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# ***Putin and Obama: warring political identities?***

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## 1. ABSTRACT

Understandably, media, political observers and academics primarily focus on the differences between the two most powerful political personalities in the world – Obama and Putin – when looking to describe the continuing conflict between East and West. However, although these disparities confirm the generalised stereotypes that fit in easily into the overall dualistic narrative that portrays the US president as the ‘good guy’ and the Russian president as ‘the despot’, does this picture offer a fair impression of these two leaders? In an attempt to address that question we look not only to confirm the apparently already understood differences but go in search of unconsidered similarities that might exist within these two political identities.

Therefore, within this thesis we start our investigation by considering Putin’s and Obama’s childhood, background, aspirations, careers and views, but not within the context of a binary and unchallenging geo political norm but within the framework of their own nation-state environment. Since, as this research looks to acknowledge the understanding of any evidence can only be truly valued when you recognize the perspective that is being used to offer meaning and hopefully some transparency. In other words, we are going to take key parts of the lives of these two ‘political monsters’ and tease out within their own domestic space, their individual aims and objectives and then compare and contrast their newly deconstructed stories.

As the content is potentially complex our method will be relatively straightforward; we will utilise biographies, books, articles, papers and interviews to try piece together a picture that is less about confirming the ‘acceptable and accepted’ and more about addressing this entitled question: ‘Are Putin and Obama warring political identities?’.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

This thesis intends to demonstrate some of the existing similarities between presidents Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin. It is well known throughout the world that there are a number of disparities between these two presidents and these differences are being more portrayed via media and other sources than is the case for the similarities between them. It may be important and interesting to look into some of these similarities, concerning both domestic matters and foreign policies, in order to demonstrate that they are not simply warring political identities.

The similarities between these two personas have a rather socio-political nature and are often disguised for people, who do not even know that there are in fact some resemblances, or who do not think about the existence, while their differences are a rhetorical narrative and obvious for anyone to see. I will take a closer look into their social and family lives, as well as into their political considerations. I will consider the differences as a given, yet, what is not a given, is their similarities. The intention is to tease out these similarities and to display another side of Putin and Obama, a side that people not often recognize.

When we take a look into both men's pasts and how they grew up to become the personalities they are today, we can see that already in their younger years there are some resembling factors between them. They both felt the urge to adapt to their societies, their environments. Putin did so by taking up fighting sports as to defend himself from the bigger children, and Obama was reluctant to use his real name because he wanted to fit in within the Anglo-Saxon society. These features can be linked up until present day, we can find these characteristics in their political personas. For instance, Putin's somewhat aggressive stance when it comes to defending his country and Obama's need to address and to appeal to a broad American audience, both white and black, young and old, etc. . They also both decided to go to law school and ended up becoming the president of their nation.

A first similarity I portray is that they are both presidents of large nations, world powers even. Their task is an immense one; they both lead great nations and while doing so, they have to bear in mind not only the interests of their own people, but also those of the rest of the world. This causes a number of differences, discussions and tensions between them, seeing they do not think and act the same way. The differences in their acts could be attributed to their different cultures, educational background, knowledge and character. When one thinks of

Putin as a self-declared Russian, who looks after the interest of the Russian people and is in a way a committed nationalist, one may also want to think that of Obama. Many people tend not to see Obama in this perspective as in this case, it is more disguised. Obama has an additional role to play in the world because the United States is pre-eminent in the world and Obama speaks for the free world, for the West. Assumedly, he is to say things that he may not say himself. Putin, on the other hand, knows no such limitations as he only speaks for Russia. This is one of the factors that hide the existing similarities between the two presidents.

