

Fake It Till You Make It

A comparison of Joseph Stalin's, Vladimir Putin's, and Viktor Orbán's personality cults and how they relate to democratic backsliding

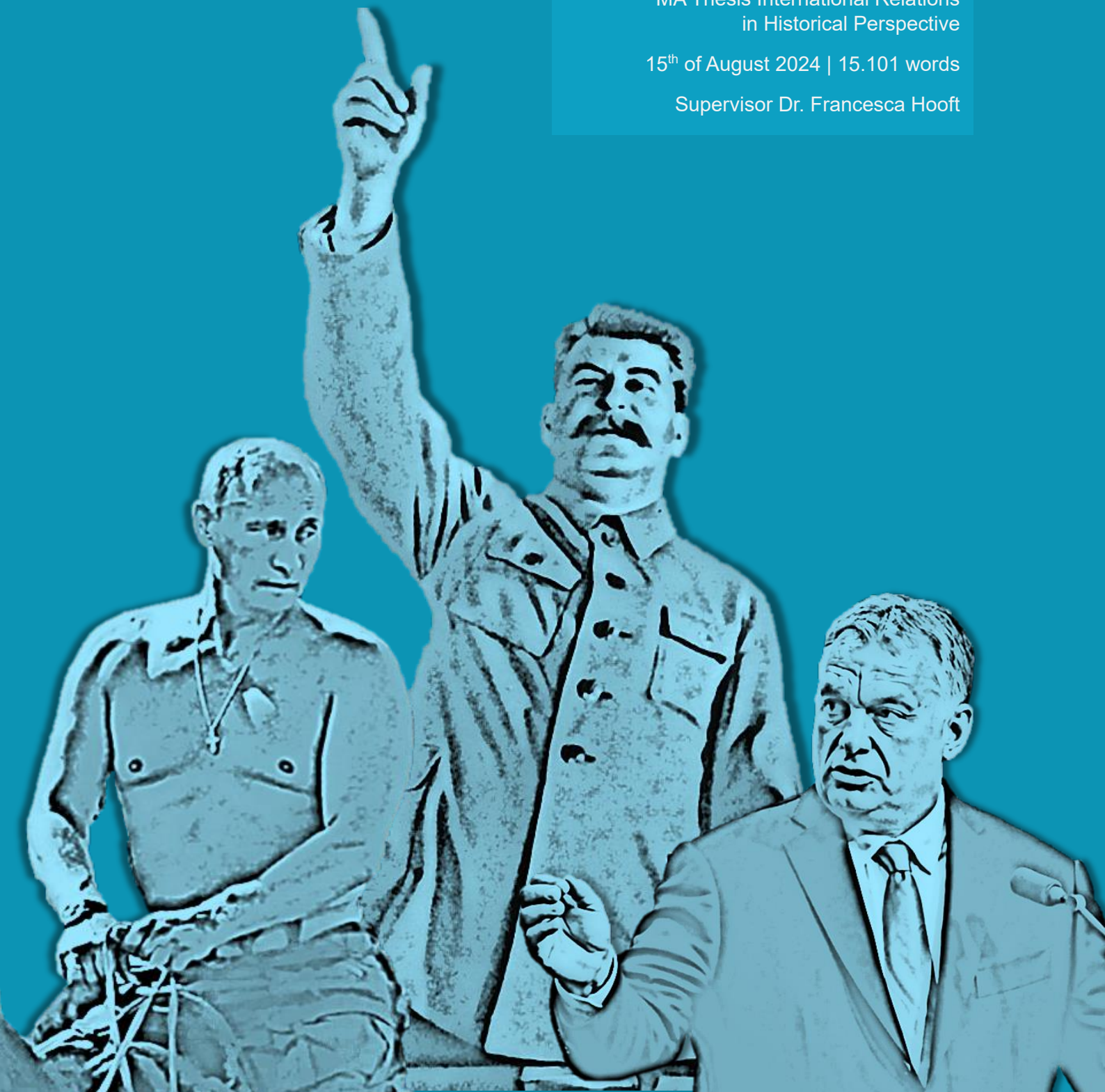
Vivian Schwarzwälder

6822819 | University of Utrecht
v.a.schwarzwälder@students.uu.nl

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Supervisor Dr. Francesca Hooft



Abstract

This research taps into the ongoing debate on democratic backsliding and compares how similar Vladimir Putin's and Viktor Orbán's personality cults are compared to Stalin's cult in light of Russia's and Hungary's current backsliding. By creating a four-topic model which consists of the cult's emergence, practicalities, role of predecessor(s), and – most importantly – of the leader's roles and image, the current leader cults prove to resemble much from Stalin's. Moreover, there seems to be a parallel between the development of the leaders' personality cults and authoritarian practices which is mainly due to the leaders centralising the nation's politics and system around their own persona, therewith pulling power to themselves and creating the belief that that no other leader could take their place. This research therefore concludes that even though Putin and Orbán may not be re-Stalinising (yet), their countries have reached the status of autocracy and will probably backslide further towards a dictatorship-like system.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
i.1. Historiography	5
i.2. Methodology	8
i.3. Structure	9
Chapter 1: the Phenomenon of a Personality Cult	11
1.1. History and definition	11
1.2. Totalitarian versus democratic context	12
1.3. The role of charisma	13
1.4. After death	14
1.5. Conclusion	15
Chapter 2: Joseph Stalin	16
2.0. The rise of Stalin	16
2.1. The birth of Stalin's personality cult	17
2.2. Practicalities of Stalin's personality cult	18
2.3. Stalin's predecessor(s)	19
2.4. Stalin's image	20
2.4.1. <i>Stalin's charisma</i>	20
2.4.2. <i>Stalin's roles</i>	21
2.5. Democratic backsliding	23
2.6. Conclusion	23
Chapter 3: Vladimir Putin	25
3.0. The rise of Putin	25
3.1. The birth of Putin's personality cult	25
3.2. Practicalities of Putin's personality cult	27
3.3. Putin's predecessor(s)	27
3.4. Putin's image	29
3.4.1. <i>Putin's charisma</i>	29
3.4.2. <i>Putin's roles</i>	29
3.5. Democratic backsliding	33
3.5.1. <i>Russia's backsliding</i>	33
3.5.2. <i>Democratic backsliding and Putin's personality cult</i>	35
3.6. Conclusion	37
Chapter 4: Viktor Orbán	39
4.0. The rise of Orbán	39

4.1. The birth of Orbán's personality cult	39
4.2. Practicalities of Orbán's personality cult	40
4.3. Orbán's predecessor(s)	42
4.3.1. <i>Dictatorial predecessors</i>	42
4.3.2. <i>Democratic predecessors</i>	44
4.4. Orbán's image	45
4.4.1. <i>Orbán's charisma</i>	45
4.4.2. <i>Orbán's roles</i>	45
4.5. Democratic backsliding	52
4.5.1. <i>Hungary's backsliding</i>	52
4.5.2. <i>Democratic backsliding and Orbán's personality cult</i>	58
4.6. Conclusion	59
Conclusion	60
Bibliography	62
Appendix	79

i. Introduction

In his infamous ‘Secret Speech’ at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956, Nikita Khrushchev called Stalin’s leadership a *kult’ lichnosti* which translates to a “cult of the individual” or “cult of personality”.¹ Indeed, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had created a leader cult around his persona which went accompanied by a vast amount of propaganda. Yet Stalin was not the only one to do so, as the phenomenon of a personality cult, in this research shortened as PC, characterised almost all authoritarian leadership systems in the twentieth century and thus leaders like Mao Zedong, Josip Broz Tito, and Adolf Hitler all had their own cults. Nowadays, however, there are no official dictators in eastern Europe, yet some twenty-first century presidents have been accused of having authoritarian tendencies and of having cultivated a personality cult around themselves. This thesis will focus on two of them: current Russian president Vladimir Putin and current Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán. The goal of this research is to compare their PC’s with Stalin’s PC to discuss the meaning and influence of the discovered patterns and (dis)similarities in light of democratic backsliding. Democratic backsliding entails a loss of democratic quality and an increase in authoritarianism which has happened in different ways during the rule of all three leaders.² As there seems to be a parallel development between a leader’s PC and his increasing authoritarian rule, this connection will be explored in this study. Stalin’s PC will be taken as a basis, as his seemingly set the tone for later PC’s in the (post-)Soviet area. Concretely, this thesis will thus research and answer the question: ‘How (dis)similar are the personality cults of current twenty-first century eastern European leaders Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán compared to the personality cult of Joseph Stalin and how do their PC’s relate to democratic backsliding in their countries?’.

i.1. Historiography

Even though the leaders’ lives, rule, and policies have been studied quite thoroughly, few scholars have specifically researched their personality cults.³ Regarding Stalin, art historian Anita Pisch confirms this academic gap, as she comments that ‘[a]lthough the literature on Stalinist propaganda is enormous, there has been no dedicated study on the marketing of

¹ Dmitri Zakharine, “Personality cults”. The career of the contested notion’, in: Kirill Postoutenko and Darin Stephanov (eds.), *Ruler Personality Cults from Empires to Nation-States and Beyond* (Oxon and New York 2021) 10; Valerie Sperling, ‘Putin’s macho personality cult’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49 (2016) 1, pp. 13-23, here 13.

² Johannes Gerschewski, ‘Autocratization and Democratic Backsliding: Taking Stock of a Recent Debate’, in: Democracy Promotion in Times of Uncertainty: Trends and Challenges (report 2018), pp. 5-9, here 5.

³ Frank Dikötter, *How to Be a Dictator. The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London 2019).

Stalin's personality cult in posters during the Stalinist period', even though posters were one of the main ways Stalin's PC was propagated.⁴ This prompted her to write the book *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*.

There seem to be more concrete studies about Putin's PC. Russian affairs expert Ben Judah wrote, for example, the book *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin* wherein he argues that even though 'Putinism' peaked in 2008, it thereafter declined due to Putin's new authoritarian tendencies which broke Putin's established system that was based on him being a good, popular politician.⁵ Similarly, political scientist Valerie Sperling wrote the article 'Putin's macho personality cult' wherein she pleads that Putin-centred politics highlight his masculinity to legitimise his authority.⁶ Furthermore, Russianists Julie Cassiday and Emily Johnson published the article 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality' wherein they conclude that Putin does not have the same control as Stalin and that post-Soviet cults remain different.⁷ A last example is the book *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult* wherein journalist Anna Arutunyan argues that Russia has an individualised, divided nature which makes Russians more open to centralised power. This also is visible in Putin's PC, she states, as there was an unusual bottom-up support for Putin's PC.⁸ There is thus relevant literature dedicated to Putin's PC, yet often it only discusses certain roles or aspects, e.g., his machoism or popularity, not providing the full picture of his multiple roles. Moreover, even though scholars usually take political and authoritarian developments into account, most research is published pre-2016, making it relatively outdated.

It proved more difficult to find academic literature devoted to Orbán's PC. An insightful article is, however, historian Balázs Apor's chapter 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary'. He concludes that Orbán could have a successful leader cult after Hungary democratised party due to Hungary's long history of modern leader cults and to individual agency, i.e., a leader's decision between modesty or a personalised cult.⁹ Another example is political scientist Anna Szemere's article 'But he has

⁴ Anita Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications* (Acton 2016) 5.

⁵ Ben Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin* (London 2013) 2-3 and 324-325.

⁶ Sperling, 'Putin's macho personality cult', 13 and 21.

⁷ Julie A. Cassiday and Emily D. Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', *The Slavonic and East European Review* 88 (2010) 4, pp. 681-707, here 707.

⁸ Anna Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult* (Northampton 2015) introduction and chapter 13.2, 17.5, and epilogue [no page numbers].

⁹ Balázs Apor, 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary', in: James Ryan and Susan Grant, *Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism: Complexities, Contradictions and Controversies* (London 2021), pp. 93-109, here 97 and 109.

nothing on at all!’ Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s celebrity politician’ wherein she argues that Orbán has established a nationalist and ‘monarch-like celebrity status’ to increase censorship and his own power.¹⁰ Together, these texts give some insight into Orbán’s personality cult, yet they are rather the exception than the rule. Most research seems unable to grasp the complexity of Orbán’s cult and misses, for example, the fact that Orbán has different, even contradicting portrayals and that there is an important link to be recognised between his roles and his autocratic behaviour, something this thesis aims to rectify.

A second observation regarding the existing literature is that when scholars do analyse a leader’s PC, it is often not in comparison with others.¹¹ An exception is *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, edited by Balázs Apor, Jan Behrends, Polly Jones, and E.A. Rees, as they discuss multiple historical leader cults in light of Stalin’s influence.¹² Another exception is the comparison of Stalin’s and Hitler’s PC’s in part of R.J. Overy’s book *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia*.¹³ Contrastingly, most of the aforementioned literature lacks the comparative approach and even historian Frank Dikötter’s promising-sounding book *How to Be a Dictator. The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century* discusses the leaders separately.¹⁴ However, it is important to understand how different leaders create and use their persona to establish power and how this influences societies, particularly because it often relates to authoritarian tendencies. Patterns, effects, power dynamics, and contexts should be studied, especially because the change from democracy towards more autocratic regimes is a new phenomenon in the current Western world. Hereby motivated, this thesis uses the comparative approach and therewith studies the (dis)similarities between Stalin’s and the current leaders’ PC’s whilst asking if Stalinist, non-democratic patterns are returning.

Indeed, this thesis will also focus on Russia’s and Hungary’s democratic backsliding, because whereas democratisation has strongly increased since the mid-1970s and exploded since 1990, the consolidation of Western democracies came into question in the mid-2000s.¹⁵ Most

¹⁰ Anna Szemere, ‘But he has nothing on at all!’ Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s celebrity politician’, *Celebrity Studies* 11 (2020) 3, pp. 320-335, here 320 and 330.

¹¹ Kirill Postoutenko and Darin Stephanov (eds.), *Ruler Personality Cults from Empires to Nation-States and Beyond* (Oxon and New York 2021) 1.

¹² Balázs Apor, Jan C. Behrends, Polly Jones, and E.A. Rees, *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships. Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (Hampshire and New York 2004).

¹³ Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia* (New York 2005).

¹⁴ Dikötter, *How to Be a Dictator. The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*.

¹⁵ Renske Doorenspleet, ‘Reassessing the Three Waves of Democratization’, *World Politics* 52 (2000) 3, pp. 384-406, here 386; Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, ‘The Landscape of Democratic Backsliding’ in: *Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding* (report published by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2022)), pp. 4-6, here 4; Hakan Sönmez, ‘Democratic Backsliding or Stabilization? The Role of Democracy Indices in Differing Interpretations’, *Politikon: The*

scholars, referred to as the “optimistic”, ‘find no evidence for democratic backsliding’ and ‘state that there is a period of stabilization’, political scientist Hakan Sönmez notes.¹⁶ The “pessimistic” scholars, on the other hand, observe an increase in authoritarian tendencies and a worsening of democratic quality, especially concerning ‘civil liberties and the rule of law’.¹⁷ As a result, a democratic system can transform into a full authoritarian regime (democratic breakdown) or into an illiberal hybrid version (democratic regression).¹⁸ Democratic backsliding thus entails the dismantling of democratic institutions, which is often done by the nation’s leader or leading party.¹⁹ International factors can also influence a country’s democratic path, as, for example, Ukraine improved its democratic quality whilst reaching out to the West and Belarus’ democracy deteriorated whilst the country remained close to Russia.²⁰ As is well known, post-2000 Russia has experienced a democratic regression yet possibly less well known is the serious illiberal turn Hungary has taken.²¹ To improve our understanding of Russia’s and Hungary’s backsliding, this thesis will analyse how both current leaders use their personality cults to establish a persona-based rule with authoritarian tendencies. This will also be studied in light of Stalin’s PC, as a comparative analysis of their PC’s can say much about the possibly continued harsh and unfree ideals and practices of today’s officially non-totalitarian, systems.

i.2. Methodology

This research includes secondary and primary sources. The first consist of scholarly literature about the leader’s rise, creation of his PC, and effects on his rule. To complete this academic groundwork, primary evidence will be used to show what the PC actually entails, i.e., how the leader is portrayed. These sources will mostly pertain to propaganda and speeches, as they give a clear idea of the direct image and roles the leader conveys to the nation’s public.

IAPSS Journal of Political Science 46 (2020), pp. 54-78, here 54; Gerschewski, ‘Autocratization and Democratic Backsliding: Taking Stock of a Recent Debate’, 5.

¹⁶ Sönmez, ‘Democratic Backsliding or Stabilization? The Role of Democracy Indices in Differing Interpretations’, 55 and 73.

¹⁷ Gerschewski, ‘Autocratization and Democratic Backsliding: Taking Stock of a Recent Debate’, 5; Sönmez, ‘Democratic Backsliding or Stabilization? The Role of Democracy Indices in Differing Interpretations’, 55; Gerschewski, ‘Autocratization and Democratic Backsliding: Taking Stock of a Recent Debate’, 6 and 9.

¹⁸ Sönmez, ‘Democratic Backsliding or Stabilization? The Role of Democracy Indices in Differing Interpretations’, 56 and 58.

¹⁹ Aníbal Pérez-Liñán and Eduardo Pagés Jiménez, ‘Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Resurgence in Latin America: Summary of Findings from an Expert Roundtable’ (2022), pp. 1-10, here 2.

²⁰ Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *Dictators and Democrats: Masses, Elites, and Regime Change* (Princeton and Oxford 2016) 196 and 201; Sönmez, ‘Democratic Backsliding or Stabilization? The Role of Democracy Indices in Differing Interpretations’, 68.

²¹ Sönmez, ‘Democratic Backsliding or Stabilization? The Role of Democracy Indices in Differing Interpretations’, 68.

Important to note is that these primary sources take on different shapes due to the arrival of new technology and trends. Because whereas Stalin's propaganda mainly consists of state-produced posters, the current leaders use photos and videos which are often published on social media platforms like *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *X*. The used textual primary sources are also to be found online, e.g., on governmental websites. Together, the secondary and primary sources will reveal the characteristics of the PC and with which roles the leader is propagated to the nation's public.

To systematically analyse the personality cults of the three leaders, I have created a model that consists of four aspects. The first three are mainly based on secondary sources and the fourth mostly depends on primary evidence. The selected topics are based on the results of my analysis of Stalin's PC which highlighted the prominent themes and foci of the propaganda and overall PC. One could study a fifth theme, namely the PC's international expression as it also extends beyond the borders. However, this thesis will limit itself to the leader's domestic PC as the international image is possibly different and therewith would exceed the scope of the desired research. A sixth topic could also be included, namely what happens with the PC after the leader's death or retirement, but as two of three leaders are still alive and reigning, this will be saved for future research. The current approach thus consists of the following four aspects. First, it discusses the emergence of the PC. How was it founded, by whom, and why? Second, the practicalities of the PC are researched. Where and how was the PC propagated and who was in charge? Third, the role of the predecessor is discussed as Lenin played a surprisingly large role in Stalin's PC and thus this must be included in this comparative analysis. Fourth, the leader's image and roles are studied. How is he propagated, i.e., as a father figure, hero, friend, or as someone else? Is there symbolism or are there recurring themes? Additionally, the role of charisma is considered, as many national leaders are characterised by a certain yet different charisma which affects their persuasive power. The overall analysis will give insight into the purpose of the PC and therewith into societal degree of liberty, censorship, and authoritarianism. As the latter topics are very relevant to Stalin, Putin, and Orbán, the development of their PC's and discovered characteristics are afterwards be discussed in light of the nation's democratic backsliding.

i.3. Structure

In broader terms, the thesis is structured as followed. In the first chapter, the concept of the personality cult is explained, as this phenomenon is not widely known. In the following three chapters, Stalin's, Putin's, and Orbán's PC's are analysed (in this order) according to the four aspects and in light of democratic backsliding. Hereafter, the conclusion completes the research with an answer to the question of how (dis)similar the personality cults of current

leaders Putin and Orbán are compared to the personality cult of Stalin and how the development of their cults relate to democratic backsliding in their countries.

