

Sincerity, Strength, and Spin: Putin's Brand in a Decade of Direct Line

Applying Aaker's Brand Personality Framework to Authoritarian Image Management

Sofie Poestovit

r0885368

Masters' thesis submitted to obtain the degree of

MASTER OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Supervisor: Dr. Maryna Shevtsova

Reporter: Prof. Dr. Ria Laenen

Academic year: 2024-2025

Word count: 10003

Contents

Acknowledgments	- 2 -
List of Figures	- 3 -
Abstract.....	- 4 -
Introduction	- 5 -
Problem statement	- 6 -
Theoretical Framework	- 10 -
Methodological Framework	- 12 -
Analysis	- 16 -
<i>Results.....</i>	<i>- 16 -</i>
2014	- 16 -
2019	- 17 -
2024	- 18 -
Comparison of all the years	- 19 -
<i>Discussion of the Results.....</i>	<i>- 22 -</i>
<i>Limitations, Relevance and Opportunities.....</i>	<i>- 26 -</i>
Conclusion	- 27 -
References	- 29 -

Acknowledgments

I would like to sincerely thank Prof. Dr. Kevin Buterbaugh for the valuable help and advice he offered during the most challenging moments of writing my thesis. His support made a real difference when I was struggling the most.

I also wish to thank my supervisor, Dr. Shevtsova, for her guidance and feedback, particularly during the early stages of the research process.

A heartfelt thank you to my parents, Elena and Sergej Poestovit, for listening to my endless rants and for being a constant source of encouragement and strength. Your support was crucial to completing my education at KU Leuven.

Finally, thank you to Lukas Bosch for your genuine enthusiasm, unwavering belief in me, your support and comfort, and for recognizing the value of this thesis, even at times when I couldn't see it myself.

List of Figures

Figure 1: Results 2014	17
Figure 2: Results 2019	18
Figure 3: Results 2024	19
Figure 4: Comparison Branding Dimensions over Three Years	20
Figure 5: Comparison Subdimensions ‘Excitement’ over three years	21
Figure 6: Branding Dimension for Foreign Affairs	22
Figure 7: Branding Dimensions for Internal Affairs	22
Figure 8: Subdimensions of Excitement in Foreign Affairs	24

Abstract

This thesis examines how Vladimir Putin has adjusted his personal brand over a ten-year period by analyzing three episodes of the televised program *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin* from 2014, 2019, and 2024. In modern authoritarian regimes, popularity and public legitimacy are crucial for maintaining power. This research applies Jennifer Aaker's Five Dimensions of Brand Personality: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Ruggedness, and Sophistication, as a coding framework to assess how Putin constructs and adapts his image in response to changing political and social contexts. Four hypotheses were tested: (1) that Putin's brand primarily uses Sincerity, Excitement, and Competence; (2) that Competence is emphasized during economically stable periods; (3) that Ruggedness and Daring increase during international crises and (4) that Excitement becomes more prominent when public mobilization is needed. The findings affirm the first two hypotheses. Sincerity, Excitement, and Competence consistently dominate Putin's image, with a notable emphasis on Competence in 2019. The third hypothesis receives partial support, as Ruggedness increases during crisis years, though mainly in domestic contexts. The fourth hypothesis is not supported, as no significant rise in Excitement was observed in 2024. This study contributes to the field of political marketing in authoritarian regimes and offers a deeper understanding of how contemporary autocrats use media and personal branding to maintain legitimacy and control.

Introduction

“We are going to hunt down the terrorist everywhere: If they are in the airport, we will catch them in the airport. And if we capture them, you’ll excuse me, in the toilet, then we will wipe them out in the sh*thouse, for once and for all.”

This was Putin’s infamous reaction during a press conference in 1999, following the apartment bombings that triggered the Second Chechen War (BBC, 15/07/2011). At the time, this use of tough slang shocked many Russians, as it was the first time they had heard a Russian leader using improper language (Dougherty, 2015; Burrett, 2025, p.2). With this notorious quote, Putin began crafting his image as a “tough guy” and macho leader. Over the years, he reinforced this image with other macho stunts, such as saving journalists from a tiger, fishing shirtless or displaying his martial arts skills (Sperling, 2015, p. 29). In 2021, despite nearing 70 years of age, Putin was even elected as Russia’s “hottest man” (The Moscow Times, 02/04/2021).

These are several examples of Putin’s built image. Putin’s image matters, as does his popularity and approval ratings. Putin is what academics call a spin-dictator: he controls media, he fakes democracy, he manipulates his popularity and most importantly he cares about his approval ratings (Guriev & Treisman, 2022, p.4, p.14). All of that is needed to remain in power and to legitimate his own rule, by letting citizens genuinely believe that he is competent, popular and liked. This is because economic modernization made it increasingly difficult for dictators to control their population by expensive, often ineffective and messy brutal force alone (Guriev & Treisman, 2019, p.2, 2020, p.2; Stoner, 2023, pp.5-6). Instead, they just remove the desire from the population to rebel, by genuinely trying to persuade their citizens (Guriev & Treisman, 2019, p.21, 2020, p.7).

Popularity, therefore, functions as a mode of legitimacy for the Russian ruler, alongside other strategies that imitate democratic processes, such as staged elections (Guriev & Treisman, 2020, p.4). This reliance on personal popularity rather than institutional or ideological legitimacy is not unique in Russian history. Even under leaders like Stalin and Peter the Great, it was (perceived) popularity, not ideology, that served as the primary foundation of their rule (Burrett, 2025, p.7). However, the key difference between Putin’s popularity and that of Stalin lies in the methods through which it is cultivated. Stalin imposed his popularity through a personality cult built on fear and repression, no one would have dared to joke about him. In contrast, Putin’s popularity appears more spontaneous and celebrity-like. No one forces Russians to buy Putin-themed souvenirs or quote his jokes. He does not have a traditional personality cult; rather, he functions as a brand: a brand that must remain likable, relatable, and, most importantly, in power (Guriev & Treisman, 2022, pp.77-78).

Problem statement

Personal popularity of the president plays a crucial role in Russian politics, as the stability of the system depends on the public's trust in the president (Buckley et al., 2024, p. 1047; Frye et al., 2017, p.5; Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p.1116). This is particularly important given the persistently low levels of trust in governmental institutions. This means that the system can only remain stable, if the president is both trusted and popular. If both trust in governmental institutions and trust in the president were to decline, and brute force wouldn't be used, the Russian political system is at risk to collapse (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p.1107, p.1116).

This consequently leads to statements like: "No Putin, no Russia" said in 2014 by Vyacheslav Volodin, now Chairman of the State Duma (Boskakov, 2023, p.60). It reflects the broader belief among Putin supporters that without Putin, there will be no ideology, no stability and no legitimate governance.

Some scholars similarly emphasize the importance of Putin's persona in understanding Russian policy. DeBardleben, for example, highlights in her analysis that many academics were surprised by Russia's invasion of Ukraine not because they misunderstood the country, but because they misread Putin himself (2024, p.139). His personal preferences, beliefs, attitudes and character play a large role in shaping his policies (Gomza, 2022, pp.24-25).

The importance of Putin's popularity within the Russian political system can be explained through several factors. First, he serves as the ideological center of the United Russia party. The party is known for its lack of clear ideology or goals, with Putin functioning as the glue that holds the party together. It is composed of elites from various political backgrounds, whose careers depend entirely on their loyalty to him. Without Putin, the party would fall apart. It functions as an instrument of power, guaranteeing re-election solely through its associations with the president. Whatever Putin says, becomes its ideology; it's very purpose is to legitimize his power (Boskakov, 2023, p. 62-64). Consequently, any decline in his popularity would directly affect the legitimacy and appeal of Russia's dominant political party.

Second, scholars argue that Putin embodies the authority of the state and symbolizes the stability of the regime. His perceived popularity weakens the legitimacy of the opposition, leaving them with little political ground to challenge him (Frye et al., 2017, p.5; Tempest, 2016, p.102). Moreover, there is no meaningful opposition for Putin to confront, as political alternatives are either suppressed, co-opted, or lack public visibility and support (Wilson & Lee, 2020, p.45).

Third, Putin holds a central position in policy making, which he exercises through a network of personal, institutional and corporate ties within his inner circle (Burrett, 2025, p.5; Gomza, 2022, pp.24-25). Since 2008, this inner circle has grown more complex, as new stakeholders and factions have emerged (Kelley, 2017, pp. 206-207). As a result, Putin must not only maintain popular support among the public but also ensure his dominance within this increasingly fragmented elite network.

Putin's approval ratings have never been less than 60 percent throughout his more than 20 years in office, despite international sanctions, economic crises, four wars, rampant corruption, suppressed protests, critics dying in suspicious circumstances and the unpopular pension reforms (Frye et al., 2017, p.1, p.3; Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p.1114; Wilson & Lee, 2020, p.37, p.42, p.45). It is worth mentioning that it is not unique for authoritarian leaders to have high popularity ratings, and that Putin is not an exceptional case. Other authoritarian leaders from nearby regimes, as for example Azerbaijan, Belarus and Kazakhstan, have also consistently collected high popularity ratings and have also stayed in office a long time. In contrast to Russia, where approval ratings are frequently measured and widely available, such data is rarely collected or published in the regimes mentioned. (Wilson & Lee, 2020, pp.39-40).

But why exactly are those approval ratings so high? Of course, Putin is in the first place popular because it is not exceptional for authoritarian regimes to have a popular authoritarian leader (Wilson & Lee, 2020, p.39). But when looking past the effect of popularity caused by the authoritarian regimes, scholars give different reasons why the Russian people would support him. Scholars argue that his popularity rests on his image of a credible guarantor of Russia's great power tradition, the image of being the bearer of stability and his good performance in office (Petersson, 2017, p.242; Simons, 2016, p.159, Wilson & Lee, 2020, p.37). This constructed image is important, as it is designed to represent the exact opposite of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, who was associated with corruption, health problems, alcoholism, nepotism, chaos and hard times (Simons, 2016, p.154). In contrast, Putin is portrayed with positive characteristics such as patriotic, healthy, determined and tough (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p.1111; Simons, 2016, p.157). There is a belief that under him Russia is going to be taken seriously again and that there is no other serious candidate that could do it better (Simons, 2016, p.164; Sperling, 2015, p.14).