This thesis will look into two similarities; one regarding a domestic matter for both presidents and one regarding an overseas matter. The first similarity in this thesis between Obama and Putin concerns the task to live up to the people's unrealistic and often impossible expectations of their coming to office. In Russia, Putin experienced the pressure to construct a Western style democracy when he was elected a second term as president in 2004, and when Obama won the American presidential elections in 2008, he was expected to make an end to racism. The second similarity will concern the issue of Syria, as both presidents are looking to find a peaceful solution in order to end the warfare that has existed there for some years already. They have not always agreed with one another when it came to tackling this issue, however, Putin and Obama came together politically in Syria, and they met each other in public for the first time in quite some time.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology that I have used is driven by other narratives from other places. These are primary and secondary sources that have been researched and confirmed. This approach is an accepted academic stance when writing a discursive paper.

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### 3. VLADIMIR PUTIN

According to Stanislav Belkovski (2014) there exist two stories about Putin's birth. The first story tells that Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born in Saint-Petersburg on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November 1952, when the city was still called Leningrad. In this story, Vladimir is said to be the son of labourer Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin and his wife Maria Nikolajevna Sjelomova. According to the second story, however, Putin was born in Perm, in the village Terechine, which now no longer exists. This version of Putin's birth states that he is born in 1950 in the family of Platon Privalov and Vera Nikolajevna Putina. Vera left Platon and moved to Georgia where she remarried. However, her new husband did not want to recognize her son Vladimir as his own and as a result, Vera sent Vladimir to Leningrad and had him adopted by her childless relative Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin. One could assume that Putin's deep interest in orphans and adoption might be due to the fact that he was adopted himself (Belkovski, 2014, p37). Furthermore, Belkovski (2014) finds that Putin's behaviour and career can be explained by the secret of Putin's childhood.

According to Elbert Toonen (2005) Putin spent his childhood years living in a communal residence sharing a kitchen with four other families, yet, Masha Gessen (2012) finds that there were three families who lived in the communal residence and that Putin practically grew up without a father or any love or care of his parents. He is said to have been a lonely child and also quite aggressive- his father was also very strict. Putin's father, Vladimir, worked as a skilled labourer in a factory and his mother, Maria, worked night shifts as a guard and cleaning lady. If one takes into account how poor people were in the post-war Soviet Union, it was as if the Putin family was rich (Gessen, 2012). Putin and his family housed the largest room in the communal residence, which was almost a royal accommodation at that time (Gessen, 2012).

As mentioned above, Putin's father was rather strict. To him and to Russian society in general in the 1960s, discipline was more important than education. Therefore, the young Vladimir Putin only went to school for the first time when he was eight years old. Gessen (2012) offers that education was not of great importance to Putin himself, either. Instead, he found it more important to profile himself as a scoundrel. As he was rather little in comparison to other children, he learned to box as a way of defending himself. Yet, when he had his nose broken, he decided to take on sambo, a Russian method of self-defence which combines wrestling and



judo (Toonen, 2005). Putin soon learned judo and his trainer taught him the values of self-discipline and to have respect for the opponent. To this day, it is said that Putin compares politics with judo, in terms of respecting his opponents (Gessen, 2012). His school performances improved because of his self-discipline. He was able to enrol in a better school and held weekly political speeches in his class as he became the ‘political informant’ of his class (Toonen, 2005). He seemed to have been a perfectionist and cared deeply about loyalty, which he still does today.

Some years later, Putin aspired to become a spy. Therefore, he reached out to the Committee for State Security (KGB) when he was around the age of sixteen, before he even finished secondary school (Gessen, 2012). The KGB told Putin he was to study at a university first, and advised him to study law. When he graduated he received the rank of reserve lieutenant (Toonen, 2005).

