

## MEDVEDEV VS. PUTIN IN KREMLIN-SPONSORED ADVERTORIALS IN THE U.S. AND INDIA

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### Abstract

This essay explores the image making of Vladimir Putin vs. Dmitri Medvedev in the Kremlin-sponsored advertorials the “Russia Now” and the “Russia India Report” circulated as free supplements to *The Washington Post*, and *The Times of India*, India, in 2011. Advertorial content mentioning each politician was analyzed using basic qualitative and quantitative techniques, and several image making messages highlighting Putin’s vs. Medvedev’s leadership were deduced. Both advertorials served as a platform for mediated public diplomacy aimed at influencing foreign publics’ perceptions of Russia’s leadership in the wake of a major presidential election.

### Key Words

Russia, Eastern Europe, Putin, India, messaging, advertorials, editorials, journalism, media relations, image, leadership, public opinion, publics, elections, campaigns

Although the results of the 2012 presidential race in Russia came as no surprise to many, the intrigue surrounding the country’s domestic political situation was heightened during the year leading up to the election. First, Vladimir Putin, then-Prime Minister of Russia, announced his decision to run for a third term as President in late September 2011. Simultaneously, President Dmitry Medvedev affirmed that he would abstain from the competition. By that time, the Russian government, also known as the Kremlin, had sent a variety of mixed messages concealing who had decision-making power and which of the two leaders would attempt to sustain it. Second, few experts predicted the electoral liberalization of the Russian regime, spawned by thousands of protesters sweeping through the central streets of Moscow and other big cities in December 2011 after an allegedly fraudulent parliamentary election. This new political movement, similar to the Arab Spring which evolved through social media use and the Internet, sparked the biggest anti-government protests in the history of independent Russia.<sup>1</sup> In response, the Kremlin allowed for more freedom of speech, and the leader of the opposition, Boris Nemtsov, appeared on state-owned television for the first time in a decade.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Mikhail Prokhorov emerged on the electoral field as a potential competitor to Putin.

<sup>1</sup> Danielle Lussier, “The Failure of Democracy in Post-Soviet Eurasia” (seminar, Kennan Institute, Washington, D.C., June 12, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Danielle Lussier, “The Failure of Democracy in Post-Soviet Eurasia” (seminar, Kennan Institute, Washington, D.C., June 12, 2012).

This essay does not attempt to analyze the presidential competition in Russia, but draws conceptually on this theme. It focuses on one narrow aspect of the Kremlin’s public diplomacy: mediated public diplomacy in the United States and India, implemented through advertorials, paid-for content disguised as editorial material.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, this essay is based on a public diplomacy study conducted in February-March 2012 with Guy J. Golan, associate professor of public relations and public diplomacy at Syracuse University.<sup>4</sup> Using content analysis techniques, the researchers performed a quantitative assessment of key frames and attributes of Kremlin-sponsored and -circulated advertorials *Russia Now* and *Russia India Report*. These advertorials, which were included as free supplements to *The Washington Post* and *The Times of India* newspapers, are accessible on Russia’s public diplomacy media outlet’s website, *Russia Beyond the Headlines*.<sup>5</sup> The study analyzed January-December 2011 editions of the advertorials (ten of *Russia Now* and six of *Russia India Report*) with an individual news item being a unit of analysis. In total, 303 news items ranging from regular news articles and briefs, to op-eds and blog entries were examined.

Unlike the aforementioned public diplomacy study, this essay focuses on examining image-producing messages surrounding Medvedev and Putin in 2011. By highlighting certain characteristics and actions of these politicians, made salient via the advertorials’ agenda-setting capabilities, this essay aims to explore the differences and commonalities in leadership image sponsorship. Political scientists have studied the effects of a leader’s image on domestic public opinion, but public diplomacy scholars have yet to explore the potency of such person-specific frames on the foreign perceptions of a country’s image.

The quantity of direct and indirect mentions regarding each politician and the nature of such coverage is important in a wider context. The mention was direct when the leader’s comments or opinions on a particular subject were prominently featured in the news item. It was indirect when there was only a scarce mentioning of the leader, putting him in a rather passive position.<sup>6</sup> The nature of the coverage was considered negative if the leader himself, his actions, or his policies were criticized; neutral when it was not possible to identify the underlying sentiment and positive when the leader, his actions, or his policies were described in a positive manner.