Every period has its great men, and if these are lacking, it invents them.

Claude Adrien Helvétius²²

Chapter 1: the Phenomenon of a Personality Cult

1.1. History and definition

The modern personality cult, here shortened as PC, emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth century. It is defined by historian E.A. Rees as an ‘established system of veneration of a political leader, to which all members of the society are expected to subscribe’.²³ The leader’s goal is thus to acquire people’s devotion as this enables him to legitimise his rule and system. Therefore, the PC is indefinitely omnipresent and constantly expressed in produced propaganda which aims ‘at creating a bond between leader and subject’, Rees explains.²⁴ Historian Jan Plamper adds that the PC, also dubbed as a ‘leader cult’, contains the “god-like glorification of a modern political leader with mass media techniques, and excessive glorification of this leader”.²⁵

It is thus not strange that some refer to the PC as a secular or political religion, especially because it has its own ecclesiastic, rituals, and symbols.²⁶ In fact, the pre-modern concept of a leader cult has its roots in ancient, classical times and religious communities, as in these societies political and religious authority were intertwined. Stemming from this, a modern leader is thus portrayed in charismatic yet mysterious ways and with ‘quasi-miraculous powers’.²⁷ Similar to God(s) in religions, he is depicted as an omniscient, holy figure, and the immortal embodiment of his system.²⁸ The PC’s propaganda machine therefore engages in the process of “god-building”, causing the political leader to have an everlasting, holy image during his reign but also after his death.²⁹ Often, people do not even consider the death of such rulers to be possible as they view them as ‘unshakable, like their statues’, historian Frank

²² Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 49.

²³ E.A. Rees, ‘Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions’, in: Balázs Apor, Jan C. Behrends, Polly Jones, and E.A. Rees, *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships. Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (Hampshire and New York 2004), pp. 3-26, here 4.

²⁴ Rees, ‘Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions’, 3-4; Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 50.

²⁵ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 53.

²⁶ Rees, ‘Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions’, 7.

²⁷ Ibidem, 5.

²⁸ Rees, ‘Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions’, 7; Dikötter, *How To Be A Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*, preface.

²⁹ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 58.

Dikötter comments.³⁰ This timelessness is also characterised by the central, transhistorical position the leader enjoys within his PC, 'to which the past and future must all relate', Rees adds.³¹

1.2. Totalitarian versus democratic context

A personality cult in a dictatorial system is quite similar to the long-existing phenomenon of a "pagan" cult with a leader at the helm.³² First, both aspire totalitarian control of the community and claim to place the people's interests above everything, therewith legitimising their actions.³³ Second, they both strongly centralise and propagate the leader. They do this in similar yet not identical ways, as both leaders would be celebrated differently.³⁴ Third, both cults are usually tied to myths and cults of heroes and martyrs.³⁵ These myths do not have to be true, but they do have 'to be embodied in powerful symbols' which enables them to legitimise the leader and his regime, shape history, and 'demonstrate a continuity of values and principles'. Propaganda containing myths is very effective, as they are often already embedded in the society, albeit unnoticed.³⁶ Normally, a cult contains three main myths, as pointed out by political scientist Graeme Gill: "the existence of an evil conspiracy against the community, the presence of a saviour (...) and the coming of a golden age".³⁷ The fourth similarity between the cults, also mythically propagated, is the mentioned utopian dream of a great nation, shared and chased after by the leader.³⁸ The utopian focus can also pertain to contemporary situations, as myths can conceal the often-grave reality with positive, utopian circumstances. The fifth similarity is the PC's centralised and omnipresent nature which enables authoritarian control and an openly hostile, intolerant, and violent attitudes towards other ideologies and systems whilst sacralising its own history and existence.³⁹ Herewith, myths blur the boundaries between reality and fiction and 'simplify the world' and enemies.⁴⁰ As a result, 'no one can any longer be quite certain any more who supports and who opposes

³⁰ Dikötter, *How To Be A Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*, 203.

³¹ Rees, 'Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions', 5 and 7.

³² Sperling, 'Putin's macho personality cult', 13.

³³ Rees, 'Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions', 7; Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters*, 55.

³⁴ Rees, 'Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions', 7.

³⁵ Rees, 'Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions', 8; Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters*, 57.

³⁶ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 83-84.

³⁷ Ibidem, 85.

³⁸ Ibidem, 61-62.

³⁹ Ibidem, 55-56.

⁴⁰ Dikötter, *How To Be A Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*, 204; Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 84.

the dictator', Dikötter comments and thus the totalitarian control gets even stronger.⁴¹ This modern, rather negative version of the PC got its now-infamous shape with the authoritarian regimes of Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini in the 1930s.⁴²

Does the likeness of the cult and totalitarian system mean that a personality cult cannot exist in democratic systems? Not per se, but the PC does take on a different form in free(er) societies, as it does not have to be focused on one leader but can also be aimed at other, multiple individuals or offices. A second difference is the lack of coercion in democratic societies. This causes the scope of the PC to be limited, as a PC can only fully develop in regulated societies where the public is closed off. Democracy also increases the need for natural charisma as the public cannot be forced.⁴³ That a PC thrives best in coerced systems does not mean, however, that the coercion is openly recognised. Rather, the PC has the task of legitimising any forceful actions, uphold the illusion of popular support, and secure the leader's position.⁴⁴ And whereas force buys the leader some time, an established PC is the most efficient tool to achieve legitimacy in the long run.⁴⁵ Therefore, many leaders use 'the full resources of the state to promote themselves', Dikötter remarks. They became the state and some lied so much that they 'became wrapped up in their own world, convinced of their own genius', Dikötter resumes.⁴⁶ As these leaders mainly rely on these two instruments, i.e., terror and their cult, this thesis will also discuss the leader's PC's in light of totalitarian tendencies and democratic backsliding.⁴⁷

1.3. The role of charisma

An important aspect of the PC to point out is the role of charisma. With Hitler and Stalin, a new kind of authoritarian rule was created: the totalitarian dictatorship. New was that the leader gained legitimation by appealing to the masses and establishing popular support.⁴⁸ Charisma is an important tool to achieve this, as it creates the emotional relationship between the leader and his followers, 'based on belief in the abilities, persona, or vision of the leaders', political

⁴¹ Dikötter, *How To Be A Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*, 204.

⁴² Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 54-55; Postoutenko and Stephanov (eds.), *Ruler Personality Cults from Empires to Nation-States and Beyond*, 10.

⁴³ Rees, 'Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions', 8.

⁴⁴ Dikötter, *How To Be A Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*, x; Sperling, 'Putin's macho personality cult', 21.

⁴⁵ Dikötter, *How To Be A Dictator: The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century*, xi.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, xii and xv.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, xvi.

⁴⁸ Robert C. Tucker, 'The Dictator and Totalitarianism', *World Politics* 17 (1965) 4, pp. 555-583, here 559.

scientist Jean Robinson comments.⁴⁹ This can pertain to good looks, but more often, it consists of a special, individual quality that sets the leader apart from ordinary people, for example rhetorically.⁵⁰ As charisma can also be fabricated, it is sometimes difficult to separate real from manufactured charisma.⁵¹ Indeed, some have a natural mesmerising ardour, oratorical brilliance, or good physical appearance whilst others lack any form of charisma. For them, the charismatic quality has to be created and constantly upheld which is done with propaganda and institutionalisation.⁵² Charisma, albeit manufactured or natural, is a central tool to achieve the people's devotion.⁵³ People obey a charismatic leader not because of his position, beliefs, or content, 'but because they believe in him', famous sociologist Max Weber concludes.⁵⁴

1.4. After death

As the PC focuses on one person and aims to create a bond between that specific leader and the nation's public, there is often no worthy successor after the leader's death.⁵⁵ Additionally, the system's political legitimacy is based on the now-deceased's persona of whom people thought he would rule indefinitely.⁵⁶ Therefore, a new yet alike PC must be created with propaganda portraying a similar image of the successor, also based on a form of charisma.⁵⁷ This continuation-strategy is often successful and thus coups, public revolts, or system changes are unusual.⁵⁸ To be fair, this is also due to the fact that most autocrats who die during their reign were skilled politicians who established a persisting system.⁵⁹ Still, most important is thus the public feeling of continuation, as this gives the successor legitimacy. It is also possible, however, that the new PC is used to contrast the predecessor's regime if public criticism is large, for example with the process of de-Stalinisation.

⁴⁹ Jean C. Robinson, 'Mao after Death: Charisma and Political Legitimacy', *Asian Survey* 28 (1988) 3, pp. 353-368, here 354.

⁵⁰ Richard Tempest, 'The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin', *Journal of Political Marketing* 15 (2016) 2-3, pp. 101-119, here 113; Tucker, 'The Dictator and Totalitarianism', 557.

⁵¹ Robinson, 'Mao after Death: Charisma and Political Legitimacy', 354.

⁵² Ronald Glassman, 'Legitimacy and Manufactured Charisma', *Social Research* 42 (1975) 4, pp. 615-636, here 616-617; Robinson, 'Mao after Death: Charisma and Political Legitimacy', 354-355; Tempest, 'The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin', 113.

⁵³ Tucker, 'The Dictator and Totalitarianism', 560.

⁵⁴ Tempest, 'The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin', 113-114.

⁵⁵ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 81, 83, and 61.

⁵⁶ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 81; Robinson, 'Mao after Death: Charisma and Political Legitimacy', 354.

⁵⁷ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 83.

⁵⁸ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, 'When Dictators Die' (version 10th of September 2015) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/10/when-dictators-die/> (21st of April 2024).

⁵⁹ Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 'When Dictators Die' (version 10th of September 2015) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/10/when-dictators-die/> (21st of April 2024).

1.5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of a personality cult is thus similar to a 'normal' cult. By analysing these patterns and the PC's effectiveness in totalitarian and democratic societies, it becomes clear that a PC functions best in a dictatorial context where it can strongly propagate the leader's special qualities to establish a bond between him and the people which gives him legitimacy. The PC can, like charisma, take on different forms which will also become clear during this research. Keeping the totalitarian context wherein the PC thrives best in mind, the level of censorship and coercion that accompanies the PC is observed throughout this thesis and later discussed in light of the nation's democratic backsliding.

Glory to our great Stalin (Applause and shouts of "Hurrah" followed.)

Nikita Khrushchev, 27th of November 1943, Kyiv⁶⁰

Chapter 2: Joseph Stalin



2.0. The rise of Stalin

Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, better known as Joseph Stalin, was born in 1879 in a provincial town in Georgia.⁶¹ He grew up as a smart child who was well-spoken about the hardships of peasants and the Georgian nation.⁶² During his religious studies, Stalin read banned secular books and at the age of fifteen, he became a Marxist revolutionary.⁶³ When this got him dismissed from school four years later, Stalin enlarged his revolutionary movements and was put in prison multiple times.⁶⁴ In the following years, Stalin opposed feudalism, czarism, capitalism, and social inequality.⁶⁵ He participated in the February and October Revolutions wherein the Bolsheviks staged a coup and Russia became governed by the Council of People's Commissars (later the Communist Party) with Lenin as Chairman.⁶⁶ After Lenin's death in 1924, there was a power struggle from which Stalin emerged as victor.⁶⁷ He remained politically challenged throughout the 1920s, yet by 1930, he had gained 'control of power in the state by withdrawing all important decisions and debates in the party from public view, and even from the view of the party', political scientist Paul Scheffer comments.⁶⁸ He therefore operated within a thick 'cloud of secrecy' and any opposition was 'dealt with as a traitor', Scheffer adds.⁶⁹ Herewith, Stalin had changed the Soviet Union's one-party regime into a sole-ruler system.⁷⁰

⁶⁰ Serhy Tekelchuk, *Stalin's Citizens. Everyday Politics in the Wake of Total War* (New York 2014) 36.

⁶¹ Gerhard Schnehen, *Stalin, A Biography In Facts* (New York 2020) 5; Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 24

⁶² Schnehen, *Stalin, A Biography In Facts*, 6-8.

⁶³ Ibidem, 10-11.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, 12 and 20-21.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, 29.

⁶⁶ Schnehen, *Stalin, A Biography In Facts*, 57; Editors of *Britannica*, 'Lenin and the Bolsheviks' (version 9th of August 2024) <https://www.britannica.com/place/Soviet-Union/Lenin-and-the-Bolsheviks#ref174883> (10th of August 2024).

⁶⁷ Allan Todd, *The European Dictatorships: Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini* (Cambridge 2002) 47 and 54.

⁶⁸ Paul Scheffer, 'Stalin's Power', *Foreign Affairs* 8 (1930) 4, pp. 549-568, here 559.

⁶⁹ Scheffer, 'Stalin's Power', 559.

⁷⁰ Tucker, 'The Dictator and Totalitarianism', 556; Prabhat Patnaik, 'Lenin on Democracy and Class Struggle', *Social Scientist* 48 (2020) 11, pp. 3-10, here 4 and 8.

2.1. The birth of Stalin's personality cult

Stalin needed legitimacy, because the Bolshevik rule was fairly novel with an intense, not very loved economic policy.⁷¹ Politically, many Party secretaries supported Stalin and helped him establish his power which meant that when their interests began to diverge in the early 1930s, 'there was nothing they could do about it', historian James Harris remarks.⁷² And thus, without a concrete PC, Stalin had centralised the Party's decision-making in his own hands.⁷³ However, Stalin also needed compliance by the nation's people(s) and thus his PC's main goal became to stimulate popular legitimacy. From 1929, when Stalin implemented the super-industrialisation, Party ideologists started using the Stalin cult to establish the 'authority and legitimacy of the Soviet system' yet also to strengthen the Party's own authority.⁷⁴ Indeed, the Party needed legitimisation too, because it had failed to achieve so via propaganda before.⁷⁵ The Party's and Stalin's rule was even more threatened by the forced collectivisation and famines and later unleashing of Stalin's the Great Terror which hit the Soviet Union with mass arrests, show trials, and executions.⁷⁶ In the 1930s, the Party thus became heavily invested in gaining popular support and legitimacy.⁷⁷

Even though Stalin's PC was thus mainly shaped by the Party's propaganda machine, it seems also supported by Stalin himself. Indeed, Stalin – even though behind a 'mask of modesty' as this was not 'the Bolshevik way' – 'was hungry for the devotion', political scientist Robert Tucker comments.⁷⁸ Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich Molotov, who was a leading figure in the Soviet government and Stalin's political inner circle from the 1920s to 1950s, recalls that Stalin, at

⁷¹ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 27.

⁷² James Harris, 'Stalin as General Secretary: the appointments process and the nature of Stalin's power', in: Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds.), *Stalin: A New History* (New York 2005), pp. 63-82, here 65-66.

⁷³ J. Arch Getty, 'Stalin as Prime Minister: power and the Politburo', in: Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds.), *Stalin: A New History* (New York 2005), pp. 83-107, here 83.

⁷⁴ David Brandenberger, 'Stalin as symbol: a case study of the personality cult and its construction', in: Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds.), *Stalin: A New History* (Cambridge and New York 2005), pp. 249-270, here 249, 251, and 270.

⁷⁵ Brandenberger, 'Stalin as symbol: a case study of the personality cult and its construction', 249, 251, and 270.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Haslam, 'Political Opposition to Stalin and the Origins of the Terror in Russia, 1932-1936', *The Historical Journal* 29 (1986) 2, pp. 395-418, here 395 and 413; Editors of History.com, 'Great Terror' (version 4th of October 2022) <https://www.history.com/topics/european-history/great-purge> (3rd of July 2024).

⁷⁷ Brandenberger, 'Stalin as symbol: a case study of the personality cult and its construction', 251 and 256.

⁷⁸ Robert C. Tucker, 'The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult', *The American Historical Review*, 84 (1979) 2, pp. 347-366, here 347-348.

first, 'resisted the cult of personality, but then he came to like it a bit'.⁷⁹ Art historian Anita Pisch agreeingly writes that '[w]hen the writer Mikhail Sholokhov criticised the adulation directed at Stalin, Stalin replied smiling, 'What can I do? The people need a god.''.⁸⁰ Moreover, Stalin reportedly said in the mid-1930s that "the people need a tsar, i.e., someone to revere and in whose name to live and labour".⁸¹ He thus believed that Russia wanted and needed a strong leader which could explain his strong leader cult.⁸² It was also what he expected in a nation's leader, because he had been disappointed by Lenin's simple appearance as he had envisioned an intriguing, large man the first time they met. Later Stalin understood Lenin's simplicity, he said, but one cannot help but wonder if Stalin still wanted to be that intriguing and great man.⁸³ Historian David Brandenberger, however, doubts Stalin's 'self-aggrandisement' and suggests that it was rather 'a populist effort' by the Party.⁸⁴ Moreover, Stalin himself is reported to have said that 'Stalin is Soviet power' and that his name was synonymous with the state, but not with himself as a person.⁸⁵ Indeed, Stalin was rather 'a form of deity' as he became the symbol of Bolshevism and revolutionary and ideological transformation with the aim of mobilising the nation's people.⁸⁶ '[I]t was genuinely expected to win the hearts and minds of the Soviet populace.', Brandenberger concludes.⁸⁷

2.2. Practicalities of Stalin's personality cult

When Stalin was first depicted by the Party propaganda machine, he had a rather neutral, cold, distant, and simple appearance and was often not in the spotlight.⁸⁸ In the 1930s, his image softened, the relationship with his people became emphasised, and propagated adulation for Stalin increased.⁸⁹ He became the central focus of Soviet propaganda and all art was brought under state control which meant that all professional artists were promoting socialist and

⁷⁹ Wilson Center Digital Archive, 'Molotov, Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich', <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/people/molotov-vyacheslav-mikhaylovich> (13th of June 2024); Albert Resis (eds.), *Molotov Remembers: inside Kremlin politics: conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago 1993) 181.

⁸⁰ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 42.

⁸¹ Brandenberger, 'Stalin as symbol: a case study of the personality cult and its construction', 250.

⁸² Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 79.

⁸³ Schnehen, *Stalin, A Biography In Facts*, 36.

⁸⁴ Brandenberger, 'Stalin as symbol: a case study of the personality cult and its construction', 270.

⁸⁵ Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 53.

⁸⁶ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 45 and 24.

⁸⁷ Brandenberger, 'Stalin as symbol: a case study of the personality cult and its construction', 270.

⁸⁸ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 198.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, 198-199.

communist goals embodied by the leader.⁹⁰ Even ‘Soviet historians were forced to conform to whatever happened to be Party’s current political line on Stalin, and produced what was essentially propaganda for the regime’, historians Sarah Davies and James Harris comment.⁹¹ And thus, monuments, paintings, posters, poems, movies, songs, oaths, ceremonies, and much more were dedicated to the Soviet leader to be omnipresent and appeal to the widest possible audience.⁹² Especially posters played an important role as these were ‘a comparatively cheap and accessible medium that was particularly suited to this time and to the purposes of mass propaganda’, Pisch writes.⁹³ Posters also enabled symbolism and avoided any language problems. Stalin himself was thoroughly involved in shaping the propaganda, as he wanted to approve (or veto) and edit every film, press slogans, scientific and scholarly debates et cetera.⁹⁴ ‘[I]n many respects his influence was decisive’, Davies and Harris conclude.⁹⁵

2.3. Stalin’s predecessor(s)

As mentioned before, Stalin needed to increase his popularity to secure the authority of him as leader, the Party, and their policies. Succession, however, especially because it was not hereditary or democratic, proved difficult in the Soviet system.⁹⁶ The main problem was that the political authority resided in Lenin’s *body natural* and charismatic *body politic* which meant that there was no immediate or unanimously accepted successor after he died.⁹⁷ And thus the question whether this original charisma could be transferred to his successor arose.⁹⁸ Succession in communist and totalitarian political systems is complex, as it is in their nature to ‘inherently lack reliable mechanisms for the transfer of supreme authority, causing a potential crisis’, political scientist Chung Joong-Gun points out. However, ‘close association with the charismatic leader (...) frequently confers charisma onto others’ which became Stalin’s tactic.⁹⁹ In the propaganda portraying himself, he made sure to show close, public association with the

⁹⁰ Ibidem, 23, 33, and 88.