Quite a number of books and articles are written on Putin and his past with the KGB, all of which offering somewhat different perspectives. This might be due to the lack of records from the time of the KGB, or even the time of the Soviet Union perhaps. Thus, it might well be the case that authors are merely speculating about Putin’s past, based on what other people say or write about it – some people even argue that Putin never was a member of the KGB – . All of this makes it difficult to form a realistic image of Putin. Nevertheless, Putin told his biographers that during the entire period he was at the university, he was waiting for someone from the KGB to contact him. He thought that they had forgotten about him and four years passed when a man said that he wanted to meet with Putin. The man gave no details, which made Putin realise it was someone from the KGB. Putin occasionally met with the KGB agent and in the second half of the 1970s, he had finally made the cut. At first, Putin kept it a secret that he worked for the KGB but after some time it was no longer a secret, and he told people that he worked there (Gessen, 2012). However, Toonen, (2005) says that Putin never really told anyone about his job with the KGB, moreover, he offers that former KGB agents who wrote books or gave interviews about the KGB did not know anyone by the name of Putin. For this reason, differing perspectives from authors, speculations, a lack of evidence, it seems easy to tell stories about Putin’s activities in his past to the media without having any evidence about it.

After he graduated from university, Putin spent six months doing administrative work at the KGB offices in Leningrad, after which he received an officer training of six months,

graduated and was appointed to the counterintelligence unit in Leningrad. This job was quite meaningless, as it was more or less a time of peace and there were not a lot of people to spy on in Leningrad. Putin waited for four and a half years for his breakthrough, which arrived in 1984, when he was sent to Moscow where he received a training in espionage. Putin was extremely dedicated to his training, after which he was sent to Dresden in the east of Germany (he had hoped to be sent to the west of Germany, or to Berlin) (Gessen, 2012). After one year, his wife Lyudmila Shkrebnova followed him with their daughter and after another year, their second daughter was born. They lived a simple, modest life and soon he acquired a taste for beer which led him to gain 10 kilos (Toonen, 2005).

His job in Dresden was once more a job with no prospective, and Putin was very disappointed. His task, recruiting undercover agents – once the job he dreamed about – seemed pointless (Gessen, 2012). Toonen (2005) wrote that, according to Putin, tracking down dissidents was not the KGB's responsibility, which is being contradicted in other sources, such as Gessen (2012) and Belkovski (2014). One of Putin's tasks was to accompany Russian tourists and sportsmen abroad. Toonen (2005) also offers that Putin spied on church services and processions where he was attacked on two occasions. Putin himself said that for his job in Dresden, he sent detailed reports on the political situation in the west of Germany, recruiting spies etc. (Toonen, 2005).

Shortly after Putin and his family left for Dresden, profound changes took place in the Soviet Union: Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985. Two years later he freed all the Soviet dissidents and gave more authorisation to the countries in the Eastern bloc, which led to the discontent of the KGB. In the Soviet Union as well as in East Germany, people went out on the streets to protest against what seemed inevitable: the fall of the Berlin Wall. Everything in which Putin believed was now insecure and he felt offended by this. He told his biographers that he felt abandoned by his country, the country he had worked so hard for. He said that Moscow had remained silent, while he was not able to protect himself, while he was scared (Gessen, 2012).

Eventually, Putin returned from Dresden to Leningrad in 1990 where his office was a small room in the University of Leningrad. His career almost ended at the age of 37, when he held the rank of major. According to Belkovski (2014, p. 58), "this would have been the perfect moment for Putin to shoot himself in the head, if he would have had a little more

imagination". But then he was introduced into Anatoly Sobchak's office, who was elected in May 1990 as the democratic president of the Leningrad City Soviet (Sakwa, 2004).

Putin found in Sobchak a father figure, and Sobchak saw a son in Putin, who he hired to become his assistant. In four years' time, Putin climbed his way up to become Sobchak's right hand. This may seem strange, regarding Putin's past with the KGB, as Sobchak was a democrat who rejected all things coming from the KGB (Belkovski, 2014). Even the democratic society of Leningrad was surprised when Sobchak chose Putin to become his assistant, knowing that Putin was an officer within the KGB. On 12 June 1991, on the same day Yeltsin was elected as the first Russian president, Sobchak was elected as mayor of Leningrad (these were also the first mayoral elections in Russia). One month later, on 20 August, Putin resigned from the KGB (Sakwa, 2004). Putin became Sobchak's deputy mayor and always remained loyal towards his boss, even when he was forced to leave due to corruption charges. In fact, when Sobchak was forced to leave, Putin also resigned from office, not willing to work for someone else (Sakwa, 2004). When Sobchak deceased in 2000, Putin was clearly and genuinely touched by the loss of his mentor and father figure.