But are those approval ratings reliable? On this question scholars are split. Some scholars argue that these approval ratings are not necessarily a reliable measure for his true popularity, even if conducted by independent organizations. They believe that they are exaggerated through falsification, come from the unwillingness of Russians to voice their political opinion or the lack of such an opinion, are high because of fear of repression, because of the pressure to conform to the social norms or because people are more likely to express support for a leader when he or she appears popular (Buckley et al., 2024, p.1046; Burrett, 2025, p.7; Wilson & Lee, 2020, p.37; Yudin, 2022, p.34). However, some scholars, through survey experiments and consistent polling across various organizations, have found substantial evidence suggesting that Putin's popularity is genuine and that the approval ratings are real (Buckley et al., 2024, p.1047; Frye et al., 2017, p.108; Snegovaya, 2024; Treisman & Guriev, 2022, p.108; Wilson & Lee, 2020, p.37). This leaves scholars puzzled on how he can sustain those high approval ratings for such a long time (Frye et al., 2017, p.3).

The question about how he maintains consistently high approval ratings is where scholarly speculations start, with only a few empirical studies. The most common theory in academic literature is that assertive

foreign policy actions, such as the annexation of Crimea, helped bolster declining approval ratings, particularly following the 2011–2012 mass protests, by triggering a rally-around-the-flag effect (Burrett, 2025, p.13; Fridman & Michlin-Shapir, 2024, p.1114; Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p.12, ; Petersson, 2017, p.247; Wilson & Lee, 2020, p.43).

Following the annexation, his approval ratings reached to unprecedented levels as he became the embodiment of a resurgent great-power Russia (Burrett, 2025, p.12; Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p.1107). Similarly, some scholars attribute the 2022 invasion of Ukraine to his need to regain popularity and to stay in power (Burrett, 2025, p.13). The global pandemic in 2020, and his decision to not leave the Kremlin, dragged his approval ratings to an all-time low, and scholars have noted a pattern in which low approval ratings are often followed by assertive foreign policy actions that boost his popularity (Burrett, 2025, p.6; Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p.1114; Petersson, 2017, p.242). They argue that, for Putin to remain in power, he must continually appeal to the public through foreign actions, staying relevant and legitimate (Petersson, 2017, p.250).

While much scholarly work has been written about Putin's popularity, its characteristics, its evolution, its importance to the regime, and its consequences, there is a noticeable lack of empirical evidence to explain how he succeeds in maintaining that popularity, despite the war¹ dragging on. Most studies focus on approval ratings and theoretical analyses of the link between popularity and foreign policy, but they offer little detailed research on how he constructs his public image or how his image-building strategies evolve over time. Some studies do note shifts, such as the increasing emphasis on militarism and masculinity, but often without a clear framework that could be applied to other leaders or without empirical exploration of how these changes have occurred (Burrett, 2025, p.8).

This thesis seeks to fill that gap by researching Putin's popularity maintenance by examining Putin's image through a political marketing lens, specifically by using a branding framework first theorized specifically for Putin by Beale (2018). Political leaders, like brands, aim to remain popular and maintain a positive image. This research contributes to the study of Putin's image by applying interdisciplinary marketing insights, offering deeper understanding of his efforts to actively manage his public persona over the years and how his political communication has evolved.

The framework will be applied to the yearly television program *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*, as it is his most popular communication medium, drawing more attention than his other speeches, and is one of the most important means through which Putin creates his image (Chapman, 2024, p.90, p.110, p.114). *Direct Line* is a live program lasting on average three to four hours during which Putin answers citizens' questions and addresses societal concerns (Chapman, 2024, p.100). The program airs annually, except in 2004, 2012, 2020 and 2022 (Chapman, 2024, p.84). This program was chosen for its accessibility, as full transcripts are publicly provided by the state, making it feasible for a master's

¹ Every time the term "war" is mentioned in this thesis, it refers specifically to the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

student to analyze multiple episodes. However, since each episode typically exceeds three hours in length, and given the limited scope of this study, the analysis is limited to a comparison of three selected episodes. Hence, the research question:

How is Vladimir Putin's personal brand presented in the 2014, 2019, and 2024 episodes of *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*, and what patterns or shifts, if any, emerge over time when analyzed through Aaker's Five Dimensions of Brand Personality?

The 2014 episode was selected because scholarly work often highlights the year as a peak in Putin's popularity, with approval ratings reaching a historic high of 89% following the annexation of Crimea (Burrett, 2025, p.12; Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016, p.1107; Petersson, 2017, p.247). This will be compared to the 2024 episode to explore a ten-year interval and to examine how the ongoing war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, has influenced his strategies for appealing to the public. The 2024 edition of *Direct Line* featured a slightly altered format, as it was combined with the annual press conference ("Results of the year with Vladimir Putin"). Despite this change, it was still selected for analysis because it represents the most recent available data. Moreover, the core objective of the program, Putin answering citizens' questions, remained fundamentally unchanged. The year 2019 was selected because it falls in the middle of the chosen time period and serves as a useful control year, given that it was relatively 'quiet' for Russia in terms of foreign policy. This makes it well-suited for observing potential changes or evolutions in Putin's image.

Comparing 2014 to 2022 would also have been compelling, as both years marked significant invasions and spikes in popularity. However, no episode of *Direct Line* aired in 2022. Similarly, comparing years of lowest approval ratings (2012 and 2020) to years of highest ratings (2014 and 2022) would have been valuable, but no episodes were broadcast in those years, making such comparison impossible.

There are several limitations to using *Direct Line* as a source for studying Putin's image. First, as the program airs only once a year, it only offers just a snapshot of his image-building efforts for that year. This approach may exclude other significant events that contribute to his image, such as military parades, speeches, or visits. Consequently, some techniques, such as portraying tenderness by interacting with animals or children, may not feature prominently in the program (Beale, 2018, p.151). Nonetheless, even a snapshot is useful, as *Direct Line* likely prioritizes certain image-building elements, making it possible to identify and analyze these priorities and their evolution over time.

This thesis is structured as follows: The first section outlines the theoretical framework, focusing on political marketing and, more specifically, branding theory, which forms the foundation for the coding scheme. This section also introduces the hypotheses that guide the analysis. The second section presents the methodological framework, detailing the rationale for using thematic analysis and explaining how it was conducted. The third section is the analysis. It begins with an overview of the

data, followed by a comparative discussion of the three selected episodes. Subsequently, the hypotheses and the central research question are addressed. The thesis concludes with a discussion of its limitations and offers suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Political marketing was chosen as the theoretical framework for this thesis because it has become increasingly important in politics for shaping the image and the reputation of political figures. While it is important during election campaigns, in contemporary politics it has become a continuous practice to remain relevant and appealing (Simons, 2016, p.149, p.152). Political marketing is not only of great importance in democracies, where there is pressure to be reelected and where competition exists among political actors, but it also plays a significant role in authoritarian or dictatorial regimes, where the leader's image represents the legitimacy and the authority of the state (Scammell, 2015, p.8; Tempest, 2016, p.102). As mentioned earlier in the introduction, modern authoritarian leaders place significant importance on maintaining high approval ratings. They often achieve this by simulating democratic processes, such as holding fake elections, which serve to construct a perceived relationship between the autocrat and the people (Guriev & Treisman, 2020, p.5 2022, p.13; Yudin, 2022, p.31). As mentioned earlier, Putin's public image is vital to legitimizing his rule.

Within the field of political marketing, the theory of branding was selected to analyze Putin's case. Political branding is defined by Pich & Newman as:

“the critical application of traditional branding concepts, theories and frameworks to politics in order to provide differentiation from political competitors and identification between citizens and political entities” (2020, p.4).

Branding was chosen above other existing theories, because it is as Scammell argues, the most appropriate lens for understanding permanent campaigns of contemporary politics (2015, p.11). Not only can this framework be applied to democracies, but also modern autocracies rely increasingly on permanent campaigning. While older autocracies primarily relied on fear and propaganda to maintain control, modern regimes have evolved to use mass media in ways that aim to genuinely persuade and shape citizens' beliefs (La Lova, 2025, p.234).

Studying political figures as brands is relevant for three reasons. First, brand dimensions capture the nuance that image construction and portrayal is not entirely controlled by the individual constructing the brand. The success of image construction depends on citizens' perceptions, making it an interaction between politicians and the public (Scammell, 2015, p.12). In Putin's case, this suggests that his image portrayal strategies may shift in response to public sentiment.

Second, the branding concept also represents the symbolic meaning of the image (Scammell, 2015, p.12). Applied to Putin, this perspective underscores his symbolic role as the embodiment of Russia's image, meaning that Putin's brand is also going to affect perceptions about Russia.

Lastly, the field of political branding remains an understudied area. Most studies focus on democracies and parties during election campaigns, with little research on branding in autocracies or branding applied to ideology (Pich & Newman, 2020, p.10).

For this thesis, the primary theoretical framework is Jennifer L. Aaker's model of branding (1997), which identifies five dimensions of product brand personality. Despite being an older framework, it was chosen because it remains the most statistically reliable, with high Cronbach's alphas scores for its dimensions and high correlations with the test-retest samples (Aaker, 1997, p.352).

Aaker's five dimensions of brand personality are: **Sincerity** described as cheerful, down-to-earth, honest and wholesome; **Excitement** described as daring, imaginative, spirited and up-to-date; **Competence** described as reliable, intelligent and successful; **Sophistication** described as charming and upper-class and **Ruggedness** described as tough and outdoorsy (Aaker, 1997, p.352-353). Beale has demonstrated the framework's applicability by using it to analyze Putin's image. He gives examples of the Competence dimension, such as Putin being perceived as successful due to Russia's economic revival and the campaigns about him keeping his promises. Examples of Ruggedness include propaganda highlighting his athletic talents and use of vulgar language, while Sincerity is reflected in his humble upbringing and his interaction with children and animals (Beale, 2018, p.133, p.138, p.148). However, Beale's study focuses on just three of the five dimensions, providing an overview of examples rather than a systematic application of the framework to a specific case (Beale, 2018). Additionally, Beale assumes that Putin's brand is static and does not explore its potential for change. In contrast, this thesis aims to examine the evolution of Putin's image and applies Aaker's framework directly to *Direct Line*.

Results of earlier conducted surveys about branding of presidential candidates in Mexico indicate that voters evaluate the candidates based on their perceived competence, energy and sincerity (Guzmán & Sierra, 2009, p.215). Although the referenced study was conducted in a democratic context, this thesis builds on the previously mentioned assumption that authoritarian regimes aim to genuinely persuade their citizens to stay popular and thus stay in power (Guriev & Treisman, 2020, p.7; La Lova, 2025, p.234). Consequently, it is expected that public priorities will influence the construction of Putin's image. This leads to the first hypothesis: that the three pillars, Competence, Sincerity, and Excitement, will be the most prominently used during the *Direct Line* broadcasts.