⁹¹ Sarah Davies and James Harris, ‘Joseph Stalin: power and ideas’, in: Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds.), *Stalin: A New History* (Cambridge and New York 2005), pp. 1-17, here 2.

⁹² Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 23-24 and 199.

⁹³ Ibidem, 31.

⁹⁴ Ibidem, 29-30.

⁹⁵ Davies and Harris, ‘Joseph Stalin: power and ideas’, 1.

⁹⁶ Andrej Kokkonen, Jørgen Møller, and Anders Sundell, *The Politics of Succession: Forging Stable Monarchies in Europe, AD 1000-1800* (Oxford 2022) 8.

⁹⁷ Kokkonen, Møller, and Sundell, *The Politics of Succession*, 8.

⁹⁸ Chung Joong-Gun, ‘Charisma and Regime Legitimacy: Political Succession in North Korea’, *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 7 (1993) 1, pp. 79-115, here 94.

⁹⁹ Joong-Gun, ‘Charisma and Regime Legitimacy: Political Succession in North Korea’, 95.

deceased Lenin.¹⁰⁰ Stalin embodied Lenin's ideas, imaged himself next to Lenin, and relied 'on Lenin's personal charismatic qualities, writings and teachings as a source of legitimacy', Joong-Gun explains.¹⁰¹ That Stalin's PC was based on Lenin's PC for continuation is also recognisable in his speeches. Stalin often vowed to continue Lenin's path and educated the public about Bolshevik beliefs and goals by encouraging them to recall his beloved predecessor, regularly referring to him by his patronymic: 'Remember, love and study Ilyich, our teacher, our leader'.¹⁰² In 1950, he proudly announced on a poster: '26 years without Lenin, but still on Lenin's path'.¹⁰³ Stalin also referred to Lenin to motivate the people's militancy by exclaiming: 'Fight and defeat our enemies (...) in the way that Ilyich taught us' and 'Under the banner of Lenin, forward to victory!'.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, he used his Lenin-focused PC to annihilate opposition, for example by saying that 'Trotsky is trying to revise Leninism' which legitimised Stalin to drive any anti-Leninists out of the Party.¹⁰⁵

2.4. Stalin's image

2.4.1. Stalin's charisma

In contrast to the great orator Lenin, Stalin lacked clear charisma, was unable to dazzle crowds, and appeared unappealing.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, media-manufactured techniques were used to create a charismatic and infallible new Stalin.¹⁰⁷ His new 'special' qualities were, however, contrasted by signs of him being human. Stalin admitted being 'dreadfully overworked' and humbly said to be 'not an expert on literature, and certainly not a critic', even though he was well-read and

¹⁰⁰ Joong-Gun, 'Charisma and Regime Legitimacy: Political Succession in North Korea', 95 and 111; Scheffer, 'Stalin's Power', 553.

¹⁰¹ Joong-Gun, 'Charisma and Regime Legitimacy: Political Succession in North Korea', 111.

¹⁰² *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, 'Working Women and Peasant Women Remember and Carry Out Ilyich's Behests' (January 1925), *Marxist Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1925/01/05.htm> (9th of April 2024); *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, 'To Rabochaya Gazeta' (January 1925), *Marxist Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1925/01/21.htm> (9th of April 2024).

¹⁰³ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 180.

¹⁰⁴ *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, 'To Rabochaya Gazeta' (January 1925), *Marxist Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1925/01/21.htm> (9th of April 2024); *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, 'Speech at the Red Army Parade on the Red Square, Moscow' (7th of November 1941) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1941/11/07.htm> (9th of April 2024).

¹⁰⁵ *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, 'Speech Delivered at a Plenum of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission of the R.C.P.(B.)' (17th of January 1925) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1925/01/17.htm> (9th of April 2024); *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, 'Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism: Letter to the Editorial Board of the Magazine "Proletarskaya Revolutsia"' (1931) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1931/x01/x01.htm> (9th of April 2024).

¹⁰⁶ Scheffer, 'Stalin's Power', 550.

¹⁰⁷ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 111-112; Glassman, 'Legitimacy and Manufactured Charisma', 616 and 630.

undoubtedly a critic of the arts.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, when compared to Lenin, Stalin answered: ‘...an exaggeration. How can I be compared to Lenin?’¹⁰⁹ However, this humbleness could just be part of the propaganda-strategy, because Stalin, as mentioned before, also referred to himself as the tsar and god the Russians needed. Moreover, even though he said to be open to criticism, he still radiated intimidation and danger and thus it could just have been a ploy.¹¹⁰

2.4.2. Stalin’s roles

Stalin’s PC, as created by the Soviet system, consisted of many roles for Stalin which were propagated by Soviet propaganda. On the one hand, Stalin had the uniting role of a kind, wise man, the nation’s caretaker, and the people’s friend.¹¹¹ He was ‘Comrade Stalin’, the friendly advisor, motivating everyone to ‘[b]e as the great Lenin was’.¹¹² He was the indispensable ‘Father of the nation’ who had raised the new Soviet generation.¹¹³ He was the kind caretaker of children and Soviet propaganda called him the ‘[b]est friend of children’.¹¹⁴ Stalin was also depicted as an advocate for women’s rights.¹¹⁵ Indeed, he was not only a caretaker of certain groups, but of all Soviet citizens which was, for example, propagated by the poster of figure 1 which shows a hardworking Stalin with the text ‘Stalin takes care of each of us from the Kremlin’.¹¹⁶

On the other hand, Stalin was a military strategist, ‘the Great Warrior’ and ‘Saviour of the land’.¹¹⁷ He was depicted as a sturdy leader, often pointing or looking forwards and surrounded by soldiers. Moreover, Soviet propaganda proclaimed that with Stalin’s leadership and protection, the U.S.S.R. would overcome the enemy.¹¹⁸ However, even though Stalin’s warrior

¹⁰⁸ *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, ‘Letter to A. M. Gorky’ (1929-1930) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1930/01/17.htm> (9th of April 2024); *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, ‘To Comrade Bezymensky’ (1929-1930) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1930/03/19.htm> (9th of April 2024).

¹⁰⁹ *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, ‘Talk With Colonel Robins’ (13th of May 1933) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1933/05/13.htm> (9th of April 2024).

¹¹⁰ *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, ‘Letter to A. M. Gorky’ (1929-1930) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1930/01/17.htm> (9th of April 2024); *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, ‘Letter to Comrade Shatunovsky’ (August 1930) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1930/08/x01.htm> (9th of April 2024); Scheffer, ‘Stalin’s Power’, 551; Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia’s Power Cult*, chapter 13.2 [no page numbers].

¹¹¹ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 75-76 and 88.

¹¹² Ibidem, 173, 174, and 175.

¹¹³ Ibidem, 225, 276, and 277.

¹¹⁴ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 262 and 273.

¹¹⁵ Ibidem, 288 and 289.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem, 268.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem, 24.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, 402.

archetype became prominent in posters, his PC rarely depicted him amidst the actual brutality of war.¹¹⁹ During the Second World War, Stalin even withdrew from the public eye, yet he reappeared from 1944 ‘as a saviour and bringer of peace’ and his military portrait became a recurring image.¹²⁰

In a third way, Stalin’s role was linked to the communist ideology, as he was “‘the genius architect of communism’”, the “‘teacher’”, and the successor of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.¹²¹ Therefore, he was often depicted next to the three pioneers, for example on figure 2.¹²² On this poster, the four wise men (including Stalin), all ‘virtually infallible’ as they were ‘true Marxists’, are illustrated from old to new and they all look in the same direction which indicates their like-mindedness and indirect support for Stalin. To emphasise their connectedness even more, many posters show the request to highly raise ‘the great invincible banner of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin’, something Stalin also repeats in his speeches.¹²³ Marx and Engels were portrayed, however, less frequently as posters rather showed Lenin and Stalin together, probably because both also were leaders of the Soviet Union, something the other two had not been.

Stalin’s fourth role was indeed that of the supreme Soviet leader. The Party was often referred to as ‘the great party of Lenin-Stalin’ and Molotov declared Stalin to be ‘the strongest politician’ after Lenin.¹²⁴ However, this did not mean that Stalin was always in Lenin’s shadow, as he was often portrayed alone.¹²⁵ On photographs, which were rarer than the mass-produced posters, it was made sure that Stalin clearly stood out as leader with, for example, his clothing, stature, and central position, even when surrounded by people.¹²⁶ His role as supreme leader was also emphasised by the praising of the many great socialist achievements.¹²⁷ During his reign, Stalin was therefore credited as the “‘engineer of history’” and “‘the great genius of

¹¹⁹ Robert C. Tucker, ‘The Emergence of Stalin’s Foreign Policy’, *Slavic Review* 36 (1977) 4, pp. 563-589, here 563; Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953. Archetypes, inventions and fabrications*, 319.

¹²⁰ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 199 and 343.

¹²¹ Ibidem, 352.

¹²² Ibidem, 183 and 186.

¹²³ Ibidem, 185.

¹²⁴ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 171; Resis, *Molotov Remembers: inside Kremlin politics: conversations with Felix Chuev* 156.

¹²⁵ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 171.

¹²⁶ Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, translated by Nora Seligman Favorov (Yale 2015) 176j and 176n.

¹²⁷ *Stalin Reference Archive* (marxists.org), Joseph Stalin, ‘Dizzy with Success: Concerning Questions of the Collective-Farm Movement’ (2nd of March 1930) <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1930/03/02.htm> (9th of April 2024).

mankind””.¹²⁸ ‘[A]s a political leader he fulfilled a role which no one else could undertake’, Molotov remarks, which made Stalin indispensable.¹²⁹ ‘Stalin inspired faith’, Molotov concludes, and ‘faith is extremely valuable’.¹³⁰

2.5. Democratic backsliding

In contrast to Putin’s and Orbán’s states which will be discussed in the next chapters, Stalin’s system was never a democracy. Still, due to his actions, the Soviet system backslid from a one-Party system into a dictatorship and thus some attention must be paid to this transition.

Lenin had been in favour of a democratic revolution and the establishment of a multi-party democracy as it empowered the basic classes.¹³¹ He was against personalising politics and therefore made sure it remained open to class influences and that ideology trumped personal loyalties.¹³² Instead however, against Lenin’s wishes, a one-Party dictatorship was established.¹³³ After Lenin’s death, Stalin wiggled himself into the Party’s leader position and became the main decision-maker due to, for example, his strategic and manipulative political tactics. Yet Stalin’s PC also played a significant role in Stalin’s power grab and the resulting regime’s transition as the creation of his charisma and leader image caused political power to reside in Stalin’s persona. By giving him diverse roles like the ultimate leader, great thinker, and sturdy military man, yet also as caring and uniting comrade, Stalin was able to tighten his authoritarian grip as he was a leader for all needs, therewith taking away political power from the Party. Moreover, the strong propaganda and censorship that promoted and protected Stalin’s PC enabled him to create a closed belief system, something Putin and Orbán will also do yet to a lesser degree. Unlike Putin and Orbán, however, Stalin did not have any democratic obligations and thus created a system of fear, manipulation, intimidation, and open terror. And so, by cultivating his PC, Stalin established a dictatorship, an indisputable label.

2.6. Conclusion

The Party and Stalin thus created Stalin’s PC based on Lenin’s PC for continuation. As successor, Stalin claimed Lenin’s special and charismatic qualities for his own PC to establish

¹²⁸ Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions & fabrications*, 75-76 and 124.

¹²⁹ Resis, *Molotov Remembers: inside Kremlin politics: conversations with Felix Chuev*, 181.

¹³⁰ Ibidem, 201.

¹³¹ Patnaik, ‘Lenin on Democracy and Class Struggle’, 3-4.

¹³² Ibidem, 7.

¹³³ Ibidem, 4 and 8.

legitimacy, absolute political power, and infallibility.¹³⁴ The cultivation of his PC centralised power made him the central Soviet symbol and enabled Stalin to legitimise his authority by propagating his many roles. Stalin's cult with its many roles, strong propaganda, and protection thus played a significant role in the securing process of his dictatorship.

¹³⁴ Tucker, 'The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult', 347-348 and 356; Todd, *The European Dictatorships: Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini*, 42.

In 2000, our society married Vladimirovich Putin. Society voted for him and said: Vladimir Vladimirovich, be our husband, care for us, protect us, and give us work.

Vasily Yakemenko, head of the Russian State Agency for Youth, 2011¹³⁵

Chapter 3: Vladimir Putin



3.0. The rise of Putin

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born in 1952 in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), Russia.¹³⁶ At thirteen years old, he was accepted into the Communist Party Youth League, and with his martial arts talent, Putin became a national sportsman.¹³⁷ Career-wise, however, he became a lawyer as he wanted to join the KGB which he did in 1975.¹³⁸ He worked as a spy in Leningrad and in the German Democratic Republic wherefrom he returned in 1989.¹³⁹ He became head of the Foreign Section at Leningrad State University and vice-mayor.¹⁴⁰ In 1996, Putin started working in Yeltsin's staff in Moscow where president Yeltsin noticed him and made him head of Russia's secret police, now called the Federal Security Service (FSB), in 1998.¹⁴¹ How Putin was opted as future president in 1999 is unsure, but clear is that everyone, even Yeltsin, knew little about him.¹⁴² Yeltsin knew, however, that Putin differed from other power guys as he was ordinary, grey, and small, yet also loyal and modest.¹⁴³ And thus in August 1999, Yeltsin unexpectedly made Putin prime minister. Even more surprising was Yeltsin resigning on the 31st of December 1999 and appointing Putin as acting president.¹⁴⁴ Putin was supported by state and private media and won the elections with 53,4 per cent the following year, therewith becoming Russia's second freely elected president.¹⁴⁵

3.1. The birth of Putin's personality cult

Putin's personality cult arose from the ashes of the chaotic 1990s. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia had lost her superpower status, suffered social and economic crises, and

¹³⁵ The Putin mystique, chapter 13 (no page numbers)

¹³⁶ Philip Short, *Putin: His Life and Times* (New York 2022) 21.

¹³⁷ Short, *Putin: His Life and Times*, 37 and 49.

¹³⁸ Ibidem, 44, 54, and 56.

¹³⁹ Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York 2012) 152.

¹⁴⁰ Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, 152.

¹⁴¹ Dale R. Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', *Russia Today*, pp. 151-174, here 153.

¹⁴² Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, 20-21.

¹⁴³ Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* 22; Mark Galeotti, *Een kleine geschiedenis van Rusland: van de heidenen tot Poetin (A small history of Russia: from the heathens to Putin)*, translated by Mario Molegraaf (Amsterdam 2022) 201.

¹⁴⁴ Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', 153.

¹⁴⁵ Galeotti, *Een kleine geschiedenis van Rusland: van de heidenen tot Poetin (A small history of Russia: from the heathens to Putin)*, 202; Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', 153.

changed her communist ideology to commercial capitalism. Yeltsin's disappointing presidency was the final straw and many Russians were ready for a new kind of leader.¹⁴⁶ To achieve his position as acting president, however, Putin had not created nor used a personality cult, as this power was directly transferred by Yeltsin. The elections of March 2000, however, required Putin to gain popular support which could be seen as the start of his PC.¹⁴⁷ However, no one knew the aspiring president due to his inconspicuousness and plainness which was not ideal for gaining support.¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, Putin's namelessness made it possible for anyone to interpret his character and thus Putin's PC started with the aim of being 'a Putin for every Russian'.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, Yeltsin presented Putin as a new generation of statesmen who would make the lives of the Russians easier and therewith Putin's hero image was born.¹⁵⁰ Many indeed saw him as a promising problem solver and Putin became the symbol of continuity and change.¹⁵¹ He was deemed the able restorer of Russia's glory and embodied anti-corrupt and traditional values like nationalism and patriotism. Moreover, Putin voiced the societal longing for stability and tranquillity.¹⁵² This portrayal made him quickly popular, yet it remained unclear what Putin's broad persona precisely entailed.¹⁵³ This was partly caused by modern technology and integrated capitalism and commercialism, as these made Putin's PC unable to be fully state-created and -controlled. As a result, there was relatively much creative freedom, at least in the 2000s and compared to other Soviet cults, which led to non-state support of the PC.¹⁵⁴ This is visible in, for example, the production of Putin-themed items by Russian citizens, such as chocolate portraits or a calendar 'depicting 'The President's Twelve Moods'' and more normal items like Putin-themed images, balloons, and t-shirts.¹⁵⁵ Putin's PC was thus freely supported by many Russians which was quite unusual and contrasted the obligatory nature of

¹⁴⁶ Sperling, 'Putin's macho personality cult', 14; Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, translated by Antonina W. Bouis (Washington 2005) 8.

¹⁴⁷ Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 385.

¹⁴⁸ Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, 8; Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, 22.

¹⁴⁹ Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, *Fragile Empire*, figure 7 [no page numbers].

¹⁵⁰ AP Archive, *Youtube*, 'Putin's 1st Inauguration – 2000 | Today In History | 7 May 17' (version 7th of May 2017) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsFsmVGiQjI&t=208s> (7th of June 2024); Tempest, 'The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin', 109.

¹⁵¹ Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, 3.

¹⁵² Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', 153-154; Helena Goscilo, 'The ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP *Objet d'Art*', in: Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov (eds.), *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia* (Abingdon and New York 2011), pp. 29-55, here 32.

¹⁵³ Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 686.

¹⁵⁴ Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 696; Julie A. Cassidy and Emily D. Johnson, 'A personality cult for the postmodern age. Reading Vladimir Putin's public persona', in: Helena Goscilo (eds.), *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon* (New York 2013), pp. 37-64, here 49.

¹⁵⁵ Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 681 and 702.

Stalin's cult.¹⁵⁶ Yet Putin was a pragmatist without a strict ideology to impose and thus adapted whatever strategy would work, i.e., in this case letting media and media fuel his PC.¹⁵⁷

3.2. Practicalities of Putin's personality cult

Officially however, the Kremlin controlled Putin's PC, but it also remained relatively hands-off.¹⁵⁸ Soon after Putin's start as premier, the Kremlin increased its media supervision, produced its own pro-Putin propaganda, and disallowed some criticism, but still, the press remained relatively free, especially when compared to Soviet standards.¹⁵⁹ In Putin's third term, however, his popularity declined and state intolerance of criticism grew, causing the Kremlin to implement stronger measures, however still with little violence and rather relying on manipulation and intimidation.¹⁶⁰ The Kremlin's increased involvement was also proven by its intensified goal to create a bond between Putin and the Russian population.¹⁶¹ Whereas it already had created a 'TV tsar' in the 2000s, it now more intensively monitored media channels to ensure that 'a steady diet of homogenised pro-Putin content' was produced to stimulate the 'Putinomania'.¹⁶² Putin initially saw his PC 'as a regrettable but unavoidable consequence of the job', journalist Philip Short comments, yet the new Russian president soon adapted and willingly invited media to photograph him to develop his image as premier celebrity, sex symbol, macho, and more which will be discussed in subchapter four.¹⁶³

3.3. Putin's predecessor(s)

Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin was 'the first politician whom Russians had ever trusted', yet he left the country 'battered, traumatized, and disappointed', journalist Masha Gessen writes.¹⁶⁴ When he realised his mistakes and immense unpopularity, Yeltsin acknowledged that

¹⁵⁶ Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*, chapter 13.2 [no page numbers].

¹⁵⁷ Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', 155.

¹⁵⁸ Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*, chapter 13.2 [no page numbers]; Cassiday and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 696.

¹⁵⁹ Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York 2014) 312; Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*, chapter 13.2 [no page numbers]; Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', 160-161.

¹⁶⁰ Maria Lipman, 'How Putin Silences Dissent: Inside the Kremlin's Crackdown', *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016) 3, pp. 38-46, 39.