In each advertorial, Medvedev appeared in 19 percent of the news, with more direct mentions than indirect. In 57 percent of the advertorials from *Russia Now*, the president was portrayed positively, and he was portrayed negatively in 13 percent. In the *Russia India Report*, Medvedev was depicted in a positive light in 84 percent of all the cases. Meanwhile, the frequency of Putin’s appearance in the advertorials lagged behind Medvedev’s: the Prime Minister was mentioned in 14 percent of the news items from *Russia Now* and 10 percent of those from the *Russia India Report*, and such mentions were largely indirect. Similarly to Medvedev’s portrayal to the Indian publics, Putin’s persona and actions were framed positively in 80 percent of the news. By contrast, *Russia Now* depicted Putin in a much more balanced way: positive mentions took up 46 percent of the news and the negative mentions were present in 35 percent.

Surprisingly, Medvedev was mentioned more frequently than Putin, both directly and indirectly, and his coverage was more positive in both advertorials. Putin, on the other hand, appeared in the news less frequently, often evoking sharp criticism. Speculations on who would run for President and ultimately rule the Kremlin were raised throughout all issues of both advertorials, without a clear preference given to either candidate.

The Indian supplement provided one-sided coverage in favor of both politicians, whereas the U.S. advertorial allowed for negative frames, especially pertaining to the Prime Minister. Whenever both politicians were mentioned in tandem,<sup>7</sup> there was no clear pattern as to which politician was portrayed more favorably. This

<sup>3</sup> Bong-Hyun Kim, Yorgo Pasadeos, and Arnold Barban, “On the Deceptive Effectiveness of Labeled and Unlabelled Advertorial Formats,” *Mass Communication and Society* 4, no. 3 (2001): 1.

<sup>4</sup> This study resulted in a paper “The Advertorial as a Tool of Strategic Public Diplomacy: Russia’s Outreach in India and the USA,” currently under review.

<sup>5</sup> “The Project,” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 2007-2012, <<http://rbth.ru/archives.html>>. *Russia Beyond the Headlines* is produced by Kremlin-funded paper of record and daily newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta

<sup>6</sup> The following excerpt, “The news will cheer blogger-in-chief President Dmitry Medvedev, fitting neatly as it does into his model to transform the Russian economy,” illustrates an indirect mention of Medvedev. “Top Ranking for Yandex and Kaspersky,” *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), March 30, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> This also includes the visual elements, such as photographs and political cartoons.

finding, elaborated in more detail in the discussion section, leads to the conclusion that advertorial staff in Russia segmented their target publics based on the history of Russia's foreign relations with the United States and India and public opinion regarding Russia in each of those nations.

### *Tsar Putin Vs. Medvedev 2.0*

While image-makers working for Medvedev apparently accepted the challenge posed by the global framing competition to shape Medvedev's image to conform with mainstream democratic principles and Western political culture, Putin's consultants did not attempt to disguise the Prime Minister's autocratic wrongdoings and low likeability among internal and external publics, despite being given a uniquely controlled advertorial media platform. This is not to say, however, that there had been no effort made to demonstrate a humane side of Russia's "good tsar."<sup>8</sup>

The majority of news in both advertorials mentioning Medvedev dealt with economic or financial issues and often cited the President's push for liberal economic reforms, also known as modernization.<sup>9</sup> Therefore it is no surprise an image of a liberal economic crusader was molded by positive headlines ("Unveiling his vision of liberalizing state-controlled economy, Medvedev asks investors to take charge and pitches strongly for reforms"<sup>10</sup>), references to concrete policy actions ("President Dmitry Medvedev's plan to turn Moscow into a global financial hub took another step forward with the formation of a 27-member advisory board consisting of major Wall Street bankers"<sup>11</sup>), a domestic expert endorsement ("Economists agree that President Dmitry Medvedev's term in office was decisive in terms of dismantling the last remnants of the Soviet social system"<sup>12</sup>), or a foreign endorsement from a U.S. CEO ("It is the same language that a U.S. president would use. It was an excellent speech and I haven't heard a single criticism ... a clear sign that modernization is going forward."<sup>13</sup>)

Medvedev's progressive thinking and technological savvy were emphasized in numerous articles regarding development of a "Russian Silicon Valley" in Skolkovo or a number of free economic zones in the Russian Federation. Moreover, statements describing his personal affection for widgets and the Internet were innocuously placed in several news items dealing with the economy, domestic politics, and human interest. Examples include, "President Dmitry Medvedev has been pictured at powwows caressing his tablet while all the Soviet-era ministers scribbled in their cheesy leatherette AS notebooks,"<sup>14</sup> and "The Internet has a powerful champion in the form of President Medvedev. Russia's 'blogger-in-chief' has repeatedly insisted that he will not allow censorship of the Internet."<sup>15</sup>