Also, the next set of hypotheses can be formulated based on earlier conducted research. Baturo and Tolstrup analyzed speeches of 51 leaders from post-Soviet autocracies, to identify what communication strategies were used to shape their images (2024, p.583). They reached interesting

conclusions about how authoritarian rulers adapt their communication strategies. They found that during good economic times post-Soviet autocrats tend to legitimize themselves; that when facing domestic or international threats, they aim to intimidate audiences, and that during international crises, they focus on mobilizing the public. Although the original study did not employ a branding framework, its findings are valuable to reinterpret through such a lens and to apply to the case of Putin. This is justified, first, because the study is based on the same assumption, that modern autocrats actively seek to create a favorable public image, and second, because it focuses on authoritarian leaders from the same regional context (Baturu & Tolstrup, 2024, pp.582-583). Applied for this research this would form the following hypotheses:

First this study hypothesizes that during relatively good economic times, Putin is going to brand himself more as competent. If looking at GDP per capita adjusted for PPP data for Russia, the economy peaked in 2019 (Stoner, 2023, p.12). Before that there was first a downfall after the annexation of Crimea, most likely due to imposed sanctions, and after 2019 again a downfall after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (*World Bank Open Data*, n.d.). So, of the three researched dates, 2019 scored the highest on economic growth, thus it is expected that he is going to focus more on competence than in 2014 and 2022.

The second hypothesis is that in both 2014 and 2024, Putin will present himself as more rugged and daring, reflecting the heightened sense of national and international threat. In 2014, this stems from the annexation of Crimea and the resulting geopolitical tensions, and in 2024, due to the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The third hypothesis proposes that in 2024 Putin will increasingly emphasize the pillar of Excitement, aimed at mobilizing the public. This would serve to sustain support for the prolonged war in Ukraine and to mitigate the domestic impact of ongoing sanctions.

These hypotheses, derived from Baturu and Tolstrup's findings, align closely with the earlier hypothesis based on voter-oriented branding theory, which highlights Competence, Sincerity, and Excitement as central branding dimensions. The primary difference lies in the emphasis on Ruggedness, which emerges more strongly in Baturu and Tolstrup's framework due to its focus on the strategic perspective of the leader, whereas the very first formulated hypothesis is rooted more in the citizens perceptions.

Methodological Framework

The methodology chosen for this thesis is thematic analysis, a qualitative research method in which data is coded into themes (Fugard et al., 2020, p.3). This method of analysis was selected due to of the large amount of text that will be analyzed. Each episode of *Direct Line* exceeds three hours in length, making discourse analysis infeasible within the one-year timeframe and with only one person coding. In this master thesis alone, there was 13 hours' worth of video footage to analyze and more than 300 pages of

transcripts. Thematic analysis allows the coder to interpret sentences and assign a broader meaning, without being constrained to counting specific words alone (Fugard et al., 2020, p.3). That is also why it was opted for a qualitative method, over a quantitative, because the context of the words is crucial for the interpretation of the data.

To capture subtle nuances in the data, coding was conducted using the original Russian transcripts provided by the Russian state, while simultaneously listening to the episodes. This dual approach ensures a more accurate interpretation by considering the intonation of sentences and the (intended) audience reactions, if present in the episodes. President Putin is known for his use of irony, making it particularly important to listen to the audio to avoid misinterpreting tone or intent. This method also allowed for verification of the transcript's accuracy; during the coding process, discrepancies were noted in two instances where numerical data in the transcript differed from what was actually said in the broadcast.

The transcripts were coded twice, with the assistance of NVivo to better organize the coding categories. This thesis first employed an inductive approach, where segments of the text were coded based on the topics president Putin discussed. This process led to the development of the following themes: Crimea, Foreign Affairs, Internal Affairs, Personal, and Ukraine. Although each theme initially included subthemes, these were excluded from the final analysis due to an insufficient amount of data in each subtheme.

Subsequently, the same segments were coded again using a deductive approach to thematic analysis, in which themes were derived from existing theory (Fugard et al., 2020, p.4). In particular, the five dimensions and their subdimensions of brand personality, as outlined in the theoretical framework, were applied. To ensure clarity and consistency in interpreting the branding elements, each subdimension will be explained and illustrated with an example.

For Competence there were 3 subdimensions coded. Sentences were coded as 'Intelligent' when the president demonstrated subject-matter knowledge, provided insightful commentary or explained how certain figures were derived. For example: 'Why do we have to use them, these average numbers? Because there is a big difference between industries and regions.'² (2019, p.8) or another example when discussing pensions: 'Is it a lot or a little? At first glance, a lot, but out of 4.5 trillion, it is, in general, a small figure. And only 16.5 billion is allocated to support state employees, which is completely manageable' (2014, p.45). Sentences were coded as 'Reliable' when he emphasized that the people could trust him and that something would get done: 'We will strive to ensure that it is done as quickly and efficiently as possible, but also, of course, cost-effectively' (2014, p.56) or another example: 'Those funds are from the budget, they are budgeted, and we will provide that funding' (2019, p.33). Lastly

² All Russian-language excerpts were translated into English using DeepL. While this facilitated consistent and efficient translation, it is acknowledged that some nuances of tone or meaning may be affected by the limitations of automated translation tools.

parts of the text were coded as 'Successful' when he talked about his own achievements such as: 'The total volume of housing built, last year was 110 million square meters, a record since the Soviet Union, nothing like this has ever happened before' (2024, p.65) or 'In reality, the number of corruption offenses is decreasing. And it is decreasing, I think, largely because we are acting consistently and uncompromisingly, and we will continue to do so' (2019, p.64).

For the dimension of Excitement, four subdimensions were coded. Sentences were categorized as 'Daring' when president Putin delivered sharp or bold responses, often involving indirect criticism of the subject being discussed. This subdimension differs from 'Tough' under Ruggedness, where the tone is more direct, often involving slang, or even vulgar language. Examples of Daring are: 'And our so-called partners are in no hurry to extradite anyone, even in absolutely obvious cases involving criminal offenses or even just civil offenses' (2019, p.73) or 'But no one has canceled Article 5, and this article is precisely about mutual military support. Against whom are NATO's actions directed, where is it expanding towards our borders, why?' (2014, p.22).

Sentences were coded as 'Imaginative' when the president had a certain vision about projects such as a fund for veterans: 'I realized that the usual methods of supporting the guys who need this help and who have been seriously wounded, disabled, and the families of fallen heroes are not enough, it is necessary to create a separate mechanism, a separate tool, including for those who lose their ties with the Armed Forces' (2024, p.86) or when for example discussing the future of buildings built for the Olympics in Sochi: 'Somewhere there will be an exhibition center, somewhere a large shopping center, something will be used for shows, somewhere some ice facilities will remain' (2014, p. 83).

'Spirited' was used when Putin spoke with visible passion or emotional intensity about a topic: 'We must do everything we can to help these people protect their rights and determine their own fate. This is what we will fight for.' (2014, p.32) or 'No, we don't trade our allies, our interests, or our principles' (2019, p. 109). Finally, responses were coded as 'Up to Date' when President Putin demonstrated awareness of current events or showed that he was well-informed about a specific issue: 'All of this is known, we'll be watching and responding closely' (2014, p.67).

For Ruggedness the most relevant subdimension was 'Tough' and as indicated earlier, this is a category for more direct attacks and the use of vulgar language or slang. Examples include: 'We'll strangle them all ourselves! Why are you so afraid?' (2014, p.42), or 'That's all bullshit [Чушь]' (2014, p.5). The subdimension 'Outdoorsy' or 'Masculine' was less relevant overall, as it appeared only in the 2024 episode. It was used to code patronizing remarks or statements that showcased military strength, which did not fit into other existing categories. An example of a patronizing statement, was the way in which he familiarly addressed a journalist, when she asked a critical question, but she couldn't give further details: 'But how so, Lenchka?' (2024, p.82).

The last branding dimension is Sincerity. The subtheme 'Cheerful' was used to code the jokes made by the president: 'Faina Ivanovna, my dear, why do you need Alaska?' (2014, p.51), or 'Porn sites are seen, I think, all over the world. First you watch some porn, and then, you order something like a

meatball [котлету], you know?’ (2025, p.107). ‘Down to earth’, when he positioned himself as humble: ‘The thing is, it’s well known, I was born into a simple, working-class family.’ (2024, p.121) or when asked why he seems to be only occupied with small everyday problems: ‘If they concern the fates of specific people, I do not consider them minor.’ (2019, p.123). ‘Honest’ was coded when he admitted mistakes, weaknesses or started his sentences with ‘to be honest’ or ‘honestly’: ‘Honestly, it hadn’t occurred to me. I apologize, but this will all be corrected’ (2024, p.18), or ‘I have to be frank, as long as I do not see that all the plans, we have outlined in this regard are being fully implemented, it should be given more attention’ (2014, p.59). Lastly sentences were coded as ‘Wholesome’ when his reactions were warm or genuine: ‘Daniel, big greetings to all your friends, all your acquaintances, all those who live in this orphanage. I hope that we will meet someday’ (2014, p.98).

Lastly, the dimension of Sophistication was rarely applied. One of its subdimensions, ‘Upper-Class’, was excluded from the analysis due to the absence of any references in the data. The other small sub-dimension ‘Charming’, was only mentioned 9 times in total and consisted mostly of friendly phrases giving compliments: ‘I think your wonderful, beautiful braid would fit in a helmet’ (2019, p.107).

There is a downside of using these methods. The downside of the deductive approach is the potential for finding only what the theory predicts, thereby inhibiting the discovery of new ideas (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.94). However, the decision to use an established theory is justified. Without a guiding framework, the amount of data and wide variety of interpretations could overwhelm the research process, making it challenging to ensure academic validity. Coding with theory as a guide, facilitates better comparisons between episodes, as the coding terms will remain consistent for both.

Another limitation of this study is that all coding was conducted by a single researcher. This introduces the possibility of subjective interpretation, meaning that if another coder were to analyze the same material, the results might vary slightly. Categories such as ‘Cheerful,’ ‘Daring,’ and ‘Charming’ are particularly prone to variation in interpretation, as they rely on personal judgment. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to double-code the transcripts to enhance inter-coder reliability. However, in the interest of breadth and comparative insight, the decision was made to code three full episodes once, rather than double-code two episodes for the sake of increased validity. This approach prioritized the inclusion of more data for analysis over methodological rigor in coding consistency.

Analysis

Results³

The results are going to be discussed for each year separately. First the inductive coding is going to be discussed, more specifically what the most asked category was. This is to determine what topics for each year were considered the most important. After the inductive coding, a discussion of deductive coding based on the theory of branding follows. Finally, the three years are going to be compared with each other. The theoretical discussion of the results is going to follow in the discussion sections.

2014

The Direct Line episode of 2014 had a duration of 3 hours and 54 minutes. In this episode Vladimir Putin answered 84 questions. 43 percent (36 questions) of those questions were about internal affairs, and the most discussed aspect of internal affairs was social policy (12). The second most asked category was about Crimea⁴ (19 percent or 16 questions), which is logical considering the annexation the same year. 75 percent (12) of questions related to Crimea were about its economy and its integration into Russia. The third most important category was foreign affairs, consisting of 18 percent of the questions (15). More than 60 percent of the questions within foreign affairs were about bilateral relations.

