CHAPTER ELEVEN

RE-IMAGINING THE PRIMAL LEADER: VLADIMIR PUTIN AND THE RHIZOMATIC EMERGENCE OF THE "NEW" RUSSIAN LEADERSHIP

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Lookin' out across this town,
Kind o' makes me wonder how,
All the things that made us great,
Got left so far behind.

This used to be a peaceful place:
Decent folks, hard-working ways.
Now they hide behind locked doors,
Afraid to speak their mind.

I think we need a gunslinger,
Somebody tough to tame this town.
I think we need a gunslinger,
There'll be justice all around.

John Fogerty: *Gunslinger* (2007)

Introduction

Critical times give rise to charismatic leadership (Weber 1947). Leadership is important because it infuses purpose and meaning into the lives of individuals (Podolny, Khurana, and Hill-Popper 2004). When it comes to leader characteristics, credibility is a key ingredient of authority (Tourish 2013, 14), as the role of the leader is to explain the crisis

(Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch 2002) and provide meaning for suffering and chaos (Frankl 1985; Nietzsche 1999; Weber 1947). Thus, the leader is the one that brings about or re-creates harmony in a disrupted system (Islam 2009).

The President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, is one of the most controversial leader figures in our contemporary media sphere. His devotees worship him for his strong actions in Georgia, Crimea and Ukraine, endowing him with authority and charisma. His adversaries depict him as a defiant yet crafty character with questionable personal motives. The leader image of Putin is a worthy research subject due to its stark contrast with the contemporary Western view of contractual governance and shared leadership styles. In practice, this means that recent Russian politico-military actions spearheaded by the Kremlin fundamentally run counter to the European understanding of how political leadership should operate in the contemporary socio-economic context.

To Western audiences, accustomed to the liberal democratic arguments and predominantly NATO narratives of the new Russian “truth”, the current Kremlin narrative of force, threat and fear is very alarming. European nations have recently become cognisant of the fact that the Russian leadership does not share the Western values or “rules” of political manoeuvring – making it a potential security threat for the West. What the West may easily view as the “charismatisation” of information, culture and money is an integral part of the Kremlin’s vision for 21st-century “hybrid” or “non-linear” power politics: there is a tendency to blur the lines between Western and Eastern values (Galeotti 2013). This has caught the slumbering Western countries by surprise: their collective imagination has concentrated on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the “victory” of Western ideology and the wake-up call has been traumatic, to a varying degree. Unsurprisingly, the deepest concerns have revolved around economic issues.

In this chapter, we discuss the emergence of leadership at a controversial crossroads of different socio-politico-historical contexts. In our contemporary age, characterised by a global flow of information, leadership can be seen to take on new forms. The dominant Anglo-American reading of leadership is challenged by new – or, rather, age-old – readings that derive their premises from other cultural contexts. What is new here is that the rapid global flow of information facilitates the possibility of various leadership images being disseminated from one

cultural context to another, or even generating new forms. Strong and masculine “primal” leadership evokes mostly loathing and ridicule in the West. However, as insinuated by some media sources, hidden support for Putin’s leadership style also occurs within the European political parties. Putinism is everything that American social reactionaries, Australian anarchists, British anti-imperialists and Hungarian neo-Nazis want leadership to be (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014) – leaders not only speak to their own domestic audiences but also to global ones. Instant online arguments crisscrossing between the mass media and social media debate the image of a leader.

Hence, this chapter focusses on the leader image. We track how the leader persona, leadership style and leader actions constitute and contribute to the emergence of this image. However, various leader images can be interpreted in radically different ways. Therefore, we ask *why* and *how* a leader image invites such polarised interpretations and what the theoretical implications of this heterogeneity of leadership interpretations are. To achieve this, we focus on the case of Putin; on why charismatic leadership is attributed to him in the global media and how this charismatic reading thrives even when his leadership actions and styles are regarded as “unwanted” or “unethical”, according to the Western mainstream ideal of shared and democratised leadership.

We establish this by tracking the emergence of the Putin administration in Russia, highlighting the events that facilitated the infusion of charisma into his person. We build our research narrative using media and scholarly texts discussing Putin, his leadership and the global and Russian political evolution. Our method is narrative analysis (Polkinghorne 1995; Czarniawska 1999), while our data consist of actions, events and arguments published in the scholarly and popular press. The result of our analysis is a story. Our story is presented as a research narrative, where we unveil our reading of the reasons for the tension between Putin’s primal leadership image and its Western interpretations.

Moreover, we discuss “Russian charisma”, adopting what Alvesson et al. (2008) call a “positioning reflexive practice”. This implies that we are exploring the broader social landscape within which our research is positioned. We illustrate networks of beliefs, practices and interests that make up the different, often competing, leadership interpretations. To this end, we show the heterogeneity of leadership interpretations using the theoretical concept of the “rhizome” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). We also

argue that the various leadership interpretations are further escalated in a Manichaean contrasting of the cultures, values and aspirations of the global media scene. Concluding remarks on Putin's leadership and contemporary Russia will bring this chapter to a close.

Charisma and the rhizome

The research on charismatic leadership shows that there is no universal "charismatic behaviour" (Conger 2013, 377). In different cultural systems, different behaviours are perceived as charismatic (Lian et al. 2011), and perceptive leaders may learn to use the cultural cues of their own cultural sphere to their benefit (Willner 1984; Gardner and Avolio 1998). Charisma can appear in the form of the "soft and resolute leadership" of Mahatma Gandhi, but also as "strong and energetic", as personified by Vladimir Putin.