After all this, Putin dealt with a number of other unfortunate events, such as his wife's car accident from which she would never fully recover and his dacha burning down. Despite these hardships, Putin managed to get back on his feet and moved to Moscow (Belkovski, 2014). For the third time, Putin started his life over again. After losing Sobchak, Putin was searching for a new father figure, which he eventually found in president Boris Yeltsin (Belkovski, 2014). Yeltsin, having two daughters but no son, and thinking himself a Russian tsar, evidently looked for a son to be his successor.

Yeltsin's family was attracted to Putin's way of thinking, and to the fact that nothing in Putin resembled the Soviet Union (Belkovski, 2014). However, they were well aware of Putin's bond with Sobchak, who had fallen victim to Yeltsin's regime some years before. Nevertheless, with Putin leading the country, Yeltsin's family was hoping to safeguard Yeltsin's interests and future and alongside with his, those of his family, as they knew that Putin would not prosecute him. In 1998, Putin became head of the FSB (Federal Security Service) and secretary of the Security council, which gave him an office in the Kremlin. In 1999 Putin was appointed prime minister by Yeltsin, at first Putin was reluctant as he was not fond of election campaigns, saying that he did not know how to run them, but then he agreed to it for the good of the country, preventing it to collapse (Sakwa, 2004).

When Yeltsin surprisingly resigned on New Year's Eve, Putin unintentionally became the new acting president, pending the presidential elections in March 2000 (Sakwa, 2004).

#### 4. BARACK OBAMA

Barack Hussein Obama was born on August 4, 1961 in Honolulu, Hawaii. His father, Barack senior was an African man whose origins lie in Kenya. Obama's mother, Ann Dunham, was an American woman with roots in Kansas. The couple met in Hawaii, where they were both studying Russian. They got married in 1960, a year after they met and at a time when a mixed marriage was tolerated in (the young state of) Hawaii. (Uylenbroek, 2007). Ann was only in her first year at the university, while Obama was twenty six years old when they met. He also had a wife and two children in Kenya, something which he did not share with his new environment (Maraniss, 2012).

Obama's full name is Barack Hussein Obama II. It is not a habit in Kenya to name a son after his father, and certainly not to put Roman numerals behind the name. No one really used that full name, and Obama was called 'Barry'. Barack means 'the blessed one' in African, but Barry did not use this name for a very long time as he did not want to explain it, he wanted to adapt to the Anglo-Saxon society (Maraniss, 2012). In the first two years of Obama's life, he nor his mother played an important role in the father's life, many people did not even know that Obama and Ann were married, let alone that he had a child (Maraniss, 2012). They were rarely seen together. A month after Obama was born, Ann moved back to Seattle with her child. There are some speculations about her reasons to leave Hawaii: either Obama senior was still married to his first wife, which was legal in Kenya, but not in the US, or he had abused her, however, there is no direct evidence about this (Maraniss, 2012).

Ann started to study again, at the University of Washington and she did well. Her husband, Barack received the opportunity to study at the New School where he would get a scholarship, enabling him to take his wife and child with him. He refused. This broke their family, if it was not already broken (Maraniss, 2012). He went to Harvard instead, after which he intended to go back to Kenya. Ann returned to Hawaii when Barack was two years old, they lived with her parents and she started her second year at the University of Hawaii. Ann eventually applied for divorce in January 1964 and Barack signed the papers without any hesitation. He travelled back to Kenya that same year (Maraniss, 2012).

The reason Ann wanted to divorce was practical: she started a relationship with another man, an Indonesian, Lolo Soetoro. He gave tennis lessons to Ann, which was the beginning of their romance (Maraniss, 2012). Ann married Lolo in 1965, when Barry was three and a half years

old. Due to problems with his visa, however, Lolo had to return to Indonesia in 1966. Again, Ann was separated from her husband. Yet, in October 1967, sixteen months later, she followed him.

