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Cold And Distant Or Hearty And Human? The Visual Portrayal Of Vladimir Putin On Russian Television

ABSTRACT

Sharply dressed, smooth, and sporty—these are probably among the first attributes associated with the Russian president Vladimir Putin. This image is promoted by television which still remains a powerful medium in Russia. While the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014 initially led to an increase in the popularity of Putin, his approval rating has significantly fallen since the signing of pension reforms in autumn 2018. This could explain why in September 2018 a new talk show called *Moskva.Kremľ'.Putin*, which offers a synopsis of Putin's working week, began its broadcast. By analyzing the „new“ image of Putin portrayed in this show and comparing it with his visual presentation in the news program *Vremia* and the annual talk *Priamaia Linia s Vladimirom Putinym*, the following paper examines the visual portrayal of Putin transmitted on television. By focusing on the visual, the analysis reveals that the president's image, and the attributes assigned to him, are established and communicated mostly via the content and arrangement of (moving) pictures. Thus, the study suggests that visual communication on television significantly shapes and influences the perception of the Russian president. This work therefore contributes to a better understanding of television in general and of mass media communication in Russia in particular.

KEY WORDS

Visual communication. Vladimir Putin. Russian television. Talk show. Mass media. Visual images. Visual representations. Russian president.

1. Introduction

Television is one of the most powerful and influential forms of media in Russia. According to opinion polls, most Russians rely on television as their primary source of information.¹ The two dominant state-owned channels, *Pervyi kanal* (Channel One) and *Rossia-1* (Russia-1), are free of charge and based on the soviet transmission system, reaching more than 90% of Russia's inhabitants.² Therefore, it is unsurprising that President Vladimir Putin, after coming to power in the year 2000, took immediate steps to regain control over the then partly privatized television sector. The Kremlin's control over television not only influences the content of news from abroad and decisions of internal policy, it also concerns the content transmitted about the president and his visual portrayal. More precisely, it is Russian television that guides and selects the information the Russian public receives about the president, in turn shaping ideas and opinions of him. After the first attempts under his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin is the first Russian president to professionally use the media to portray a particular image of himself that advances his political agenda.

Despite the increased popularity of Putin after the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014, his approval rating has dropped significantly since signing pension reforms in October 2018.³ This might explain why a new talk show called *Moskva.Kremli'. Putin* started its broadcast in September 2018 on *Rossia-1*. It seems that the goal of this new TV show is to improve the image of the president by offering a favorable synopsis of Putin's working week and by providing insights into his leisure activities.⁴ The purpose of this article is to analyze the visual representations of Putin in this new talk show and to compare them with his visual presentation in two older and established TV formats: the daily news program *Vremia* (Time) and the annual television special *Priamaia linia s Vladimirom Putinyom* (Direct Line with Vladimir Putin). Thus, the current study examines the visual representations of Vladimir Putin as transmitted through three TV talk formats. Using techniques of description and interpretation of the visual by basing the analysis on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) as developed by Machin and Mayr (2012), the current study exposes how television shapes the president's image. In doing so, this study contributes not only to a better understanding of visual communication on Russian television, but in a broader sense it also provides a better understanding of television and mass media communication in the 21st century.

2. The Use of Visual Communication for Political Purposes

2.1 The Ubiquity of Visual Communication

Images and pictures pervade modern human life and society. Public areas, the media, shopping centers and mobile phones – everything is dominated by images. With the ongoing development of mass communication, images have become more important than ever before. The term

¹ *Kanaly informatsii*. Released on 13th September 2018. [online]. [2019-08-20]. Available at: <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/13/kanaly-informatsii/>>.

² *Reporter ohne Grenzen*. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/uploads/tx_lfnnews/media/ROG-Russland-Bericht-2013_web.pdf>.

³ *Doverie piatoi chasti rossian poterial Vladimir Putin za proshedshij god*. Released on 8th October 2018. [online]. [2019-08-20]. Available at: <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/10/08/doverie-pyatoj-chasti-rossiyan-poteryal-vladimir-putin-za-proshedshij-god/>>.

⁴ This claim is supported, for example, by news articles reacting to the first episode of the show (see e.g. TAROSHCHINA, S.: *Ves' etot MKHAT. Moskva. Kremli'. Putin: rabochii grafik prezidenta v zhanre poemy ekstaza*. [online]. [2019-08-20]. Available at: <<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/09/04/77703-ves-etot-mhat>>.

„ocularcentrism“⁵ describes the apparent centrality of images in Western society. For example, when comparing the front page of a newspaper from the early 1990s with a current newspaper, it is obvious that the amount of text has decreased while images have enlarged and proliferated. Consequently, newspapers are no longer a „text medium“; they have increasingly become a medium of visual communication.

This development is true for nearly all kinds of media: Today human communication functions mostly via images, and visual communication, which can be defined as the process of interpretation and creation of visual messages,⁶ has become „a central aspect of our lives.“⁷ Since communication is mostly visual today, the interpretation of and the critical reflection upon images or pictures is vital to understanding their impact. This ability, called visual literacy, is needed in contemporary times to navigate strategies of visual manipulation and persuasion occurring, for example, in advertisements and political campaigns.⁸

2.2 Reception and Effect of Visual Images

Images or pictures can generally be defined as collections or combinations „of signs and symbols.“⁹ Normally, each of these signs and symbols has a meaning¹⁰ and by transporting meaning, pictures communicate. Showing pictures is therefore a communicative action between the image and the recipient. Three factors influence a recipient's understanding of an image: (1) the content of the image, (2) the context in which the image appears, and (3) the knowledge and the additional information the recipient has about the image.¹¹

Regarding the impact of pictures, they are perceived differently than texts and they therefore have unique effects on the recipients. An example of this is the „picture superiority effect“¹², which describes that, in contrast to text, visuals are received automatically, without much mental or cognitive effort.¹³ Furthermore, visuals activate the recipient and they are captured and processed faster than texts. When it comes to the effect of images on the spectator, they are better recalled and more memorable than a text.¹⁴ Moreover, images imply a kind of „eyewitness-effect“ and involvement of the recipient through the impression of sensual immediacy. Therefore, visual images seem to be trustful and authentic. Interestingly, the trustfulness of images does not disappear when the visual information is proven wrong.¹⁵ The memorizing effect is one of

⁵ ROSE, G.: *Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. Los Angeles, London et al. : Sage, 2016, p. 3.

⁶ BARNES, S. B.: *An Introduction to Visual Communication. From Cave Art to Second Life*. New York : Peter Lang, 2011, p. 3.

⁷ BERGER, A. A.: *Seeing is Believing: An Introduction to Visual Communication*. Singapore : Mc Graw Hill, 2012, p. 2.

⁸ BARNES, S. B.: *An Introduction to Visual Communication. From Cave Art to Second Life*. New York : Peter Lang, 2011, p. 3.

⁹ BERGER, A. A.: *Seeing is Believing: An Introduction to Visual Communication*. Singapore : Mc Graw Hill, 2012, p. 63.

¹⁰ In Social Semiotics the notions „image“ and „signs“ is commonly referred to as „semiotic resources“.

¹¹ MÜLLER, M. G., KAPPAS, A.: Visual emotions – emotional visuals. In DÖVELING, K., VON SCHEVE, C., KONIJN, E. (eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media*. Oxon et al. : Routledge, 2011, p. 319.

¹² MÜLLER, M. G., GEISE, S.: *Grundlagen der Visuellen Kommunikation*. Konstanz, München : UVK, 2015, p. 97.

¹³ BUCY, E. P., GRABE, M. E.: Taking Television Seriously: A Sound and Image Bite Analysis of Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1992-2004. In *Journal of Communication*, 2007, Vol. 57, No. 4, p. 654. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00362.x>>.

¹⁴ GRABER, D. A.: Say it With Pictures. In *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1996, Vol. 546, p. 87.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 89.

the strengths of visual images making them very powerful. Visuals can also trigger associations and stereotypes. Besides, images have the potential to add drama to a story or an event and they cannot only depict, but also elicit emotions.¹⁶ In terms of emotions, however, there is a difference between still images and images in motion because the latter can more strongly excite emotionally than still images.¹⁷ Therefore, by transferring foremost moving images, television can be called an „*emotional medium*.“¹⁸

Visual communication is very powerful because viewers may have difficulty in remembering verbal information when it is in conflict with the visual message and because visual messages outweigh other messages when processed at the same time.¹⁹ According to Graber (1996), however, it is the combination between the two—the visual and the verbal—which is most effective for mental processing and memory enhancement. The interaction, as well as the mutual effect of these two modes, have been the object of various studies.²⁰

Political advisors are completely aware of the strengths and the power of visual images. Consequently, the visual dimension of messages in politics has become very important. In terms of research, visual aspects of political communication have attracted more attention in the last decade.²¹ However, they can still said to be „*one of the least studied and the least understood areas*.“²²

¹⁶ MÜLLER, M. G., KAPPAS, A.: Visual emotions – emotional visuals. In DÖVELING, K., VON SCHEVE, C., KONIJN, E. (eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media*. Oxon et al. : Routledge, 2011, p. 327.