To ensure the results of the branding theory coding are meaningful and comparable, all figures in this thesis are presented as percentages. The most important categories from the deductive coding for 2014, were Excitement, covering 36,7 percent of all references to branding theory in that year, Sincerity, covering 27,9 percent and Competence covering 25 percent. In a more detailed analysis (Figure 1) for 2014, combining both inductive and deductive themes, Crimea was excluded from the results to enable a meaningful comparison between the subthemes of the other years. Within the subcategories of the inductive coding, Excitement was the most used strategy for foreign affairs (42,9%), internal affairs (32,5%) and Ukraine (45%), with Sincerity (42,8%) only being the most important strategy for the category 'personal'. Although Excitement was the most important for three categories, the subdimension of Excitement did vary between them. For foreign affairs Daring and Spirited were the most important subcategories (both 33,3%), while for internal affairs the subtheme Up to Date (28%) turned out to be the most important. For the subcategory Ukraine Spirited was by far the most important subcategory (56,5%). In the personal category where Sincerity was the most important, the subcategory Wholesome with 66,7% was the most important category.

³ More detailed results and tables can be found in the appendix

⁴ A separate category was created for Crimea to facilitate its exclusion from the analysis later, as explained below. Due to the contested and highly sensitive nature of the peninsula's annexation, it was decided not to include it under the categories of Ukraine or internal affairs, in order to maintain the neutrality of the research.

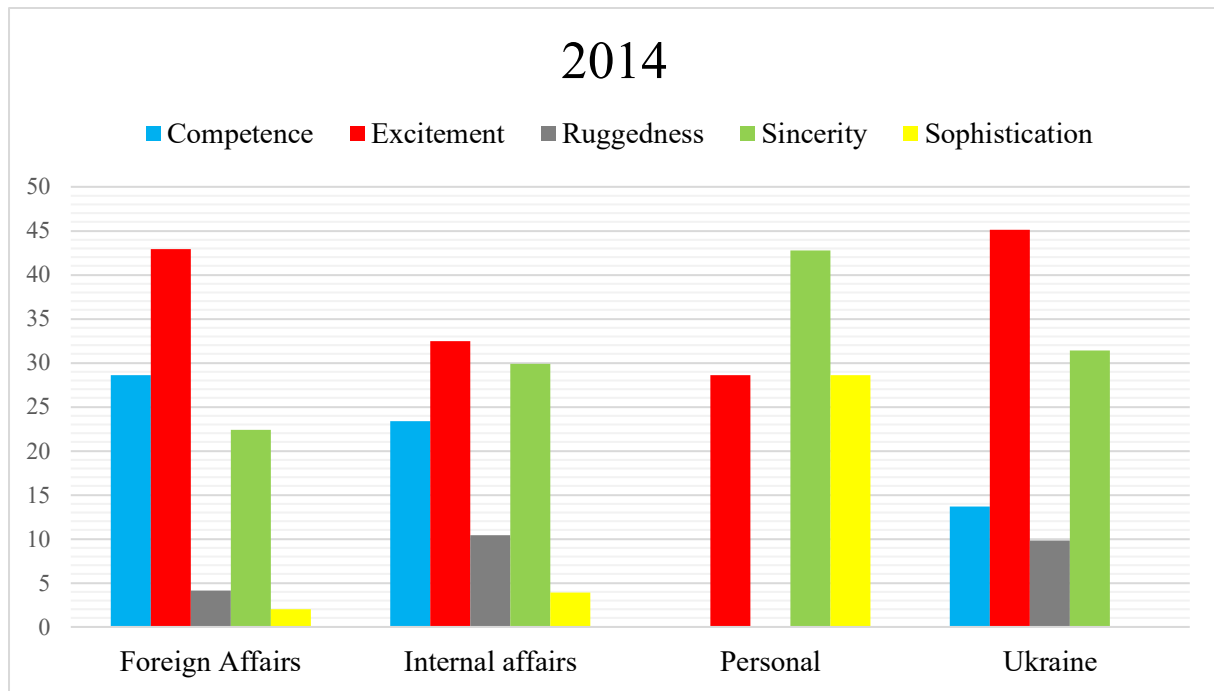


Figure 1: Results 2014

2019

The Direct Line episode of 2019 had a duration of 4 hours 24 minutes, with a total of 80 questions asked. The majority of the questions (68% or 54 questions) were asked about internal affairs, with the largest subcategory being 'governance, transparency & participation' (16 questions). The second largest category, covering 19% of the questions, were personal questions. It is notable that there were half (7) as many questions about foreign affairs compared to 2014.

When looking at the branding coding (Figure 2), the most important category is Excitement covering 39,9 percent of all deductive coding for the year 2019, followed by Competence with 34 percent and Sincerity with 23,1 percent. Sophistication plays almost no role in this episode, covering only 0,4% of the mentions. Looking with more detail at the results it shows that the most important category for internal affairs was Excitement (38,8%) closely followed by Competence (35,9%). For personal, the most important category was Sincerity (44,4%) and lastly for foreign affairs also Excitement was by far the most important category (62,1%). The subdimensions of Excitement for foreign affairs and internal affairs were different. For foreign affairs the most important subdimension was Daring, covering 38,9% of all mentions of Excitement. For internal affairs the most important subdimension was Up to Date, covering 45,5%. The subdimensions for Competence vary as well, with internal affairs emphasizing the reliable subdimension (52,5%) and the most important subdimension of Competence for foreign affairs being Successful with 66,7% of the mentions.

It should be noted that the 2019 episode featured more video reports and placed a stronger emphasis on holding local leaders accountable, including interviews with those leaders. It was also the only episode where the presenters mentioned the 'Direct Line effect,' implying that all problems are

resolved before the program begins. This could be attributed to the regular changes the program undergoes to stay relevant, as well as the public support Putin receives when acting as a tsar holding court. Earlier research has also noted that the practice of calling out local leaders was a new addition to the program in 2018 (Chapman, 2024, pp.116-117). The assumption that this technique was not yet refined by 2019, could explain the disproportionately long video reports.

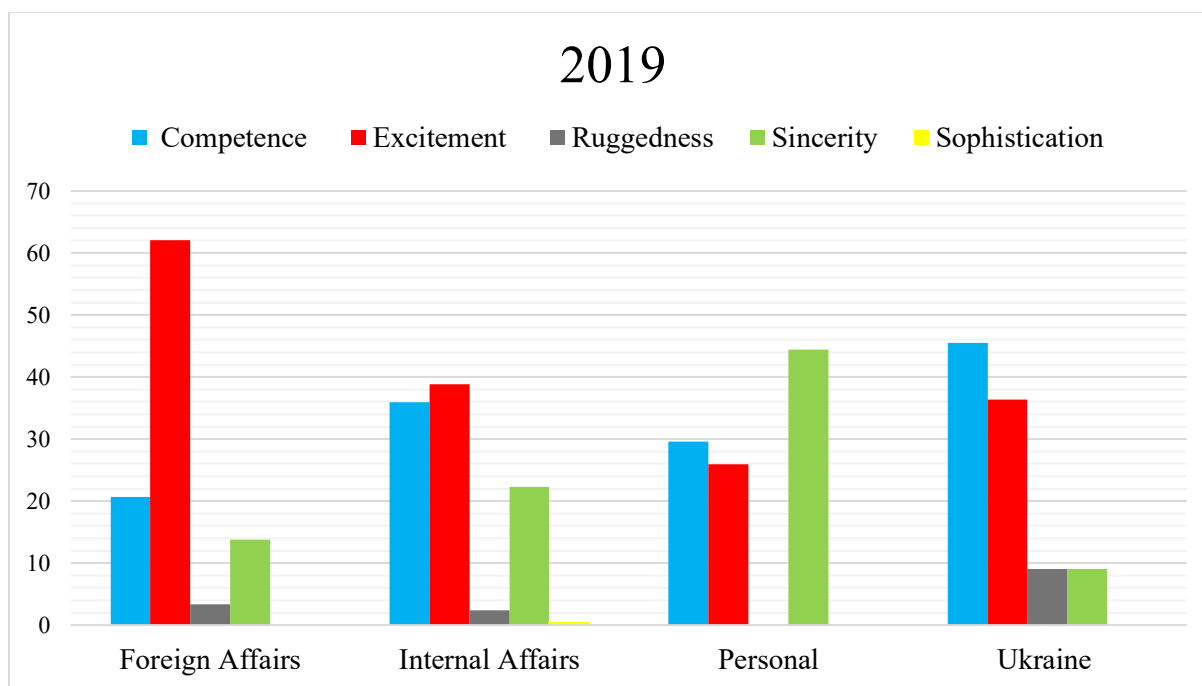


Figure 2: Results 2019

2024

The 2024 episode had a duration of 4 hours and 26 minutes, and 80 questions were answered in total. Most of the questions were once again about internal affairs, covering 45% (36) of all the asked questions, with the largest subcategory being ‘regional development & local issues’. The next largest category was Ukraine, where 16 questions (20%) were asked, with all the questions dealing with the war in Ukraine. The third largest category was personal questions, with 15 questions in that category covering 19% of all asked questions.

When looking at the branding coding (Figure 3), the most important category for 2024 is Excitement with 42,4%, followed by Competence 26,5% and lastly the third biggest category is Sincerity with 23,9%. Once again, the category ‘Sophistication’ plays almost no role in the branding coding. A more detailed look at the results, reveals that the most important categories for internal affairs were Excitement (37,3%) and Competence (34,3%), in the category Ukraine excitement was by far the largest coding category (45,5%) and for personal the largest category was once again Sincerity (43,3%). Zooming in even closer, the results reveal that the subcategories for Excitement are different for foreign

and internal affairs, where Daring was again the most important category for foreign affairs (43,3%) and Up to Date (51,3%) the most important category for internal affairs.