In other words, a leader is not charismatic unless described by their followers as such (House, Spangler and Woycke 1991). Rather, charismatic leadership is an attribution based on the followers' perception of their leader's behaviour (Conger and Kanungo 1987; Conger and Kanungo 1998). Shamir (1995) describes charismatic leaders as embodying the core values of the groups, organisations, or societies they represent, promoting follower identification. Willner (1984) identified four factors which, aided by the leader's personality, appeared to be catalytic in the attribution of charisma to a leader: 1) the invocation of important cultural myths by the leader, 2) the performance of what was perceived as heroic or extraordinary feats, 3) the projection of attributions "with an uncanny or a powerful aura", and 4) outstanding rhetorical skills. Followers identify with a leader who is deemed charismatic, and willingly comply with the leader's expectations. Gardner and Avolio (1998) argue that the leader essentially seeks to construct a charismatic identity that he or she believes will be valued by those he or she targets as followers. Meindl (1990) proposed that followers will influence one another in the very process of attributing charisma to their leader through a model of social contagion.

In the context of leadership, Grint (2005, 1490) points out that

> the appearance of the wooden horse outside the walls of Troy did not require the Trojans to bring the horse inside the wall; they chose to do it. This assertion of the role of choice in the hands of leaders does not imply that leaders are free to do whatever they want but neither are they determined in their actions by the situations they find themselves in.

Therefore, it should be highlighted that it is not the charisma of the leader that is making people commit to certain agendas or actions. Rather, the leader depicts, characterises, manifests and explains the values and cultures of the collectives and societies s/he leads. In the leader, the collective recognises and identifies the characteristics it considers meaningful and precious – as something worth preserving and protecting. The struggle for the top position in a collective is a struggle for meaning, for a hegemonic position whereby one can interpret the collective: its history and future, its aspirations and fears. Yet, in our modern, networked global society, the leadership message can no longer be targeted solely at primary members of the collective, as other external parties, both neutral, supportive, and malicious, will also participate in making meaning vis-à-vis leaders as well as the issues at hand. This is particularly salient in the media sphere, where we can see the distinctive return of the propaganda of what is right and wrong (consider, for instance, the downing of the Russian fighter jet by Turkey and the discourse surrounding it in November 2015).

In the contemporary, post-modern Western world charismatic leadership could be better understood through the metaphor of the *rhizome* (Deleuze and Guattari 1983; for the main differences between hierarchical and rhizomatic systems, see also Glezos 2012). Deleuze and Guattari use the terms "rhizome" and "rhizomatic" to describe the non-hierarchical organisation. According to their conceptualisation, any point on a rhizome can be connected with any other. A rhizome can be cracked and broken at any point, but it starts growing again on one or more of its old lines, or on new ones. As the writers point out, "[w]e have no units of measure, but only multiplicities or varieties of measure" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 15).

All things considered, the Internet can ostensibly be seen as being based on the idea of the rhizome. The rhizome resists the organisational structure of the root-tree system, which charts causality along chronological lines, looking for the original source of "things" and towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those "things". The rhizome presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin or genesis, for a "rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle and between things". The planar movement of the rhizome resists chronology and organisation, favouring instead a nomadic system of growth and propagation. Rhizomes are underground formations that have no given direction of growth but are "simply" manifested:

> becoming is an intransitive verb in that it has meaning without needing to take an object – it is possible just to become, not simply to become something. This processual view recognizes that becoming has "a consistency all of its own"; it does not reduce to, or lead back to (Linstead and Pullen 2006, 1289).

Thus, we view leadership as emerging from the "soil" of social reality. The charisma of a leader has to be well aligned with the conditions presupposed by this ground – only certain organisms will find favour and flourish in certain conditions.

In the next section, we will describe how Vladimir Putin rose to power, how his persona and actions satisfy the societal needs of the Russian population, as well as how they have become an essential part of Putin's leadership image.

The re-establishment of the Empire: Vladimir Putin's rise to power

At the present time, Vladimir Putin's position at the pinnacle of Russian power is undisputed, and his popularity among the Russian population has been growing apace, peaking at 89% in June 2015 (Nardelli, Rankin, and Arnett 2015). His leadership is further legitimised by the Russian Church, whose leader, patriarch Kirill, has called Putin a "miracle from God", who rectified the "crooked path of history" (Tschudi 2014). This statement is interesting, especially considering that the word "charisma" originally referred to divinely conferred power (Conger 2013).[1]

Another example of Putin's current dominance was encapsulated in the words of businessman Gennady Timchenko (a dual Russian-Finnish citizen whose net worth is estimated to be in the region of 12 to 16 billion US dollars), who stated in an interview in 2014: "If necessary, I am willing to hand all my assets to the state" (Rusgate.fi 2014). Arguably, Putin's strong position and popularity have emerged at least partly as a result of his success – he was the leader who wrested control over the key assets of Russia and returned them to the state. So far, he has been victorious in his major exploits, which has legitimised his position as the leader of the nation. Putin's leadership image is a combination of militaristic, technocratic and paternalistic elements (Priestland 2012).

Analogies are often drawn between Putin's leadership and historical strongman leaders of Russia, from Ivan the Terrible to Peter the Great and

Joseph Stalin. Yet, to understand how Putin's leadership came to be, we have to return to the era preceding his rise to power. One of the biggest events of the 20th century was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The evanescence of the former superpower has been a traumatic experience for Russians and the nation has been seeking absolution from it ever since. During the time of the collapse, Russia was led by the reformist Mikhail Gorbachev. He sought to dismantle the old, rigid communist administration that was constraining the economic development of the nation. Gorbachev was well liked in the West, as his leadership image and style were in stark contrast to the old communist guard, especially that of Brezhnev. Gorbachev's ideas of "perestroika" and "glasnost" struck a chord with Western audiences,[2] and his leadership style was perceived to be analogous with Western values. He shunned the military and strove to enhance economic growth (Priestland 2012). On the home front, Gorbachev's objectives were perceived as too radical among his political adversaries. The failed coup attempt of August 1991 resulted in the final lowering of the Soviet red flag from the Kremlin and the emergence of Boris Yeltsin as the leader of the newly formed state of Russia.