¹⁷ SCHILL, D.: The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication. In *The Review of Communication*, 2012, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 127. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.653504>>.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

²⁰ See e.g., HOLLY, W.: Besprochene Bilder – bebildertes Sprechen. Audiovisuelle Transkriptivität in Nachrichtenfilmen und Polit-Talkshows. In DEPPERMAN, A., LINKE, A. (eds.): *Sprache intermedial. Stimme und Schrift, Bild und Ton*. Berlin, New York : De Gruyter, 2009, p. 359-382., HOLLY, W., JÄGER, L.: Transkriptionstheoretische Medienanalyse. Vom Anders-lesbar-Machen durch intermediale Bezugnahmepraktiken. In SCHNEIDER, J. G., STÖCKL, H. (eds.): *Medientheorien und Multimodalität- ein TV-Werbespot – Sieben methodische Beschreibungsansätze*. Köln : Herbert von Halem, 2011, p. 151-169., STÖCKL, H.: Multimodalität – Semiotische und textlinguistische Grundlagen. In KLUG, N., STÖCKL, H. (eds.): *Handbuch Sprache im multimodalen Kontext*. Berlin, Boston : de Gruyter, 2016, p. 3-35.

²¹ See e.g., CARPINELLA, C. M., JOHNSON, K. L.: Visual Political Communication: The Impact of Facial Cues from Social Constituencies to Personal Pocketbooks. In *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2016, Vol. 10, No. 5, p. 281-297. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/spc3.12249>>., O'HALLORAN, K. L. et al.: Interpreting text and image relations in violent extremist discourse: A mixed methods approach for big data analytics. In *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2016, Vol. 31, No. 3, p. 1-21. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1233871>>., NAGEL, F., MAURER, M., REINEMANN, C.: Is There a Visual Dominance in Political Communication? How Verbal, Visual, and Vocal Communication Shape Viewers' Impressions of Political Candidates. In *Journal of Communication*, 2012, Vol. 62, No. 5, p. 833-850. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01670.x>>., PYPE, K.: Visual media and political communication: reporting about suffering in Kinshasa. In *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2011, Vol. 40, No. 4, p. 625-645. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X11000504>>., SCHEUFELE, D., KIM, E., BROSSARD, D.: My Friend's Enemy: How Split-Screen Debate Coverage Influences Evaluation of Presidential Debates. In *Communication Research*, 2007, No. 34, Vol. 1, p. 3-24. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650206296079>>.

²² SCHILL, D.: The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication. In *The Review of Communication*, 2012, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 119. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.653504>>.

2.3 Visual Images and Politics

Not only have visual images changed modern human life and society, they have also significantly influenced the way politics are conducted. As Schill (2012) points out, visual images play an important role in the construction of political images.²³ Despite the rapid growth of the Internet as an information source, in many countries, it is public television that remains the most important source for political information. Television has been characterized by Schill as the „most important communication channel in contemporary political affairs.“²⁴ One of the best known examples of how the media, in particular television, changed the way political communication is made, is the presidential television debate between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960. People who were watching the debate on television were in favour of Kennedy whereas people who were following the debate via radio preferred Nixon. The debate had not only a big impact on the outcome of the elections, but it also marked the „visual turn“ in political communication because the visual aspects eclipsed and dominated the verbal arguments. At that point, television became the dominant political medium and since then great importance is placed on the visual presentation of a political candidate. In this regard, Bucy and Grabe (2007) argued that visuals are often considered as first-hand information about politicians and political events and that they therefore can deliver substantial information to viewers.²⁵

Schill (2012) stated that visuals serve at least ten functions in politics, five of which are especially relevant to the current analysis:

- **Argument Function:** This means that images „can have rhetorical impact and make persuasive arguments to viewers.“²⁶ When images are juxtaposed, they can „suggest associations, causal connections, contrasts, analogies and generalizations.“²⁷ Schill (2012) distinguishes two different types of the argument function: (1) the facial expressions and gestures of a person, and (2) the use of crowds. First, facial expressions and gestures work together with aural and contextual information to influence the viewer. An example here is, again, the presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon which demonstrated that these nonverbal expressions are very powerful. Furthermore, as research shows, the attractiveness and physical appearance of a politician equally play an essential role in this regard.²⁸ Second is the politician’s use of the crowds. Showing a politician surrounded by many people signals that he or she is popular, has widespread support and that, for this reason, he or she must be good.²⁹
- **Dramatization and Emotional Function:** On the one hand, images can add drama to a story or a media event and on the other hand, they communicate emotions and thereby elicit an emotional reaction from viewers.
- **Identification Function:** Schill (2012) explains that „the more a person identifies with a source, the more power that source has to influence the person.“³⁰ People do more easily identify with visuals than with other communicative forms because they elicit emotional reactions and persuade viewers.

²³ SCHILL, D.: The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication. In *The Review of Communication*, 2012, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 119. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.653504>>.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

²⁵ BUCY, E. P., GRABE, M. E.: Taking Television Seriously: A Sound and Image Bite Analysis of Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1992-2004. In *Journal of Communication*, 2007, Vol. 57, No. 4, p. 669. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00362.x>>.

²⁶ SCHILL, D.: The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication. In *The Review of Communication*, 2012, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 122. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.653504>>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 123.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 124.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 129.

- **Image-building Function:** As citizens normally do not meet politicians or other officials in person, they mostly rely on television or other media outlets to learn about these persons. Hence, there do exist some „standard“ images which should raise the appeal of officials and politicians. For example, showing the latter with children or among family members aim at the viewers' compassion; while presenting a politician wearing casual or athletic clothes should demonstrate his or her ordinariness, capturing this person doing sports or attending a sports event, should transport the image of his or her physical activity and characterize him/her as „mythic athletes or outdoorsman.“³¹ The visual information on a specific politician on television also targets the support of the voters. Besides the already mentioned „standard“ images, there are some further archetypical images which politicians or officials use in the media in order to portray a picture of themselves: The so-called „glad-to-see-you“ images are visual fragments showing the politician waving, pointing, giving a thumbs-up or shaking hands with a crowd.³² Other stereotypical images are the politician as beloved leader, for example, when he/she is applauded or praised, the politician as a media star, as a father or as a family figure. As will be shown in the current analysis, these archetypical images can also be found on Russian television, when transmitting the image of Vladimir Putin.

As has been shown in this section, visual images play a central role in politics, especially when it comes to the representation of politicians on television. This is also true for Russia, where television is still the most important nationwide means of mass communication.

3. Visual Communication in Soviet Russia

Although visual images have always played a central role throughout Russian history, it was the Soviets who professionally began to use visual communication and emerging new media for propagandistic purposes. From the beginning of the Soviet Union, posters were the most important medium for „communicating with and educating“³³ the population of the USSR. Despite the growing importance of films since the late 1930s, posters remained an important medium for political propaganda. Posters are primarily a visual medium, combining visual and textual signs. Although there did exist various Lenin posters during his lifetime, they only became widespread after his death when visual images of Lenin were also transferred to other media, for example, plates, porcelain cups, or canvas. More and more, a fixed appearance of Lenin was established showing parallels to religious icons and folk traditions.³⁴

After coming to power, Stalin initially visually demonstrated his closeness to Lenin, by linking his image with that of Lenin.³⁵ In the first years after Lenin's death in 1925, Lenin and Stalin appeared side by side on the posters. By the mid-1930s, however, Lenin was placed on a banner, a poster on the wall or represented as a statue while Stalin was situated on the ground.³⁶ From 1936 onwards, when „Stalin was referred to in superhuman terms“,³⁷ he did

³¹ SCHILL, D.: The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication. In *The Review of Communication*, 2012, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 119. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.653504>>.

³² Ibid., p. 128.

³³ PISCH, A.: *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions and fabrications*. Acton : ANU Press, 2016, p. 5.

³⁴ BONNELL, V. E.: *Iconography of Power. Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*. Berkley et al. : University of California Press, 1997, p. 147.

³⁵ PISCH, A.: *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions and fabrications*. Acton : ANU Press, 2016, p. 136.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 141.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

very rarely appear together with Lenin on posters, but when they were represented together, they were mostly treated in the same way.

Until Stalin's death in 1953, the „*complex phenomenon*“ of the personality cult of Stalin was subtly elaborated showing Stalin as leader with „*superhuman abilities*“, as „*symbol for the Party, the state and the nation*“, as the Soviet „*new man*“, archetypal as „*the Father and Teacher*“³⁸ or as „*the Warrior and the Saviour*.“³⁹ One of the aims of these various visual representations of Stalin was, as Pisch (2016) stresses, to establish a unified nation.⁴⁰

The visual representations and the personality cult of Lenin and then Stalin can doubtlessly be called the peak of the veneration of the Soviet *vozhd'*, a term used primarily for Lenin and Stalin. Both were associated with Christ and additionally Stalin „*(...) was endowed with many of the qualities of the Mother of God*.“⁴¹ Furthermore, when studying the visual image of Lenin and Stalin, it is evident that the Soviets had already used some of the visual „standard“ functions described in the previous section, for example the use of the crowds, the fixed appearance, or the portraits with children.