¹⁶¹ Cassiday and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 681 and 696; Sperling, 'Putin's macho personality cult', 15.

¹⁶² Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, *Fragile Empire*, 47; David Averre, 'The personality cult of Putin: How Vladimir uses assassinations and bare-chested photo ops to rule unchallenged... and has laid the foundations for CIVIL WAR or another deadly dictator to step up when he dies' (version 16th of March 2024) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13191773/Personality-cult-Putin-Vladimir-assassinations-bare-chested-CIVIL-WAR-deadly-dictator.html> (14th of June 2024).

¹⁶³ Short, *Putin: His Life and Times*, chapter 13 [no page numbers].

¹⁶⁴ Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, 12-13.

new statesmen were needed to rebuild a modern Russian state.¹⁶⁵ Putin's image depicted a young and dynamic yet calm and organised successor which was 'such a contrast to the pathetic Old Boris at the end of his rule', historian Lilia Shevtsova notes.¹⁶⁶ This contrast became Putin's purpose: to be everything Yeltsin had not been.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, he aimed to be a tough, responsive, and pragmatic leader and told the Russians what they wanted to hear whilst 'Yeltsin had told them what he wanted them to hear', Russian affairs expert Ben Judah notes.¹⁶⁸ Even though Putin thus chose a different path, he did not condemn his predecessor as he recognised that Yeltsin was dealing with what Gorbachev had left him.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, Putin was harsher on Gorbachev who, in his eyes, had caused 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century', i.e., the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁷⁰ And even though Putin mostly refrains from direct criticism, he has undone almost all of Gorbachev's reforms and refrained from giving him a large state funeral.¹⁷¹

Putin's predecessors thus play the opposite role of Stalin's predecessor, as the latter built his PC on Lenin's legacy to gain legitimacy by continuation whilst Putin's PC was mainly based on contrasting his predecessors. Still, like Stalin, Putin sought legitimacy through continuity and therefore remained relatively mild about Yeltsin and Gorbachev, despite pursuing a different path.

¹⁶⁵ Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (New York 2012) 1; AP Archive, *Youtube*, 'Putin's 1st Inauguration – 2000 | Today In History | 7 May 17' (version 7th of May 2017) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSfSmVGiQjl&t=208s> (7th of June 2024).

¹⁶⁶ Editors of History.com, 'Putin becomes acting president of Russia, following Yeltsin's resignation' (version 27th of October 2022) <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/putin-becomes-president-russia> (7th and 11th of June 2024); Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, 4.

¹⁶⁷ Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 329.

¹⁶⁸ Sperling, 'Putin's macho personality cult', 14; Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, 4; Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', 155-156; Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 52.

¹⁶⁹ Jamie Dettmer, 'Why Putin could forgive Yeltsin but not Gorbachev' (version 2nd of September 2022) <https://www.politico.eu/article/why-putin-could-forgive-yeltsin-but-not-gorbachev/> (11th of June 2024).

¹⁷⁰ Andrew Katell, 'History's bookends: Putin reversed many Gorbachev reforms' (version 1st of September 2022) <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-mikhail-gorbachev-nato-716fbcf9308c0bfda7518a320b01ebf0> (11th of June 2024).

¹⁷¹ Andrew Katell, 'History's bookends: Putin reversed many Gorbachev reforms' (version 1st of September 2022) <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-mikhail-gorbachev-nato-716fbcf9308c0bfda7518a320b01ebf0> (11th of June 2024); Dettmer, 'Why Putin could forgive Yeltsin but not Gorbachev' (version 2nd of September 2022) <https://www.politico.eu/article/why-putin-could-forgive-yeltsin-but-not-gorbachev/> (11th of June 2024).

3.4. Putin's image

3.4.1. Putin's charisma

Like Stalin, Putin lacked natural charisma and thus the Kremlin and media had to manufacture an attractive leadership persona which they did successfully.¹⁷² 'Putin acted the part of a macho-saviour in front of the cameras and his popularity exploded', Judah writes.¹⁷³ Especially fruitful was that Putin was 'multiple Putins' which enabled a non-static, broadly-appealing image.¹⁷⁴ Putin thus became the charismatic centre of Russia's government, propagated in different ways.¹⁷⁵ After studying diverse primary and secondary sources, five roles have been selected to be analysed here, as these seem to be the most significant in Putin's PC.

3.4.2. Putin's roles

First, Putin is 'the country's premier celebrity', as after he won the election in 2000, his PC became the so-called "'Putiniana'" or 'Putinomania', also referred to as the 'Putin "craze"'.¹⁷⁶ The intense adoration was enabled by the 1990s Russian celebrity culture that arose after the development of Russia's commercialisation and new technology.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, it is in line with the larger trend of popularising politics and making a political leader a famous, star-like media personality.¹⁷⁸ In contrast to Putin, Stalin did not have pop celebrity cult but rather had a political celebrity cult. Moreover, whereas Stalin seemingly disregarded his adulation, Putin willingly invited camera crews to create his film-star persona, making him Russia's biggest celebrity and most popular politician.¹⁷⁹ And so, next to the Russian flag, the double-headed eagle, and the Soviet anthem, Putin became the fourth symbol of Russian statehood.¹⁸⁰

Connected to his celebrity image, Putin assumed the role of sex symbol. Indeed, he emitted 'the aura of limitless power that for many is synonymous with sexual potency', Russianists

¹⁷² Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*, chapter 13.2 [no page numbers]; Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 48.

¹⁷³ Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 33.

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem, 48.

¹⁷⁵ Tunku Varadarajan, 'Unquiet American' (version 12th of March 2017) <https://www.politico.eu/article/unquiet-american-michael-mcfaul-russia-putin-trump-us/> (26th of June 2024); Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 48-49.

¹⁷⁶ Gosילו and Strukov, 'Introduction', 14; Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 681 and 700.

¹⁷⁷ Gosילו and Strukov, 'Introduction', 14; Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 700-701.

¹⁷⁸ István Povedák, 'One from us, one for us. Viktor Orbán in Vernacular Culture', in: István Povedák (eds.), *Heroes and Celebrities in Central and Eastern Europe* (Szeged 2014), pp. 153-171, here 153-154.

¹⁷⁹ Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*, vii; Gosילו, 'The ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP *Objet d'Art*', 29; Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*, ix.

¹⁸⁰ Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?*, 310.

Helena Goscilo and historian Vlad Strukov write.¹⁸¹ This new and modern strategy strongly contrasted Yeltsin and the 'flabby, flaccid leaders of the late-Soviet era', Russianists Julie Cassidy and Emily Johnson add.¹⁸² As a result, many Russian women swooned over their athletic and strong president, declaring their love and creating romantic fantasies.¹⁸³ The strategy was thus very effective, as Putin's popularity exploded and even resulted in incidents of Putin hysteria.¹⁸⁴

As a sex symbol, Putin's physical masculinity was emphasised and thus it is not surprising that he was also portrayed as 'the ultimate Russian action man'.¹⁸⁵ He portrayed features of strength, toughness, and manliness which characterised the traditional Slavic macho, yet less crudely.¹⁸⁶ The emphasis on his assertive machismo gained Putin popularity, authority, and legitimacy, especially regarding his goal of restoring Russia's pride.¹⁸⁷ Putin showed that he was 'a leader who will not back down' and that 'Russia is an international force to be crossed only at one's peril', political scientist Valerie Sperling comments.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, the macho-patriotic strategy also established the idea that Putin as political strongman was irreplaceable.¹⁸⁹ He became the 'picture of Russia's strength' whilst opponents were strategically de-masculinised to undermine their authority.¹⁹⁰

Propaganda depicts these three roles similarly, i.e., by imaging him riding a horse, fishing, hunting, or taking an ice bath, all bare-chested and all aimed to flaunt Putin's physical strength and desirability.¹⁹¹ There are almost no comparable images as the only other world leaders who were campaigned shirtless were Mussolini and Mao Zedong and thus Putin's footage caused a media sensation.¹⁹² Additionally, Putin is often depicted in his judo uniform to show

¹⁸¹ Goscilo and Strukov, 'Introduction', 14.

¹⁸² Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 690.

¹⁸³ Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, 7.

¹⁸⁴ Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 690.

¹⁸⁵ Goscilo, 'The ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP *Objet d'Art*', 31; Sperling, 'Putin's macho personality cult', 13-14.

¹⁸⁶ Sperling, 'Putin's macho personality cult', 15.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 14 and 16-17.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 17.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 18-21.

¹⁹⁰ Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 49; Sperling, 'Putin's macho personality cult', 16.

¹⁹¹ Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*, vii.

¹⁹² Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 687; Olafimihan Oshin, 'G7 leaders joke about stripping to outdo bare-chested Putin' (26th of June 2022) <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3537795-g7-leaders-joke-about-stripping-to-outdo-bare-chested-putin/> (14th of June 2024); Averre, 'The personality cult of Putin: How Vladimir uses assassinations and bare-chested photo ops to rule unchallenged... and has laid the foundations for CIVIL WAR or another deadly dictator to step up when he dies' (version 16th of March 2024) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13191773/Personality-cult-Putin-Vladimir-assassinations-bare-chested-CIVIL-WAR-deadly-dictator.html> (14th of June 2024).

physical strength, discipline, passion, skills, and power.¹⁹³ Next for public purposes, this portrayal is also meant for Russian oligarchs, as many are involved in professional sports.¹⁹⁴ Another example of propagating these roles is the song ‘Такого как Путин’ (‘A Man like Putin’) which was used extensively in his 2004 campaign.¹⁹⁵ In the song, the singers complain about their boyfriends and wish for a strong and loyal man like Putin.¹⁹⁶

A fourth role in his PC is Putin as the patriotic and wishful husband who married Russian society to restore the country’s glory after the dire 1990s.¹⁹⁷ His speeches are therefore filled with the collective memory of Russia’s struggles, survival, pride, solidarity, and unison.¹⁹⁸ He often emphasises his plans to ‘make Russia even stronger’ and wishes for peace and prosperity of ‘our common, great homeland’.¹⁹⁹ When Russia invades Ukraine in 2022, his language becomes even more nationalistic. ‘Russia’s future is what matters the most’ and ‘Russia’s sovereign, independent and secure future depends only on us’, Putin says.²⁰⁰

Connectedly, Putin is characterised as Russia’s saviour and undisputed Leader of the People who brought stability and modernisation and who restored Russia’s national and international pride. This was well-propagated and became part of his charm, stimulating a widespread hero-worship that had not been seen since Stalin.²⁰¹ Putin’s PC and society’s approval thus caused Putin to become ‘a sort of sacred king, a role that many Russian leaders inadvertently assume’, journalist Anna Arutunyan notes.²⁰² ‘Patriarch Kirill has gone so far as to speak of Putin as

¹⁹³ Short, *Putin: His Life and Times*, 36.

¹⁹⁴ Matthias Müller, ‘Putins Sport-Soldaten: So sichert sich Moskau seinen Einfluss im Profisport’ (‘Putin’s Sports Soldiers: How Moscow secures its Influence in Professional Sports’) (version 24th of February 2022) <https://www.tz.de/sport/mehr/putin-russland-oligarchen-moskau-einfluss-profisport-russland-ukraine-konflikt-fussball-uefa-91369303.html> (17th of June 2024).

¹⁹⁵ Matthew Clayfield, ‘Putin a comic book hero to stir the Russian spirit’ (version 23rd of December 2011) <https://www.crikey.com.au/2011/12/23/putin-a-comic-book-hero-to-stir-the-russian-spirit/> (16th of June 2024).

¹⁹⁶ Avak Yeramian, *Youtube*, ‘A man like Putin (Такого как путин | Takogo kak Putin) Enhanced Edition’ (version 29th of January 2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtZUeHmpV6A> (16th of June 2024).

¹⁹⁷ Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia’s Power Cult*, chapter 13 [no page numbers]; Goscilo, ‘The ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP *Objet d’Art*’, 32.

¹⁹⁸ Herspring, ‘Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy’, 157; *Kremlin*, Vladimir Putin, ‘New Year Address to the Nation’ (version 31st of December 2021) <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67514> (17th of June 2024).

¹⁹⁹ *Kremlin*, Vladimir Putin, ‘New Year Address to the Nation’ (version 31st of December 2017) <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56591> (17th of June 2024); *Kremlin*, Vladimir Putin, ‘New Year Address to the Nation’ (version 31st of December 2021) <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67514> (17th of June 2024); *Kremlin*, Vladimir Putin, ‘New Year Address to the Nation’ (version 31st of December 2016) <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53683> (17th of June 2024).

²⁰⁰ *Kremlin*, Vladimir Putin, ‘New Year Address to the Nation’ (version 31st of December 2022) <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70315> (17th of June 2024).

²⁰¹ Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?*, 311; Goscilo, ‘The ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP *Objet d’Art*’, 29-30.

²⁰² Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia’s Power Cult*, introduction [no page numbers].

being a ‘miracle of God’’, historian Marlene Laruelle comments.²⁰³ Similar to Stalin, Putin adapts myths, changes narratives, and (ab)uses history to shape a belief system that emphasises his role as Russia’s defender.²⁰⁴ Moreover, by highlighting Russia’s uniqueness and his own heroism, Putin undermines other countries and leaders and legitimises his own actions, for example his military invasion of Ukraine.²⁰⁵

Putin’s PC thus clearly echoes the Stalinist past by idealising Putin as Russia’s saviour and strongest politician. Aside from these latter roles, it is easy to say that only differences between the two leaders remain, but that would be untrue. Indeed, Stalin was rather imaged as a father than as a sex symbol, but he was, like Putin, also often imaged as a premier celebrity with everything centred around him and as a total macho, the ultimate man. This was just portrayed differently, possibly due to different times or characters. The similarities with Stalin have caused scholars to suggest that Putin is following a similar path as Stalin or even already turned into a modern-day Stalin, yet there is much discussion about this.²⁰⁶ Putin himself denied in 2013 the existence of a Stalin-like PC, mass violations of the law, and repressions.²⁰⁷ Arutunyan agrees in 2014 and calls Putin’s PC ‘latent’ and Stalin’s ‘full-fledged’ and notes that there is more coercion involved in the protection of Stalin’s PC.²⁰⁸ Historian Richard Tempest confirms in 2016 that ‘Putin is no Stalin’, as Putin can steer the national discourse significantly, but lacks Stalin’s oppressiveness.²⁰⁹ Recently, however, democracy analyst Adrian Karatnycky wrote an article wherein he argues that Putin’s Russia has returned to a ‘Soviet-style election’ in 2024 and that a better understanding is needed of ‘how significantly Putin is borrowing from Stalin’s playbook’.²¹⁰ Therefore, this thesis will dive deeper into where Russia’s democratic backsliding stands and how Putin’s PC and its similarities with Stalin’s PC relate to Russia’s backsliding.

²⁰³ Marlene Laruelle, ‘Russia as an anti-liberal European civilisation’, in: Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (eds.), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-15* (Edinburgh 2016), pp. 275-297, here 292.

²⁰⁴ Galeotti, *Een kleine geschiedenis van Rusland: van de heidenen tot Poetin (A small history of Russia: from the heathens to Putin)*, 214.

²⁰⁵ Galeotti, *Een kleine geschiedenis van Rusland: van de heidenen tot Poetin (A small history of Russia: from the heathens to Putin)*, 207 and 214; *Kremlin*, Vladimir Putin, ‘Address by the President of the Russian Federation’ (version 21st of February 2022) <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> (28th of June 2024).

²⁰⁶ Tempest, ‘The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin’, 103.

²⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 104.

²⁰⁸ The Putin mystique Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia’s Power Cult*, chapter 13.2 [no page numbers].

²⁰⁹ Tempest, ‘The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin’, 105.

²¹⁰ Adrian Karatnycky, ‘Russia Is Back to the Stalinist Future’ (version 24th of March 2024) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/24/russia-putin-stalin-soviet-election-war-repression-political-prisoners/> (28th of June 2024).

3.5. Democratic backsliding

3.5.1. Russia's backsliding

In 2000, Putin announced that 'Russia is becoming a modern democratic state'.²¹¹ Western countries therefore assumed that Russia would build democratic institutions and integrate with the West.²¹² However, 'what Putin meant was authoritarianism – but without repression', political scientist Dale Herspring points out.²¹³ Moreover, the country's democratic base was already deteriorating as Russia had turned into a 'managed democracy' under Yeltsin who addressed problems democratically when possible but with less-democratic means when necessary.²¹⁴ Legally, the Russian president thus already had a lot of power.²¹⁵ Like Yeltsin, Putin believed that a strong leadership was needed. He favoured democracy but deemed the coherence of the state most important.²¹⁶ When Putin became president, he promised to de-corrupt politics by letting the law dictate.²¹⁷ However, in reality, Russia is governed by a 'more fluid, informal, and often irrational system of patrimonialism', also dubbed a 'dual state', Arutunyan comments.²¹⁸ Putin thus continued Yeltsin's managed democracy, yet also went further. He reaffirmed his own power, e.g., by encoding his will into law and thus Russia started to turn towards authoritarianism already in the early 2000s.²¹⁹ Putin also realised that power was gained by media dominance and thus within weeks of his first premiership, Putin started building a 'videocracy', i.e., a modernised, media-oriented form of authoritarianism.²²⁰ By 2008, Putin controlled about ninety per cent of Russian media.²²¹ He thus combined his managed democracy with media dominance and censorship whilst still gaining popular support by saying what Russians wanted to hear. Putinism even peaked in 2008, as many Russians believed that Putin had restored Russia's great power. However, this enthusiasm deteriorated in 2011 when

²¹¹ *Kremlin*, Vladimir Putin, 'Speech at the Inauguration Ceremony' (version 7th of May 2000) <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21399> (27th of June 2024).

²¹² Varadarajan, 'Unquiet American' (version 12th of March 2017) <https://www.politico.eu/article/unquiet-american-michael-mcfaul-russia-putin-trump-us/> (26th of June 2024).

²¹³ Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', 163.

²¹⁴ Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 23 and 51.

²¹⁵ Editors of History.com, 'Putin becomes acting president of Russia, following Yeltsin's resignation' (version 27th of October 2022) <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/putin-becomes-president-russia> (7th and 11th of June 2024); Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', 158.

²¹⁶ Herspring, 'Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy', 154.

²¹⁷ Galeotti, *Een kleine geschiedenis van Rusland: van de heidenen tot Poetin (A small history of Russia: from the heathens to Putin)*, 202; Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*, introduction [no page numbers].

²¹⁸ Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*, introduction [no page numbers].

²¹⁹ M. Steven Fish, 'What Has Russia Become?', *Comparative Politics* 50 (2018) 3, pp. 327-346, here 334; Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?*, 312; Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*, introduction [no page numbers].

²²⁰ Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 47 and 41.

²²¹ *Ibidem*, 47.

huge rallies against Putin's believed corruption arose.²²² As a result, the Kremlin started prosecuting and being violent against disagreeing citizens, protesters, and the remaining liberal media.²²³ These new dictatorial-like tactics were, however, quite effective as Putin's power and authority remained relatively intact.²²⁴

Many scholars agree that Russia is an authoritarian-led state and compare his rule to the systems of dictators like Stalin, Hitler ('Putler'), Mussolini, and Mao.²²⁵ Indeed, Russia cannot carry the democracy-label, even not 'managed', as, for example, the 2024-elections were so rigged that Putin's victory was mathematically impossible. Moreover, similar to Stalinist strategies, '[a]ll prominent opposition figures had either been murdered, imprisoned, or exiled', Karatnycky notes.²²⁶ However, it remains disputed what kind of autocracy or authoritarian state Putin's regime has turned into.²²⁷ Political scientist Michael Steven Fish suggests it to be 'a conservative populist autocracy', as Putin prioritises his popularity and ensures a high level of social inclusivity by positioning himself as a leader for all Russians.²²⁸ Meanwhile, his system is 'an autocracy in the fullest sense, because the state's power is 'centralized, concentrated, personalized, and sovereign', Fish writes.²²⁹ Similarly, international relations experts Erol Yayboke and Sam Brannen label Russia as a digital authoritarian regime which includes 'centralization of digital power in the hands of government at the expense of citizen privacy', the spread of disinformation, and 'creating a narrative that diminishes participatory democracy'.²³⁰ Other scholars call Russia a 'hybrid regime' that allows opposition but also limits its abilities by measures of repression.²³¹ Furthermore, economist Sergei Guriev and political scientist Daniel Treisman characterise Putin's regime as 'New Authoritarianism' or a 'soft autocracy'.²³² This means that democracy is simulated by holding rigged elections and having

²²² Ibidem, 3.