Yeltsin's era was characterised by economic chaos and a collective revelation of Soviet-era hubris. The state's degradation resulted in the rise of the oligarchs: the unscrupulous businessmen who amassed personal fortunes during the "overnight" privatisation of the state corporations of the communist era. The oligarchs of the 1990s are reminiscent of the "robber barons" of the US during the latter half of the 19th century (for a classic study of the US power elite, see Mills 1956). For example, in the US people such as Andrew Carnegie and J. P. Morgan amassed huge fortunes while simultaneously wielding considerable political power in the country (Bridges 1958). To illustrate their relative financial and political power, it was only after Morgan's death in 1913 that the United States Federal Reserve System was founded, so that urgently needed financial bail-outs would not have to be arranged through networks of private businessmen (Chernow 1990). No wonder that the Russian business environment was sometimes referred to as the "Wild East" during the late 1990s (Sebenius 1999).

For ordinary citizens, this era marked a deep economic downturn; life expectancy dipped rapidly, and governmental wages and pensions became almost negligible. The feared and hated oligarchs and their thugs were seen as abusing the system and prospering from it. They transferred huge fortunes overseas and promoted lifestyles reminiscent of the Russian

aristocrats of the 19th century. The humiliation of the Russian nation peaked with a defeat in the first Chechen War (1994-1996). Even the army, which had once saved the nation from German fascists, was foundering. The general discontent resulted in Yeltsin almost losing out in the presidential elections to communist Zyuganov in 1996. Only with the financial support of the oligarchs was Yeltsin able to hold onto his position (Priestland 2012, 229). Nor did the situation improve, as the global economic instability drove the Russian economy into turmoil. The seven-year era of wild capitalism ended in the collapse of the Russian economy in August 1998. Russia was devastated militarily, economically, and spiritually.

It was out of this context that Vladimir Putin emerged in Russian national politics. The sudden appearance of a previously obscure figure in the political limelight surprised many observers at the time. Boris Yeltsin invited Putin onto the stage and made him his war chief in a new war against the Chechens. Putin was, and still is, a *silovik*, which translates as "man of force", a term used to describe former members of the KGB, military or police with nationalistic tendencies (Dmitriev 2015). Putin's training and tenure within Soviet intelligence circles are used by commentators to link the Russian leader to qualities such as shrewd intelligence, warlike brutishness and a hard-nosed, unsentimental view of the world (Priestland 2012, 230).

In keeping with such a view, life in an intelligence organisation not only accustoms one to working in a bureaucratised environment, but also indoctrinates one with a totalitarian, zero-sum game worldview. Moreover, it teaches one to value information and reconnaissance. Putin's authoritarian leadership style enforces hierarchical thinking and centralized decision-making. In Russia, this is seen as a sign of strength: newspaper articles typically emphasise how a certain decision comes straight from Putin (see reporting on the destruction of imported food, Kramer 2015).

It was thus on the military front where Putin notched up his first wins. During the second Chechen war, he played the part of a vindictive hero who was "out to get" the terrorists, using even brasher rhetoric than his peer George W. Bush after 9/11 (Eichler 2012). Putin came across as someone who would avenge the collective shame resulting from the loss of the first Chechen war. Yet during this era, Putin also had sympathisers in the West, which was recuperating from a surge in attacks by Al-Qaeda.

Still, criticism abounded towards the war crimes and other atrocities perpetrated in Chechnya during the war. The second Chechen war ended more successfully for the Russians and was considered a victory. The redemption of the Russian army had begun.

After this phase, Putin turned his attention towards the oligarchs (Filipov 2000), duly wresting the control of the Russian media, especially the television networks, from the oligarchs Berezovsky and Gusinsky. The power of the oligarchs consequently dwindled – many of them went into exile, some to prison (Khodorkovsky), while the rest succumbed to Putin's power. After excelling in war, Putin subsequently concentrated on putting the national economy in order and succeeded on this front as well. The rise in oil prices occurred mainly due to the global economic growth, originating in particular from the rise of China (*Review of Issues Affecting the Price of Crude Oil*, 2010, 7), but the Kremlin had no qualms about taking the credit for it. Nonetheless, a substantial part of the wealth increase has been distributed to the general public with rises in governmental wages and pensions.

With the aid of the media, Putin has been depicted as a protector and father of the nation, and the paternalistic elements in his leadership image have been emphasised. A pop song depicting Vladimir Putin as the ideal husband for Russian women was a hit in 2002; it was later used by the man himself as a political anthem.[3] The rugged masculine media images showing Putin engaged in various sports and outdoor activities continue to baffle Western audiences. In the West, such imagery would be expected of a movie star but not from a politician.[4] Yet, among the general Russian public such imagery seems to have the desired effect. Putin's actions are seen as leading Russia back to glory, which has been further supported by the increase in the oil price during the early 21st century (Meyer, Lovasz, and Pismennaya 2014). Hence, Putin has excelled in all sectors he has focussed on: he has won wars, knocked the economy into shape, reined in the oligarchs, made sure that ordinary citizens get their paychecks on time, and provided the nation with both success and entertainment (namely the Winter Olympics in 2014, and the football World Cup in 2018). In other words, he has been on a path to restore the lost reputation of the Soviet Union/Russia as a global superpower. This track record has made him a winner – and who would not want to follow a winner?

Next, we turn our attention to the Russian cultural landscape and ponder whether it gives rise to genuinely different leadership compared with the West.

"New" Russian leadership – a combination of the mythical and the contemporary

The Soviet leader Joseph Stalin commissioned the acclaimed director Sergei Eisenstein to film the story of a well-known Russian tsar, Ivan the Terrible (1945; 1958). Rumour even has it that Stalin co-directed some sections, as showing the hard-handed tsar as a "dire Father of the Nation" was in his immediate interests. For Stalin, Ivan represented an allusion to himself as the agent of necessity: reforming the country and protecting it from its internal and external foes. In Stalin's understanding, decades of Stalinist terror would be comparable to Ivan's campaigns against the scheming hedonistic and materialistic boyars (nobles).