After Stalin's death, his successor Nikita Khrushchev began with the demystification of the personality cult around Stalin. However, today's Russia is making a step backwards in this regard because Stalin is becoming popular again and officially a slight cult of Stalin has been „*planted*.“⁴² Some scholars (e.g., Cassiday and Johnson, 2010) have argued that the so-called „*Putin mania*“ or „*Putin cult*“ somehow „*mirrors*“ the Stalin cult and that his „*popularity serves ends similar to those of Soviet leader cults, particularly the cult of Stalin*.“⁴³ Notwithstanding some evident parallels between the Putin and Stalin cults, there are obvious differences. These differences as well as the emergence and the development of today's Putin cult will be discussed in detail in the next section.

3.1 Creating the Image of Putin

Since the year 2000, Putin has been the President of the Russian Federation. From 2008 to 2012 he was also the Prime Minister under his close associate Dmitry Medvedev and since 2012 Vladimir Putin is again serving as President of Russia. After the elections in 2018, the fourth term of his presidency began and this period will mostly be in the center of the current analysis.

What undoubtedly distinguishes Vladimir Putin from his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, is his presence in the media. In fact, Putin is the first Russian president to professionally use technology, especially digital media, in order to construct and convey his image.⁴⁴ For example, Putin is not only ubiquitous on television, but also in printed magazines, newspapers, and the Internet. In addition, there are many portraits, statues, films, songs and books about him. Following Goscilo (2013), it is the abundance and multiplicity of Putin images that is most prominent for the cult of „*Russia's major contemporary icon*.“⁴⁵

³⁸ PISCH, A.: *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions and fabrications*. Acton : ANU Press, 2016, p. 136.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 260.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 259.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴² MERZLINKIN, P., SULIM, S.: Dazhe pochitateli Stalina ne khoteli by zhit' v te vremena. Spetsialisty rassuzhdaiut, proizoshlo li v Rossii razvenchanie stalinskogo mifa. Released on 30th July 2017. [online]. [2019-06-05]. Available at: <<https://meduza.io/feature/2017/07/30/dazhe-pochitateli-stalina-ne-hoteli-by-zhit-v-te-vremena>>.

⁴³ CASSIDAY, J. A., JOHNSON, E. D.: Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. In *Slavonic and East European Review*, 2010, Vol. 88, No. 4, p. 685. [online]. [2019-08-19]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41061898?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents>.

⁴⁴ GOSCILO, H.: Russia's ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP *objet d'art*. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 18-19.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

Putin's popularity and the „cult of personality“ around him already began in 2000, soon after his victory in the presidential elections. Enjoying widespread adoration, his portraits were quickly put on walls in official buildings and chapters in schoolbooks were dedicated to his life.⁴⁶ However, during his first term of presidency the image of Putin was anything but clear and well elaborated: Thus, he was repeatedly described as having a „*nebulous, all-embracing image*“⁴⁷ which was also compared to a mirror where everybody could see what he or she wanted.⁴⁸ In the same way it is argued that the phenomenon „Putin“ worked in the first years of his presidency mainly by establishing as many links as possible to already existing media representations.⁴⁹ Journalists, politicians and citizens alike „*could inscribe the qualities deemed lacking in past rulers*“⁵⁰ on him. It was only by 2004, that Putin's image had acquired several distinguishable qualities: He was depicted as a sober, intelligent and competent person, being physically and psychologically healthy and above all very manly and attractive.⁵¹ In comparison to previous Russian or Soviet leaders, the apparent prominence of his male sexuality and masculine potency is one of the innovative aspects of Putin's image and it furthermore echoes the pop-culture in which his image is inscribed.⁵² By 2007, this then elaborated image of Putin had been disseminated throughout Russia⁵³ and in the same year he was also awarded the title „Person of the Year“ by the famous American news magazine *Time*.

The success of the distribution of Putin's image is also linked to the gradual take-over of control over mass media in general and over television in particular since the beginning of his presidency. Therefore, the current media system in Russia is often labelled „*neo-authoritarian*“⁵⁴ or even „*neo-Soviet*“⁵⁵ as the media serves the interests of the state leaders and not of the citizens. However, Hutchings and Tolz (2015) emphasize the difference between the current Russian television and its Soviet predecessor, because today's television has to react to the changes in the discursive environment, which means that it has to consider and respond to the debate on the Internet and alternative media outlets.⁵⁶

Concerning the difference between the Putin and the Stalin cult Cassidy and Johnson (2010) highlight that the Stalin cult was „*monolithic in structure*“, that is to say that every representation or narrative transmitted about Stalin was strictly regulated and carefully edited.⁵⁷

⁴⁶ CASSIDAY, J. A., JOHNSON, E. D.: Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. In *Slavonic and East European Review*, 2010, Vol. 88, No. 4, p. 685. [online]. [2019-08-19]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41061898?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents>.

⁴⁷ WHITE, S., McALLISTER, I.: Putin and His Supporters. In *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2003, Vol. 55, No. 3, p. 385. [online]. [2019-10-10]. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3594606.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A88cc17e74c0dc1b0c8368314944af861>>.

⁴⁸ GOSCILO, H.: Russia's ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP objet d'art. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 20., GORHAM, M. S.: Putin's language. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 83.

⁴⁹ BINDER, E.: *Persönlichkeiten in Politik / Gesellschaft des postsowjetischen Russland: Boris El'cin und Vladimir Putin*. [talk at Innsbruck University, 19.11.2013].

⁵⁰ CASSIDAY, J. A., JOHNSON, E. D.: Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. In *Slavonic and East European Review*, 2010, Vol. 88, No. 4, p. 686. [online]. [2019-08-19]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41061898?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 686.

⁵² MIKHAILOVA, T.: Putin as the Father of the Nation. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 66.

⁵³ CASSIDAY, J. A., JOHNSON, E. D.: Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. In *Slavonic and East European Review*, 2010, Vol. 88, No. 4, p. 683. [online]. [2019-08-19]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41061898?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents>.

⁵⁴ BECKER, J.: Lessons from Russia. A Neo-Authoritarian Media System. In *European Journal of Communication*, 2004, Vol. 19, No. 2, p. 139-163.

⁵⁵ OATES, S.: *Introduction to media and politics*. Los Angeles : Sage, 2008, p. 41.

⁵⁶ HUTCHINGS, S., TOLZ, V.: *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television. Mediating post-Soviet difference*. London, New York : Routledge, 2015, p. 35.

⁵⁷ CASSIDAY, J. A., JOHNSON, E. D.: Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. In *Slavonic and East European Review*, 2010, Vol. 88, No. 4, p. 694. [online]. [2019-08-19]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41061898?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents>.

The Putin cult, in contrast, cannot be claimed to be monolithic because the material about Putin is very heterogeneous including texts, images or consumer objects and even foodstuffs e.g. ice cream, vodka, lollipops, etc. have borne his name.⁵⁸ This is maybe the most obvious difference to the Soviet leader because Putin has become a part of today's pop and consumer culture, presenting him simultaneously as a patriarch and leader as well as an international pop star. In this context, the Putin cult is an amalgamation of official and unofficial speech and it shows more creativity than the Soviet leader cult because the „overwhelming majority“ of today's artists „operate outside any obvious system of state control.“⁵⁹ This also explains why many objects, gadgets, and texts about Putin do often have an equivocal nature.⁶⁰ Furthermore, although today souvenir shops and markets overflow with objects and gadgets with Putin's image, most of these products do not have a „real“ Putin-content.⁶¹

Accordingly, this is one of the two reasons why the Putin cult exists in Russia: On the one hand, the Putin mania is part of today's consumer culture where every consumer determines him- or herself the meaning of a specific object. Here, again, the Putin cult differs from the Stalin cult because despite the control of most media outlets by the Russian state, there is no official pressure or coercion to buy Putin objects, portraits or products.⁶² People purchase these objects because either they see profit for themselves in them or because they intrinsically want to.

On the other hand, the Putin cult is part of the nostalgia for the Soviet past, which can be observed in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶³ Because the Putin cult unites Soviet nostalgia and modern consumption it is no surprise that the images of him created by the media are very complex and sometimes even antithetical: Accordingly, Putin might be presented as a tsar, a Father of the nation or even as a saviour and master of animals. He sometimes may be depicted as a sportsman, a star or even as an artist.⁶⁴ In either case, Vladimir Putin can be called a „master of metamorphosis“⁶⁵ and an „entertainer“.⁶⁶

Although Putin's image has only been described verbally so far in this article, the Putin cult is foremost a visual cult and therefore it is especially interesting to analyze, which image of Putin is represented officially on television. This is the question the current study tries to answer and in the next section, the aim of this analysis is explained in detail.

⁵⁸ GOSCILO, H.: Russia's ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP *objet d'art*. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 7.

⁵⁹ CASSIDAY, J. A., JOHNSON, E. D.: Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. In *Slavonic and East European Review*, 2010, Vol. 88, No. 4, p. 696. [online]. [2019-08-19]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41061898?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 692.

⁶² Ibid., p. 695.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 697.