²²³ Lipman, 'How Putin Silences Dissent: Inside the Kremlin's Crackdown', 42-44.

²²⁴ Ibidem, 45.

²²⁵ Fish, 'What Has Russia Become?', 343; Erol Yayboke and Sam Brannen, 'Promote and Build A Strategic Approach to Digital Authoritarianism', *Center for Strategic & International Studies* (CSIS) (2020), pp. 1-11, here 2; Tempest, 'The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin', 103-104.

²²⁶ Karatnycky, 'Russia Is Back to the Stalinist Future' (version 24th of March 2024) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/24/russia-putin-stalin-soviet-election-war-repression-political-prisoners/> (28th of June 2024).

²²⁷ Fish, 'What Has Russia Become?', 343; Yayboke and Brannen, 'Promote and Build A Strategic Approach to Digital Authoritarianism', 2.

²²⁸ Fish, 'What Has Russia Become?', 331.

²²⁹ Ibidem, 333.

²³⁰ Yayboke and Brannen, 'Promote and Build A Strategic Approach to Digital Authoritarianism', 2, 5, and 7.

²³¹ Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', 684.

²³² Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, 'How Modern Dictators Survive: An Informational Theory of the New Authoritarianism' (working paper), *National Bureau of Economic Research* (2015), pp. 1-42, here 1-3.

an existing yet censored private press.²³³ Central, however, is the country's leader who aims to convince his citizens of his 'competence to govern'.²³⁴ Putin thus has a sort of "performance legitimacy" which explains why state propaganda spends much time boosting Putin's image and why Putin does not use open, Stalin-like mass terror.²³⁵ Since 2015 when Guriev and Treisman published the article, Putin's forcefulness has, however, increased. On the one hand, it remains in line with soft authoritarianism, because when he strengthens his power, he covers most or all tracks.²³⁶ For example, Putin used judicial means to lawfully lengthen the presidential terms to six years. This caused a presidential "reset" to go into effect after the end of Putin's fourth term in 2024, allowing Putin to legally and without force stay in office until 2036, if the 2030-election agrees.²³⁷ On the other hand, Putin's oppression is becoming more open, for example in July 2019 when opposition protests were violently put down, leading to almost 1400 arrests.²³⁸ The correct characterisation for Putin's system is thus still debated, but sure is that Putin's regime is neither soft nor democratic and it is very plausibly on the way to a full-fledged, Stalin-like authoritarian regime if not almost or already there.

3.5.2. Democratic backsliding and Putin's PC

Putin's regime thus has become more authoritarian and this backsliding seems significantly fuelled by the cultivation of his PC.

First, the PC established Putin as the centre and national symbol of Russia.²³⁹ He is Russia's premier celebrity, the ultimate macho man with his body as political brand, and saviour of a country that entered the new millennium in disarray. It did not matter that Putin lacked charisma and that these qualities and roles had to be created, because he passed with flying colours which is proven by his quick popularity. And thus whereas Stalin remained 'a servant of the Party', the Russian system is now solely built around one individual whose persona legitimises its regime.²⁴⁰ It is Putin himself, his own image, who has become synonymous with the Russian

²³³ Guriev and Treisman, 'How Modern Dictators Survive: An Informational Theory of the New Authoritarianism' (working paper), 2.

²³⁴ Ibidem, 2 and 36.

²³⁵ Ibidem, 2-3 and 6.

²³⁶ Ibidem, 10 and 35-36.

²³⁷ Andrew Roth, 'Vladimir Putin passes law that may keep him in office until 2036' (version 5th of April 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/05/vladimir-putin-passes-law-that-may-keep-him-in-office-until-2036> (7th of June 2024); Laura Gozzi and Francis Scarr, 'Russian election: Why Putin's fifth term as president was never in doubt' (version 17th of March 2024) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68505228> (7th of June 2024).

²³⁸ Ian Bremmer, 'What the Protests in Russia Mean for President Putin' (version 31st of July 2019) <https://time.com/5639451/what-the-protests-in-russia-mean-for-president-putin/> (26th of July 2024).

²³⁹ Tempest, 'The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin', 112.

²⁴⁰ Fish, 'What Has Russia Become?', 342; Varadarajan, 'Unquiet American' (version 12th of March 2017) <https://www.politico.eu/article/unquiet-american-michael-mcfaul-russia-putin-trump-us/> (26th of June 2024).

state and many Russians cannot imagine any other leader.²⁴¹ Putin's manufactured PC and specific roles thus gained him popular support whilst simultaneously legitimising the individual political power that increasingly resided in his persona.

Second, the propagation and protection of Putin's PC influence and cover the degree of freedom and coerciveness in Russian society. Whereas Stalin deemed force more effective than propaganda and thus largely relied on mass terror and indoctrination, Putin initially focused on propaganda and allowed a degree of independence.²⁴² Meanwhile, however, this has shifted. Even though Putin's control is still limited by the internet and modern technology, he enforces strict censorship and therewith, Soviet-like surveillance of citizens has returned.²⁴³ A recent study even determined that Russia's current system is politically more repressive than it was under all Soviet leaders except Stalin.²⁴⁴ Indeed, Putin is no Stalin, yet Stalinist norms and values are used, like the state being infallible, patriotism equalising loyalty to the governing authority, and disloyalty equalising a criminal act.²⁴⁵ And with the forced propaganda, censorship, widespread surveillance, intimidation, arrests, and torture, Putin is also using many practical techniques of totalitarian control.²⁴⁶ To rationalise his actions and legitimise the individualisation of his power, he uses his PC and roles he has as Russia's leader. He is Russia's devoted protector, capable problem-solver, patriotic husband, and undisputed leader who wants to restore Russia's stability and glory. Putin's PC thus shields his Stalin-like actions and power-hungry desires with a more noble explanation, therewith ensuring popular compliance.

Does Putin's PC also prove that the current Russian leader is re-Stalinising? On the hand, Putin is said to have 'no longing for the Soviet past'.²⁴⁷ This may be true regarding the recent Soviet past yet seems to be untrue when it comes to Stalin. Putin is the only one since Stalin

²⁴¹ Judah, *Fragile Empire: how Russia fell in and out of love with Vladimir Putin*, 3-4.

²⁴² Guriev and Treisman, 'How Modern Dictators Survive: An Informational Theory of the New Authoritarianism' (working paper), 2.

²⁴³ Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult*, chapter 13.2 [no page numbers]; Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, 'Russia's New Nobility: The Rise of the Security Services in Putin's Kremlin', *Foreign Affairs* 89 (2010) 5, pp. 80-96, here 90.

²⁴⁴ Karatnycky, 'Russia Is Back to the Stalinist Future' (version 24th of March 2024) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/24/russia-putin-stalin-soviet-election-war-repression-political-prisoners/> (28th of June 2024).

²⁴⁵ Maria Lipman, 'Stalin Is Not Dead: A Legacy That Holds Back Russia', in: Maria Lipman, Lev Gudkov, Lasha Bakradze, and Thomas de Waal (eds.), *The Stalin Puzzle: Deciphering Post-Soviet Public Opinion* (Washington 2013), pp. 15-27, here 24.

²⁴⁶ Karatnycky, 'Russia Is Back to the Stalinist Future' (version 24th of March 2024) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/24/russia-putin-stalin-soviet-election-war-repression-political-prisoners/> (28th of June 2024).

²⁴⁷ Robert Legvold, 'Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics', review of Vladimir Putin, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President* (New York 2000) in: *Foreign Affairs* 79 (2000) 4, pp. 145-146, here 146.

to have gained a widespread hero-worship and, like Stalin, Putin's persona became synonymous with the state.²⁴⁸ It was almost like Stalin had symbolically returned in 'the implicitly Soviet, paternalistic quality of Putin's regime', political scientist Maria Lipman notes in 2013.²⁴⁹ Moreover, Putin's popularity and roles caused him to become 'more messianic, more wrapped up in his own vision of personalized power', journalist Susan Glasser notes. "In the present circumstances my image and name constitute a popular brand that is used by everyone under the sun," Putin said already in 2005.²⁵⁰ This self-aggrandisement has 'happened in many dictatorships', Glasser adds and thus it seems 'that Putin views himself now as sort of heir to the tsars' or similar to Lenin and Stalin.²⁵¹ Indeed, the Stalin-like patterns of the PC and accompanying increasing censorship prove that Putin desires a return to the all-mighty throne.²⁵² Other aspects suggest that Putin specifically wishes to return to a Stalinist system. After all, '[i]n Putin's Russia, Stalin remains the embodiment of the state at its most powerful', Lipman notes.²⁵³ Moreover, recently, Putin has been 'deliberately normalizing Stalin as a justification for his own war-making and repression', Karatnycky comments. In Karatnycky's eyes, 'Putin now resembles Stalin more closely than any other Soviet or Russian leader'.²⁵⁴ Indeed, in recent times, Putin's Stalin-like roles as absolute strongman, leading genius, and brilliant military strategist seem to be emphasised rather than his celebrity image as sex symbol. And with his strong dominance over civil life and media, increasing repression and terror, and constant propaganda of his PC, Putin indeed seems to mimic the Stalin playbook.²⁵⁵

3.6. Conclusion

By portraying the new Russian president as a sex symbol, macho, and Russia's saviour, Putin's PC turned him from an unknown, grey guy to a charismatic leader many willingly supported. However, after 2010, many Russians fell out of love with their president and his charisma and popularity declined. Meanwhile, Putin's grip on Russian society tightened and he increasingly

²⁴⁸ Goscilo, 'The ultimate celebrity: VVP as VIP *Objet d'Art*', 29.

²⁴⁹ Lipman, 'Stalin Is Not Dead: A Legacy That Holds Back Russia', 18-19.

²⁵⁰ Tempest, 'The Charismatic Body Politics of President Putin', 105.

²⁵¹ Vazha Tavberidze, 'Messianic' Putin Fell Victim To His Own Propaganda, Says Veteran Journalist' (version 29th of September 2023) <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-victim-own-propaganda-ukraine-glasser-interview/32616268.html> (27th of June 2024).

²⁵² Lipman, 'Stalin Is Not Dead: A Legacy That Holds Back Russia', 22; Karatnycky, 'Russia Is Back to the Stalinist Future' (version 24th of March 2024) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/24/russia-putin-stalin-soviet-election-war-repression-political-prisoners/> (28th of June 2024).

²⁵³ Lipman, 'Stalin Is Not Dead: A Legacy That Holds Back Russia', 22.

²⁵⁴ Karatnycky, 'Russia Is Back to the Stalinist Future' (version 24th of March 2024) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/24/russia-putin-stalin-soviet-election-war-repression-political-prisoners/> (28th of June 2024).

²⁵⁵ Ibidem (28th of June 2024).

displayed authoritarian tendencies. Indeed, not only his PC is similar to Stalin's, but his rule has also started to show similarities, as Putin had centralised Russia's political power around his persona, gained media dominance, implemented strong censorship and increasingly resorted to open violence. Therewith, Putin seems to embrace the Stalin-image more and more.

Chapter 4: Viktor Orbán



4.0. The rise of Orbán

Viktor Mihály Orbán was born in 1963 in the village of Alcsútdoboz, Hungary.²⁵⁷ He attended a distinguished grammar school, specialised in English, completed his military service, and finished law school in 1987.²⁵⁸ A year later, he co-founded the radical youth movement *Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz)*.²⁵⁹ The party joined national politics as an anti-communist, anti-Soviet, and pro-liberal group, striving to transform Hungary from a one-party dictatorship to a parliamentary democracy which it became in 1989.²⁶⁰ Four years later, Orbán became chairman of Fidesz and the party transitioned into a moderate, centre-right party.²⁶¹ In 1998, at the age of 35, Orbán became the youngest freely elected prime minister of Hungary. He lost the next two elections but returned in 2010 and has been in office ever since.²⁶²

4.1. The birth of Orbán's personality cult

In contrast to Stalin's and Putin's PC's, Orbán's cult was initially uncoordinated. It mainly got its shape from his second term onwards rather than at the start of his premiership in 1998. There was, however, already some earlier basis, as Orbán had emerged as a political celebrity in the 1990s and monarchical imagery was already used by Fidesz to portray him.²⁶³ Yet this still raises the question: why did Orbán not have a manufactured PC from the start, like Stalin and Putin had? A significant reason seems to be that Orbán had natural charisma, talents, and skills which lessened the initial need for a fabricated persona.²⁶⁴ Moreover, in contrast to Putin and Stalin, Orbán was already famous and popular in Hungarian politics. He was a young, change-driven, and well-spoken politician who promoted a reinvented, healthy, and strong

²⁵⁶ Povedák, 'One from us, one for us. Viktor Orbán in Vernacular Culture', 159.

²⁵⁷ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* (New York 2017) 11-14.

²⁵⁸ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 13-14.

²⁵⁹ Magyarország jobban teljesít (Hungary performs better), 'CV of Viktor Orbán' https://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_cv_of_viktor_orban/ (8th of July 2024).

²⁶⁰ Magyarország jobban teljesít (Hungary performs better), 'CV of Viktor Orbán' https://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_cv_of_viktor_orban/ (8th of July 2024); Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 22.

²⁶¹ Péter László, 'The Holy Crown of Hungary, Visible and Invisible', *The Slavonic and East European Review* 81 (2003) 3, pp. 421-510, here 422.

²⁶² Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 9.

²⁶³ Apor, 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary', 106.

²⁶⁴ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 9.

Hungary which attracted many voters.²⁶⁵ During his first term as premier, Orbán remained pro-democratic, yet he still had his own vision of how to rule Hungary which led him to populism, creating narratives, othering opposition, and gaining media influence.²⁶⁶ These actions resulted in a so-called 'State-capture' which was unpopular amongst the Hungarians as they were still on the more traditional democratic path.²⁶⁷ Orbán lost the re-elections and the need for more popularity and trust in Orbán arose. Therefore, Fidesz extended Orbán's PC so that Orbán would symbolise the Hungarian national character and the return to stability in Hungary in the dire economic and societal circumstances.²⁶⁸ This populist development was easy as the governments of 2002 and 2006 were making big mistakes. Orbán became popular again and easily won the election of 2010.²⁶⁹ From thereon, his PC mainly focused on legitimising and strengthening Orbán's rule by maintaining his charismatic and popular persona, making Orbán the only leader imaginable.²⁷⁰

4.2. Practicalities of Orbán's personality cult

Since changing the Party's bylaws in 2003, Orbán has been the main decision maker within Fidesz. It is thus likely that he is in charge of his own PC.²⁷¹ As Orbán is a pragmatist and opportunist who is mainly interested in success, he watches the public closely to calculate his next steps, always with a nationalist tint.²⁷² His image, even though having a few core principles like 'Christianity, tradition, ethnic homogeneity, and "Hungary first."', is thus constantly being adapted to political and societal circumstances.²⁷³ It is therefore not strange that his cult is non-

²⁶⁵ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 43; András Bozóki, 'Consolidation or Second Revolution? The Politics of the New Rights in Hungary', *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 6 (2005) 1, pp. 17-27, here 18.

²⁶⁶ Bozóki, 'Consolidation or Second Revolution? The Politics of the New Rights in Hungary', 20 and 24; Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 46.

²⁶⁷ Bozóki, 'Consolidation or Second Revolution? The Politics of the New Rights in Hungary', 22.

²⁶⁸ David Baer, 'What Viktor Orbán Revealed This Weekend' (version 26th of July 2022) <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/what-viktor-orban-revealed-this-weekend> (8th of July 2024); Apor, 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary', 106.

²⁶⁹ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 84.

²⁷⁰ Julia Sonnevend, 'Populist Iconicity: The Contradictions of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a Political Celebrity', *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 63 (2024) 2, pp. 169-175, here 170; Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all!' Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 324.

²⁷¹ András Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', in: Klaus Larres (eds.), *Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power across Global Politics* (London 2021), pp. 346-366, here 355-356; Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 9.

²⁷² Bálint Magyar, 'A posztkommunista maffiaállam: rendszerképző sajátossága' ('The post-communist mafia state: its system-forming peculiarity'), in: Bálint Magyar (eds.), *A Posztkommunista Maffiaállam* ('The Post-communist Mafia State'), Magyar Polip 2 (Hungarian Octopus 2 (e-book 2020), chapter 1.3 [no page numbers].

²⁷³ Julia Sonnevend and Veronika Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 0 (2023) 0, pp. 1-30, here 1 and 23.

ideological and has sometimes contrasting elements.²⁷⁴ For example, even though Orbán was originally anti-Church, he came to call Hungary a Christian state and now collaborates with the Church.²⁷⁵ In fact, Orbán's influence on Hungary's Christianity is so strong that even though he, as a true pragmatist, still draws on pagan and other non-Christian elements, Hungarian church leaders often follow Orbán rather than the Vatican.²⁷⁶ However, the versatility of Orbán's PC does not mean that his image is shaped spontaneously. Orbán rarely does unscheduled interviews and his regime relies on regulated mass propaganda to maintain his image.²⁷⁷ In contrast to Putin's Russia where propaganda is also bottom-up, it is a rather top-down system in Hungary, yet, as mentioned, with a listening ear to public opinion.²⁷⁸

Next to his active social media presence, which will be discussed later, Orbán is constantly present in traditional media. Since 2002, he has been building a media empire and since 2010, his media dominance, i.e., ownership, financial resources, and sources of information, provides only a pro-Orbán narrative.²⁷⁹ In 2017, only 22,2 per cent of the media remained independent, yet they had it increasingly difficult with high costs and penalties.²⁸⁰ Moreover, in 2018, Orbán restructured the Hungarian media and the Central European Press and Media Foundation (CEPMF) was founded.²⁸¹ Within a few hours, CEPMF became Hungary's largest media company as patronal, government-friendly media owners donated their properties

²⁷⁴ Péter Kende, *Az Igazi Orbán. A Viktor* ('The Real Orbán. The Viktor') (Budapest 2006) chapter A VIKTOR CÍMŰ KÖNYV UTÓÉLETE – LELŐNI, MINT EGY KUTYÁT [no page numbers]; Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 22 and 1.

²⁷⁵ Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all!' Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 322; Rudolf Metz and Veronika Kövesdi, 'Whoever is not against us is for us' sectarianization of politics in Hungary', *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 24 (2023) 4, pp. 521-542, here 531.

²⁷⁶ Metz and Kövesdi, 'Whoever is not against us is for us' sectarianization of politics in Hungary', 531; Kende, *Az Igazi Orbán. A Viktor* ('The Real Orbán. The Viktor') (Budapest 2006) chapter A VIKTOR CÍMŰ KÖNYV UTÓÉLETE – LELŐNI, MINT EGY KUTYÁT [no page numbers]; Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework* (Budapest 2020) 189.

²⁷⁷ Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 2-3; Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 362.

²⁷⁸ 'Stefano Bottoni: how a child of Kádár's time built a post-democratic autocracy [part 2]' (21st of January 2022) <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2022/01/27/stefano-bottoni-how-a-child-of-kadars-time-built-a-post-democratic-autocracy-part-2/> (17th of July 2024).

²⁷⁹ Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all!' Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 321; Metz and Kövesdi, 'Whoever is not against us is for us' sectarianization of politics in Hungary', 539.

²⁸⁰ Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 251-252; András Bozóki, 'The Politics of Worst Practices: Hungary in the 2010s', *SciencesPo: Centre de Recherches Internationales* 2 (2015), pp. 1-13, here 3.

²⁸¹ Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 6.

