on behalf of the public. Ideographs as such do not possess disembodied fundamental meaning — there only exist countless uses of notions/concepts in texts and other discursive performances. It is, therefore, impossible to determine conclusively whether a given notion is an ideograph or not, as it appears that they are defined through their function. McGee described ideographs as “agencies of social control” and “agents of political consciousness”¹⁷ that do not use the classical conditioning and do not operate mechanically as individuals are conditioned to a vocabulary of concepts whose function is that of “guides, warrants, reasons or excuses for behaviour and belief.”

Ideographs are, then, those recurrent words, labels or expressions that guide and warrant behaviour and belief; a culture’s ideographs are its dominant “vocabulary of motives”; “[...] they are the terms we use to impart value, justify decisions, motivate behaviour, and debate policy initiatives.”¹⁸

In the world constructed by the conservatives, i.e. the one in which the country has lost its identity and moral values, embracing “abortion on demand, homosexual marriage, pornography, promiscuity

¹⁵ W. Eckhardt, *Authoritarianism*, “Political Psychology” 1991, no. 12, p. 97–121.

¹⁶ M. McGee, *The Ideograph: A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology*, “Quarterly Journal of Speech 66” 1980, p. 1–16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

and the whole panoply of Hollywood values”¹⁹, the politics and decisions of Putin seem to be consistent with those of the conservative part of American society, and he becomes a valuable part of the in-group. “Our grandparents would not recognize the America in which we live” — the statement by Patrick Buchanan, an American conservative political commentator, author, politician and broadcaster, a former advisor to U.S. Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan, and former conservative Presidential candidate, is an open expression of the conservatives’ dissent with the contemporary reality and an introduction to a world where Putin is the representative of American conservatives and the authority speaking on behalf of mankind: “While his stance as a defender of traditional values has drawn the mockery of Western media and cultural elites, Putin is not wrong in saying that he can speak for much of mankind.”²⁰ And while Buchanan constructs a reality in which the USA is divided: “We are two countries now,”²¹ and the world has changed, he invites his audience to reconsider their reality, presupposing they would share his observations and conclusions due to the persuasive nature of the images he presents and the audience’s ability to think and analyze on their own, thus establishing the bond between himself and the people on the basis of the traditional values they have lost and long for. For conservatives, Vladimir Putin seems to evoke the traditional values that used to contribute to the greatness of USA and now are lost to multiculturalism and other liberal disasters. The romanticized version of the Russian President is presented as a brand new — and upgraded — version of leadership the US does not have. As such, Putin becomes an embodiment of the new struggle — the horizontal one — with “conservatives and traditionalists in every country arrayed against the militant secularism of a multicultural and transnational elite.”²²

Putin’s position as the (important) part of the in-group evolves into a leader-position when he is juxtaposed with the contemporary American President Barack Obama who — with a combination of rhetoric of exposing and responsibility is defined as the enemy and

¹⁹ P.J. Buchanan, *Is Vladimir Putin a paleoconservative? In the culture war for mankind’s future, is he one of us?*, <http://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/patrick-j-buchanan/putin-one-of-us> (17.12.2015).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

to be proven — paradoxically — as a threat to the *true* American values and the country itself; someone dishonest and dangerous and at the same time inadequate, incapable of coping with reality, a weak person who fails even when he is supposed to present his political ideas²³ — someone who “saved and strengthened the Russian state”²⁴ and created a situation in which “Moscow appears to understand [the requirements of foreign policy] better than Washington.”²⁵ Lind — from the position of authority — not only expresses dissent with contemporary US politics when compared to those of Putin but also summons his fellow conservatives to join the *right* side in this fight consolidating the image of Putin as a part — or perhaps leader — of the in-group:

Blinded by their worship of the clay god “Democracy,” Washington elites cannot perceive the importance of what Putin did, but conservatives should. (...) The world has turned upside down. America, condemning and even attacking other countries to push “democracy” and Jacobinical definitions of human rights, is becoming the leader of the international Left. Russia is reasserting her historic role as leader of the international Right. This is a reversal of historic importance. American foreign policy should be based on America’s interests, not on affinity for any foreign power. But putting America first does not require being hostile to Russia or anyone else. On the contrary: American conservatives should welcome the resurgence of a conservative Russia.²⁶

And, at the same time, he summons them to learn from the great Russian leader how to oppose what conservative media define as “a bullying, interventionist America.” Nevertheless, for the rhetoric of the American conservative media, Putin is more than a foreign leader USA should admire and follow; he, simultaneously, becomes an ideograph of traditional values, wisdom, strength, consequence and fearlessness. Someone who, if not loved or liked, must be admired: “To me, he’s a genius [...]. I don’t like the guy one bit. But I have to respect his abilities”²⁷ and appreciated for his abilities to

²³ B. Avni, *Obama has turned Putin into the world’s most powerful leader*, <http://nypost.com/2015/09/29/obama-has-turned-putin-into-the-worlds-most-powerful-leaders> (26.04.2016).