⁶⁴ In 2009, a painting called *Uzor* (engl. patterns), which was claimed to be a work of art made by Putin himself, was sold by auction for 860 000 euros.

⁶⁵ ENGELFRIED, A.: Zar und Star. Vladimir Putins Medienimage. In *Osteuropa*, 2012, Vol. 5, p. 47.

⁶⁶ MIKHAILOVA, T.: Putin as the Father of the Nation. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 77.

3.2 The Current Study

Although Putin is a popular subject matter for many studies, the existing literature mainly focusses on the broader and general image of Putin,⁶⁷ his visual representations in photographs, works of art or caricatures⁶⁸ or on his language⁶⁹ and does not concentrate on his image as transmitted by a particular visual medium—television. As for many Russians television is still the most important medium for political information, it is especially interesting to analyze which image of President Putin is conveyed regularly into households. The current study therefore wants to close this gap by analyzing the image of Putin as presented in three different TV formats: First, the image of Putin as transmitted daily by the news program *Vremia* (Time). Second, the image of Putin conveyed one time per week by the talk show *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin*. Third, the image of Putin presented one time per year on the annual talk show *Priamaia Linia s Vladimirom Putinyim* (Direct Line with Vladimir Putin). By doing so, the current study tries to answer the questions (1) what image of Putin is broadcasted visually via television, and (2) does this image differ across the three TV programs? The reason for the selection of these television talk programs as well as the methods used for the study will be explained in the following chapter.

4. Methods

4.1 Analytical Overview

This study uses Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to examine the visual representation of Vladimir Putin in three different TV formats. MCDA, developed by Machin and Mayr (2012),⁷⁰ is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as described and elaborated by Fairclough and Wodak (1997).⁷¹ CDA is a linguistic approach that defines discourses as „broader ideas communicated by a text“⁷² and it is used to draw out ideologies and power hidden in texts by looking at the words and grammar choices. Extending this, *Multimodal* CDA acts on the assumption that ideologies and power are not only communicated via language, but also via other semiotic resources, for example images, gestures or sound. This presupposes that images are used to say and express things that language cannot transmit. MCDA is not

⁶⁷ See e.g., CASSIDAY, J. A., JOHNSON, E. D.: Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality. In *Slavonic and East European Review*, 2010, Vol. 88, No. 4, p. 681-707. [online]. [2019-08-19]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41061898?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents>, ENGELFRIED, A.: Zar und Star. Vladimir Putins Medienimage. In *Osteuropa*, 2012, Vol. 5, p. 47-67., FRANZ, N.: 'Einen wie Putin': Herrscherlob und -verehrung im postmodernen Russland. In HOLTZ, B., MARGGRAFF, U. (eds.): *Herrscherlob und Herrscherkritik in den slawischen Literaturen. Festschrift für Ulrike Jekutsch zum 60. Geburtstag*. Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz, 2013, p. 241-257.

⁶⁸ See e.g., MIKHAILOVA, T.: Putin as the Father of the Nation. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 65-81., GOSCILO, H.: Russia's ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP objet d'art. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 6-36., GOSCILO, H.: Putin's performance of masculinity. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 180-207.

⁶⁹ See e.g., GORHAM, M. S.: Putin's language. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 81-103., GORHAM, M. S.: After Newspeak. Language Culture and Politics in *Russia from Gorbachev to Putin*. Ithaca, London : Cornell University Press, 2014.

⁷⁰ See e.g., MACHIN, D., MAYR, A.: Personalising crime and crime-fighting in factual television: an analysis of social actors and transitivity in language and images. In *Critical Discourse Studies*, 2013, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 356-372., MAYR, A.: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). In KLUG, N., STÖCKL, H. (eds.): *Handbuch Sprache im multimodalen Kontext*. Berlin, Boston : de Gruyter, 2016, p. 261-276.

⁷¹ See e.g.: FAIRCLOUGH, N., WODAK, R.: Critical Discourse Analysis. In VAN DIJK, T. (ed.): *Discourse as Social Interaction*. London : Sage, 1997, p. 258-285.

⁷² MACHIN, D., MAYR, A.: *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis. A Multimodal Introduction*. London et al. : SAGE, 2012, p. 20.

only interested in showing *how* images and other semiotic choices create meaning, but also in analyzing *what* they mean.⁷³ Thereby, this approach provides many tools for the analysis of semiotic choices, that is to say, the analysis of the words and images chosen in texts. Although language is in the center of multimodal analysis, MCDA is completely aware that language „is embedded within a frame of other semiotic resources“⁷⁴ and that for this reason, images have to be taken into consideration.

4.2 Procedure

The present analysis used MCDA mainly for the visual analysis, without neglecting certain aspects of linguistic choices made to represent Putin. The reason for focusing on the visual is, on the one hand, the already mentioned centrality of images on television. On the other hand, there is also a practical reason because the full linguistic transcriptions are only available of *Vremia* and therefore, the linguistic analysis primarily concentrated on this news program.

Regarding MCDA, the current study sequentially followed and examined the four categories of representation as described by Machin and Mayr (2013): the linguistic and the visual representation of social actors, as well as the linguistic and visual representation of transitivity.⁷⁵ The first two categories focus on the analysis of the representation of social actors in a text because the linguistic and visual choices made to represent people influence the way the recipients perceive these people and their actions, for example, when certain aspects of their identity are highlighted or omitted.⁷⁶ Linguistically, the representation of President Putin was analyzed by examining the nouns used to represent him (nomination and/or functionalisation),⁷⁷ which were detected and organized by means of the software program MAXQDA. Visually, the study looked at the choices which have been made to represent the Russian head of state and at the way he was represented (e.g., alone, in a group, in close shot, from distance). The visual observations made were collected while watching the broadcasts and afterwards, they were sorted and summarized. The other two categories, the linguistic and the visual representation of transitivity, concentrate on the question „*what people are represented as doing*.“⁷⁸ In linguistic terms, this category deals with verb categories giving the social actors character and agency.⁷⁹ Therefore, the current study examined the verbs utilized to describe Vladimir Putin's actions. The fourth category, the visual representation of transitivity, was integrated in the analysis by asking how President Putin was represented visually when doing something. Here again, camera shots were examined as well as the different angles from which the viewer looks at the president, but also the circumstances (colour, shadows, light, etc.). Finally, a central concept of MCDA is „*recontextualisation of social practices*“ meaning that this method is interested in processes of deletion, addition, substitution and evaluation in a text. The current study also tried to consider this concept by looking for linguistic representations which were absent visually and vice versa.

⁷³ MACHIN, D., MAYR, A.: *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis. A Multimodal Introduction*. London et al. : SAGE, 2012, p. 20.

⁷⁴ MAYR, A.: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). In KLUG, N., STÖCKL, H. (eds.): *Handbuch Sprache im multimodalen Kontext*. Berlin, Boston : de Gruyter, 2016, p. 263.

⁷⁵ MACHIN, D., MAYR, A.: Personalising crime and crime-fighting in factual television: an analysis of social actors and transitivity in language and images. In *Critical Discourse Studies*, 2013, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 356-372., MAYR, A.: Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). In KLUG, N., STÖCKL, H. (eds.): *Handbuch Sprache im multimodalen Kontext*. Berlin, Boston : de Gruyter, 2016, p. 261-276.

⁷⁶ MACHIN, D., MAYR, A.: *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis. A Multimodal Introduction*. London et al. : SAGE, 2012, p. 77-79.

⁷⁷ MACHIN, D., MAYR, A.: Personalising crime and crime-fighting in factual television: an analysis of social actors and transitivity in language and images. In *Critical Discourse Studies*, 2013, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 360.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁷⁹ Drawing on Halliday (1994) and Van Leeuwen (1996), Machin and Mayr (2013) distinguish six kinds of verb processes to answer the question „who does what to whom“.

4.3 Materials

The material of the study comprises eleven randomly selected issues⁸⁰ of the news broadcast *Vremia* on *Pervyi kanal* from April 2018 to March 2019, the issues of *Priamaia Linia s Vladimirom Putinym* from 2013 to 2018 and five different issues of *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin* aired from September 2, 2018, until March 3, 2019. All videos as well as the linguistic transcript of *Vremia* are available on the homepages of the two TV channels. The reason for the choice of this period of *Vremia* is the beginning of Putin's fourth term of office on March 18, 2018. *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin* began its broadcast only on September 2, 2018, and therefore five shows until March 2019 are taken into consideration.⁸¹ *Priamaia Linia* is aired only once a year and in terms of comparability, the six latest shows are examined in the current study.

5. Results

In order to capture the different visual representations of Putin, the study is structured around the three TV programs, starting with the two „older“ and longer established programs, *Vremia* and *Priamaia Linia s Vladimirom Putinym*. After the examination of Putin's image in these two programs, the last paragraph analyzes the image of Putin in *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin* as „a new page of Putiniana“⁸². Within each TV program, the results are organized according to the four categories of representation, which are all considered, to different degrees, in the analysis. The final comparison of all three programs is presented in the Discussion section.