In January 1968, Barry went to a Catholic primary school, he was the only one in his class who did not speak Indonesian. He learned fast however, and he was seen as a hard worker and not as shy as the Indonesian pupils. He was not afraid to make mistakes, he just wanted to participate. He was a leader, yet also a team player. One of his teachers at that time, Bu Fer, recalled a story that Barry had written, and he wrote that he wanted to become president (Maraniss, 2012).

The time Barry spent playing in the streets of Indonesia, has taught him to adapt and it also raised his cultural awareness. Everything differed from what he knew and he wanted to adapt so that he could be the same as his friends, however, he always remained different and alone in a way, alone in embracing his new world, his new life (Maraniss, 2012). Barry wrote his adventures in letters to his grandparents. Barry grew up fast in Indonesia and he began to realize that there were different races, which made him think about his own ethnicity, whether there was something wrong with him, looking differently than his friends (Maraniss, 2012).

Meanwhile, while Barry was struggling to find his identity, something with which Putin was also familiar with in his childhood, Barry's father had remarried with an American woman, Ruth Baker, who followed him back to Nairobi in Kenya. She gave him two children (Maraniss, 2012). Along the way turned into an alcoholic, he was often driving drunk in his car, causing several car accidents. After a series of incidents he lost another job and Ruth divorced him. Despite all his distress, however, there was one person who continued writing letters, telling him all the important events that occurred in his life. Barry Obama.

At the age of ten, Barry moved back to Honolulu, where he was accepted to one of the most prestigious private schools, despite the lack of money (Maraniss, 2012). His mother tried to teach him a great deal of the African-American history, something she also did when they lived in Indonesia. After two months Barry's father came to visit him for a month. He was nothing like the boy had imagined his father to be. He had thought of him as an African prince, but he was very skinny and his clothes did not resemble those of the people in Hawaii (Maraniss, 2012). He was also very bossy, commanding his son, something Putin also knew, a strict father. Maraniss offers that Barry liked the imagined version of his father better than the real one. Barack Obama had hoped to take Ann and Barry with him, to Kenya. Ann refused

and Barack went back alone, without his son. His mother travelled back and forth between Hawaii and Indonesia for a period of eight years, leaving Barry with her parents (Maraniss, 2012).

To abandon and to be abandoned, it is a pattern in Obama's life that made him the man he is today. It made him search for a home, it taught him to adapt. Throughout his childhood, he felt a loneliness, he felt like an outsider. It was not the colour of his skin that defined his personality, it was the story of his family (Maraniss, 2012). The same can be said about Putin, his childhood years also made him the man he is today. He was also considered an outsider because he often resorted to violence in order to stand his ground against the bigger boys.

During his puberty, Barry focused on playing sports. First tennis, then basketball, where, according to Maraniss (2012, p. 353), "he found a family, a way to express himself, a link between his past and his future". At the age of fifteen, it was his dream to become a professional basketball player. His friends described him as a calm personality, he never panicked or never felt nervous, whether he was playing basketball or finishing homework (Maraniss, 2012). He was very intelligent and very good in debating, while he was less loquacious in class. Maybe this was a quality he inherited from his father, who had a charming voice, a love for debates and who always believed he was right.

Barry's time in secondary school was the time he became more aware of the injustices in the world regarding race. He felt alone and felt insecure about his identity. He even wrote a piece about these feelings in Pundora Bulletin (a magazine for former students), twenty years after he had finished secondary school. It said that, coming from a broken family, having little means, he nursed a grievance more than his situation justified, and he could not always ventilate these feelings well (Maraniss, 2012). His peers, however, said that they never noticed such feelings, that Barry would not show this to them, as he was always walking around with a smile.

On June 2 1979, Barry graduated from secondary school. His family was reunited that day, his mother came back from Jakarta where she had spent three years without coming back. Barry, his mother, his sister Maya and his grandparents from his mother's side all posed together to have their picture taken, as a family.