In the contemporary political-leadership talk, it is often forgotten that this is the cultural and historical landscape that the Russian population is acculturated into understanding – subconsciously or at least semi-automatically. Such leader images of Ivan ("the Terrible") and Stalin ("Man of Steel"), that for the average Western intellectual embody strangling oppression and systematic terror, represent stern father figures in the minds of millions of Russians. It is a culture in which compromise is regarded as a sign of weakness (Richmond 2009, 126). Contributors to these kinds of cultural characteristics are many, and the webs of causality regarding them complex, but what is essential to note here is that failure to understand these characteristics leads Western analysts to superficially single out the distinctive characteristics of Russian leadership. This easily leads to seeing their actions as being simply "barbarous".

When it comes to contemporary political leadership, what seems "characteristically Russian", "oriental" or even "barbaric" in Western eyes is, in fact, merely the public side, or the visible "shop window", of the completely logical and coherent actions of the Kremlin. Beneath the surface of such actions lies a hidden (in fact, not-so-hidden) vision – the expansion of Russia's power on the Eurasian continent. In pursuing this, Moscow is not different from its counterparts in Washington, Beijing or Brussels. This is simply something power elites do – they maintain, solidify and expand their power. Failing to understand this is either a conscious lie designed to mask the *Western* pursuit of power, especially in

the former Warsaw Pact countries, or a sign of ignorant lack of reflection. Neither of these alternatives is flattering to the Western governments that tell their citizens and the world that they are defending "humanitarian values", "openness" and "democracy". Perhaps the prime examples of this double standard are the two massive and ongoing expeditionary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, "peace-keeping" operations in Africa, as well as the bombing campaigns of Libya and Syria.

There are, undoubtedly, fundamental differences in how leadership "works" in these two contexts. (Here, we would like to note that there is arguably a qualitative difference between Western and Russian values). What is missing is a more nuanced explanation of this, providing that there is one in the first place. Is Russia simply experiencing a phase in its socio-cultural development, or are there fundamental, irrevocable cultural "deep structures" (à la Lévi-Strauss 1967)?

There are remarkable differences in the Russian vis-à-vis the Western understanding of leadership. The leader under study, Putin, is illuminating in this sense as well. Since coming to power, he has been portrayed as a "hard man" from the streets of Soviet-era Leningrad. Among his first duties as prime minister and acting president was leading Russia in the Second Chechen War, ending the decade-long independence of the spin-off Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (1991-2000) in the Northern Caucasus. In the course of this war, Putin earned a tough reputation for himself with his relentless measures against the "bandits", vowing to "whack" them in the "outhouse", if necessary (Camus 2006; Tisdall 2006). His consequent success and soaring approval rating confirmed that this war-like rhetoric was to the liking of the Russian population, largely wallowing in apathy after a decade of economic turmoil and the rise of the oligarchs that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. In a similar fashion in the US, President Bush's media talks became more charismatic and his popularity increased after the 9/11 attacks (Bligh, Kohles and Meindl 2004). Throughout history, rulers have used external threats and war to deflect attention away from their nation's internal problems.[5]

We argue, however, that Putin's leadership image is constructed as a combination of new and old, traditional and contemporary, global and locally Russian. In actual fact, it seems that his leadership mythology as the "hard man" of Russia is constructed and narrated to appeal to the largest possible proportion of Russian citizens. In this regard, he radically departs from his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, who was known to be an out-

going and sociable person who was not averse to a drink. Putin, for his part, is known as an "intelligence officer" and a "thug" who practised judo and would later become an agent in the ranks of the KGB, acting as the head of the FSB (the successor organisation of the KGB) prior to his first term as prime minister.

Western observers recognise the same elements that comprise Putin's leadership image, but typically attach a different meaning to them. Clearly, Putin does not fit the contemporary Western ideal of a good leader, representing something "primal" instead. Western observers link Putin's leader habitus to something they have seen either in museums in pictures of ancient kings and tribal chiefs, or in films portraying historical or mythical leaders. The masculine imagery hints at physical force and violence. Putin has been caught lying several times during his tenure.[6] In the West, such behaviour would be scandalous, inviting public pressure for a politician to resign. In Russia, it implies that the leader is crafty. For example, Lt. Gen. Fredrik B. Hodges, the commander of the US Army Europe, stated in the *Wall Street Journal* (Ahmari 2015):

> They're not burdened with the responsibility to tell the truth. So they just hammer away, and whenever somebody in the West puts out a blog or a tweet, there's an immediate counterattack by these trolls.

The generic Western view of Putin has progressed during his reign from curious (Who is this guy?), to rather neutral (He is exotic!), to antagonistic (He is a threat!). It was only after Western and Russian interests visibly clashed that the media began depicting Putin as a sort of arch-villain, reminiscent of the characters in superhero comics. A major turn was the war against Georgia in 2008 and the new propagandist imagery that emerged in the same year and further escalated during the ongoing Ukrainian crisis that erupted in 2014. Currently, Putin is one of the focal leaders featured in the Western press. The Russian political agency is attributed to his person, which – most probably – is a simplification, despite his authoritative position in the Kremlin.[7] No leader leads alone (Gronn 2002).

Western myopia in treating Russia as fundamentally different and in a way "detached" from the global community stems largely from difficulties in translation. We argue that these difficulties are both cultural and linguistic; particularly the former should be taken more seriously, as it is harder to overcome. Take, for instance, the course of events after the collapse of the

twin towers in New York in 2001. When the US regime headed by George W. Bush attacked Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, they claimed to be defending "democracy", "freedom" and "human rights", despite basing their actions on weak, non-existent or inherently doubtful evidence and intelligence data. When the regime in the Kremlin attacked Chechnya in 1999, Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, they used similar language, as well as similarly dubious evidence. Take, for example, the alleged FSB involvement in the Russian apartment bombings of 1999 and their role as the *casus belli* for Russia entering the Second Chechen War (for an extensive treatment of the subject, see Dunlop 2014).

Differences between these two characters are largely rhetorical. Whereas Bush emphasised the role of the revered values of the American people, as well as the importance of establishing American hegemony in the Middle East, Putin emphasised the need to restore Russia's power over its immediate geo-political sphere of influence along the lines of restoring the "lost Empire". In this light, Putin's expeditions seem much more contained than those of Bush and Blair – the post-1999 Kremlin regime has only intervened militarily in the immediate backyard of Russia (with the notable exception of bombing the Syrian rebels), whereas the US and its allies are operating around the globe.