5.1 President Putin in *Vremia*

Vremia (Time) is the primetime news program on *Pervyi kanal* and it is broadcasted every day at 9 p.m. Transmitted since 1968, *Vremia* is one of the most important news programs in Russia. President Putin appears very often in this news program and he is reported on nearly every evening. The news items usually refer to his meetings and actions during the day, to his telephone calls with other politicians or simply to his presence at some event. In eleven randomly selected⁸³ news items from April 2018 to March 2019 the linguistic and visual representation of Vladimir Putin is analyzed and presented in the following sections.

5.1.1 Linguistic Representations of Vladimir Putin

Regarding language, Putin is mostly represented by personalization. Strikingly, his name „*Vladimir Putin*“ or sometimes simply „*Putin*“ is found in all the news items and often the president's first and last names stand at the beginning of the news headlines. This reference by name personalizes Putin and puts the emphasis on the question who he is. Putin is also referred to by functionalisation and honorifics by terms such as „*prezident (Rossii)*“ or „*rossiiskii*

⁸⁰ As all news items are available online, one news item per month was selected by randomly choosing a day on the calendar and by scanning the news headlines. When „Vladimir Putin“, „the Russian president“ or other nouns referring to President Putin figured in a headline, the news item was chosen and the same procedure was applied to the following month. By doing so, 11 different news items on Putin—one per month—were selected for the current study.

⁸¹ As the show began its broadcast in September 2018, the first three issues of the talk show were examined. The other two selected issues were one show from February and one from March 2019.

⁸² TAROSHCHINA, S.: *Ves' etot MKHAT. Moskva. Kreml'. Putin: rabochii grafik prezidenta v zhanre poemy ekstaza*. Released on 04th September 2018. [online]. [2019-08-19]. Available at: <<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/09/04/77703-ves-etot-mhat>>.

⁸³ Only news items with headlines referring to the Russian president were chosen (see also footnote 80).

prezident“ (President of Russia/Russian president), „*glava (rossiiskogo) gosudarstva*“ (head of the [Russian] state) or „*rossiiskii lider*“ (Russian leader). These terms are more official than the personal nomination „*Vladimir Putin*“ and they signal respect and importance. Furthermore, they accentuate the function of Putin within the state and the role that he fulfills in Russia. Other social actors, in contrast, for example other presidents or state leaders, are often functionalized and personalized at the same time. First, their function „*prezident*“ or „*prem'er-ministr*“ (primeminister) is mentioned and second, the name of the leader's state and his/her name follow. One reason for this kind of reference is probably to remind the recipient, which important people President Putin is meeting with, who they are and where they come from. This type of representation is common for international guests of Putin, but when it comes to national guests, they are often only referred to by their function, especially in the headlines.

5.1.2 Visual Representations of Vladimir Putin

Visual representations of Vladimir Putin show him frequently individualised in medium close-up, when he is speaking to the public, to other ministers or having a conversation with somebody. The background of these recordings are often the colours of the Russian flag or gold, brown and red, referring to state power. The background of other participants when represented alone in medium close-ups for example during a tête-à-tête conversation with Putin, is often darker than the one of Putin and disturbed by the screen of a computer.

President Putin is not always represented alone. When he is meeting another politician or president normally both of them appear on the screen. When sitting at a table and discussing with others, Putin is sometimes represented as one amongst others. For example, in the 6th news item on March 19, 2019, during his meeting with young winners of a contest called „Leaders of Russia“ Putin sits side by side with them on a long table. However, when he is shown during meetings with his ministers, the scenery is strictly defined (see Figure 1).



PICTURE 1: Putin during a meeting with his ministers

Source: Vremia, News broadcast, 16.01.2019

In Figure 1, Putin is sitting at the top of the table. He is at the center of the events. His ministers or cabinet members sit on both sides lengthwise around him and are looking into his direction, their heads turned towards him. This also directs the gaze of the recipient towards Putin because the eyes follow the long table. This table symbolizes the so-called „*vertical of power*,“ which is defined as „*the top-down command structure established by Putin during his*

presidency.”⁸⁴ This screen shot of the 1st news item on January 16, 2019 (Figure 1) is a typical and recurrent example of the visual representation of Putin in the news and demonstrates how the visual transmits the picture of a very powerful president by establishing vertical distance. Furthermore, not only the table and the position of the attendees is strictly defined, but there is also a ritual, which is transmitted by moving images: Putin is the last person entering the scene, the others have to wait for him and often the news show a sequence where the ministers get up and sit down when the president enters the room. This whole mise-en-scene as shown in the news should illustrate and remind that everything is in Putin’s hands and that he directs the course of the events that it is him who guides the country and makes decisions.

5.1.3 Linguistic and Visual Representations of Transitivity

Transitivity concerns the question about what people are represented in doing. As regards Putin, the language used in the news items duplicates his visual portrayal and even reinforces it. For example, the headlines as well as the news texts themselves often use active verbs to describe Putin’s actions for instance „*potreboval*“ (he demanded), „*prodolzhit*“ (he continued), „*vstretit/vstretitsia s*“ (he met with), „*podpisal*“ (he signed) or „*obsudil s*“ (he discussed with), which all hint at the president’s activity. They also imply that Putin fulfills his role as a statesman by working very hard, discussing, meeting different people, making decisions, etc.

His power and assertiveness are represented by the quoting verbs used to describe his speech. While there are certain neutral verbs utilized for citing his utterances as „*skazal*“ (he said), there are also metapositional verbs⁸⁵ as assertives, for example, „*utochnil/poiasnil*“ (he made clear) and „*ob”iavil*“ (he announced), and directives, for example, „*utverdil pravo Genprokuratury*“ (he confirmed the right of the General Procuracy) or „*privlek vseh uchastnikov prezidiuma k obsuzhdeniiu voprosov*“ (he enlisted all participants of the general committee to discuss the matters). These examples not only illustrate that Putin is the one who explains or announces something, but also, that he grants permits and tells people what to do. As regards the speech of Putin’s conversation partners or other persons cited in the news items, there is a smaller variety of quoting verbs used and they are often neutral speech reporting verbs such as „*rasskazal(a)*“ (he/she told), „*skazal(a)*“ (he/she said) or „*otmetil(a)*“ (he/she remarked). If the speech of both conversation partners, Putin and another person is referred to, most often the neutral verbs „*obsuzhdali/obsudili*“ (they discussed) are utilized.

While the social action of Vladimir Putin in the news is linguistically represented as active and busy, the moving images also support this impression. Besides, his activity is visible in the amount of news items on Putin. For example, almost every evening there is at least one of average 12 news items dedicated to President Putin. This creates the impression that he is continuously working and officiating seriously.

In addition, the moving images provide a broader impression of his activities by showing him for example feeding fish, shaking hands, talking to children, etc. On the one hand, the moving images and the news text work together, when for example visually illustrating and duplicating what is said in the text. On the other hand, the moving images and the text complement each other, because the images often provide information about the attendees of an event, its location and the surroundings whereas the text presents dense information about its content and the decisions.

Concerning the „*recontextualisation of social practices*“ there is, for example, visual deletion which can be found in the news: The third news item on August 21, 2019, with the headline „*Vladimir Putin podpisal Ukaz ob ucherzhenii medali Za stroitel’stvo Krymskogo mosta.*“ (Vladimir

⁸⁴ MONAGHAN, A.: *The Russian Vertikal: the Tandem, Power and the Elections*. [online]. [2019-08-07]. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/19412_0511ppmonaghan.pdf>.

⁸⁵ For the meaning potential of quoting verbs see the table in MACHIN, D., MAYR, A.: *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis. A Multimodal Introduction*. London et al. : SAGE, 2012, p. 59.

Putin signed a decree on the establishment of a medal „For the construction of the Crimean bridge“) consists only of the studio sequence with the presenter and images of the Crimean bridge. Although Putin is referred to linguistically, he is visually completely absent. One possible reason for his absence could be that the Kremlin provides the journalists with many information about Putin's activities during the day and that the journalists are not supposed to take part in every action made by the president, which, in turn, forces them to illustrate the news items with already existing images.

5.2 President Putin in *Priamaia Linia*

Since its first broadcast on December 24, 2001, *Priamaia linia s Vladimirom Putinyim* (Direct Line with Vladimir Putin) has become an annual event.⁸⁶ It is a special TV show transmitted by the most important and popular TV channels in Russia. The concept of this four-hour show can be summarized as follows: Putin is asked questions from two journalists in the studio and Russian citizens by telephone, Internet or live video translation, which he tries to answer. There are several reasons for staging such a media event or „spectacle“⁸⁷ every year: On the one hand, the show aims at the creation of the image of a united and coherent Russian nation.⁸⁸ On the other hand, it communicates the image of Putin as „a president of the people“⁸⁹ and constructs the image of his omnipotence.⁹⁰ Although this annual televised meeting with Russian citizens creates the impression of spontaneity, all participants prepare for the show.⁹¹

Because this annual talk show is a very important event for the Russian as well as for the foreign media, it is particularly interesting to look at the visual representation of Putin in this show. Therefore, the following analysis concentrates for the main part on the first two categories of analysis of MCDA.⁹²

5.2.1 Linguistic Representations of Vladimir Putin

When Putin is introduced at the beginning of the show, he is referred to by functionalization, namely as „prezident Rossii“ (President of Russia). As he attends this show, he is directly and formally addressed as it is common in Russia by the forename and the patronymic „Vladimir Vladimirovich“ and by the formal personal pronoun „Vy“ (You). Linguistically, this show gives Putin the chance to present himself on Russian TV, his rhetoric skills and he makes use of it. The two journalists in the studio on his left and right side pose often vague and broad questions, which allows Putin to extend the scope of the questions and to give sometimes very general answers. He can also speak as long as he wants without being interrupted, which provides him the opportunity to show himself in a good light.⁹³

⁸⁶ Even during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev it was Putin who held this question-answer forum with the nation. Only in 2004 and 2012 there was no issue of *Priamaia linia*.