“voluntarily” to the foundation.²⁸² In reality, however, this was not so voluntary as Orbán’s government had issued a degree declaring the merger of national, strategic importance which exempted it from competition law.²⁸³ The new government’s media dominance made Orbán’s control of Hungary’s belief system enormous, as he could, like in a sect, systematically isolate members from outside influences and create a pro-Orbán, social reality.²⁸⁴ This *Gleichschaltung* also included historical research, scholarship, and the arts which were used to reinvent traditions and spread symbols of nationhood.²⁸⁵ This enabled Orbán to systematically legitimate his rule in patriotist, unifying terms, protect and propagate his PC, and undermine his political opponents.²⁸⁶

4.3. Orbán’s predecessor(s)

4.3.1. Dictatorial predecessors

Until 1988, Hungary was led by the communist dictator János Kádár who had risen to power after the Hungarian Uprising in 1956.²⁸⁷ Initially, he had supported this anti-Soviet revolution, but then he aligned with the Soviets and continued communism yet with de-Stalinising aspects.²⁸⁸ Eventually, the party removed Kádár from his position in 1988.²⁸⁹ Contrasting to Kádár’s regime, Orbán is strongly anti-communist and anti-Soviet as it goes against his nationalistic ideas. Therefore, Orbán annually celebrates the 1956-revolution to emphasise Hungary’s current freedom.²⁹⁰ Another difference is that Orbán’s system depends much more

²⁸² Sonnevend and Kövesdi, ‘More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán’s Charismatic Authority on Facebook’, 6; Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 251-252.

²⁸³ Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 251-252.

²⁸⁴ Metz and Kövesdi, ‘Whoever is not against us is for us’ sectarianization of politics in Hungary’, 537-538.

²⁸⁵ György Péteri, ‘Applied Science in Stalin’s Time: Hungary, 1945-1953’, in: David Kaldewey and Désirée Schauz (eds.), *Basic and Applied Research: The Language of Science Policy in the Twentieth Century* (New York 2018), pp. 205-227, here 223; András Edit, ‘Vigorous Flagging in the Heart of Europe: The Hungarian Homeland under the Right-Wing Regime’, *e-flux Journal* 57 (2014), pp. 1-6; Povedák, ‘One from us, one for us. Viktor Orbán in Vernacular Culture’, 164.

²⁸⁶ Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 593.

²⁸⁷ Julius Várallyay, ‘Review’, review of: Roger Gough, *A Good Comrade: János Kádár, Communism and Hungary* (London 2006), *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11 (2009) 1, pp. 167-169, here 167.

²⁸⁸ Várallyay, ‘Review’, review of: Roger Gough, *A Good Comrade: János Kádár, Communism and Hungary*, 168.

²⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 169.

²⁹⁰ *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s commemoration speech on the 63rd anniversary of the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight’ (version 25th of October 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-commemoration-speech-on-the-63rd-anniversary-of-the-1956-revolution-and-freedom-fight> (27th of July 2024).

on the leader's persona.²⁹¹ Indeed, whereas Orbán maintains a personality cult, Kádár did not allow one.²⁹² Maybe that is why Kádár depended more on violence, at least in the beginning, in contrast to Orbán who rather depends on economic pressures and his PC's cultivation.²⁹³ Yet Orbán also reflects of Kádárism, as both were strongmen and pragmatists rather than ideologists, striving to prolong their power by adapting their beliefs.²⁹⁴

An earlier yet even more significant predecessor is Miklós Horthy who was Hungary's leader from 1920 to 1944 and functions as Orbán's spiritual predecessor.²⁹⁵ Like Orbán, Horthy had a leader cult propagating him as the nation's saviour. Indeed, Hungary needed saving after the Treaty of Trianon which was a humiliating, territory-losing, peace settlement Hungary signed after being defeated in World War I.²⁹⁶ Similar to Horthy, Orbán adopts nationalistic, saviour-like, and victimised narratives to exaggerate Hungary's unfortunes.²⁹⁷ Moreover, Orbán wishes to, albeit symbolically, solve the Trianon issue as well and therefore manipulates the historical narrative for his own political gain.²⁹⁸ In 2018, for example, Orbán paralleled the migration crisis with the Trianon history by saying that other countries want 'us to voluntarily hand our country over'.²⁹⁹ And even though Horthy had collaborated with Nazi-Germany, Orbán minimised and eventually white-washed this, reinstating Horthy's image as an honourable and heroic nationalist leader.³⁰⁰

²⁹¹ 'Stefano Bottoni: how a child of Kádár's time built a post-democratic autocracy [part 2]' (21st of January 2022) <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2022/01/27/stefano-bottoni-how-a-child-of-kadars-time-built-a-post-democratic-autocracy-part-2/> (17th of July 2024).

²⁹² Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 5.

²⁹³ Péter Bajomi-Lazar, Dalma Kékesdi-Boldog, and Jörn Pinnow, 'Zurück in die Zukunft', *Osteuropa* 68 (2018) 3/5, pp. 272-282, here 282.

²⁹⁴ 'Stefano Bottoni: how a child of Kádár's time built a post-democratic autocracy [part 1]' (21st of January 2022) <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2022/01/21/stefano-bottoni-how-a-child-of-kadars-time-built-a-post-democratic-autocracy-part-1/> (17th of July 2024); Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 361-362.

²⁹⁵ Michael Toomey, 'History, Nationalism and Democracy', *New Perspectives* 26 (2018) 1, pp. 87-108, here 93, 101, and 103.

²⁹⁶ Toomey, 'History, Nationalism and Democracy', 88 and 93-94.

²⁹⁷ Ibidem, 88 and 96.

²⁹⁸ Toomey, 'History, Nationalism and Democracy', 97, 101, and 103; Baer, 'What Viktor Orbán Revealed This Weekend' (version 26th of July 2022) <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/what-viktor-orban-revealed-this-weekend> (8th of July 2024).

²⁹⁹ *About Hungary*, 'Orbán Viktor's ceremonial speech on the 170th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848' (version 15th of March 2018) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/orban-viktors-ceremonial-speech-on-the-170th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-of-1848> (27th of July 2024).

³⁰⁰ Jackie Mansky, 'Why It Matters That Hungary's Prime Minister Denounced His Country's Role in the Holocaust' (version 21st of July 2017) <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/holocaust-and-hungary-prime-minister-180964139/> (17th of July 2024); Toomey, 'History, Nationalism and Democracy', 100-101.

4.3.2. Democratic predecessors

József Antall of the centre-right Hungarian Democratic Forum was Hungary's first post-communist prime minister after winning the 1990-election. He was widely respected and started Hungary's transition to capitalism, liberal democracy, and independence.³⁰¹ However, this transformation proved difficult and after Antall died in 1993, his party lost the re-elections.³⁰² Orbán criticised Antall's failed transition attempt, yet Fidesz still promoted a good political relationship between them, probably for continuation.³⁰³ Orbán tried to win the 1994-election, but lost to the Hungarian Socialist Party.³⁰⁴ As a response, Orbán and Fidesz abandoned liberalism and their youthful, casual character and embraced conservatism and right-wing politics in 1995.³⁰⁵ This populist and nationalistic shift paid off as Fidesz won the election of 1998, making Orbán premier.³⁰⁶ However, in 2002, Orbán lost the election to the Hungarian Socialist Party again.³⁰⁷ He became a fierce oppositionist politician and increased his populist character by concerning himself with the "'Plebejus'".³⁰⁸ The socialist government made many mistakes, for example lying about Hungary's dire economic situation, which Orbán strongly criticised.³⁰⁹ Orbán thus refused any collaboration and with this oppositionist attitude, Orbán won the elections in 2010.³¹⁰ Hereafter, he quickly changed the system by cultivating his leader cult and consolidating his own power, something his democratic predecessors had not done.³¹¹

³⁰¹ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 24; Jason Wittenberg, 'The 1994 Hungarian Election in Historical Perspective', in: Gábor Tóka and Zsolt Enyedi (eds.), *The 1994 Election to the Hungarian National Assembly* (Berlin 1999), pp. 139-167, here 141.

³⁰² Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 24.

³⁰³ *Ibidem*, 35.

³⁰⁴ Wittenberg, 'The 1994 Hungarian Election in Historical Perspective', 139.

³⁰⁵ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 34 and 36; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2017) 76.

³⁰⁶ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 36 and 42.

³⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 45 and 49.

³⁰⁸ 'Stefano Bottoni: how a child of Kádár's time built a post-democratic autocracy [part 1]' (21st of January 2022) <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2022/01/21/stefano-bottoni-how-a-child-of-kadars-time-built-a-post-democratic-autocracy-part-1/> (17th of July 2024).

³⁰⁹ Michael J. Jordan, 'The Roots of Hate', *World Policy Journal* 27 (2010) 3, pp. 99-111, here 105; *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's commemoration speech on the 65th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight' (version 23rd of October 2021) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-commemoration-speech-on-the-65th-anniversary-of-the-1956-revolution-and-freedom-fight> (2nd of August 2024).

³¹⁰ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 79-80; Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 174; Magyar, 'A posztkommunista maffiaállam: rendszerképző sajátossága' ('The post-communist mafia state: its system-forming peculiarity'), chapter 1.4 [no page numbers].

³¹¹ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 52, 50, and 45.

4.4. Orbán's image

4.4.1. Orbán's charisma

In contrast to Stalin and Putin, Orbán had natural charisma when he started his political career. This first became evident during his infamous speech of 1989 wherein he passionately pleaded for Hungary's independence and democratisation.³¹² As a powerful orator, he aroused the public's admiration and faith which transformed him into a seemingly heroic and infallible statesman.³¹³ Since the 2010s, Orbán has maintained his charismatic appeal, though it has arguably become more manufactured as he aged and adopted more authoritarian tendencies which increased the need to cover and legitimise his actions.³¹⁴ This enlarged the importance of his PC and caused his charisma to become rather routinised in nation-wide propaganda.³¹⁵

4.4.2. Orbán's roles

Like Putin, Orbán is a premier celebrity. Unlike his Russian colleague, however, Orbán does not have nor strive for a sexy star image and rarely displays his physical prowess.³¹⁶ His celebrity status is thus less physical yet still machoistic and aimed at projecting a monarch-like celebrity image.³¹⁷ Indeed, Orbán presents himself as Hungary's crownless king and 'as the ultimate icon of Hungarian-ness' which personalises his representative political role.³¹⁸ This is highly effective in Hungary because its relatively recent history with autocracy and leader cults makes the country receptive to nationalism, symbolism, and hero cults.³¹⁹ Moreover, in contrast to Putin, Orbán is not only a traditional celebrity politician, but he is also an online influencer. As he recognises the power of social media, he uses these platforms to form an emotional

³¹² Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 5.

³¹³ Kirby and Thorpe, 'Who is Viktor Orban, Hungarian PM with 14-year grip on power?' (version 13th of February 2024) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67832416> (8th of July 2024); Metz and Kövesdi, 'Whoever is not against us is for us' sectarianization of politics in Hungary', 529; Povedák, 'One from us, one for us. Viktor Orbán in Vernacular Culture', 153.

³¹⁴ Iván Szelenyi, 'Weber's theory of domination and post-communist capitalisms', *Theory and Society* 45 (2016) 1, pp. 1-24, here 23.

³¹⁵ Metz and Kövesdi, 'Whoever is not against us is for us' sectarianization of politics in Hungary', 541.

³¹⁶ Sonnevend, 'Populist Iconicity: The Contradictions of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a Political Celebrity', 170; Apor, 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary', 107.

³¹⁷ Sonnevend, 'Populist Iconicity: The Contradictions of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a Political Celebrity', 171-172; Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all!' Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 320-321.

³¹⁸ Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all!' Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 323; Sonnevend, 'Populist Iconicity: The Contradictions of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a Political Celebrity', 171.

³¹⁹ Apor, 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary', 109.

bond with his followers, like a 'normal' influencer.³²⁰ Orbán thus moves into the private lives of citizens whilst they easily access his world of politics and beliefs. By promoting himself and his actions in this way, he can directly reach and influence citizens, gain support, and secure his legitimacy.³²¹ Any needed charismatic qualities or roles can be easily fabricated with the new online tools. Moreover, whereas Orbán has created an inclusive social media community, he also uses his online presence to slyly scapegoat and exclude any opposition by individualising, dramatising, and showcasing his political role and topics he deems important.³²²

In a second way, Orbán fulfils the roles of Hungary's saviour and protector. He does this by victimising the country and constantly recalling its losses and tragedies, portraying Hungary as a gloomy, frightened, and suffering nation.³²³ Even when he lists Hungary's successes, he emphasises that there still are battles to be fought as others 'can imagine a world and a human race without Hungarians and without Hungary'.³²⁴ In response to this manipulated existential fear, Orbán portrays himself as Hungary's indispensable hero with almost messianic qualities who will rescue the country from humiliation and failure and herewith cultivates his PC.³²⁵ He is Hungary's sole saviour and its ultimate solution, as he strives to increase Hungary's prosperity and safety.³²⁶ He protects the country from illegal immigrants and maintains its NATO and EU membership whilst emphasising that the EU is 'an alliance of European nations,

³²⁰ Magyar, 'A posztkommunista maffiaállam: rendszerképző sajátossága' ('The post-communist mafia state: its system-forming peculiarity'), chapter 4.7 [no page numbers].

³²¹ Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 23; P. David Marshall, 'Celebrity, Politics, and New Media', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 33 (2020) 1, pp. 89-104, here 89.

³²² Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 23; Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all!' Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 320-321; Sonnevend, 'Populist Iconicity: The Contradictions of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a Political Celebrity', 171.

³²³ Miklós Sükösd, 'Victorious Victimization: Orbán the Orator—Deep Securitization and State Populism in Hungary's Propaganda State', in: Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen (eds.), *Populist Rhetorics: Case Studies and a Minimalist Definition* (e-book 2022), pp. 165-185, here 178-179.

³²⁴ *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" address' (version 16th of February 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-2> (2nd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the opening of the temporary exhibition "Treasures from Budapest"' (version 5th of December 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-opening-of-the-temporary-exhibition-treasures-from-budapest> (31st of July 2024).

³²⁵ Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all!' Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 324; Povedák, 'One from us, one for us. Viktor Orbán in Vernacular Culture', 158-159; Susan Faludi, 'Pity, O God, the Republican: What America can learn from Hungary's "Viktator"', *The Baffler* (2016) 31, pp. 20-33, here 23.

³²⁶ Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 16.

not a Brussels empire' and that only the Hungarian people can decide about the Hungarian homeland.³²⁷

Orbán's saviour-like role is fuelled by Orbán being 'a through-and-through populist', even though he does not consider himself to be one.³²⁸ Populists believe that they represent all citizens and plead to protect these 'pure people' against the 'corrupt elite' and 'others'.³²⁹ A populist therewith creates non-accountability as he is the true defender the nation and its citizens.³³⁰ Orbán is clearly a populist as he portrays himself as saviour and protector by adapting nationalistic rhetoric, controlling the historical narrative, and victimising the Hungarians in light of existing or upcoming dangers and the strong return of the state that he will provide.³³¹ After all, he and his government are 'the only genuine representatives of Hungarians' and, in Orbán's words, 'a true people's party'.³³² 'Hungary before all else', he declares.³³³ '[W]e lost the 20th century, but Hungarians will win the 21st century', herewith also

³²⁷ *About Hungary*, 'Statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, following a summit on migration with the Chancellor of Austria and the President of Serbia' (version 7th of July 2023) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-a-summit-on-migration-with-the-chancellor-of-austria-and-the-president-of-serbia> (2nd of August 2024); János Kornai, 'Hungary's U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy', *Journal of Democracy* 26 (2015) 3, pp. 34-48, here 43; *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union' (version 29th of September 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union> (26th of July 2024).

³²⁸ Sükösd, 'Victorious Victimization: Orbán the Orator–Deep Securitization and State Populism in Hungary's Propaganda State', 177-178; Péter Krekó, 'More Hungarys in eastern Europe?' (version 27th of August 2014) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/more-hungarys-in-eastern-europe/> (14th of July 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" address' (version 16th of February 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-2> (2nd of August 2024).

³²⁹ Maarten van Rossem, *Waarom is de burger boos?: Maarten van Rossem over hedendaags populisme* ('Why is the citizen angry?: Maarten van Rossem about contemporary populism') (Amsterdam 2010) subchapter 'de structuur van het populisme' ('the structure of populism') [no page numbers]; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Populism: corrective and threat to democracy', in: Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Corrective of Threat to Democracy?* (Cambridge 2015), pp. 205-222, here 8 [terms translated by Vivian Schwarzwälder]; Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 3.

³³⁰ Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 235.

³³¹ *About Hungary*, 'Speech given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after swearing his prime ministerial oath' (version 16th of May 2022) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-given-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-after-swearing-his-prime-ministerial-oath> (2nd of August 2024); Karl P. Benziger, 'The Strong State and Embedded Dissonance: History Education and Populist Politics in Hungary', *Yesterday and Today* (2017) 18, pp. 64-84, here 72 and 83.

³³² György Péteri, 'Should We Really be Surprised by Where Viktor Orbán's Hungary is Heading?', *Transit Online* (2014); *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union' (version 29th of September 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union> (26th of July 2024).

³³³ *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union' (version 29th of September 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union> (26th of July 2024).

overcoming the existing ‘Hungarophobia’.³³⁴ Furthermore, populism is characterised by the quick adjustment to changing circumstances and popular demands and can be combined with authoritarianism and nativism.³³⁵ Therefore, many populists-in-power, also Orbán, are prepared to resort to a ‘state-authoritarian approach to problem-solving’, especially when the nation’s will is endangered.³³⁶ This enables the opportunist populist politician to de-democratise the system, ‘cement himself into power’, and expand his illiberal narratives, something Orbán definitely has done.³³⁷

Orbán also has the dual role of being a great and common man at the same time.³³⁸ On the one hand, he is Hungary’s strong political leader, ‘the man in charge’.³³⁹ His strength and competence are, contrastingly to Putin, not emphasised by physical appearance, but rather by nationalistic and masculine rhetoric and symbols. For example, Orbán metaphorises national elections as battles or revolutions and exclaimed in a ceremonial speech on Hungary’s freedom in 2018: ‘Hungarians! Lift the flags high! Advance to battle! Long live Hungarian freedom, long live the homeland! Forward to victory! Go for it Hungary, go for it Hungarians!’³⁴⁰ In other speeches, he declared the Hungarians to be ‘brothers-in-arms’, ‘freedom fighters’, and heirs to the revolutionaries who fought for Hungary’s independence in 1848.³⁴¹ Domestically

³³⁴ *About Hungary*, ‘Interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme “Good Morning Hungary”’ (version 12th of June 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/interview-with-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-2020-06-15> (2nd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s commemoration speech on the 65th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution and Freedom Fight’ (version 23rd of October 2021) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-commemoration-speech-on-the-65th-anniversary-of-the-1956-revolution-and-freedom-fight> (2nd of August 2024).

³³⁵ Sükösd, ‘Victorious Victimization: Orbán the Orator–Deep Securitization and State Populism in Hungary’s Propaganda State’, 177-178; Krekó, ‘More Hungarys in eastern Europe?’ (version 27th of August 2014) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/more-hungarys-in-eastern-europe/> (14th of July 2024); Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 34.

³³⁶ Jens Becker, ‘The rise of right-wing populism in Hungary’, *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* 13 (2010) 1, pp. 29-40, here 34.

³³⁷ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 96; Péter Krekó, ‘More Hungarys in eastern Europe?’ (version 27th of August 2014) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/more-hungarys-in-eastern-europe/> (14th of July 2024).

³³⁸ Povedák, ‘One from us, one for us. Viktor Orbán in Vernacular Culture’, 163.

³³⁹ Apor, ‘From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary’, 107.

³⁴⁰ Apor, ‘From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary’, 107; *About Hungary*, ‘Orbán Viktor’s ceremonial speech on the 170th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848’ (version 15th of March 2018) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/orban-viktors-ceremonial-speech-on-the-170th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-of-1848> (27th of July 2024).