Yet the Western audience sees Putin's leadership differently. It addresses elements that people clearly link with leadership, yet feel have become politically incorrect and reprehensible. The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the era of Mikhail Gorbachev had suggested that the claim made by Francis Fukuyama in his bestselling *The End of History* (1992) would ring true. Fukuyama's argument was that the war between ideologies was over and that liberal democracy had prevailed. This prognosis pacified Western commentators. It supported the claim that their value base was "right" and would win in the end. If some dictators happened to be lingering somewhere in the developing world, it would only be a matter of time before democracy would prevail.

The case of Russia falsifies this claim: Russian democracy is a mockery, and Putin is like Napoleon, the emperor who took over the bickering factions after the revolution. The recent development of China is also challenging the prognosis issued by Fukuyama – who himself has abandoned his previous claim (Fukuyama 2011) – yet China does not have a similar leading figurehead who would personify the different ideological basis underlying the political order. It is no wonder that the European

extreme right-wing parties are fascinated by Putin. For them, he represents a masculine, no-frills leader, who gets to say what he wants and who achieves what he undertakes. In Russian political rhetoric, "fascists" pose the biggest historical threat to Russia (this rhetoric invokes the great Russian myth of World War II and the victorious Red Army that defeated Nazi Germany), yet it is the Western rightists who associate their ethos with Putin's leadership. In this light, it is also highly illuminating to consider Donald Trump's early successes in his 2016 US presidential campaign: strong, populist rhetoric blaming others attracts both headlines and followers.

Of course, all this does not mean that the expansion of one's hegemony would be "OK" by any mainstream ethical means.[8] Apart from strategy, the case of the "new" Russian leadership is intriguing at the tactical level as well. As observant readers and commentators may have noticed, Russia has been increasingly active in the media sphere, in social media in particular. In the course of recent unfolding events, Russia-linked "Internet trolls" have employed a set of tactics that seem aggressive, foreign and disturbing to many Western audiences (Sindelar 2014). This Russian discursive tactic of persistent denial and overturning opposing information is a well-known and traditionally used tool in the Russian palette of techniques, successfully implemented as early as the 1920s by the Red Army in the aftermath of the Russian Civil War (Bergman 1927). While "civilised Western intellectuals" might disagree with the wording and precise emphasis on various politically debatable subjects, at the strategic level, however, Russia is doing exactly the same as the West in its own expeditionary wars in the Middle East – securing its interests and expanding its power.

In the next section, we delve into the contemporary readings of Putin's regime and leadership. The media creates a rhizomatic meaning space, where multiple interpretations – supportive, neutral and antagonistic – are applied to promote certain "truths". The leader character has become a focal arena in the contest of meanings in the ongoing hybrid warfare, fought especially in the media and on the Internet.

Quo vadis, Russia?

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO and most of the European countries adopted the premise that massive land-based warfare was a thing of the past. The idea was that economically developed nation states would

not start traditional wars against each other. The discourse of the last 15 years has been mostly dominated by the experiences of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As the Ukrainian crisis began, the need to create a new concept for warfare appeared, namely that of hybrid war. *Hybrid warfare* incorporates and combines a full range of different modes of threatening action, applying military, political, economic and cultural means (Hoffman 2007). The clandestine and asymmetrical intrusion into Ukraine, orchestrated by the Kremlin using unconventional techniques, warranted the term "hybrid war" in the West.

According to Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman nominee, General Joseph Dunford, Russia poses the greatest threat to the US (Lamothe 2015). The continuous and vocal statements emanating from the Russian side have made it apparent to the West that there is an increasingly widening gap between Russia and the West. One of the many ideological voices is Alexandr Dugin (2012, 30); according to him, many Russians intuitively understand that Russia has no place in the "liberal, postmodern and individual" world. In addition, the challenges and problems surrounding the neoliberal economic and post-industrial process increase their antagonistic attitude towards Western values. Recently, Putin himself questioned the nobility of the Western interest in helping Greece through its economic difficulties (Where Was EU When Greek Crisis Was Evolving?, 2015). Hence, the Russians have to seek alternative fundaments for their lives. A rather preposterous practical example of this ideological rift was the order of the Kremlin order to destroy food imported from the West in front of Russian people (Kramer 2015). In response to the perceived deficiencies in the Russian identity, the Kremlin has resorted to using military force in its attempt to regain the status of the "great old days" (in this regard, see Sperling 2014). The display of strong leadership also serves the purpose of re-establishing the lost empire.

Moreover, the Kremlin has systematically centralised and taken control of nearly all of the Russian media, especially television. Approximately 90% of Russian citizens get their news via television broadcasts. Hence, Putin has an enormous opportunity to broadcast his message into the homes of ordinary Russians (Naím 2015). The Kremlin has managed to create an atmosphere of paranoia and nationalism against the West, and the Western media in particular. For instance, the so-called Project Network is designed to encourage young people to support the Kremlin's brand of politics (*Silencing Dissent in Russia: Putin's Propaganda Machine* 2015). Dugin's (2014, 6) main idea is that the Russian lifestyle integrating

religion, i.e. the Russian Orthodox Church, Soviet-style industriousness and an upright, honest administration constitutes a fundamental alternative to the Western rational-liberal – and decadent – way of thinking. Dugin's propagandist argument is that the West has lost its faith. His projection of holiness onto Putin is reminiscent of Heidegger's belief that Hitler represented the light in the dark modern world of the 1930s (Farías 1989).

Since 2000, Putin has used international conflicts to send a clear message about the perceived threats to the Russian civilisation. For example, he sees the Rose Revolution in Georgia, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine as direct attacks orchestrated by the United States and the EU against Russia. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and invaded Eastern Ukraine (see Beck 2015). Putin has shown that he is both willing and able to use the military as an instrument of strong Russian politics, as well as an integrated part of his leadership.