The democratic orientation of the Russian President was conveyed through policy steps he took to fight corruption, increase transparency in governance, and defend human rights, as illustrated in the following mentions:

"Medvedev proposed the upgrade of the electronic voting system to enhance the transparency."<sup>16</sup>  
 "Medvedev has taken the Magnitsky case under his personal control. Medvedev has made fighting corruption the centerpiece of his presidency."<sup>17</sup>  
 "Reporting can still be the most dangerous business, but some say the atmosphere is improving under Medvedev."<sup>18</sup>

It is noteworthy that mentions of what the President accomplished were not followed by a rigorous policy analysis in the majority of materials.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Putin was labeled a "good tsar" in Konstantin von Eggert, "The Internet Generation," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Dec. 14, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Over a quarter of all the analyzed content revolved around economic issues, which fully complies with the principles of Putin's "economic diplomacy" in the United States and India laid out in his pre-election address: Vladimir Putin. 2012. "Russia and the Changing World." RT. Feb. 27. <<http://rt.com/politics/official-word/putinrussia-changing-world-263/>>.

<sup>10</sup> Nikolaus von Twickel, "President's Choice: More Power to Investor," *Russia India Report* (Moscow, Russia), Jun. 29, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> "Kremlin Hires Wall Street Bankers," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), March 30, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Dmitry Babich, "New Party on the Horizon," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Dec. 14, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Nikolaus von Twickel, "Medvedev Speech Inspires Investors," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Jun. 29, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Eremeeva, "Face Time with the Ipad," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), June 29, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Gosling, "Yandex, Russia's Google, Launching IPO on NASDAQ," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), May 25, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Aleksei Morozov, "Tech-savvy Polls: Get Ready for Optic Scan Voting System," *Russia India Report* (Moscow, Russia), Oct. 26, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Galina Masterova and Vladimir Ruvinsky, "Who Knows Where I Will Be Soon," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), May 25, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Veronika Dorman, "For Journalists, Small Ripples of Change?" *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Aug. 31, 2011.

In contrast to Medvedev's pro-democratic leaning, the news items portrayed Putin as a strong leader who barely needed to solicit advice from his President or public opinion before making a policy decision. Headlines such as "It's harder and harder for a free, self-sufficient person to breathe in Putin's Russia,"<sup>19</sup> "Putin is attempting to try to hoard all power to himself,"<sup>20</sup> and, "It's easier to go after 'goateed people' [as Putin calls opposition activists] than a worked-up crowd of football fanatics,"<sup>21</sup> illustrate Putin's intolerance of his multiple dissenters, be they official opposition or citizen activists.

Like Medvedev, Putin transcends to the level of a visionary reformer in the messages. For example, an improvement in Russia's export-driven economy, mainly dependent on the world price of oil, was attributed to Putin's pre-2012 terms in office: "Under Vladimir Putin, stability and an economic boom appeared."<sup>22</sup> Notable reforms, or rather draft reforms, cited as Putin's brainchild, included long-awaited initiatives in healthcare and pharmaceutical manufacturing.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Putin promised to "launch [even more] serious reforms after his likely return to the presidency."<sup>24</sup>

Despite the negativity associated with Putin on the pages of *Russia Now*, there was room for showing the prime minister's humane side. Materials about Putin's endorsement of an art-house movie that was denied funding by the Ministry of Culture,<sup>25</sup> him singing "Blueberry Hill" at a charity event for children,<sup>26</sup> or a brief mention of his healthy diet,<sup>27</sup> seem to contain relationship-building rather than real news value, and therefore can be regarded as contributing to Putin's international celebrity-politician image-making process.

### *Discussion*

For Russia, the period of heavy, one-sided, Soviet-style propaganda seems to be over, giving way to much more narrowly defined and disguised (read: strategic) public diplomacy programs, implemented via the use of innovative communication platforms and audience segmentation. Outsourcing media relations to foreign public relations firms and financing Russia's own radio and international TV broadcasting seems to be insufficient.<sup>28</sup> The Russian government now fully utilizes the power of the foreign press to affect reputation while creating new media (advertorials) specifically aimed at communicating Kremlin-sponsored frames to various external publics.