³⁴¹ *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union’ (version 29th of September 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union> (26th of July 2024); *About Hungary*, ‘Orbán Viktor’s ceremonial speech on the 170th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848’ (version 15th of March 2018) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/orban->

but especially internationally, Orbán is therefore often referred to as a strongman, i.e., a decisive, sometimes difficult, aggressive, and conflictive leader who gets things done through force of will, which is similar to Putin's depiction.³⁴² Orbán's persona thus radiates masculine macho power, alpha dominance, charisma, and determination to gain respect, legitimacy, and compliance.³⁴³ In line with this image, Orbán openly undermines EU-norms, even though he is not leaving the body, as Hungary needs EU-investments to modernise.³⁴⁴ 'The EU is unprepared for dealing with a member state that rejects EU norms and values', economist János Kornai comments, and Orbán seems to know that.³⁴⁵ The Hungarian premier therefore emphasises to the Hungarians that Europe is not their future, but that 'we are the future of Europe' and that '[w]e live in our own way'.³⁴⁶ Orbán also promotes relations with other strongmen, e.g., Russian president Vladimir Putin, former U.S.A. president Donald Trump, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Chinese president Xi Jinping.³⁴⁷ It is thus not surprising that by opponents, Orbán is dubbed the "'Viktator'".³⁴⁸

On the other hand, Orbán is propagated as a son of the people and a (grand)father-figure, like Stalin had been.³⁴⁹ To many Hungarians, he is just 'Viktor', a term of endearment that is widely used.³⁵⁰ In speeches, Orbán often appears modest, often calling the Hungarians 'dear friends'

[viktors-ceremonial-speech-on-the-170th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-of-1848](#) (27th of July 2024).

³⁴² Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 2; Sonnevend, 'Populist Iconicity: The Contradictions of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a Political Celebrity', 171; Apor, 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary', 109; Pierre Ostiguy and Kenneth M. Roberts, 'Putting Trump in Comparative Perspective', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23 (2016) 1, pp. 25-50, here 31.

³⁴³ Ostiguy and Roberts, 'Putting Trump in Comparative Perspective', 31; Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 8-9.

³⁴⁴ Caroline de Gruyter, 'Orbán kijkt wel uit om de EU te verlaten' ('Orbán is looking forward to leave the EU'), in: *NRC*, 3rd and 4th of August 2024, pp. 10; Benziger, 'The Strong State and Embedded Dissonance: History Education and Populist Politics in Hungary', 82.

³⁴⁵ Kornai, 'Hungary's U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy', 44-45.

³⁴⁶ *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" address' (version 16th of February 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-2> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁴⁷ Kornai, 'Hungary's U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy', 44; Jon Nixon, 'Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher: learning together', in: David Scott (eds.), *On Learning, Volume 2: Philosophy, concepts and practices* (London 2024), pp. 171-186, here 172; Bozóki, 'The Politics of Worst Practices: Hungary in the 2010s', 11; *About Hungary*, 'Address by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the "One Belt, One Road" Forum' (version 18th of October 2023) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/address-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-one-belt-one-road-forum> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁴⁸ Faludi, 'Pity, O God, the Republican: What America can learn from Hungary's "Viktator"', 23.

³⁴⁹ Povedák, 'One from us, one for us. Viktor Orbán in Vernacular Culture', 161; Apor, 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary', 107.

³⁵⁰ Povedák, 'One from us, one for us. Viktor Orbán in Vernacular Culture', 163.

and crediting his successes to the Hungarian's hard work.³⁵¹ This humble role and approachability seems more similar to Stalin than to Putin and are emphasised in Orbán's propaganda.³⁵² It showcases Orbán meeting the common man, young and old, helping animals, and visiting crises sites.³⁵³ Like Stalin who admitted that he was overworked, Orbán sometimes shares personal, 'human' difficulties, for example when he was unable to meet his parents during the COVID-pandemic.³⁵⁴ Overall, by showing that he is humble and always there for people, he propagates his omnipresent care and elevates his charisma, therewith gaining respect and capturing many hearts.³⁵⁵

The fifth and last role to be discussed here is Orbán as mediator and peace broker. As a true pragmatist, Orbán maintains good relations with many countries, even if these nations do not get along with each other. His main motivation is 'to protect Hungarian families' and thus when, for example, Russia invaded Ukraine, Orbán decided to remain neutral apart from humanitarian assistance to Ukraine.³⁵⁶ He thus keeps his bilateral ties with both Russia and Ukraine whilst urging for peace.³⁵⁷ Meanwhile, he meets with European leaders to discuss

³⁵¹ *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union' (version 29th of September 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union> (26th of July 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" address' (version 16th of February 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-2> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁵² Apor, 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary', 107; Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 14-17.

³⁵³ Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 15-16; *About Hungary*, 'Interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme "Good Morning Hungary"' (version 10th of April 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/interview-with-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-2020-04-14> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁵⁴ *About Hungary*, 'Interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on Mária Radio' (version 20th of April 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/interview-with-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-maria-radio> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁵⁵ Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 15-16; *About Hungary*, 'Interview with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme "Good Morning Hungary"' (version 10th of April 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/interview-with-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-2020-04-14> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁵⁶ *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's address to the Hungarian parliament before the start of daily business' (version 26th of September 2022) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-address-to-the-hungarian-parliament-before-the-start-of-daily-business> (2nd of August 2024); Kim Lane Scheppele, 'How Viktor Orbán Wins', *Journal of Democracy* 33 (2022) 3, pp. 45-61, here 48.

³⁵⁷ Scheppele, 'How Viktor Orbán Wins', 48; *About Hungary*, 'Press statement by Viktor Orbán after his meeting with Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine' (version 2nd of July 2024) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-viktor-orban-after-his-meeting-with-volodymyr-oleksandrovych-zelenskyy-president-of-ukraine> (3rd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán following his meeting with Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, President of Russia' (version 5th of July 2024) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-statement-following-his-meeting-with-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-president-of-russia>

peace and security strategies, yet also with other, in the EU's-eyes controversial, strongmen, for example in July 2024 with Xi, Trump, and Erdoğan.³⁵⁸ Orbán thus images himself as mediator and peace broker and pleads that Hungary is one of the few countries left who can talk to everyone.³⁵⁹ As mentioned, for Orbán 'the most important thing is peace' and Hungary's security.³⁶⁰ However, he doubts NATO's will to protect Hungary and pleads that the EU needs reorganising first to escape Brussels outdated and absolutist system.³⁶¹ Orbán therefore argues that Hungary must defend itself which he will as chosen protector.³⁶² Orbán does not only assume his mediating role regarding security, yet he also promotes economic, political, cultural, and intellectual cooperation.³⁶³ Moreover, he supports countries who want to join or

[remarks/statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-his-meeting-with-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-president-of-russia](#) (3rd of August 2024).

³⁵⁸ Orbán Viktor, 'EPC-csúcs. Béke és biztonság!' ('EPC summit. Peace and safety!'), *Facebook* (version 18th of July 2024) <https://www.facebook.com/orbanviktor/posts/pfbid02yEjjzgb63KvTYVxsyFbKSvKBs8FtzLATCo5phViQfRQXbKFhocPmB2dLZgG4zGeWl> (25th of July 2024); Orbán Viktor, 'Pekingi békemisszió' ('Beijing Peace Mission'), *Facebook* (version 8th of July 2024) <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1030492618448336&set=pb.100044628210344.-2207520000&type=3> (25th of July 2024); Orbán Viktor, 'Békemisszió. Tárgyalás Donald Trump elnök úrral' ('Peace mission. Discussion with President Donald Trump'), *Facebook* (version 12th of July 2024) <https://www.facebook.com/orbanviktor/posts/pfbid0ubKSERK68wwT2QL72bLf7vJZSjBzrPTuJcXzmQBWPxmRfCwAKKCe5b66uR4XYd83l> (25th of July 2024); Orbán Viktor, 'Békemisszió. Találkozó a Török Elnökkel' ('Peace Mission. Meeting with the Turkish President'), *Facebook* (version 10th of July 2024) <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1031313541699577&set=pb.100044628210344.-2207520000&type=3> (25th of July 2024).

³⁵⁹ *About Hungary*, 'Statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán following his meeting with Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, President of Russia' (version 5th of July 2024) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-his-meeting-with-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-president-of-russia> (3rd of August 2024).

³⁶⁰ *About Hungary*, 'Facebook statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán following a meeting of the European Council' (version 7th of October 2022) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/facebook-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-a-meeting-of-the-european-council> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁶¹ *About Hungary*, 'Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the 176th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–49' (version 15th of March 2024) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-176th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-and-war-of-independence-of-184849> (3rd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 30th congress of the Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance' (version 18th of November 2023) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-30th-congress-of-the-fidesz-hungarian-civic-alliance> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁶² *About Hungary*, 'Speech given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after swearing his prime ministerial oath' (version 16th of May 2022) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-given-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-after-swearing-his-prime-ministerial-oath> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁶³ *About Hungary*, 'Press statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán following his talks with President of Russia Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin' (version 30th of October 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-his-talks-with-president-of-russia-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin> (27th of July 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Statement by Viktor Orbán before his talks with President of France Emmanuel Macron' (version 11th of October 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/statement-by-viktor-orban-before-his-talks-with-president-of-france-emmanuel-macron> (27th of July 2024).

collaborate with the EU.³⁶⁴ Even though Orbán's mediating and peace-brokering roles are rather international, they are domestically widely propagated in light of Hungary's protection and Orbán's peace-willing, good character which makes him popular amongst many Hungarians. Moreover, if anyone opposes Orbán's seemingly well-intentioned plans, he opportunistically accuses them of being anti-peace and of wanting Hungary to go into war, therewith silencing any criticism.³⁶⁵

The many yet sometimes contrasting roles enable Orbán to portray himself as a rational, relatable, and caring political leader who promotes peace, safety, and calmness whilst still showing his seriousness, political competence, and problem-solving abilities.³⁶⁶ Herewith, Orbán has all ideal virtues for a successful illiberal democratic leader, as they create the idea that he is harmonious with all Hungarians and that Orbán is the only one with a good character and all necessary skills, making Orbán the only solution to the country's dire circumstances.³⁶⁷

4.5. Democratic backsliding

4.5.1. Hungary's backsliding

When exactly Hungary started diverging from its model role as a post-communist liberal democracy is debated. Some point to the year 2006 yet there are also signs of illiberalism already during Orbán's first premiership.³⁶⁸ Clear is, however, that 2010 was a year of big

³⁶⁴ *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's press statement after his talks with Prime Minister of Moldova Ion Chicu' (version 12th of March 2010) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-press-statement-after-his-talks-with-prime-minister-of-moldova-ion-chicu> (2nd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Press statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after his talks with the President of Serbia' (version 15th of May 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-after-his-talks-with-the-president-of-serbia> (2nd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Facebook Post By Prime Minister Viktor Orbán Following A Summit Meeting Of European Union And Western Balkan Heads Of State And Government' (version 6th of December 2022) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/facebook-post-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-a-summit-meeting-of-european-union-and-western-balkan-heads-of-state-and-government> (2nd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Press statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán following talks with Prime Minister of Italy Giorgia Meloni' (version 24th of June 2024) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-talks-with-prime-minister-of-italy-giorgia-meloni> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁶⁵ Scheppele, 'How Viktor Orbán Wins', 48.

³⁶⁶ Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 1, 4, and 21; Povedák, 'One from us, one for us. Viktor Orbán in Vernacular Culture', 159.

³⁶⁷ Benziger, 'The Strong State and Embedded Dissonance: History Education and Populist Politics in Hungary', 71; Apor, 'From heroic lion to streetfighter: Historical legacies and the leader cult in twentieth-century Hungary', 107 and 109; Kirby and Thorpe, 'Who is Viktor Orban, Hungarian PM with 14-year grip on power?' (version 13th of February 2024) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67832416> (8th of July 2024).

³⁶⁸ Kate Langdon, review of: Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State. The Case of Hungary* (Budapest 2016), *Czech Journal of Political Science* (2018) 3, pp. 275-278, here 275; Bozóki, 'Viktor

change, as within months of his re-election, Orbán started the transition towards an autocracy.³⁶⁹ He made himself the sole decision-maker and filled high governmental positions with close friends.³⁷⁰ He also created his own, propertied bourgeoisie, a loyal, necessary base that had lacked during his previous premiership.³⁷¹ Moreover, the parliamentary system of checks and balances was eliminated and criticism became restricted.³⁷² In his 'waiting time' as opposition politician, Orbán had also built a vast media empire which he enlarged from 2010 onwards.³⁷³ And even though these actions led to immense corruption and stirred up criticism, the new system with authoritarian characteristics remained skilfully veiled by Hungary's democratic name.³⁷⁴ In the following years, Hungary slid back even further. In 2011, Orbán introduced new laws and rapidly implemented a new constitution without public discussion, a strategy some scholars metaphorise as '*Blitzkrieg* tactics'.³⁷⁵ The new rules restricted the judiciary and enabled the parliament, whereof Fidesz held majority, to appoint judges.³⁷⁶ Herewith, Orbán had legalised his corruption.³⁷⁷ The new legislation also affected the public, as whilst state powers expanded, civil liberties were trimmed.³⁷⁸

2014 was another year of big change, as Orbán came to symbolise the rise of European illiberal politics by declaring Hungary an illiberal state.³⁷⁹ His grip on cultural and academic

Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 357.

³⁶⁹ Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 358; Attila Ágh, 'The Orbán regime as the 'perfect autocracy': The emergence of the 'zombie democracy' in Hungary', *Politics in Central Europe* 18 (2022) 1, pp. 1-25, here 3; János Kornai, 'The System Paradigm Revisited', *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Quest* 48 (2017) 1/2, pp. 239-296, here 281.

³⁷⁰ Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 9.

³⁷¹ Szelenyi, 'Weber's theory of domination and post-communist capitalisms', 22.

³⁷² Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 204; Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all!' Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 330.

³⁷³ Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all!' Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 321; Alvin Camba, 'From Duterte to Orbán: the political economy of autocratic hedging', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26 (2023) 2, pp. 347-372, here 349-350.

³⁷⁴ Paul Lendvai, 'The Transformer', *Foreign Affairs* 98 (2019) 5, pp. 44-54, here 52; Ivan T. Berend, *A Century of Populist Demagogues: Eighteen European Portraits 1918-2018* (Budapest 2020) 277; Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman*, 53.

³⁷⁵ Scheppele, 'How Viktor Orbán Wins', 52; Lendvai, 'The Transformer', 50; Bozóki, 'The Politics of Worst Practices: Hungary in the 2010s', 7.

³⁷⁶ Lendvai, 'The Transformer', 50-51; Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 218.

³⁷⁷ Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 358.

³⁷⁸ Faludi, 'Pity, O God, the Republican: What America can learn from Hungary's "Viktator"', 22

³⁷⁹ Luke Waller, 'Viktor Orbán', <https://www.politico.eu/list/politico-28/viktor-orban/> (8th of July 2024); Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 3.

freedom, courts, media, and civil institutions tightened.³⁸⁰ Nongovernmental organisations were forbidden to receive foreign funds, therewith draining them financially and many schools were lawfully nationalised under governmental authority with textbooks provided by a governmental publishing house.³⁸¹ 2014 was also the first non-democratic election-year, as legal tricks were used to maintain Fidesz's parliamentary majority and there was almost no genuine opposition.³⁸² Even though Orbán thus exceeded the democratic norms and values, he still hid with his rhetoric and propaganda behind the façade of democracy, albeit illiberal.³⁸³ He did this for domestic reasons, e.g., to avoid social unrest, but also for international reasons, e.g., to adhere to EU-standards and prevent foreign criticism, sanctions, and isolation.³⁸⁴

Yet the non-democratic signs became clearer and clearer. In 2016, the public was disallowed to organise national referenda and in 2018, Orbán won an impossible parliamentary supermajority with less than half the votes.³⁸⁵ The situation continued to worsen in the 2020s when the COVID-19 pandemic caused Orbán to invoke a state of emergency which he populistically dubbed 'a "state of danger"'.³⁸⁶ This allowed him 'to rule by decree without a time limit' which is a classic page from the fascist emergency playbook.³⁸⁷ Orbán, however, emphasised that this was not an "'Enabling Act'", yet rather constitutional "'emergency brakes'" which could be extended or taken back by the Parliament (which Fidesz, i.e., Orbán

³⁸⁰ Gideon Rachman, *The Age of the Strongman: How the Cult of the Leader Threatens Democracy around the World* (New York 2022) chapter 5 'Orbán, Kaczynski and the rise illiberal Europe (2015)' [no page numbers]; Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 359.

³⁸¹ Kornai, 'Hungary's U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy', 36 and 45; Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 359; Bozóki, 'The Politics of Worst Practices: Hungary in the 2010s', 5.

³⁸² Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 358; Kornai, 'Hungary's U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy', 42; Jacques Rupnik, 'Orban's Hungary: From "Illiberal Democracy" to the Authoritarian Temptation', in: Alain Dieckhoff, Christophe Jaffrelot, and Elise Massicard (eds.), *Contemporary Populists in Power* (e-book 2022), pp. 133-151, here 137.

³⁸³ Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 359-360.

³⁸⁴ Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 360; Guriev and Treisman, 'How Modern Dictators Survive: An Informational Theory of the New Authoritarianism' (working paper), 2.

³⁸⁵ Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 357; Scheppele, 'How Viktor Orbán Wins', 45.

³⁸⁶ Kirby and Thorpe, 'Who is Viktor Orban, Hungarian PM with 14-year grip on power?' (version 13th of February 2024) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67832416> (8th of July 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's address to the Hungarian parliament before the start of daily business' (version 26th of September 2022) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-address-to-the-hungarian-parliament-before-the-start-of-daily-business> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁸⁷ Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 656; Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux, 'American Fascism: Fourteen Deadly Principles of Contemporary Politics', *Symplokē* 28 (2020) 1-2, pp. 181-205, here 187.

controlled).³⁸⁸ Orbán pleaded that human lives ‘take priority over everything else’ and that people’s protection was not an economical nor political issue.³⁸⁹ Herewith, Orbán overruled opposition by bypassing the usual debates whilst extracting public cooperation.³⁹⁰ And when someone did criticise that the extra measures were autocratic, Orbán accused them of attacking those who are trying to save Hungarian lives.³⁹¹ Similarly, during the 2022-elections, political opponents could hardly voice their messages due to the dominance of the pro-government media.³⁹² Unsurprisingly, European states accused Hungary of restricting civil rights and the rule of law, yet Orbán defended his actions by pointing out that ‘we have different conceptions of freedom’.³⁹³

Under Orbán, Hungary plummeted from 23rd place on the World Press Freedom Index in 2010 to 87th in 2019.³⁹⁴ And whereas it was still considered ‘free’ by Freedom House in 2019, it gained the status of ‘partially free’ and ‘Transitional or Hybrid Regime’ in 2021.³⁹⁵ Looking at the reality, the evaluations seem naïvely late, especially because already in 2012, scholars labelled Hungary a

³⁸⁸ *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s statement in Parliament, responding to reactions to his address before the start of daily business’ (version 23rd of March 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-statement-in-parliament-responding-to-reactions-to-his-address-before-the-start-of-daily-business0323> (2nd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme “Good Morning Hungary”’ (version 13th of March 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-2020-03-15> (2nd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s statement in Parliament, responding to reactions to his address before the start of daily business’ (version 23rd of March 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-statement-in-parliament-responding-to-reactions-to-his-address-before-the-start-of-daily-business0323> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁸⁹ *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme “Good Morning Hungary”’ (version 13th of March 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-2020-03-15> (2nd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, ‘Press statement by Prime Minister Orbán Viktor after a meeting of the Operational Group set up in response to the international outbreak of COVID-19’ (version 5th of March 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-orban-viktor-after-a-meeting-of-the-operational-group-set-up-in-response-to-the-international-outbreak-of-covid-19> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁹⁰ *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme “Good Morning Hungary”’ (version 20th of March 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-2020-03-23> (2nd of August 2024); *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s address to the Hungarian parliament before the start of daily business’ (version 26th of September 2022) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-address-to-the-hungarian-parliament-before-the-start-of-daily-business> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁹¹ *About Hungary*, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio programme “Good Morning Hungary”’ (version 1st of May 2020) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-2020-05-05> (2nd of August 2024).