Why do the Russian people continue to support the militarised politics of the Kremlin, despite the fact that they are aware of their deteriorating economic situation? The actions of the Kremlin in Ukraine are unable to benefit the Russian people, and are unable to deliver on the promises that have been made. For example, during 2014, the rouble lost 40% of its value in relation to the euro, and food prices rose significantly (Naím 2015). The Kremlin has had to deploy massive resources to bail out some of the nation's largest companies and banks. The Russian credit rating has diminished. The continuing conflict with Ukraine may lead to more sanctions and isolation from the international community. All this begs the question of how and why the Russian leadership is able to remain in power. Is the answer simple nationalism, or is the situation more nuanced than this?

One of the key narratives of the Russian population is their faith in strong leadership. To prove its right to rule, the Kremlin must lean on Putin's persona and secure a positive development of the global oil and gas market. The charismatic leader also plays a game of expectations. The dominant Western powers try diplomacy in the first instance and beg Him – Putin – to act their way. Both sides are eager to raise expectations (for further commentary, see Turner 2011), a situation that can become routinised as we have seen during the Ukrainian crisis. The West also uses these Russian narratives in counter-propaganda. According to NATO, the Kremlin's main narrative includes several dominant themes (2014),

> positioning Russian Slavic Orthodox Civilisation in opposition to “decadent” Europe; positioning Ukraine as integral to Eurasianism and the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union; promoting the Russian World which unites Eastern Slavs, implies that Russians and Ukrainians are one nation, and recognizes the natural supremacy of Russia; portraying Ukrainians as a pseudo-nation who are unable to administer their own country and sustain their statehood; referring to the Great Patriotic War thus bringing out the hatred of Nazism and relating it to the Euromaidan protesters who are labelled as nationalists, Nazis and fascists posing a threat to the ethnically Russian part of Ukraine’s population; dividing the West by utilising the differing interests of EU member states and positioning the USA in opposition to the EU; and using legal and historic justifications to legitimize Russia’s actions in Ukraine (including the Crimea Referendum).

The arguments and counterarguments serve to evoke deeper mutual distrust. By the same token, this bifurcated process increases Putin’s charisma among his supporters and makes him appear more dangerous in the eyes of his adversaries. The arguments and counterarguments circulating in the media daily also serve to increase insecurity and ambivalence between the Russian-speaking population and other nationalities.

Instead of being taken seriously or regarded as an equal partner, Russia is perceived in the West as a backward and underdeveloped but increasingly dangerous, militaristic country (Müller 2012, 290). All this merely plays into the hands of the Russian public opinion preferred by the Kremlin: Russians can deride the West for its false assumptions. The case of Guantánamo, and the killing of the black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 serve to validate Russian attitudes against the West, and fuel their aggressive resolve to pursue their own agenda. Both sides monitor the other for all kinds of political and economic failures, seeking cases that support their interpretation of the adversary. For example, in just 45 minutes, during a speech delivered at the Munich Security Conference in February 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov rewrote the history of the Cold War, accused the West of fomenting a coup in Ukraine, and declared himself a champion of the United Nations Charter. The crowd in Germany laughed and booed, but he seemed oblivious to their taunts (Rogin 2015). Yet behind the levity lies a situation of political gravity.

Putin may realise that he cannot defeat the US or the EU militarily. He may not want to declare traditional war against the West, but he may want

to instil new meaning into the global political process. Indeed, he has taken classical propaganda, like Dugin's philosophy in Russia, imported it to Russian audiences and exported it to Western Europe. The message is simple and designed to affect the human unconscious. The Kremlin's actions have opened the eyes of the world to the fact that globalisation and free access to information have not only brought peace, economic growth and political consensus. Yet the Kremlin's actions are not a new phenomenon by any means. A similar development was witnessed when the US launched its "war against terror" at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The strong political will in the United States came to be associated with the use of military force through information and media technology. These events were followed by global economic volatility and recession. Social inequality accelerated and the extremists in our midst became even more radicalised (Borradori 2003).

NATO is a key political-military instrument for the West. Without US military power, NATO can be seen as a political-economic unity without real military power. When the West constructs its "official" statement about the current most significant threats, it frames it in NATO parlance. According to the Alliance (NATO 2014), "[t]he concept of the 'Russian World' justifies Russia's capability and rights to build its own human rights system, legal norms, and its interpretation of history and the justice system". In this argument, there is no voice for Russia and no place for dialogue.

Putin and the military

The Russian military forces have been undergoing extensive transformation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The military reforms are aimed at changing the old Cold War mass forces structure, stricken by corruption and the lack of effective command and control (Mattsson 2015), into a more relevant one, equipped to confront the threats of the 21st century. During Putin's tenure, the Russian mass media has informed the general public of the challenges pertaining to the military transformation quite openly. Huge problems remain when it comes to getting rid of old-fashioned weapon systems and boosting the motivation in units, but the overall structure has become reasonably modern and effective. The latest example of this development was the speed of communication from political decision-making to the use of actual military power during the takeover of the Crimean Peninsula.

One of the most important principles in democracy is civilian political control over the military forces. In Russia, Putin exerts strong, direct political control in this sphere. At the moment, there is a strong will to centralise all branches – air, navy and land forces – under one military command, receiving orders directly from Putin (for details on this decree from 1996, see Российская газета 2015).

In 2014, the Western media adopted the term hybrid war to describe the Kremlin's way of waging war. On the Russian side, however, this kind of concept did not exist. Hybrid tactics are neither new, nor exclusively – nor primarily – a Russian invention. They are as old as warfare itself and Western states have often used elements of hybrid warfare quite effectively (Popescu 2015). In military history, all campaigns have included a variety of tactics such as clandestine intelligence operations, sabotage, smuggling, and the deployment of paramilitary units. The latest instruments include cyber hacking and spreading disinformation in and by social media.