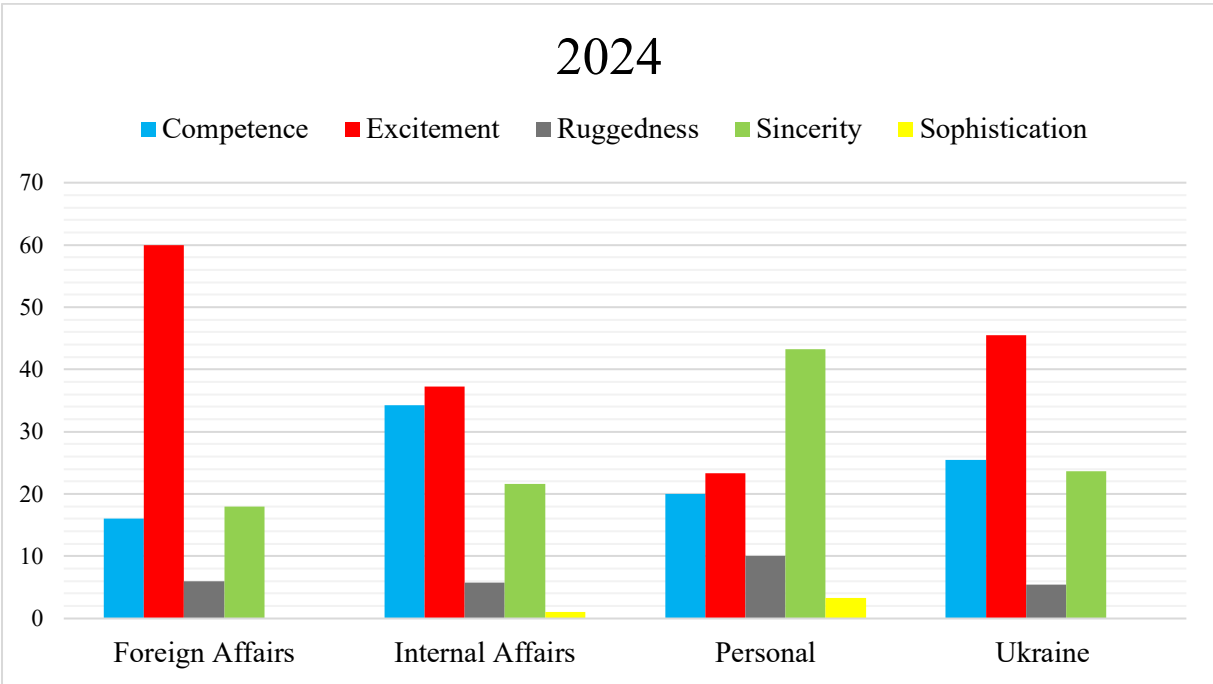


Figure 3: Results 2024

Comparison of all the years

When comparing the inductive coding across all three years, it becomes clear that the length of the program remains consistent, as does the number of questions asked. Previous research has noted that the extended duration of the program serves as a demonstration of President Putin’s strength, suggesting that he is mentally and physically capable of staying focused for long periods and responding to numerous complex questions (Chapman, 2024, p.133). This could also be seen as a way of demonstrating competency, implying that he may not need to emphasize his competence as much in his answers.

The category with the highest number of questions, internal affairs, remains the most prominent across all three years. This likely reflects the interests of the primary target audience: Russian citizens living in Russia. Previous research on *Direct Line* has shown that the questions asked tend to reflect real societal concerns held by the Russian population, making it likely that these changing subcategories represent the most pressing issues at the time (Chapman, 2024, p.100). It is also worth noting that 2019 placed a greater emphasis on internal affairs compared to the other two years. However, the most frequently discussed subcategory within internal affairs changes each year. This variation could be attributed to evolving conditions within the country, but it is also possible that the producers of the program intentionally rotate topics to address different aspects of internal affairs over time.

Crimea ceases to be a significant category after 2014, while the theme of Ukraine evolves in meaning over the ten-year period. In 2014 and 2019, Ukraine was primarily discussed from a diplomatic and political perspective. However, by 2024, it was addressed exclusively within the context of the ongoing war. Therefore, when interpreting the branding results related to Ukraine, this shift in context should be carefully considered.

It is also notable that the number of personal questions nearly doubles compared to 2014. This increase may suggest that Putin is making a greater effort to connect with his audience on a personal level, emphasizing that he is one of the people and understands their struggles, potentially as a strategy to boost his popularity and gain respect (Chapman, 2024, p.132).

Comparing the branding coding (Figure 4), the first fact that stands out, is that the category excitement gradually increased in importance over the years.

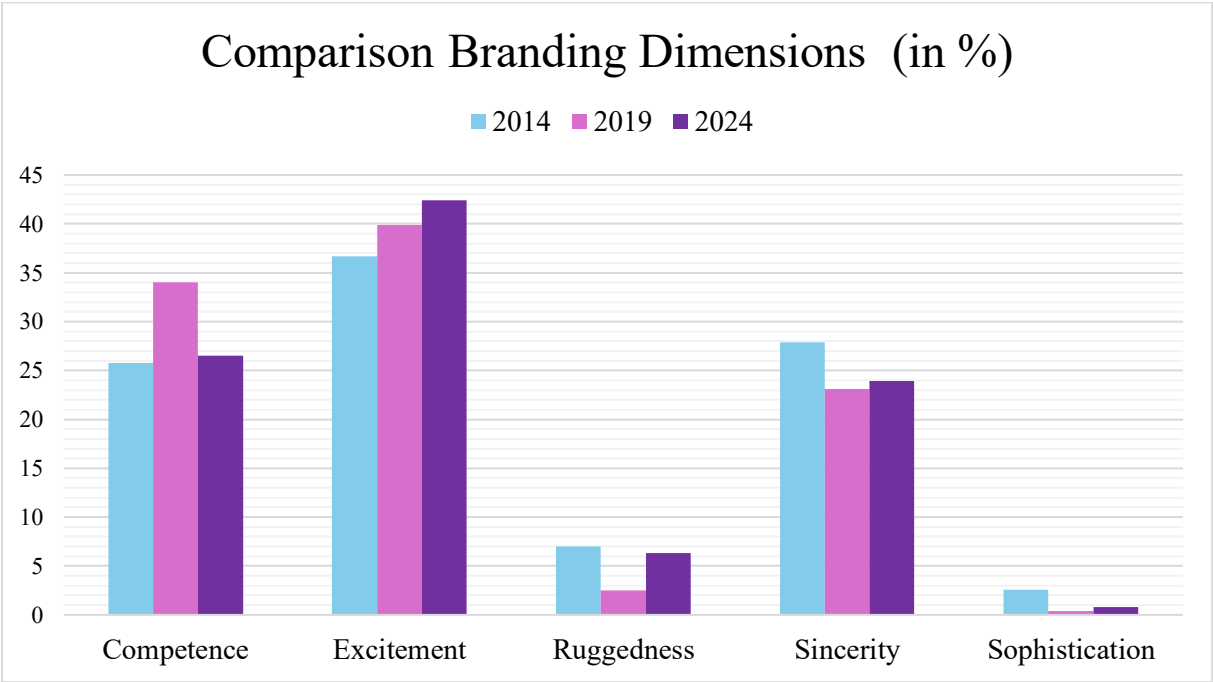


Figure 4: Comparison Branding Dimensions over Three Years

But when looking at a more detailed comparison of the different subcategories of Excitement (Figure 5), no single subcategory explains the general trend in Excitement. The only noticeable fact is that the subcategory Spirited dropped after 2014 and that three of the four categories are higher in 2024 than in 2014.

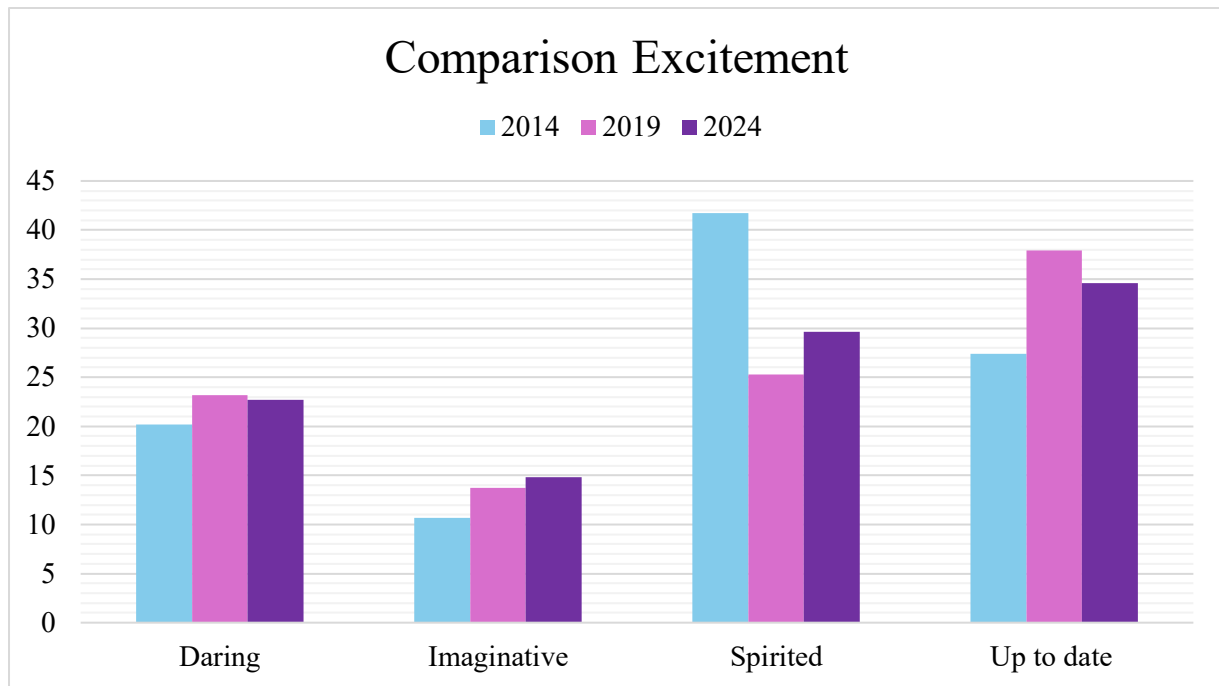


Figure 5: Comparison Subdimensions ‘Excitement’ over three years

Another notable observation is the increase in references to Competence in 2019. This can be partly explained by the year’s strong focus on internal affairs, an area where Competence is frequently emphasized. The branding sentiment of Competence was most often coded when Putin explained statistics, cited percentages, or presented information, which he typically does when discussing domestic issues

Looking at another frequently mentioned pillar, Sincerity, there appears to be a decline in this branding sentiment over time. An additional interesting finding concerns Ruggedness: Putin appears to use more tough or forceful expressions in 2014 and 2024, years when Russia was involved in major assertive foreign actions, compared to 2019. However, a closer examination of the branding results for foreign affairs by year reveals that Ruggedness is not the most prominent change in this domain. On the contrary, the fluctuation in Ruggedness appears to be more pronounced in the internal affairs category (Figure 6 & Figure 7).

It is important to note that internal affairs carry more weight in the analysis, as they consistently occupy the largest portion of each *Direct Line* episode. In the context of foreign affairs, the most notable trend is the gradual decline in the branding sentiment of Competence, a development that is not immediately visible in the overall results presented (Figure 4).