⁸⁷ RYAZANOVA-CLARKE, L.: The discourse of spectacle. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 108.

⁸⁸ GORHAM, M. S.: *After Newspeak. Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin*. Ithaca, London : Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 155-156., RYAZANOVA-CLARKE, L.: The discourse of spectacle. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 107.

⁸⁹ GORHAM, M. S.: *After Newspeak. Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin*. Ithaca, London : Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 156.

⁹⁰ RYAZANOVA-CLARKE, L.: The discourse of spectacle. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 120.

⁹¹ GORHAM, M. S.: *After Newspeak. Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin*. Ithaca, London : Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 141.

⁹² The linguistic strategies used in this show have already been described, for example by Ryazanova-Clarke (2013), who has analyzed the verbal activities of the show participants.

⁹³ It has to be stated here, that as for example Mikhailova (2013, p. 77) noticed, Putin never engages in debates with his political opponents, who are prevented from appearing on state television channels.

Although the analysis of the rhetorical strategies and skills of Putin go beyond the scope of the current article, it is worth noting here, that Putin is known for his ability to switch between different voices in accordance to the context of his utterances.⁹⁴ While most of his speech can be described as neutral and technocrat, Putin may sometimes intersperse violent and colourful words or sentences into his speech. For example, in 2018, he called the Russian ex-agent Sergei Skripal in front of the cameras a „son of a bitch“ („*podonok*“).⁹⁵ Using substandard, vulgar or even Russian swear language called „mat“ normally strongly contradicts the representation of a respectable statesman. However, Putin uttering swear words is only one of his multiple representations in the media and by speaking the language of the people he gets closer to them, making them see him as one of their own.

5.2.2 Visual Representations of Vladimir Putin

Concerning the visual staging of the latest *Priamaia linia* issues, some points are striking: In the same way as in the news program *Vremia*, the vertical power is visually omnipresent in *Priamaia linia*. There is a big spatial distance between Putin and the two journalists: While the former always sits in the middle and thus on the top of a horseshoe-like table, the two journalists sit on both ends of the table and turn their heads towards the president.

While in the *Priamaia linia* issue of 2013 (see Figure 2), Putin is surrounded by the studio audience, his table standing on the same level as the first row, hence, creating the impression of being among the people and on the same level with them, in the following issues from 2014 to 2017, this image has already changed (see Figure 3). In these years, the table stands on a platform, which is not only higher and further away from the audience, but it is also visually highlighted: In 2014, 2015 and 2017 the table and the platform are accentuated by blue or white shining light. In 2016, in contrast, the whole platform is coloured brown. In each of these issues, the platform Putin is sitting on resembles an „island“ in the middle of the studio and it establishes a remarkable spatial distance to the audience. In 2016 and 2017, however, there is a visual connection, a kind of bridge to Putin’s „island“, which probably could symbolize the accessibility of the president and his connection to the people. Whereas in comparison to previous years, the distance between the studio audience and Putin gets less in 2016 and 2017, the visual division is established by lighting and raising Putin’s platform—from two steps in 2015, the platform raises to already three steps in the years to follow. Thereby, the show visually highlights and sets the president apart. Moreover, from 2014 to 2017 the studio audience is isolated visually by a small, striped, and knee-high divider from the rest of the studio. Accordingly, in this TV show, where the people get direct access to their president and can talk with him, it is communicated visually that Putin is still the one inaccessible, untouchable, and unreachable leader of the country sitting slightly above the people and on the top of the table, symbolizing the corridors of power. This visual staging of Putin evokes the seemingly intended association of Putin sitting on a throne and here the repeatedly drawn comparisons between Putin and a tsar become evident.

⁹⁴ GORHAM, M. S.: Putin’s language. In GOSCILO, H. (ed.): *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*. London, New York : Routledge, 2013, p. 82.

⁹⁵ *Dekoder*. [online]. [2019-06-14]. Available at: <<https://www.dekoder.org/de/article/video-23-putin-skripal-ist-ein-dreckskerl>>.



PICTURE 2: Studio of the Direct Line in 2013

Source: Priamaia Linia, Annual Talk, 25.05.2013



PICTURE 3: Studio of the Direct Line in 2014

Source: Priamaia Linia, Annual Talk, 17.04.2014

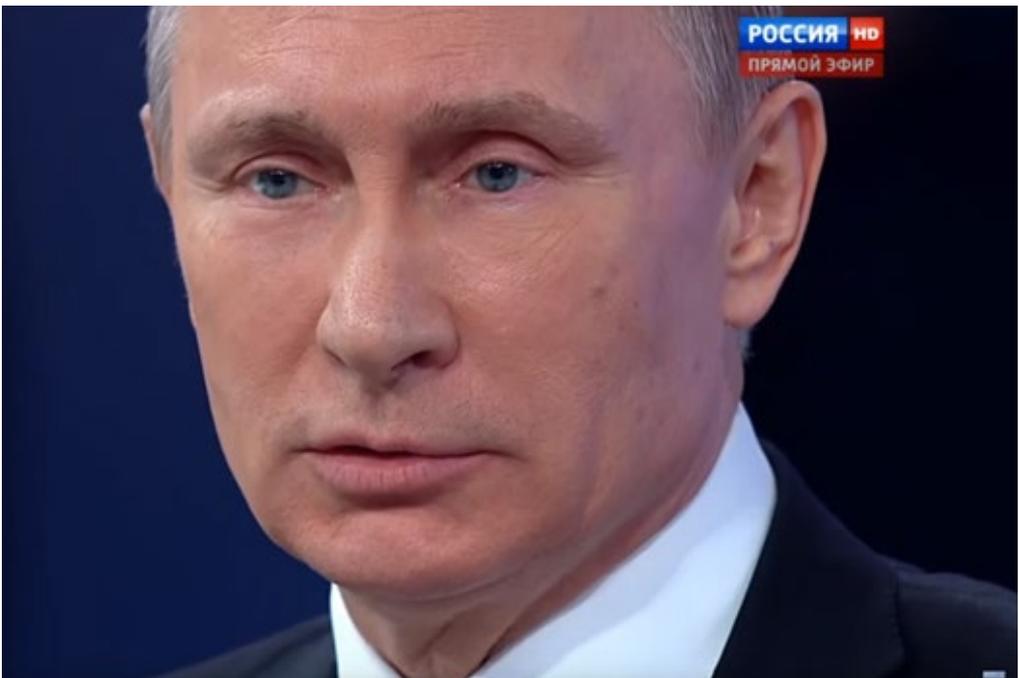
Although the changes over the last years are considerable, the most vivid change occurred in 2018, when completely emptying the studio of the audience. One of the journalists justifies the absence of the studio audience at the beginning of the show by claiming, that thereby the people in situ could ask more questions. However, the absence of a studio audience, which mainly contributes to the perception of the show as a live and public event, transfers it to a cool and sterile show, where nobody except of the journalists has access to the president in person. This could explain why the *Priamaia linia* issue in 2019, after Putin's approval rate had significantly fallen, seemed to react to this trend: First, the platform of Putin is in 2019 significantly lower than in the previous years and second, the studio audience is again present in this show. Third, the studio audience is not isolated from the rest of the studio and thereby, the show visually tries to establish again the proximity between Putin and the people.

Finally, it is also worth analyzing the camera shots in *Priamaia linia*. As the setting of the show is very stable and rigid, the dynamics is established by the movements and shots of the camera. While the studio seems very cold and distant because of the spatial arrangement of the participants as well as the colors used—mostly grey and blue—the medium and close-up shots of the president, taken from eye level, create a kind of closeness with Vladimir Putin (Figures 4 and 5).



PICTURE 4: *Shoulder close up of Putin*

Source: *Priamaia Linia*, Annual Talk, 14.04.2016



PICTURE 5: *Extreme close up of Putin*

Source: *Priamaia Linia*, Annual Talk, 16.04.2015

These camera close-ups are also known as „talking head format“ because the size of the person on TV screen is similar to the actual size of a person. This technique thereby creates the impression that the viewer is directly confronted to the person on the screen, thus getting closer to his person. In *Priamaia linia* this strategy is used to bring the president closer to each individual at home and to create the illusion of intimacy, of being with Putin.