Rhizomatic hybridisation has a long history, effectively dating back to the infiltration by the Trojan horse. In linguistics, hybridisation occurs when one variation of a language blends with another. Similarly, globalisation can be seen as a process whereby economies and cultures merge. In terms of communication, hybridisation means the combining of information techniques developed in different countries and among non-governmental actors. Hybridisation can also be valuable to leadership. For example, religious or business leaders can take on political or military roles and vice versa. In the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Russian side uses pro-Russian separatists against the Ukrainian military (The Ukraine Crisis Timeline 2015).

One reason why hybrid war is so dangerous is that it is easy and cheap to wage against external aggressors, but costly in various ways for the defenders. According to Snowden and Boone (2007), searching for the right answers in a hybrid context would be pointless. The relationships between cause and effect are impossible to determine because they shift constantly; no manageable patterns exist – only turbulence. The immediate task of leaders, actors and individuals is not to discover patterns but to staunch the bleeding and act. The interactions between multiple rhizomatic networks cannot be differentiated and solved piece by piece. Intervening to deal with one problem entails getting embroiled in others (Ho and Kuah 2014).

Conclusion: Leadership and changing regimes

In this chapter, we have discussed the charismatic leadership image of Vladimir Putin. We have tracked the developments and the turmoil that led to his ascent to the presidency, and to the current, inflated, "larger than life" interpretations of his leadership image. We have explained how the societal successes Russia has achieved since the difficulties of the 1990s are attributed to Putin and how that ensures his national popularity.

Being a leader is a polarised experience: a collective success or failure heaps either praise or blame on the leader persona, even when this person has little effect on the outcomes. In this light, leadership is a demanding practice; its eventual outcomes are the strongest measures of its legitimacy. From a Russian perspective, the current Kremlin regime has been successful thus far: the economic growth, development of public governance, military successes, and international recognition of Russian interests have increased the national self-esteem of the population, and Putin is seen as the guarantor of all this. Truly, Putin is the leader who has restored harmony in a disrupted system (in this regard, see Islam 2009).

Putin's leadership image may be – in a rather untimely fashion, regarding the Western democratised ideal – understood through a primal reading. First, his *person*: his personal history as a *silovik*, action-over-talk conduct, as well as street-credible rhetoric provide cues across the spectrum of the Russian cultural sphere. Second, his *leadership style*: hard, masculine, and authoritarian, linking him with well-known strongmen from Russia's past. Third, his *actions*: reclaiming Russia's lost glory, taking care of ordinary citizens in the face of the "powerful", and demanding international recognition of the national interests of Russia. Rhetorically, Putin repeatedly invokes primal Russian myths, namely references to the "sacred" Russian soil, the battle against the intruding fascists, or the inseparability of the church and the state. Such rhetoric evokes strong emotions among his followers and pours balm on the open wounds of a hurt nationalistic pride. To his followers across Russia, these aspects are true and sacred – something they connect with both individually and collectively – something that constructs and reconstructs their identity.

Among Western audiences, Putin's leadership image – in the form of his person, leadership style and actions – is interpreted radically differently. Putin's actions have shown him to be crafty and bold, unlike the shared Western ideal of a leader. He has taken action, especially in the military

sector, which has astonished his supporters and antagonists alike, both in the East and in the West. His masculine "no frills – I am calling the shots" style is counterintuitive to the contemporary Western readings of leadership, notably those represented under the title "post-heroic leadership" (for a discussion of the "undesirable" durability of masculine-authoritative heroism, see Fletcher 2004), and does not cave in under its criticism.

Moreover, the way his leadership image is fuelled by martial arts, taming tigers and piloting military vehicles is deeply alien to Western audiences – despite the fact that it "tickles" the unconscious affect in the Russian cultural context and beyond. It seems that Western academic audiences have largely become blind to primal constructions of leadership, even though they remain relevant to us (Kuronen and Virtaharju 2015). In fact, it has been suggested that Western followers may become emotionally disengaged from leaders that use militaristic or sports metaphors in their leadership (Mccabe and Knights 2015).

The increasing tension between East and West, the partially unacknowledged "hybrid" war fought in Eastern Ukraine, the erratic media space and the Internet have all contributed to a further polarisation of discourses. This, for its part, contributes to extreme contrasts in the readings of Putin's leadership and the Kremlin regime. We argue that the image of the "resolute and strong" primal leader builds on an unprecedented multiplicative mirror effect in a rhizomatic network of geopolitical agents. Strong, heroic feats appear in the action taken against the other, in Putin's case the antagonistic and scheming West, especially the United States, which the Russians often perceive to be behind the actions of the European Union. The charismatic leader image appears when Putin acts for the benefit of Mother Russia, sanctifying her history and arriving at a certain contemporary reading of it. In terms of her borders, for instance, Putin's actions are aimed at protecting the nation from external foes. The Russian discourse depicts the West as a threatening and ever-voracious beast that only Putin can confront, resist and vanquish.

In the current conflict surrounding a hegemonic reading of leadership, or the management of meaning (Smircich and Morgan 1982), the contributors are diverse: Putin's Russian supporters and oppositionists; Putin's Western henchmen, bystanders and adversaries, scholars and researchers of geopolitics and leadership; Third World political leaders: allies,

adversaries, and neutrals. To his adversaries, Putin is not a leader, but a scheming and mendacious villain (Schumatsky 2014) or an unpredictable monster. In other words, the ongoing discourse could be described as *dialectic* (this-that, either-or, for-against, and so on…), instead of a *dialogue*. It is also telling that both sides are referring to themselves as proponents and supporters of a dialogical approach which would be possible "if only the *other side* would be inclined to do so, too". In the early days of his rule, the West was mainly cautiously supportive, albeit sceptical towards Putin. Only after it became clear that the Kremlin regime would not be contained within the geo-*graphical* and geo-*political* frames defined by the West did the conflict of interests became apparent. It is *this* Putin and the Kremlin that the West is opposing – the one with a clear, pro-Russian vision that will not be deterred by outsiders.