After this, Ann decided to leave Hawaii again, a choice Barry could not forgive her at that time. Her absence made him feel even more alone (Maraniss, 2012).

After secondary school, Barry Obama went to California to study at Occidental College in Los Angeles. He was not the only student who came from Honolulu. He would study there for two years and the place was somewhat different from Hawaii, especially in regards to race. He met with more African American people of his own age than he did in secondary school, which helped him to accept his cultural identity a little more (Maraniss, 2012). This may seem strange, as only 4.4 per cent of the students were black (Maraniss, 2012). Basketball remained an important aspect as well for Barry, during the two years he spent at Occident College. After these two years, Barry was ready to leave Los Angeles, he wanted to travel deeper into America and get more acquainted with the country's 'black world' (Maraniss, 2012). Obama was accepted at Columbia in New York in 1981.

A couple of months after he turned twenty one years old, Barry received a phone call from his aunt Jane who lived in Nairobi. She broke him the news that his father had died in a car accident. His father, who he never really knew and was more like a myth to Barry, was now gone.

Obama lived in a small apartment in New York for a couple of months, with a friend whom he had met at Occidental, Phil Boerner (Maraniss, 2012). On his first night in New York however, Obama had to sleep outside, on the street, as he did not have the key to the apartment and his roommate only arrived a week later. They could not live on the campus as there was a shortage of rooms at that time. There was no hot water in the apartment, the heating barely functioned, even the doorbell was broken. After some time, Obama moved to another apartment, where there was no more comfort than in his previous one. He lived there with another friend, Sohale Siddiqi (Maraniss, 2012).

Obama finished his two years at Columbia and graduated in Political Science, yet, he never went to the graduation ceremony, thus ending University as he had started it, alone, like an outsider, a feeling that Putin was also familiar with (Maraniss, 2012). He started applying for a job as a social worker, and began to travel; first back to Los Angeles, then to Indonesia and Hawaii, he travelled for three months (Maraniss, 2012). When he returned to New York, he was unemployed and homeless, he stayed with friends here and there and he took on temporary jobs whenever he had the chance. Eventually, he got a job at Business International in 1983 as editor. He also worked in the social sector for three years, but in 1987 he decided it was time for a change. He wanted to study law and was accepted at Harvard, in Boston (Uylenbroek, 2007). Before he started there, however, he travelled to Kenya, to visit his



father's country. In Kenya, he heard the story of his father's life, the life of a young man with hopes for a good future.

In his second year at Harvard, during his internship at a law office in Chicago, he met Michelle Robinson, who was appointed his mentor. They got married two years later. Obama graduated from Harvard in 1991, he rejected several job offers from top law offices and decided to teach at the University of Chicago (Uylenbroek, 2007).

Obama started his first political campaign at the age of 35, to obtain a seat in the Illinois Senate with the elections in 1996. Obama wrote in his book *Dreams from my father* (2004) that his friends persuaded him to stand for a seat. He had just finished four years of law school and recently got married. He began his campaign by speaking to anyone who would listen, and it turned out that a great deal of people were willing to listen to what he had to say. He won his seat and arrived in Springfield, Illinois in 1997, ready for his first term in the Senate (Uylenbroek, 2007).

## 5. PUTIN 2004

The Russian political system is a so-called a 'super presidency', meaning that the president, as executive, holds practically all the power. The Duma, the Russian parliament, does not have a lot of power in comparison to the president. In such system, possible failures will be blamed on the president (Hale et al., 2004). The president's power also outshines the power of other executives, for instance the prime minister (Breslauer et al. in Hale et al. 2004). Yeltsin brought this 'super presidency' into life and one could think of it like a monarch who rules the country and is only subject to the elections (Rutland, 2000).