Summing up, the *Priamaia linia* issues establish a similar image of Putin as in the news program *Vremia*. Although the annual TV show tries to present Putin as a „*president of the people*,“ the spatial arrangement emphasizes the distance between him, the journalists, and the public. Thus, it transmits the image of Putin as being superior and inaccessible. The show puts Putin on a throne not only by visually raising him on a platform, but also by the question-answer-format of the show, which is suggestive of Putin being omnipotent and omniscient. Here, the parallel to Stalin can be drawn, as one of the elements of the mythology of Stalin was his omnipresence and his appearance whenever needed⁹⁶ – an illusion which is nowadays created every year by *Priamaia linia*.

5.3 President Putin in *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin*.

The talk show *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin* was first aired on September 2, 2018. It is a weekly TV program, broadcasted on Sundays on *Rossia-1* after the main news program called *Vesti nedeli* (News of the week). Every Sunday evening this nearly one-hour TV show focusses mainly on one question: What has President Putin been doing during the week? The famous journalist Vladimir Solovyov hosts this program, which is a mixture of interviews in a studio and film clips featuring the president. Although the talk show is primarily about the Russian president, Putin himself does not come in person to the show—it is the journalist Pavel Zarubin, the Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov or other famous persons who are invited to the show in order to talk about the president, his activities, and meetings during the week.

Even the name of the show is very interesting: *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin* linguistically establishes a zoom from the outside to the inside: from the big city, the capital of Russia—Moscow to the Kremlin, being in the center and the heart of Moscow, to Putin, who is working in the Kremlin. The title of the show elicits associations with the concentration of power: Being the capital city of Russia, Moscow is very important. The Kremlin is the centre of the city and it is the seat of the government, therefore being the seat of power. The whole power, however, cumulates in the hands of one person: Vladimir Putin. The talk show's name thereby reminds us of a funnel, in which the whole power flows together and at the end of which is sitting the president. Besides, „*Putin*“ is the only word printed in bold characters, which furthermore accentuates that he is at the focus of the show.

As previously stated, the content of the talk show is always very similar as it mainly consists of reports on the working week of Putin. However, this is anything but a novelty because the working week of Putin, his meetings with other politicians, etc. already appear in the news program. Therefore, it is worth asking the question of the purpose and the attractiveness for the public of this new talk show. First, the TV genre itself, the talk show, and its famous host Vladimir Solovyov attract the interest of the public as talk shows are very widespread on Russian TV and enjoy great popularity.⁹⁷ Second, this show can be claimed to be a good

⁹⁶ PISCH, A.: *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions and fabrications*. Acton : ANU Press, 2016, p. 305.

⁹⁷ Opinion polls show that talk shows rank under the most popular TV shows in Russia. See e.g., VOLKOV, D., GONCHAROV, S.: „*Levada tsentr*“: *Televidenie ostaetsia glavnym istochnikom informatsii dlia 85% rossiian*. [online]. [2018-04-19]. Available at: <<http://r.media/news/tv/levada-tsentr-televidenie-ostaetsya-glavnym-istochnikom-informatsii-dlya-85-rossiyan.html>>.

example of so called „politainment“ as it present politics as entertainment and consequently, it makes politics accessible to everyone. While the show does often not provide information as regards content or political decisions, it certainly tries to transmit a more human picture of the politicians, for instance by precisely describing and filming the circumstances of political events. For example, in the issue of September 9, 2018, the politicians are captured eating dry fruits during a conference and it is reported on how they enjoyed eating them. There are also sequences of the journalist Pavel Zarubin filming backstage at the conference with his mobile phone thereby enhancing the sense of authenticity and thus giving the viewers the impression of being live-witnesses. Hand-held camera videos and shaky, sometimes even blurred pictures additionally support this sense of authenticity and immediacy created by the show. Furthermore, the camera frequently films the politicians or other important persons from short distance, which also adds to the impression of their humanization and immediacy.

A third novelty of the show is that the talk show guests are mostly people who work for the president and know him very well. They try to create a personal and somehow intimate portrayal of Vladimir Putin by telling the viewer how Putin „really“ is, what he likes, how he reacts emotionally, etc. in order to find out what happens „behind the scenes“ and what is normally not shown in the news.

Although the implementation of the talk show *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin* in September 2018 is often explained as a result of the decline of Putin's approval rating, the television critic and journalist Irina Petrovskaya (*Chelovek iz televizora*, 2018) proposes an alternative explanation. According to her, the reason for staging Putin every day in the news or in other TV formats is that he is the only good news and that people are waiting for it. If they see Putin on TV, they calm down and think that everything is as it should be. In this context, the talk show *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin* is also good news, but in condensed form.⁹⁸

5.3.1 Linguistic and Visual Representations of Vladimir Putin

Linguistically, *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin* superhumanizes Putin. For example, in the first show on September 2, 2018, when talking about the funeral of the prominent singer Iosif Kobzon, the talk show master Vladimir Solovyov states: „As I understand they have known each other for several years—it's hard to say that they have been friends—this is a category which is not very correct when speaking of the head of the state, but at least they talked very warmly.“⁹⁹ Hereby, the talk show host implies on the one hand that as a statesman Putin is supposed to keep his distance. On the other hand, Solovyov implicates that Putin cannot have friends because he is above all other people and therefore, inaccessible and unreachable. Another superhuman representation of President Putin in this show is that of him being extremely busy and of bearing more than normal persons. This representation is in particular created by showing Putin's attendants as less strong and resilient than the president. For example, the enthusiastic and young journalist Zarubin is asked by the moderator how he is still afoot after this busy week

⁹⁸ The original Russian statement has been translated into English by the author of the article: „Путин – это единственная хорошая новость и народ ее ждет, потому что если в новостях и в телевизионных других форматах есть Путин, то люди успокаиваются, и считают, что как Сталин на посту. Все идет как надо. Поэтому эта единственная хорошая новость будет присутствовать в концентрированном виде.“ *Chelovek iz televizora*. Broadcast on 8th September 2018. [online]. [2019-06-21]. Available at: <<https://echo.msk.ru/programs/personstv/2273690-echo/>>.

⁹⁹ The original Russian statement has been translated into English by the author of the article: „Ведь как я понимаю, много лет были знакомы и сложно говорить «дружили» - это такая категория не совсем корректной, когда речь идет о главе государства, но, по крайней мере, общались очень тепло.“ *Moskva.Kreml'.Putin*. (Full Video). Broadcast on 2nd September 2018. [online]. [2019-06-22]. Available at: <https://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/63170/episode_id/1901787/video_id/1963707/viewtype/picture/>.

and journey, after this literal „marathon“¹⁰⁰ with the president and the governor of the Tuvan republic is complaining in a video sequence that his feet are still hurting after the walking-tour with Putin. All these different utterances add to the image of Putin as a strong, healthy and virile person which is visually supported by showing him in single shots in the mountains, resembling somehow Indiana Jones (see Figure 6).



PICTURE 6: *Putin in the mountains*

Source: Moskva.Kreml'. Putin, Talk show, 02.09.2019

Despite that, the show creates both linguistically and visually a very human picture of Putin. For example, in the first broadcast the journalist Zarubin claims that contact with people is very important for the president. In the same broadcast the president's Press secretary Dmitry Peskov not only tells the viewers that Putin „reacts with great pain“ to such events as the death of Iosif Kobzon, but he also draws a parallel to the Soviet leader Lenin by claiming the following: „You know, Putin doesn't only love children. He generally loves people. He is a very human person.“¹⁰¹ In addition, this humanization of Putin is consistently illustrated visually in several broadcasts of the show by filming Putin in a group of workers, in a crowd of people and with children. Especially capturing Putin with children seems to be very prominent as this motif appears in nearly every examined broadcast of the show. But also the literature described representation of Putin with animals can be found in the show. For example, the broadcast of March 3, 2019 presents an archive video of Putin with a polar bear.

5.3.2 Linguistic and Visual Representations of Transitivity

The image of Putin as the busy leader of the country also belongs to the category of transitivity as Putin is shown travelling around and meeting with different people, presidents of other countries, etc., which also adds to his representation as a world leader and good networker. For example, in the broadcast of September 16, 2018, Putin is filmed drinking vodka and eating

¹⁰⁰ Zarubin himself compared the week of Putin with a marathon: „He очень понимаю, как выдерживается такой график, такой марафон!“ Moskva.Kreml'. Putin. (Full Video). Broadcast on 2nd September 2018. [online]. [2019-06-22].

¹⁰¹ The original Russian statement has been translated into English by the author of the article: „Вы знаете, Путин не только любит детей. Он вообще любит людей. Он очень человечный человек.“ Moskva.Kreml'. Putin. (Full Video). Broadcast on 2nd September 2018. [online]. [2019-06-22]. Available at: <https://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/63170/episode_id/1901787/video_id/1963707/viewtype/picture/>.

Russian pancakes with the Chinese president Xi Jinping. When Putin is shown meeting workers or talking to normal people in the streets, these images support the representation of Putin as an omniscient, watchful and caring leader as he seems to be present wherever and whenever needed throughout Russia.