²⁴ W.S. Lind, *Russia’s Right Turn*, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/russias-right-turn/> (11.02.2015).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ R. Peters, *Obama dismisses Putin, but Czar is getting better of us again and again*, <http://nypost.com/2016/04/23/obama-dismisses-putin-but-czar-is-getting-better-of-us-again-and-again/> (22.04.2016).

THE UNEXPECTED ROMANCE...

restore his country's pride, recreate its great power — just like Venice “hijacked the Fourth Crusade to sack Christian Constantinople, leaving Venice wealthy and empowered [...] Putin's power-plays won't end well for Europe, either. But, like medieval Venice, he's good at what he does”²⁸; the Russian leader serves as the ideograph used to enhance the conservative dissent and disappointment towards contemporary political reality in the United States of America. He, unlike American leaders, “knows his people”²⁹ and embodies the strong leader, “a tough-talking, tough-acting politician,”³⁰ unlike the American leader:

[...] Obama's — the perception of him and his potency across the world is one of such weakness. And you know, look, people are looking at Putin as one who wrestles bears and drills for oil. They look at our president as one who wears mom jeans and equivocates and bloviates. We are not exercising that peace through strength that only can be brought to you courtesy of the red, white and blue, that only a strengthened United States military can do.³¹

It seems difficult if not impossible to ascertain whether the evolution of the American conservatives' relationship with or, perhaps, the attitude towards the Russian President is reflected in their constitutive rhetoric or is it the other way around. Nevertheless, the contemporary USA conservative media's representation of Vladimir Putin seems neither to have little in common with the image of the Russian leader as presented in the mainstream media, nor to be influenced by the history and politics of the Cold War. The President of Russia, when a part of American conservative constitutive rhetoric seems defined by attributes such as strength, power, patriotism and tradition, is presented as someone who managed to redefine the *Us vs. Them* opposition within the USA into one in which American conservatives admire, and are jealous of, the Russian leader.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ M. Bennetts, *Russia's Vladimir Putin keeps Westerners guessing on his strategies, intentions. Strength quietly lifted former KGB yes-man to leader*, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/apr/13/russias-vladimir-putin-keeps-westerners-guessing-o/> (13.04.2015).

³¹ S. Palin, *Putin Wrestles Bears; Obama Wears Mom Jeans And Bloviates*, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2014/03/03/sarah_palin_putin_wrestles_bears_obama_wears_mom_jeans_and_bloviates.html (29.05.2016).

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NIEOCZEKIWANY ROMANS.
WŁADIMIR PUTIN JAKO UCIELEŚNIENIE
KONSERWATYWNEJ WERSJI AMERYKAŃSKIEGO SNU

Streszczenie

Niniejszy tekst jest próbą przybliżenia/opisania pozycji, jaką zajmuje Władimir Putin w retoryce amerykańskich konserwatystów. Sposób prezentacji wizerunku prezydenta Rosji w mediach konserwatywnych znacząco odbiega od innych mediów. W medialnym dyskursie republikańskim lider największego państwa świata pełni rolę kluczowego ideografu – niezbędnego dla utrzymania opozycji *my vs. oni*. Co ciekawe, nie uosabia on tam *wroga*, stanowi raczej pewien wzór władcy, bliski propagowanej przez republikańców koncepcji sprawowania władzy prezydenckiej.

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НЕОЖИДАННАЯ РОМАНТИКА.
ВЛАДИМИР ПУТИН КАК ВОПЛОЩЕНИЕ
(КОНСЕРВАТИВНЫЙ ВАРИАНТ) АМЕРИКАНСКОЙ МЕЧТЫ

Резюме

Настоящая статья представляет собой попытку приблизить/описать позицию, которую занимает Владимир Путин в риторике американских консерваторов. Изображение президента России в консервативных масс-медиа существенно отличается от образа, представленного в средствах массовой информации основного течения. В медийном дискурсе республиканский лидер крупнейшего в мире государства исполняет роль ключевого идеографа, необходимого для поддержания оппозиции *мы–они*. Примечательно то, что он не олицетворяет там врага, а скорее представляет собой образец правителя, близкого концепции осуществления президентской власти, пропагандируемой республиканцами.