These Russian elections often bring about a great wave of criticism. A report by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) stated that the elections might be free, but that they are not fair and being manipulated (Sakwa, 2005). This report also offered that the media, which is controlled by the state, failed to provide a balanced coverage of the campaign and that it was biased towards pro-presidential parties, especially United Russia. Therefore, the OSCE found that the elections were unfair towards other parties and candidates (Sakwa, 2005).

Russian elections follow two stages; the parliamentary elections which are then followed by the presidential elections (Sakwa, 2005). With the elections of 2003-2004, the Kremlin supposedly sought to secure Putin's position as president, as well as his regime. Sakwa (2005) notes that in addition to the charges of manipulation, Russian elections tend to sustain unexpected outcomes. One of these unexpected outcomes can be shown in the fact that Putin's party, 'United Russia' was created by the Kremlin in 1999, not to represent the president in parliament, but as a distraction for the anti-Kremlin party 'Fatherland-All Russia'. According to Hale (2004), United Russia was brought to life as a presidential election tactic, not as a parliamentary party. It was a total surprise for the Kremlin to see what unintended success United Russia harvested, yet, after its creators saw that it had defeated the rival candidates, they made the party represent presidential interest throughout the country (Hale, 2004). Putin stated that he was not a member of this party, however, he did say he was supported by it. As mentioned earlier, he was never really fond of campaigning, for instance, he abominates endless promises, which he had already made clear during the elections of 2000, and United Russia was also reluctant to participate in television debates (Sakwa, 2005). The party, however, was criticised a great deal by people stating that it had no clear

independent programme and that it supported the president and his policies (Sakwa, 2005). Sakwa (2005) disagrees with the former, saying that the party does have some propositions for its programme. The party notes that it is a realistic one, meaning it is not a party of the left, nor of the right, and that it is the basis of support for the president (Sakwa, 2005). Its most important values are order and legality, and its goal is to resolve real problems for real people (Sakwa, 2005). Their programme represents Putin's intentions regarding his second term in the office, i.e. doing work for the good of the entire country.

The OSCE eventually concluded that the process of democratisation in Russia was in a state of regression. The state's control on the media and bias towards pro-presidential parties – United Russia in particular – were one of the main reasons the elections were said to be 'free but not fair' (Sakwa, 2005). This put Putin under quite some pressure, as people who were in favour of him, expected him to pave the way for a Western style democracy. This pressure is somewhat similar with the pressure president Obama had to deal with when he was running for president for the first time. Namely, the American voters expected him to halt racism. Regarding the state media in Russia – as said before – they are believed not to provide a balanced review of the election campaign, and it is also said that journalists were under pressure of the authorities which led to a limitation of information, due to which voters were not able to make a well-informed decision. This biased control of the state media is also considered the basic flaw of the elections throughout (Sakwa, 2005).

Aleksandr Alekseev, Russia's representative to the OSCE, sharply criticised these accusations, stating that Western politicians behaved biased and selective in their ways of dealing with politics (Sakwa, 2005). Evidently, Putin was not pleased with the West criticizing Russia's electoral practices and their disbelief in their democracy, so in his speech during the election night he ensured the people with the following words:

I promise you that all the democratic achievements of our people will certainly be safeguarded and guaranteed. At the same time, we will not be resting on what we have achieved. We will bolster the multi-party system. We will bolster civil society, and do everything to ensure media freedom. In addition, we will create conditions in which neither bureaucrats hiding behind the interests of the state nor speechifiers hiding behind democratic phraseology will be able to line their pockets (Putin in Sakwa, 2005, p. 391).

According to Putin, ‘the democracy of the urban middle class is the key political mechanism which must replace the former communist machine and the post-communist bureaucracy as political player’ (Sakwa, 2005, p. 390).

Naturally, there was also opposition to Putin, something with which Obama also had to deal with during the American elections in 2008. The liberal politician Boris Nemtsov, for instance, called the Russian government’s system Putinism:

“A one-party system, censorship, a puppet parliament, a tame judiciary, strong centralisation of power and finances, and an exaggerated role for the secret services and the bureaucracy” (Sakwa, 2005, pp. 386-387).