³⁹² Scheppele, ‘How Viktor Orbán Wins’, 47.

³⁹³ Kirby and Thorpe, ‘Who is Viktor Orban, Hungarian PM with 14-year grip on power?’ (version 13th of February 2024) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67832416> (8th of July 2024).

³⁹⁴ Lendvai, ‘The Transformer’, 51.

³⁹⁵ Sükösd, ‘Victorious Victimization: Orbán the Orator—Deep Securitization and State Populism in Hungary’s Propaganda State’, 167.

'simulated democracy' and Orbán himself dubbed it an 'illiberal state' in 2014. In the following years, scholars called Hungary an 'electoral autocracy' (2015), a 'post-communist mafia state' and a 'hybrid regime' (2018 and 2019), and a 'crude autocracy' (2019).³⁹⁶ A few of these state labels will be elaborated here.

First, according to Orbán, Hungary is an illiberal democracy with Christian democratic norms.³⁹⁷ In the 1990s, Hungary became a post-communist liberal democracy which entailed free and fair elections, an honoured rule of law, separated powers, and civil liberties, yet the current state falls short of liberal norms.³⁹⁸ Indeed, as has become clear, Orbán abandoned 'liberal freedom' because in his eyes, the Western model of liberal democracy had protected Hungary insufficiently and thus he preferred illiberal, nationalised 'Christian freedom'.³⁹⁹ Yet Orbán uses the Christian principles pragmatically rather than as a coherent Christian ideology.⁴⁰⁰ Regarding the term of democracy which Orbán still mentions, Hungary could indeed have remained a democracy, albeit illiberal.⁴⁰¹ However, when Orbán changed the constitution, restricted judicial power and media independence, centralised power around himself, and, most importantly, corrupted the fairness of the election process, the loss of democratic quality was so large that Hungary is not defensible as a democracy anymore.⁴⁰²

³⁹⁶ Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 'More Than Just a Strongman: The Strategic Construction of Viktor Orbán's Charismatic Authority on Facebook', 3; Lendvai, 'The Transformer', 46.

³⁹⁷ Langdon, review of: Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State. The Case of Hungary*, 276; *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union' (version 29th of September 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union> (26th of July 2024).

³⁹⁸ Lisa H. Anders and Astrid Lorenz, 'Examining Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe from a Domestic Perspective: State of Research and Outline of the Book', in: Astrid Lorenz and Lisa H. Anders (eds.), *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe* (e-book 2021), pp. 1-25, here 3

³⁹⁹ Vratislav Havlík and Vít Hloušek, 'Differential Illiberalism: Classifying Illiberal Trends in Central European Party Politics', in: Astrid Lorenz and Lisa H. Anders (eds.), *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe* (e-book 2021), pp. 111-136, here 117; Jeffrey C. Isaac, 'From the Editor: Communism, Post-Communism, and Democracy', *Perspectives on Politics* 15 (2017) 2, pp. 317-324, here 320; *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union' (version 29th of September 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union> (26th of July 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union' (version 29th of September 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union> (26th of July 2024); *About Hungary*, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Union' (version 29th of September 2019) <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-28th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union> (26th of July 2024).

⁴⁰⁰ Havlík and Hloušek, 'Differential Illiberalism: Classifying Illiberal Trends in Central European Party Politics', 127.

⁴⁰¹ Anders and Lorenz, 'Examining Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe from a Domestic Perspective: State of Research and Outline of the Book', 3.

⁴⁰² Rupnik, 'Orban's Hungary: From "Illiberal Democracy" to the Authoritarian Temptation', 139.

Instead, some scholars consider Hungary to be a mafia state.⁴⁰³ Orbán is the “godfather”, his mafia family are his trusted allies, and other people are subsidiaries, expected to comply.⁴⁰⁴ The mafia’s goal is to gain as much power and profit as possible and participates in illegal, criminal activities and erodes civil and democratic institutions whilst pretending to have good intentions.⁴⁰⁵ The family does not resort to physical mass violence but tinkers with legislation, controls the judiciary, applies economic pressures, and uses intimidation.⁴⁰⁶ Myths and populist rhetoric also play a significant role in mafia states, as they enable the creation of an alternative reality, for example with the mafia family as the nation’s protector and others as anti-patriotic enemies.⁴⁰⁷

However, Orbán’s system also could be an autocracy which is very similar to the mafia state yet lacks the strong criminal involvement.⁴⁰⁸ An autocracy, which Putin’s system is also often described as, is a hybridlike regime category between a democracy and dictatorship, thus bearing features of both.⁴⁰⁹ It has relatively non-violent elections yet these lack competitiveness and leave one person or small group in near-absolute governmental power.⁴¹⁰ Independent media and checks and balances institutions still exist yet are severely restricted. Society is also constrained and depoliticised whilst the political power is personalised and centralised. Hungary would be the first EU member state to return from democracy to autocracy yet seems to have all the mentioned transitional aspects.⁴¹¹

Can Hungary then also be called a dictatorship? Based on the current system, the answer is no. Even though Orbán has cleverly increased his presidential power by altering legislation and imposing his dominance over media and society, he is, at least theoretically, defeatable as opposition can still run for premiership. Moreover, there is no evidence that he has liquidated political opponents nor does he resort to mass terror, something dictatorships usually do.⁴¹² Orbán rather relies on a loyalty system, even if so instilled through surveillance and fear of a difficult life or

⁴⁰³ Langdon, review of: Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State. The Case of Hungary*, 275.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibidem, 276.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibidem, 275-276.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibidem, 275.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibidem, 276.

⁴⁰⁸ Michael McFaul, ‘Choosing Autocracy: Actors, Institutions, and Revolution in the Erosion of Russian Democracy’, *Comparative Politics* 50 (2018) 3, pp. 305-325, here 306.

⁴⁰⁹ Kornai, ‘Hungary’s U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy’, 42.

⁴¹⁰ Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes. A Conceptual Framework*, 344-345; McFaul, ‘Choosing Autocracy: Actors, Institutions, and Revolution in the Erosion of Russian Democracy’, 306; Oleksandra Mamchii, ‘Autocracy Versus Dictatorship: Similarities & Differences’ (version 15th of November 2023) <https://bestdiplomats.org/autocracy-vs-dictatorship/> (23rd of July 2024).

⁴¹¹ McFaul, ‘Choosing Autocracy: Actors, Institutions, and Revolution in the Erosion of Russian Democracy’, 306; Bozóki, ‘The Politics of Worst Practices: Hungary in the 2010s’, 1.

⁴¹² Kornai, ‘Hungary’s U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy’, 43; Kornai, ‘The System Paradigm Revisited’, 281.

imprisonment.⁴¹³ This does not mean that Orbán is not on his way to establishing himself as 'Viktator', as he seems to come dangerously close, but he is not there yet.

4.5.2. Democratic backsliding and Orbán's PC

A study of Orbán's PC also proves that Orbán has created a one-ruler system, at least in the form of an autocracy, and that his PC actually played a significant role in this process.

First, Orbán's PC has enabled Orbán to centralise power around his persona by projecting him as the centre and core of Hungarian politics. Moreover, with his PC, he forms an emotional bond which he supplements by cultivating the belief that a strong leader is needed to solve Hungary's dire circumstances and threats. This makes him indispensable, especially because no-one else fulfils the many roles of strong yet caring leader, the nation's saviour and protector, and just 'Viktor'. He also claimed the role of father of the nation, something that Stalin was too but Putin's PC emphasises less. The portrayal of Orbán as Hungary's hero and ultimate solution increases popular support, silences opposition, and therefore enables Orbán to remain prime minister whilst taking more power-centralising actions. Could Orbán have turned to his current control system and authoritarian-like policies without his charisma and PC? Possibly, but he probably would have had to resort to violent tactics much sooner as he would have been less popular, admired, and voted for.

Second, the strong propagation and protection of Orbán's PC in combination with his media dominance enabled him to create and legitimise his own belief system. This is mainly based on the idea that 'Viktor' wants the best for Hungary, something all his leader roles reflect. The surveillance state Orbán built to control society's beliefs gets therefore rationalised through the propagation of these roles, populist rhetoric, and censorship. A note to make is that instead of supplementing his PC with Stalinist terror or Putin-like large-force, Orbán rather resorted to a loyalty system, propaganda, economic pressure, intimidation, and legally and rhetorically outplaying his opponents. These 'milder' tactics seem caused by the fact that Hungary needs its EU-membership and thus has to adhere to EU-norms, at least to some degree.⁴¹⁴ Orbán's restraint made many scholars, especially foreign, late to declare Hungary an autocracy. Yet it slowly becomes clearer that Hungary's political system is only centred around Orbán's PC and

⁴¹³ Bozóki, 'Viktor Orbán and János Kádár. A post-Communist and a Communist autocrat in Hungary: A comparative analysis (Kádár: 1912–1989; Orbán: born 1963)', 362; Szemere, 'But he has nothing on at all! Underground videos targeting Viktor Orbán, Hungary's celebrity politician', 322.

⁴¹⁴ Thu Nguyen, 'The European Union's Hungary Problem' (version 13th of May 2024) <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/european-unions-hungary-problem> (4th of August 2024).

beliefs and that he uses populist rhetoric, a loyalty system, and media dominance to create his increasingly autocratic regime.⁴¹⁵

Third, Orbán's PC contains historical narratives and myths that are adapted to fit his goals. Orbán does this by, for example, idolising Horthy's autocratic rule and using similar nationalistic and victimising narratives to legitimise himself as Hungary's saviour, defender and true representative. Orbán also regularly parallels himself and other Hungarians to earlier revolutions for Hungary's freedom. Like Kádár, Orbán is thus a pragmatist who strives for power and adapts his beliefs when necessary. A note to make is that Orbán also seems to have learned from his predecessor what not to do and thus his system is individualised and less tied to a party, unlike Kádár's leadership. The chance that Orbán is removed from his post by the party, like it had happened to Kádár, is therefore unlikely as the party also receives its popularity and legitimacy from Orbán's persona.

4.6. Conclusion

Orbán's authoritarian tendencies developed seemingly parallel to Orbán's PC. With the soft and hard roles of being a protecting and caring father-figure yet strong politician combined with the omnipresent propagation and protection of his PC, he was able to centralise Hungarian politics around himself. As he did so as an EU-member and under the democratic banner, his autocratisation went rather unrecognised. To a degree, this continues as Orbán's tight power-grip over the Hungarian society seems still relatively disregarded, even though he, like Putin, has restricted fair democratic elections and the checks and balances system. Obviously, Orbán is no Stalin, but he has turned Hungary into an autocracy and is not done consolidating his power yet, so maybe Europe will have a 'Viktatorship' in a few years after all.

⁴¹⁵ Kornai, 'Hungary's U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy', 35.

Conclusion

This thesis has compared Putin's and Orbán's personality cults with Stalin's PC in light of Russia's and Hungary's current democratic backsliding. Stalin's cult was taken as basis, because his seemingly set the tone for later PC's in the (post-)Soviet area. Moreover, the collaboration with democratic backsliding was decided after observing some parallels in the PC's development and the leaders' authoritarian tendencies. This combination is actually quite logical, as modern PC's thrive best in totalitarian contexts and thus it fits the study of Putin's and Orbán's existing cults and their increasingly authoritarian practices. A few concluding remarks will be made here.

First, the use of the personality cults is significantly similar amongst the three leaders. Every leader adapted diverse charismatic roles so that he was able to appeal to every citizen. These roles were constantly propagated nation-wide and enabled him to form a bond with the people. This was important as popular support confirmed the leader's capability to rule and thus legitimised his authority. Moreover, it enabled him to base power on his own persona and to become the centre of the nation's politics. The intensity and significance of this centralisation must not be underestimated. The leader is not only centralised as chosen ruler, but also as the people's carer, their personal saviour, the wise and capable problem-solver, and a close yet far friend who seems unmissable from their lives. Indeed, with his all-encompassing persona, the leader is able to manipulate the public and make himself the ultimate solution to the nation's dire reality yet glorious future. Herewith, he makes every alternative ruler seem unworthy and incapable. Of course, Stalin did this much more as his country was less globalised and more closed off, something that the internet alone now limits. Still, with their many roles and specific charisma, Orbán and especially Putin have created a similar belief that no other leader could take their place, therewith undermining any opposition. This proves how strong the power of their PC's actually is.

A second observation to be made is that the PC's of Stalin, Putin, and Orbán developed parallel to their authoritarian tendencies. The specific course and practicalities were different, but true is that whilst they were centralising of power around their persona, the leaders were also adopting more authoritarian policies, i.e., gaining media dominance, changing laws, and, in the case of Putin and Orbán, making national elections unfair. Therewith, all countries backslid towards an un-free system, whatever the label was and came to be. This transition was partly done with the use of their PC's as these authoritarian tendencies were, at least for a while, covered by a democratic façade and by the reasoning that these patriotic leaders wanted the best for their countries which was constantly emphasised in propaganda.

Third, the question has been asked if Putin and Orbán are re-Stalinising, as this seemed a relevant inquiry due to the many similarities of the cults. Putin's PC seems closest to Stalin and many scholars agree that he is approaching a Stalin-like system. Putin seems to want to be a Stalin-like tsar which his vanity also hints at. Because whereas Orbán's emphasis lies on convincing people with his rhetoric, Putin rather lets his physical image do the speaking. Moreover, his solitaire portrayal, something that has not been discussed but is worth mentioning, seems to metaphorise the system of a lone ruler with an all-mighty decision-making power. Furthermore, it seems that Putin specifically wishes to return to a Stalinist system which his similar roles prove but also his increasing force. He is not there yet, mainly due to the lack of mass terror, but he still has two terms to fill (if the 2030-election agrees) so he has some time left. Regarding Orbán, the question of re-Stalinising has been asked more implicitly, as he is currently further away from becoming a new Stalin than Putin is. However, Orbán's cult also shows similarities with Stalin's PC and he is also centralising Hungary's system around his persona and restricting fair elections and the checks and balances system. Even though he thus might not be re-Stalinising yet, Orbán is becoming an autocrat, if he is not already, and he clearly is not done consolidating his power yet.

This thesis has completed a comparative analysis of the three PC's in light of democratic backsliding which led to a few significant, hereabove mentioned conclusions. There were, however, also nuances and limitations to the research. First, the most prominent roles of Stalin, Putin, and Orbán have been selected to be discussed in this study. These were chosen based on primary and secondary research, but fact remains that the three leaders have more roles and that other scholars could have chosen other images to highlight. Second, there is a natural limitation of sources regarding Putin's and Orbán's PC's. Whereas nowadays many of Stalin-related sources are relatively open, Putin's system, and to a degree Orbán's as well, is relatively closed off and thus there remains much unknown about the domestic workings of his PC. Third, and regarding future research, it would be interesting to study how the current PC's are received by the nation's public. However, this is, of course, difficult to measure, again because of the restricted access but also because it requires large-scale sociological research. Fourth and last, there are more current democratic leaders with authoritarian tendencies who await comparative research, so I hope that the personality cults of those rulers will be studied soon, as they may be new dictators in the making.

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Appendix



Figure 1, "Stalin takes care of each of us from the Kremlin", Viktor Govorkov, 1940, *Iskusstvo* (Moscow, Leningrad), 62 x 92 cm, edn 100,000' Source: Russian State Library', in: Anita Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions and fabrications* (Acton 2016) 268.

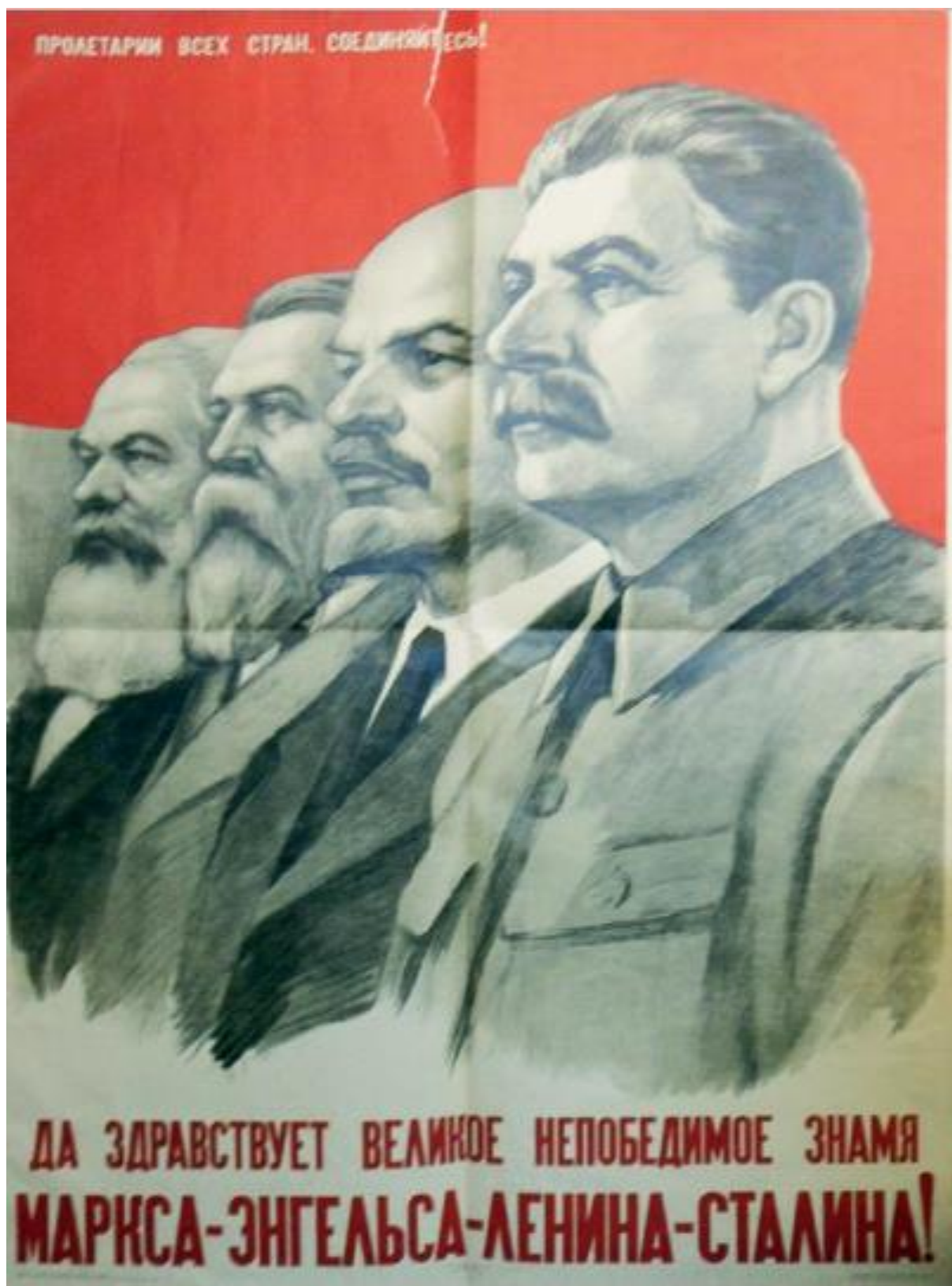


Figure 2, “Long live the great invincible banner of Marx–Engels–Lenin–Stalin!”, Nikolai Denisov & Nina Vatolina, 1941, *Iskusstvo* (Moscow, Leningrad), edn 100,000 Source: Russian State Library’, in: Anita Pisch, *The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929-1953: archetypes, inventions and fabrications* (Acton 2016) 186.