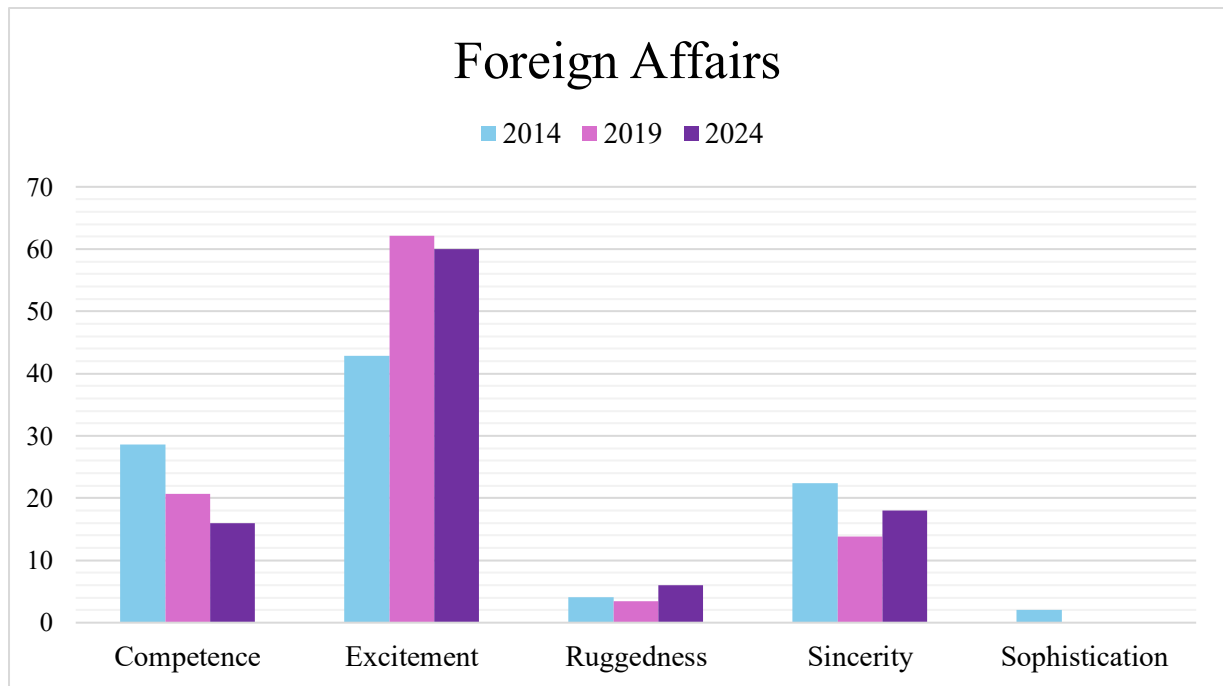


Figure 6: Branding Dimension for Foreign Affairs

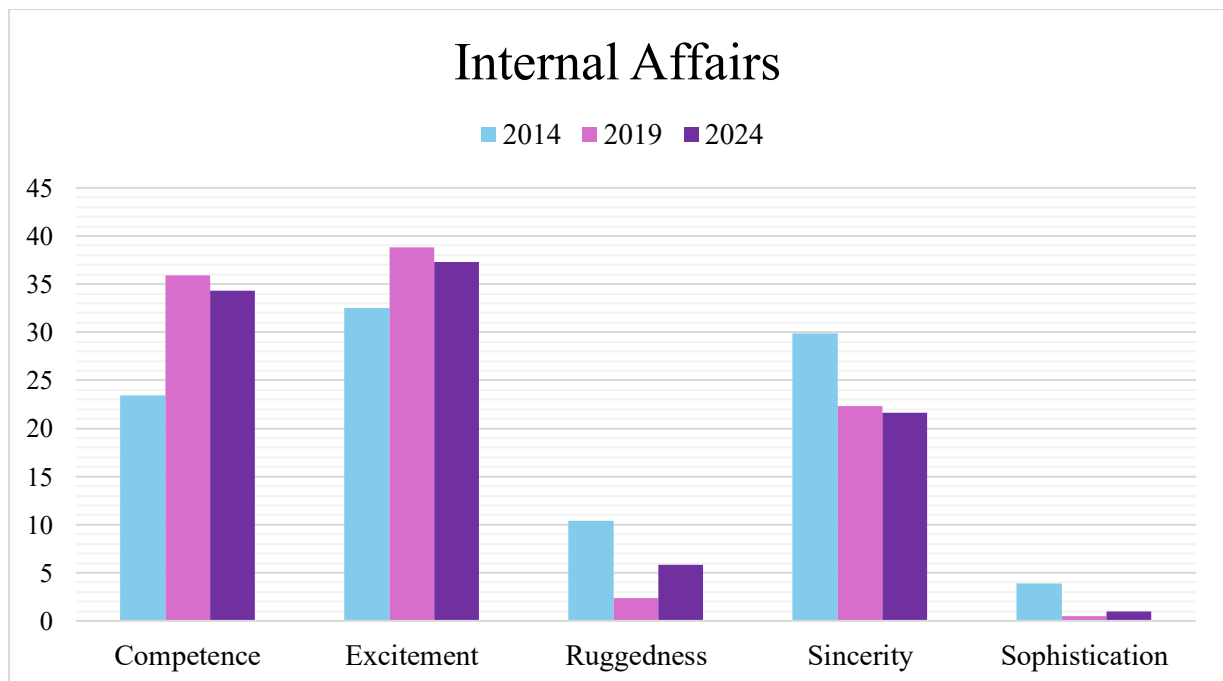


Figure 7: Branding Dimensions for Internal Affairs

Discussion of the Results

This section discusses the answers to the hypotheses and the research question. The first hypothesis, derived from existing research (Guzmán & Sierra, 2009), proposed that the most prominent branding theory components in Putin's image would be Competence, Sincerity, and Excitement. The overall results support this hypothesis. As shown and discussed in Figure 4 these three

branding dimensions consistently emerge as the most significant across all the years analyzed. This suggests that image-makers are indeed aware of the preferences of the Russian public and strategically shape Putin's image to align with those priorities. A more detailed analysis, particularly of the results concerning internal affairs (Figure 7) further reinforces this point. Assuming internal affairs are the most relevant to the domestic audience, the data shows that Competence and Excitement, and to a slightly lesser extent, Sincerity, play a major role in how Putin presents himself in this domain.

When comparing the internal affairs results with those for foreign affairs, a notable shift in emphasis appears. In the context of foreign affairs, Excitement stands out as significantly more prominent than Competence or Sincerity. This may be explained by the fact that foreign policy is generally not a top concern for the Russian population, who are more focused on social and economic issues (*Poll*, 2020). When taking a closer look at the subdimensions of Excitement within the context of foreign affairs (Figure 8), it becomes clear that the subdimension Daring has grown increasingly important over the years, while Imaginative has declined. Spirited shows two noticeable peaks, in 2014 and 2024. The high results for Daring and Spirited may help explain why the Excitement dimension is so prominent in discussions of foreign affairs.

Interestingly, Putin does not appear Rugged when speaking on these topics, he seems to avoid direct insults or vulgar language. On the contrary, his tone tends to be ambiguous or even passive-aggressive when addressing certain international issues. The reasons for this approach are, of course, speculative. However, it could be that he chooses to remain ambiguous in order to send a strong message to the domestic audience while diplomatically and legally avoiding statements that could further damage international relations.

The peaks in Spirited might be linked to the major international events occurring in those years, specifically, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war in Ukraine. These emotionally charged moments may have prompted Putin to adopt a more passionate tone to rally domestic support and present himself as both confident and resolute in his decisions.

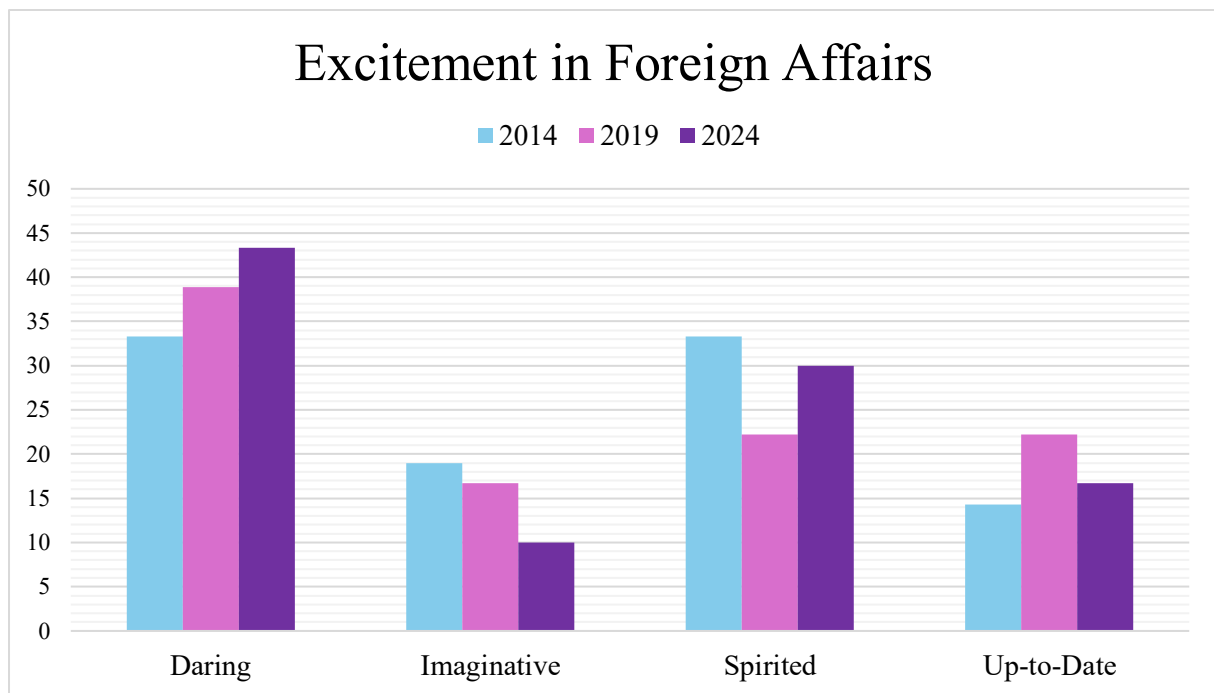


Figure 8: Subdimensions of Excitement in Foreign Affairs.

The next set of hypotheses was derived from the research by Baturu & Tolstrup, (2024).

The first hypothesis suggested that in 2019, Putin would place greater emphasis on Competence. When examining the overall results, this hypothesis is supported. Figure 4 clearly shows that Competence was a significantly more prominent branding dimension in 2019 compared to the other years.

However, this clear emphasis is not consistently reflected in the more detailed breakdowns of foreign affairs and internal affairs. The increase in Competence is more noticeable in the smaller categories of ‘personal’ and ‘Ukraine’, but these findings should be interpreted with caution. The topic of Ukraine, for example, was addressed in only three questions and yielded just five references to Competence. Similarly, although personal questions made up 18% of the questions in 2019, they included only eight references to Competence.