Some of the frames backed by the Russian government include those shaping external images of Medvedev and Putin, two leaders who are expected by some to stay in power for years to come. Given the results of the recent presidential election, it may seem counter-intuitive that the former president would be portrayed much more favorably, contrasted with the ultimate winner of the election. Yet, a more critical appraisal of Putin becomes clear if the history of foreign policy development between Russia, the United States, and India, along with the politics of advertorial placement, is considered.

Despite the pronounced "reset" in U.S.-Russian foreign policy and a short period of collaboration between Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama, the two states have always been operating "on a fundamentally different set of values and interests."<sup>29</sup> Former KGB agent, Putin is known for his "inflammatory, anti-American rhetoric,"<sup>30</sup> as no one else exemplifies an impediment to normalization of relations between the states. His leadership style is markedly different from Medvedev's, as if Putin were Batman and Medvedev were Robin.<sup>31</sup> It is

<sup>19</sup> Max Seddon, "Why the Brain Drain?" *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Apr. 27, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Veronika Dorman, "Following the Opposition From Thaw to Freeze," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Feb. 23, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Veronika Dorman, "Following the Opposition From Thaw to Freeze," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Feb. 23, 2011, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Ben Aris, "Down in the Mouth," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Apr. 27, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Galina Masterova, "Health Care You Could Live With," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Apr. 27, 2011 or Rachel Morarjee, "Local Drug Industry Gets Kremlin Injection," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Feb. 23, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Artem Zagorodnov, "Ruling Party Challenged," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Dec. 14, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Galina Masterova, "Sokurov's Deal With the Devil Epic Takes Top Prize," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), Sept. 28, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Ben Aris, "Russia Invests in Hi-tech Healthcare," *Russia India Report* (Moscow, Russia), May 25, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Eremeeva, "A History of Dieting," *Russia Now* (Moscow, Russia), May 25, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Katherine P. Avgerinos, "Russia's Public Diplomacy Effort: What the Kremlin Is Doing and Why It's Not Working," *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 20, Sept. (2009): 1 - 18.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Baker, "Syria Crisis and Putin's Return Chill U.S. Ties With Russia," *New York Times* (New York, USA), Jun. 13, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> "Will Putin Victory Affect US-Russia Relations?" Voice of America, Feb. 27, 2012, <<http://www.voanews.com/content/will-putin-victory-affect-us-russia-relations-141070223/180691.html>>.

<sup>31</sup> Steven Pifer, "What Putin's Return to the Presidency Means for U.S.-Russia Relations," Brookings Institution, March 5, 2012, <<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/03/05-russia-pifer>>.



no wonder that Kremlin strategists did not come up with any unusual image-making stories about the former, preferring to balance positive and negative coverage to reinforce the existing image that Russia's real ruler holds in the West. Ultimately, placing an advertorial with one-sided positive coverage of Russia and Putin in *The Washington Post* would be detrimental to the objectives of Russian public diplomacy, as there are reasons to believe that readership of these newspapers, which includes U.S. policy makers, would identify it as propaganda and therefore not be receptive to Kremlin-generated frames.

Indian publics, on the other hand, may exhibit a higher tolerance of biased coverage about Russia, as "India sees Russia as a time-tested friend,"<sup>32</sup> dating back to when India was one of the USSR satellites. Since 2000, the two states have been pursuing a strategic partnership, and in 2010 they started to focus on building a special and privileged strategic partnership.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the differences in the image-projection of the two leaders should be interpreted in the prism of a public diplomacy concept that prioritizes long-term relationship-building over short-term advocacy. In other words, Kremlin strategists went beyond merely getting the single positive message out, either for Medvedev or for Putin. Instead they started a two-way conversation with diverse publics in fourteen countries.<sup>34</sup> Whether relationships fostered by such communication will be durable and beneficial for the Russian state and its foreign publics must be explored further in the context of Russia's wider public diplomacy efforts, local public opinion, and the media landscape in a given state.

<sup>32</sup> "India-Russia Relations," Ministry of External Affairs of India, Jan. 2012, <<http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=50044518>>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 32. This is the name of the new document laying out principles of Russia-India relations.

<sup>34</sup> The two-way communication is enabled via more conventional letters to the editor and op-eds published in the advertorials, as well as Russia Beyond the Headlines social media.

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