It is difficult to imagine how Putin as a constantly working president can have a private life or free time. While the private life of the president is not addressed in the show and is still a taboo issue in the media, the question of free time is directly broached by Solovyov, who asks if Putin does not have weekends, which is immediately affirmed by the Press secretary. Nevertheless, Putin does find time for doing sports. Peskov, for example, tells the viewer that Putin does sports every day for about 1,5 hours.¹⁰² In the broadcast on February 17, 2019, Putin is shown playing ice hockey, doing judo and going skiing. This image perfectly fits into the representation of Putin as being busy and never stopping working because he has business meetings even while doing sports, for example with the Belorussian president Alexander Lukashenko.

Besides doing sports and being very active, Putin is also represented as loving and enjoying the Russian wilderness. For example, in the first broadcast he is filmed climbing a mountain, collecting mushrooms and cowberries, watching wild animals, etc. This is indeed a very romantic theme and these images contribute to the representation of Putin as loving and venerating Russian nature and wilderness, which in turn make him being the perfect president for this country.

Summing up, the talk show *Moskva.Kremli'.Putin* can be called a real image show which imitates and pretends the accessibility of the president and at the same time adds to the creation of the myth of the omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent leader.

6. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to analyze the image of the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, as communicated and transmitted by Russian television. For this purpose, three different TV formats on the two most prominent television channels in Russia were examined by using MCDA. Although similar representations of the president were found in all three TV programs, every format presents its „own“ image of the Russian head of state.

First, the news program *Vremia* transmits a very formal and functional image of Putin who guides the country, makes decisions and meets with important people. *Vremia* transmits the image of the ever working and busy Putin as he appears nearly every day in the news, sometimes in several news items during one broadcast. In accordance with Irina Petrovskaya (*Chelovek iz televizora*, 2018), who claimed that Putin in the news is the only good news, it could be added that the news items on Putin are often pseudo-news. For example, reports on his telephone calls with other politicians do often not inform the viewer about the content of the conversation, but only about the fact itself that the call has taken place.

Second, in the annual TV show *Priamaia Linia* there exists a similar image of Putin as in the news. Additionally, the show represents Putin as being above all others by staging him on a high platform in the center of the studio. At the same time, the camera shots and the presence of the studio audience create the image of Putin as omniscient president directly speaking to every individual at home and as president of the people. *Priamaia Linia* therefore is a perfect example of Putin's self-staging on television.

Third, in the weekly talk show *Moskva.Kremli'.Putin* president Putin is on the one hand superhumanized by creating the impression of constantly working, meeting with important people and bearing more than others. On the other hand, by showing Putin with children, in

¹⁰² *Moskva.Kremli'.Putin*. (Full Video). Broadcast on 2nd September 2018. [online]. [2019-06-22]. Available at: <https://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/63170/episode_id/1901787/video_id/1963707/viewtype/picture/>.

a crowd of people or wearing casual clothes, the show transports a very human image of the president and suggest his accessibility. Furthermore, the talk show also presents Putin as very active and sporty person, thus transporting the image of the physical strength and vitality of the president.

All of these visual representations of Putin on TV perfectly fit into the function of visual symbols in politics as described by Schill (2012). Especially the image-building function can be identified in the talk show *Moskva.Kremľ'.Putin* and hence, this show can be called an image show of the Russian president. The findings also reveal that there do exist various and diverse images on Putin, as for example Goscilo (2013) has stated. The variety of Putin images, however, only exists when taking into consideration all his representations, from portraits, caricatures to music videos, and souvenir products.

Although every TV format presents its „own“ image of Putin, all these images resemble, complete and even repeat each other by showing him as a busy, hard-working, superhuman, omnipresent, omnipotent, caring and human person. Therefore, these images could all be claimed to be different sides of the same coin: First, Putin is a statesman and for this reason he is a distant and unreachable person. Second, he is a person of authority, especially for his subordinate officials and ministers. These two images of Putin become most evident in the news program *Vremia* as well as in the *Priamaia Linia*. While the news transmits an inaccessible and distant Putin, the *Priamaia Linia* once a year creates the illusion of intimacy with and accessibility of the president. In line with his accessibility is Putin's portrayal as a very human person. This image of the human Putin is best transmitted in the new talk show *Moskva.Kremľ'.Putin*. By showing him with children, animals or doing sports, the new talk show tells the viewer that Putin is an ordinary human being like everyone else, fulfilling thereby the identification function. At the same time, the new talk show also presents Putin as an extraordinary person above all others. By showing him travelling around, meeting important people and dedicating his whole life to politics and the state, the image of the superhuman Putin as an extremely busy person is established. This image is also increased by presenting Putin as a strong, virile and active man in the Russian nature and wilderness.

The overall image of Putin as established both on TV and by other media forms is twofold: On the one hand, it fulfills the want of a tough, reputable and competent state leader, as for example in the news broadcast or in *Priamaia linia*. On the other hand, the new talk show or gadgets, puppets, and other consumer products with Putin's images deliver the portrayal of a masculine, modern and entertaining representative of the Russian state, meeting the demand of today's consumer and pop culture. It is all these images together which add to the superhuman image of Putin, which mystify him and make him inaccessible and unreachable like a movie star or even a God. The new talk show and recently *Priamaia Linia* sometimes try to balance this image of Putin as a hero by placing him visually on the same level as the public and the people. At the same time, by staging him on a platform or by showing him as a busy and ever working president, they also transmit the superhuman image. Russian television thereby oscillates between two poles—Putin as the human and Putin as the hero. However, this is probably not only a characteristic of Russia, but of representations of state leaders as a whole, who can be even more godlike as for example dictators, or more human as for example some presidents of European countries.

6.1 Limitations

Although three TV programs on the two most important channels in Russia have been analyzed, the current study did not consider other TV channels or programs. Moreover, the analysis presents only an extract of the visual representation of Putin, focusing primarily on his fourth

period as President of Russia in 2018 and 2019. However, by analyzing several broadcasts of three different TV formats, the current study tries to overcome these limitations as it analyzes three programs differing in the time of broadcast on Russian television: *Vremia* is a well-established news program which had already started broadcasting in Soviet times. *Priamaia Linia* is a program which existed since Putin's first year of presidency and the talk show *Moskva. Kremi'. Putin.* is a very new TV program, which is broadcasted since his fourth term of presidency. Thus, the current study covers not only three different TV programs on two channels, but also three programs differing in the moment of their first broadcast.

6.2 Implications

The current study illustrates that the visual staging of Putin, for example in *Vremia* or *Priamaia Linia*, implies that he is the leader of the country by positioning him at the top of the table, symbolizing the vertical of power or resembling a tsar sitting on a throne. Therefore, being more attentive to the visual cannot only provide further information about a politician, but it also discloses how implicitly images work on television. As TV is foremost a visual medium, the visuals often transmit their own messages, which, as stated at the beginning of this article, stay very easily in the mind. However, TV is not the only medium working with pictures and it seems that visuals have become even more important today to which testifies the emergence of social media. A recent example of the importance of pictures can be drawn from the new occupational area of so-called „influencers“, who primarily work and „influence“ people by spreading perfectly staged pictures of themselves on social networks. Politicians, too, use social media to represent themselves and to be continuously present in the mind of people in order to persuade people to vote for them. The success of this strategy is demonstrated, for example, by the electoral success of the new President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, who conducted his election campaign in 2019 mainly via social media. Letting people take part in politicians life and thus, getting closer to the people, is maybe one reason for the success and importance of visuals in politics today. Although Vladimir Putin is not as present in social media as other politicians and doesn't provide people the opportunity to take part in his (private) life, the new talk show *Moskva. Kremi'. Putin* and *Priamaia Linia* try to simulate an intimate atmosphere and to make the president more accessible by using several media techniques.

The current study reveals some of these techniques and it illustrates that all visual representations and arrangements do convey a certain message. Therefore, being visually literate and aware of (visual) media strategies helps on the one hand to be more resistant to the manipulation of the images and on the other hand, it unveils visual communication strategies which otherwise would have been taken for granted.

6.3 Future directions

Although the present analysis tried to point out some interplays of visual and verbal elements, future research could focus more on their specific function and interaction. Furthermore, it would be interesting to analyze the visual portrayal of Putin on non-state TV channels, for example on the Internet channel *Dozhd'*, and carve out possible differences to the representation on state channels. Besides television, future research should also consider other media formats, for example, Instagram or Twitter, as these social media platforms play a crucial role in today's politics.

7. Conclusion

The current study shows that visual representations of Putin on television play a central role in the creation of his image. The analysis of three different TV formats revealed that the representations of Putin on TV always communicate between two different poles: On the one hand, Putin as the superhuman, ever working, omnipresent and busy statesman and on the other hand, Putin as a human, caring and accessible person. The image of Putin on television thereby includes both persons: the human and the superhuman hero. The reason for this duality could be the following: As a politician, Putin depends on votes and on acceptance within the Russian population. Therefore, the image of Putin as an accessible and ordinary human being is important to win the confidence of the people and to help them to identify with him. As the president and highest representative of the Russian state, the image of Putin has also to be the one of a tough, resilient, strong and masculine person, who can bear more than others can. Thus, the mythical image is crucial to communicate that Putin is the right person to guide the country and that he is unapproachable. The combination and variation of these two opposing images, the hearty and human as well as the distant and superhuman, are dominant on state television and the transmission of which finally depends on the TV format itself.

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