As a result, it is unclear which specific topics drove the overall increase in Competence in 2019, or which branding dimensions were significantly more emphasized in the other years. So, the hypothesis is supported in the overall results.

The second hypothesis, based on the Baturu & Tolstrup research, proposed that during times of national and international crises, the branding sentiments of Ruggedness and Daring would increase. When examining the general results in Figure 4 this hypothesis is partially supported. The data shows that Ruggedness was indeed more prominent in 2014 and 2024, both years marked by significant crises for Russia, compared to 2019, a relatively stable year.

As noted in the results section, this increase in Ruggedness is observed primarily within the internal affairs category, rather than in foreign affairs. This suggests that during crises, Putin adopts

a tougher, more assertive tone toward domestic audiences, perhaps to project strength and control internally. However, it should be noted that Ruggedness remained one of the least represented categories overall, suggesting that Putin does not heavily rely on this dimension in the *Direct Line* program to shape his image. It is possible that other formats or events are more suited for projecting this aspect of his persona.

To assess whether the same trend applies to the branding sentiment Daring, Figure 5 was created to provide a more detailed look at the Excitement dimension, under which Daring falls. In this case, Daring does not appear to vary significantly across the years, despite the hypothesis that it would increase in response to international crises in 2014 and 2024. On the contrary, it even shows a gradual decline over time. The two subdimensions of excitement that do show some fluctuations are Spirited and Up to date. However, for Spirited, the difference between 2019 and 2024 is only 4.1%, which is not a particularly substantial change. The fluctuation in Up to Date may be explained by the fact that 2019 was heavily focused on domestic issues, which often involved the president demonstrating current knowledge and awareness, hence the higher score in that year.

In conclusion, the results partially confirm the second hypothesis. While the Ruggedness aspect of branding is clearly more prominent during periods of crisis, there is no evidence to support the claim that daring also increases during such times.

The final hypothesis suggested that during periods when public mobilization is crucial, identified in this thesis as 2024, which arguably required greater mobilization than 2014, the president's image would place greater emphasis on the Excitement branding dimension. However, the general results presented in Figure 4 show only a gradual increase in excitement over the years, rather than a significant jump in 2024. This suggests that the data does not support the hypothesis.

A closer examination of the detailed results for excitement (also shown in Figure 5) reveal only minimal fluctuations, particularly in the subdimensions Spirited and Up to Date, as previously discussed. Therefore, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed based on the current data. One possible explanation for this non-confirmation could be a flawed assumption: that the Russian government actively sought to mobilize the population in 2024. It is also possible that mobilization efforts may have been stronger during other periods, not captured in this study. Further research would be necessary to explore this possibility and to better understand the timing and nature of any mobilization strategies.

After discussing all the formulated hypotheses, it is now time to answer the central research question: How does Putin present his brand and what patterns or shifts emerge over time? Based on the research conducted in this thesis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

First, Putin and the team managing his image primarily rely on three key branding dimensions: Competence, Excitement, and Sincerity. However, the emphasis on these dimensions varies from year to year, depending on the national and international context as well as the topics being discussed. For example, during economically strong years, the Competence aspect of his branding is

highlighted. Similarly, Putin tends to emphasize Sincerity when addressing personal questions and using more sentences that fall under Excitement when discussing foreign affairs.

While Ruggedness plays a smaller role overall, it becomes more prominent during times of national and international crises, especially in relation to domestic issues where Putin appears more rugged for his home audience. The last dimension, Sophistication, seems to play virtually no role in shaping his public image. This may be intentional, as emphasizing Sophistication could undermine his portrayal as a man of the people, or it may simply reflect that Sophistication is not a characteristic typically associated with his brand.

Overall, Putin's image construction is not static; it fluctuates based on the current situation and the topics discussed. This suggests that those involved in shaping his image are aware of the sentiments of the Russian people and the country's realities.

Second, the Direct Line with Vladimir Putin program focuses predominantly on domestic issues, indicating that his image is largely built around internal affairs where the three main branding dimensions are most actively employed. This might help explain why his popularity has not significantly declined despite sanctions or the ongoing war, although this remains speculative. It appears that as long as there are no major domestic crises, his image and his popularity will remain relatively stable.

Limitations, Relevance and Opportunities

Like any research, this study has its limitations. Some of these were mentioned throughout the thesis, but others became apparent during the research process and the writing of the analysis.

First, analyzing only three episodes provides a limited amount of data, which reduces the ability to draw definitive conclusions. Smaller data sets tend to have greater variance, and it is possible that the selected years differ from other years of the program, potentially affecting the results. Therefore, further research with a larger sample size is necessary to arrive at more robust conclusions.

Second, this research focuses exclusively on the Direct Line program, which, although a key tool for Putin's image-building, does not capture all facets of his public communication. Other events such as public speeches, interviews, and other appearances may emphasize different aspects of his branding, which are not accounted for here.

Third, analyzing a single program and a single image cannot fully capture the complexity of how Putin builds and maintains his public persona. The reality is inherently more nuanced and multifaceted than what can be understood from one format alone.

Finally, a limitation inherent to the branding theory framework itself became evident. The broad and somewhat subjective nature of branding dimensions means they can be interpreted differently depending on the coder's background and perspective. This research relies on the interpretation of a single coder, which may affect validity. If the study were conducted by others, the results might differ. To improve robustness and reliability, future research should involve multiple coders to ensure consistency in interpretation.

Despite its limitations, this research still holds value. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on political marketing that approaches politicians as brands, rather than traditional political figures. By analyzing Putin through the lens of branding theory, this thesis offers a nuanced understanding of how he constructs and maintains his public image.

Second, it helps to explain, even if it is just a little, how Putin sustains his position of power, which, in the Russian context, is strongly linked to his popularity among the people. Understanding the branding techniques he uses, provides insight into why many Russians continue to support him. This, in turn, also offers a deeper understanding of Russian society and the values that resonate with the population.

Furthermore, the analysis of the Direct Line episodes sheds light on the inner workings of the Russian propaganda system, showing how carefully crafted messages are trying to shape public perception.

Finally, by identifying and tracking the branding dimensions used across different years, this research could even serve as a tool to give an indication of the stability of Putin's position, offering potential to predict whether shifts in his branding strategy reflect broader vulnerabilities or changes in political priorities.

This research also opens several opportunities for future academic research. First, by analyzing more episodes of *Direct Line* and incorporating additional sources, such as interviews, public speeches, or media appearances, a more comprehensive and accurate picture of Putin's image-building strategy can be developed. Second, the same research method could be applied to other authoritarian leaders with strong popular support. This would allow for a comparative analysis, offering empirical insights into how different so-called "spin dictators" resemble or differ from one another in their branding strategies. Third, this approach could be applied on democratic leaders, making it possible to compare branding strategies between authoritarian and democratic contexts, and to explore how the expectations of citizens differ in these systems. Lastly, it would be valuable to investigate how Putin's image is constructed differently for domestic versus international audiences, as the messaging and branding sentiments might shift depending on the intended target group.

Conclusion

This research set out to examine how Vladimir Putin has adjusted his personal brand over the span of ten years, arguing that modern authoritarian leaders rely increasingly on popularity and public legitimacy. Unlike traditional dictatorships that depend solely on coercion and fear, today's authoritarian regimes seem to often adopt techniques from political marketing to shape their image. To explore this, the study applied a branding framework based on Aaker's Five Dimensions of Brand Personality:

Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Ruggedness, and Sophistication. Their presence was coded 14 hours' worth of video footage from three episodes of the televised *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin* from 2014, 2019, and 2024.

To guide this research, four hypotheses were formulated, based on the research of Gúzman & Sierra and Baturo & Tolstrup. The first one was That Putin's image would focus on the three key branding dimensions, Sincerity, Excitement, and Competence; The second one that Competence would be emphasized more during times of economic stability (2019); The third one that Ruggedness and Daring would increase during periods of crisis (2014 and 2024); The fourth one, that Excitement would rise in times of public mobilization (especially in 2024).

The findings support the first hypothesis: across all three years, Putin's brand was primarily constructed through the dimensions of Sincerity, Excitement, and Competence. These traits were not only dominant but also adapted depending on the context. For example, Sincerity was often used in responses to personal questions, while Excitement and Competence featured in discussions of internal affairs and foreign affairs. The second hypothesis was also affirmed. In 2019, a year marked by relative economic calm, Putin's image was strongly built on the Competence pillar, through his detailed use of statistics and emphasis on reliability. The third hypothesis found partial support. Ruggedness was indeed more prominent in 2014 and 2024, both years marked by international tension. However, this branding sentiment appeared more often in internal affairs rather than foreign policy. The fourth hypothesis, however, was not confirmed. While Excitement remained one of the core branding dimensions overall, there was no significant increase in 2024 that could be linked to efforts at public mobilization. This could potentially indicate that there was no effort public mobilization.

Overall, this study shows that Putin's image is not static. The results seem to indicate that he possibly adjusts branding strategies based on the national mood, public expectations, and international circumstances. Although more research is needed to really confirm this. The *Direct Line* program serves as one of the many instruments in this image management process, helping to portray Putin as competent, sincere, and responsive.

Putin thus is not merely a political leader, he is a product, a brand continuously reengineered to resonate with shifting public sentiment. Recognizing Putin through this lens not only reframes an aspect of our understanding of his enduring popularity, but also invites a broader reconsideration of how contemporary authoritarian power is constructed and sustained, not through brute force alone, but through the tools of marketing, media, and manufactured intimacy. Future research should explore whether this branding model applies to other authoritarian leaders and how such image-building may be reshaping the very nature of autocratic legitimacy in the 21st century.