Western antagonists present Putin's leadership image, aimed mainly at the Russian audience, as a clear indication of his irrationality, supremacy and "otherness" as a leader. These opposing interpretations of Putin's actions and his image amplify the readings of him as a leader to the extreme. In other words, the polarised interpretations of Putin's leadership oscillate in the rhizomatic network of geopolitical actors, the media and social media authors, sometimes amplifying to iconic, charismatic proportions, sometimes withering away to insignificance. The amplification of leadership happens unguided, as the network has no governing centre from where "untrue" interpretations would be extinguished.

Putin's image as "the other" is used in Russian internal communication to vindicate and legitimise his status as the protector of the nation. An example of how the leader image is amplified through media discussions – and how difficult it is to "manage" it, on either side of the discourse – is the "shirtfronting" episode that occurred prior to the G20 meeting in Australia in November 2014. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said he was "going to shirtfront Mr Putin… you bet I am" (Massola 2014a). "Shirtfront" refers to a fierce tackle in Australian football. The local Russian embassy's reply reminded the Australians of Vladimir Putin's martial arts training (Massola 2014b). When the meeting did not involve any physical fights between the participants, but rather sulking between them, the event was interpreted in Russia mostly as a submission before their leader (Bancroft-Hinchey 2014).

Previous charisma research has depicted charisma as evolving internally to a community, building on its cultural interpretations. However, the advent

of real-time communication technology – social media in particular – has opened up leader actions and communication to a wider audience. Moreover, the case of Putin shows how charismatic leadership is fuelled by a "contagious" and polarised recursion of leader interpretations provided by proponents and adversaries, followers and resistors, internals and externals. To be a hero, or to be a villain? It may be the *Realpolitik* reading that it does not matter so much, as long as one stands victorious in the end. The Kremlin is playing according to clear Machiavellian logic – the ends justify the means. In this sense, the Russian metric of analysing leadership effectiveness is the same as in US corporations – most results with least effort. Is charismatic leadership actually important for the Kremlin? In the rhizomatic world, there is no time and place for a grand and systematic political plan. The key to Putin's charisma is the ability to present himself as *the way*, as *the instrument*, and to rise above what is written, in this case the law, and command on the basis of his personal authority. The leader needs the inner capacity to act, and the energy; the ability to size up and seize opportunities, and to see that what to the people may seem a risk, is not a risk at all (Turner 2011).

The strong leadership image of Vladimir Putin emerges from a field of contrasting leader images. His leadership gains meaning when it is associated both with his predecessors and his peers across the globe. Thinking of the trajectory of Russian leaders from Brezhnev, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin to Putin, we can observe how they each manifested (and formed) the ethos of their time. Brezhnev was an old and sullen character, like the Soviet Union of his time. Gorbachev was a romantic reformist, who dreamt of a better world. Yeltsin was energetic in his early days, but succumbed to the bottle and American neoliberalism and ended up dancing to the tunes of the oligarchs. Putin embodies an energetic and ruthless technocrat, a man of the security apparatus who has no qualms about achieving his goals. From Putin's point of view, the most culpable are those leaders "who threw the power on the floor", only to be picked up by "hysterics" and "madmen" (Trudolyubov 2015). Putin can also be seen in relation to some of his American peers. His brash rhetoric reminds us of Lyndon B. Johnson and George W. Bush and their two-dimensional view of the world as a zero-sum game: "you are either with us, or against us". We are left with the question of whether a contemporary charismatic leader is merely a pre-modern leader mediated by advanced technology. In the light of this, we may legitimately ask if we have ever been modern after all (Burrell 1997).

Putin is Putin precisely because the regime change in 1999 was the kind that it was, i.e. charismatic, rhizomatic, and "back to basics", along with the trajectory that ensued over the subsequent decade and a half. Thus, the current Kremlin regime is a reflection of its precedent, the regime change itself, and the subsequent events that have shaped the nature of the ruling elite. It may well be that the West sees it as brutal, anti-liberalist, and undemocratic. This view, however, merely scratches the surface. What is relevant is the understanding that any given regime equals a balance of power that creates the conditions for leadership to take both place and shape. They will become "who they are", in a very Nietzschean sense (1974, 180). In other words, they will become manifestations of the socio-historico-cultural "soil" where they dwell.

However, as the rhizomatic contingency cannot be controlled or forecast, there will always be a strong component of uncertainty – the rhizome is fickle. The future will show the time, the place and the shape of the next Russian regime. It seems that in the Russian world – melancholic, ruthless and violent – a hard-handed order is better than no order at all.

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Notes

[1] Kivinen (2015) argues that in Russia the state and the Russian Orthodox Church have always been relationally close, and that the relationship has been characterized by “caesaropapism”, meaning that at times the state has power over the church even in theological matters.

[2] “Glasnost” refers to openness in discussion on political and social issues (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.). “Perestroika” refers to restructuring the

Soviet economic and political policy (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2014).

[3] *Takogo kak Putin*. An English version, *A Man like Putin*, is available on Youtube.com (Barton 2012).

[4] In Finland, for instance, President Niinistö called a radio programme in July 2015 to ask the nature experts for some tips on identifying wild flowers. He did not introduce himself as the President, however, but as "Sauli from Naantali". In the US, Arnold Schwarzenegger was quite successful when he linked one-liners from his movie past to his political activities, but he did not remove his shirt for photos during his tenure as the "Governator" of California.

[5] The Hollywood film *Wag the Dog* (Levinson 1998) described this phenomenon through comedy. In the film, a sex scandal jeopardises the US President's chances of getting re-elected. To counter this, the government contracts a Hollywood producer to manufacture an overseas war that the president can heroically end, all through the mass media.

[6] For example: the "little green men" in Crimea, the Russian troops "on holiday" in Ukraine, the claim that Western sanctions "have no effect on the Russian economy", and so on.

[7] An interesting event occurred during 2014 when Putin was not seen in the media for a week. This event became news in itself and theories about his whereabouts were rife ("Vladimir Putin: Russian Leader Dismisses 'Gossip' over Absence" 2015).

[8] This holds despite our foundational position: in this book in general, and this chapter in particular, we employ the principle of *Verstehen* – that is, understanding and interpreting the research context also from the "other" point of view – rather than moral judgement.