References

- Aaker, J. L. (1997). Dimensions of Brand Personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3), 347-.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3151897>
- Baturo, A., & Tolstrup, J. (2024). Strategic Communication in Dictatorships: Performance, Patriotism, and Intimidation. *The Journal of Politics*, 86(2), 582–596. <https://doi.org/10.1086/726945>
- Beale, M. (2018). Brand Putin: An Analysis of Vladimir Putin's Projected Images. *Defence Strategic Communications*, 5(5), 129–169.
- Boskakov, I. (2023). The Presidentialization of Russian Political Parties. In M. Glaser, I. V. Krivushin, & M. Morini (Eds.), *The Presidentialization of Political Parties in Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus* (1st ed.). Springer Nature Switzerland. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25977-7>
- Buckley, N., Marquardt, K. L., Reuter, O. J., & Tertychnaya, K. (2024). Endogenous Popularity: How Perceptions of Support Affect the Popularity of Authoritarian Regimes. *The American Political Science Review*, 118(2), 1046–1052. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000618>
- Burrett, T. (2025). Making Russia Great Again? Vladimir Putin's Changing Sources of Legitimacy 2000–2024. *Politics and Governance*, 13(0).
<https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/9029>
- Chapman, H. S. (2024). *Dialogue with the Dictator: Authoritarian Legitimation and Information Management in Putin's Russia* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009427548>
- DeBardeleben, J. (2024). Misreading Russia or Misreading Putin?: A Commentary on Leigh Sarty's Article. *Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies*, 17(1), 139–145.
<https://doi.org/10.22215/cjers.v17i1.4954>
- Dougherty, J. (2015, December 25). Trash talk: What Putin's presidential potty mouth is all about. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/25/europe/vladimir-putin-bad-language/index.html>
- Fridman, O., & Michlin-Shapir, V. (2024). *Deciphering Russian Enigma: In 15 Questions and 30 Answers*. Springer Nature Switzerland. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58669-9>
- Frye, T., Gehlbach, S., Marquardt, K. L., & Reuter, O. J. (2017). Is Putin's popularity real? *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 33(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1144334>
- Fugard, A., Potts, H. W. W., Atkinson, P., Delamont, S., Cernat, A., Sakshaug, J. W., & Williams, R. A. (2020). *Thematic analysis*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Gomza, I. (2022). The War in Ukraine: Putin's Inevitable Invasion. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(3), 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0036>
- Guriev, S., & Treisman, D. (2019). Informational Autocrats. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 33(4), 100–127. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.33.4.100>
- Guriev, S., & Treisman, D. (2020). The Popularity of Authoritarian Leaders: A Cross-National Investigation. *World Politics*, 72(4), 601–638. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887120000167>

- Guriev, S., & Treisman, D. (2022). *Spin dictators: The changing face of tyranny in the 21st century*. University Press.
- Guzmán, F., & Sierra, V. (2009). A political candidate's brand image scale: Are political candidates brands? *The Journal of Brand Management*, 17(3), 207–217.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2009.19>
- Hutcheson, D. S., & Petersson, B. (2016). Shortcut to Legitimacy: Popularity in Putin's Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68(7), 1107–1126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1216949>
- Kelley, D. R. (2017). *Russian politics and presidential power: Transformational leadership from Gorbachev to Putin* (First edition.). CQ Press.
- La Lova, L. (2025). Vladimir Putin on Channel One, 2000-2022. *Political Communication*, 42(2), 234–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2380438>
- Petersson, B. (2017). Putin and the Russian Mythscape: Dilemmas of Charismatic Legitimacy. *Demokratizatsiya (Washington, D.C.)*, 25(3), 235–254.
- Pich, C., & Newman, B. I. (2020). Evolution of Political Branding: Typologies, Diverse Settings and Future Research. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 19(1–2), 3–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2019.1680932>
- Poll: State political priorities in Russia 2019. (2020, November 17). Statista.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1066823/opinion-poll-state-political-priorities-in-russia/>
- Putin, V. (Director). (2014, April 17). *Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным* [Broadcast].
<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/20796>
- Putin, V. (Director). (2019, June 20). *Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным* [Broadcast].
<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60795>
- Putin, V. (Director). (2024, December 19). *Итоги года с Владимиром Путиным* [Broadcast].
<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/75909>
- Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods*, 15(1), 85–109.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822x02239569>
- Scammell, M. (2015). Politics and Image: The Conceptual Value of Branding. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 14(1–2), 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2014.990829>
- Simons, G. (2016). Stability and Change in Putin's Political Image During the 2000 and 2012 Presidential Elections: Putin 1.0 and Putin 2.0? *Journal of Political Marketing*, 15(2–3), 149–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2016.1151114>
- Snegovaya, M. (2024, December 17). The reluctant consensus: War and Russia's public opinion. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/russia-tomorrow/reluctant-consensus-war-and-russias-public-opinion/>
- Sperling, V. (2015). *Sex, politics, and Putin: Political legitimacy in Russia*. University Press.
- Stoner, K. (2023). The Putin Myth. *Journal of Democracy*, 34(2), 5–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.0020>

- Tempest, R. (2016). The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 15(2–3), 101–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2016.1151105>
- Times, T. M. (2021, April 2). *Putin Named Russia's Hottest Man*. The Moscow Times. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/02/putin-named-russias-hottest-man-a73452>
- Wilson, K., & Lee, J. (2020). Questioning Putin's Popularity: Presidential Approval in an Electoral Authoritarian Regime. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 67(1), 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2018.1541751>
- World Bank Open Data*. (n.d.). World Bank Open Data. Retrieved May 18, 2025, from <https://data.worldbank.org>
- Yudin, G. (2022). The War in Ukraine: Do Russians Support Putin? *Journal of Democracy*, 33(3), 31–37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0037>
- Путин переживал из-за фразы “мочить в сортире.”* (2011, July 15). BBC News Русская служба. https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2011/07/110715_putin_toilet_aforism

Appendix Contents

Descriptive Statistics and Data Overview	1
Thematic Branding Coding	2
<i>Overview</i>	2
<i>2014</i>	2
<i>2019</i>	3
<i>2024</i>	4

Descriptive Statistics and Data Overview

	2014	2019	2024
Duration Episode	3h54	4h24	4h26
Questions (tot.)	84	80	80
Crimea	16	1	0
Annexation	4	0	0
Economy & Integration into Russia	12	1	0
Foreign Affaris	15	7	13
Bilateral Relations	9	4	6
International Organisations	2	0	1
International Strategy	3	3	6
Post Soviet Issues	1	0	0
Internal Affairs	36	54	36
Economy & Natural Resources	3	7	2
Governance, Transparency & Participation	6	16	2
National Identity, Culture & Values	5	4	5
Regional Development & Local Issues	8	10	14
Security & Law Enforcement	2	9	2
Social Policy	12	8	11
Personal	9	15	15
Informal	4	6	9
Political carreer	2	6	4
Special Requests	3	3	2
Ukraine	8	3	16

Diplomacy	2	2	0
Politics	6	1	0
War	0	0	16

Thematic Branding Coding

Overview

	2014	2019	2024
Competence	59	81	63
Intelligent	21	22	17
Reliable	26	39	26
Successful	12	20	20
Excitement	84	95	101
Daring	17	22	23
Imaginative	9	13	15
Spirited	35	24	30
Up to date	23	36	35
Ruggedness	16	6	15
Outdoorsy (Masculine)	1	1	5
Tough	15	5	10
Sincerity	64	55	57
Cheerful	8	9	13
Down-to-Earth	18	8	14
Honest	29	33	20
Wholesome	9	5	10
Sophistication	6	1	2
Charming	6	1	2

In %	Competence	Excitement	Ruggedness	Sincerity	Sophistication
2014	25,8	36,7	7	27,9	2,6
2019	34	39,9	2,5	23,1	0,4
2024	26,5	42,4	6,3	23,9	0,8

2014

2014*	Comp.	Exc.	Rug.	Sin.	Soph.	Comp. %	Exc. %	Rug. %	Sin. %	Soph. %
Foreign Affairs	14	21	2	11	1	28,6	42,9	4,1	22,4	2
Internal Affairs	18	25	8	23	3	23,4	32,5	10,4	29,9	3,9
Personal	0	2	0	3	2	0	28,6	0	42,8	28,6

Ukraine	7	23	5	16	0	13,7	45,1	9,8	31,4	0

*Opted to not include Crimea to make comparison between years possible

Competence in percentages 2014

	Intelligent	reliable	Succesful
Foreign Affairs	57,1	21,4	21,4
Internal Affairs	38,9	50	11
Personal	0	0	0
Ukraine	42,9	42,9	14,2

Excitement in Percentages 2014

	Daring	Imaginative	Spirited	Up-to-date
Foreign Affairs	33,3	19	33,3	14,3
Internal Affairs	24	16	32	28
Personal	0	0	100	0
Ukraine	17,4	0	56,5	26,1

Sincerity Percentages 2014

	Cheerful	Down-to-Earth	Honest	Wholesome
Foreign Affairs	36,4	9,1	36,4	18,1
Internal Affairs	4,3	39,1	52,2	4,3
Personal	0	33,3	0	66,7
Ukraine	0	31,2	50	18,8

2019

2019	Comp.	Exc.	Rug.	Sin.	Soph.	Comp. %	Exc. %	Rug. %	Sin. %	Soph. %
Foreign Affairs	6	18	1	4	0	20,7	62,1	3,4	13,8	0
Internal Affairs	61	66	4	38	1	35,9	38,8	2,4	22,3	0,5
Personal	8	7	0	12	0	29,6	25,9	0	44,4	0

Ukraine	5	4	1	1	0	45,5	36,4	9,1	9,1	0

Competence in percentages 2019

	Intelligent	reliable	Succesful
Foreign Affairs	33,3	0	66,7
Internal Affairs	26,2	52,5	21,3
Personal	50	25	25
Ukraine	0	5	0

Excitement in percentages 2019

	Daring	Imaginative	Spirited	Up-to-date
Foreign Affairs	38,9	16,7	22,2	22,2
Internal Affairs	16,7	15,2	22,7	45,5
Personal	28,6	0	42,9	28,6
Ukraine	50	0	50	0

Sincerity in percentages 2019

	Cheerful	Down-to-Earth	Honest	Wholesome
Foreign Affairs	0	25	75	0
Internal Affairs	15,8	7,9	65,8	10,5
Personal	25	33,3	41,7	0
Ukraine	0	0	0	100

2024

2024	Comp.	Exc.	Rug.	Sin.	Soph.	Comp. %	Exc. %	Rug. %	Sin. %	Soph. %
Foreign Affairs	8	30	3	9	0	16	60	6	18	0
Internal Affairs	35	39	6	22	1	34,3	37,3	5,8	21,6	1

Personal	6	7	3	13	1	20	23,3	10	43,3	3,3
Ukraine	14	26	3	13	0	25,5	45,5	5,4	23,6	0

Competence in percentages 2024

	Intelligent	reliable	Succesful
Foreign Affairs	37,5	12,5	50
Internal Affairs	22,9	48,6	28,5
Personal	33,3	33,3	33,3
Ukraine	28,6	42,8	28,6

Excitement in percentages 2024

	Daring	Imaginative	Spirited	Up-to-date
Foreign Affairs	43,3	10	30	16,7
Internal Affairs	10,2	15,4	23,1	51,3
Personal	42,9	0	57,1	0
Ukraine	11,5	23,1	30,8	34,6

Sincerity in percentages 2024

	Cheerful	Down-to-Earth	Honest	Wholesome
Foreign Affairs	33,3	0	44,4	22,2
Internal Affairs	31,8	22,7	22,7	22,7
Personal	7,7	38,5	38,5	15,4
Ukraine	15,3	30,8	46,2	7,7