Nemtsov also claimed that Putin’s last two years during his first term as president were a period of stagnation of democracy and a form of neo-authoritarian regime. (Sakwa, 2005). The opposition wanted to ensure that the next president would not be appointed by Putin, they wanted a neutral person, “ a man of the street” (Sakwa, 2005, p. 386). The Russian people however, disagreed with this, that is of course, if the election outcomes were not being tampered with.

The elections in 2003-2004 were a first test for Putin’s popularity since his victory in 2000, and it seemed that he remained a popular leader. People believed that Putin’s popularity was attributed to the Kremlin, and that the intention at the Kremlin was to endure the president’s popularity. As was the case in 2000, Putin again chose not to campaign and his refusal to debate with his opponents led to them becoming marginalised, which eventually ended with their irrelevant existence. However, the ratings showed a real popular appreciation of Putin and his policies, people considered him the contrary of Yeltsin, who was regarded an old and unstable man (Sakwa, 2005). In contrast to Yeltsin’s presidency, Putin achieved economic growth and better living standards, which made the people truly believe in his capacities but at the same time put a lot of pressure on the incumbent president, as he was trusted with Russia’s future. However, during his first term, Putin also built further on what Yeltsin had tried to accomplish: a modern Russia. Putin continued to follow the path of his predecessor on important policies, such as establishing good ties internationally, creating a healthy, growing economy and reforming the market.

Even though Putin built further on some of Yeltsin’s accomplishments, he was quite different from Yeltsin regarding his policies and ambitions, and this became even more clear when

Putin began to distance himself further from him and Yeltsin's entourage which is often referred to as 'the family'. For the economy's sake, Putin stood up against the oligarchs, some of whom were even arrested. These so-called oligarchs became very wealthy under Yeltsin, who was not fond of laws and rules. Instead, he preferred personal deals and personal networks, which is in sharp contrast with Putin's "dictatorship of law" (Rutland, 2000, p. 316), meaning having a clear set of rules and abide by them. This might seem strange as Putin himself became president via personal relations with Yeltsin.

Putin's programme for his second term would focus on further state and economic reform (Sakwa, 2005). His priority was to modernize Russia's economy and joining the WTO (World Trade Organization), whereby the country would be integrating into the world economy (Sakwa, 2005).

One could say about Putin that he is a very Russian type, yet, at the same time very European minded, for instance wanting a European model of democracy, culture and politics (Sakwa, 2005). In his book, Sakwa (2004) wrote that Putin stated in a keynote speech he delivered in 2001 to the foreign ministry, that he aimed to integrate Russia into the world economy, and also that he, regarding overseas matters, aimed for 'Europeanisation'. Nowadays, however, the ties with Europe have changed a great deal, looking at the current situation of Crimea for instance.

Regarding the elections, Colton and Hale (2009) have found that a number of widespread beliefs were confirmed, being that Putin had won votes because of his personal appeal, and also because of the growing economy during the first years of the new millennium. In their article, they offer that some political observers have ascribed Putin's victory to a number of factors, for instance, Putin became more popular because of his resolute and decisive actions in the Chechen war in 1999. The second war in Chechnya may be one of the reasons for Putin's mounting support as the media showed horrific images of the war, alongside with heroic Russian soldiers. Putin's determination was immense and the people appreciated this greatly. However, some people argued that these horrific events were intentionally implemented by the secret service, serving the purpose of boosting Putin's popularity during the elections (Rutland, 2000). His popularity might be linked to his style of leading the people, or bring about a nationalist sentiment (Colton & Hale, 2009).

There are, however, also other opinions on this matter of popularity: the belief that the elections are being manipulated, the fact that Yeltsin resigned on New Year's Eve, which

made Putin acting president and having the elections earlier whereby other candidates did not have the time to prepare for their campaigns (Colton & Hale, 2009). According to a handful of analysts (Marsh, 2002), fraud was also an important factor in the presidential elections, while some behaviour studies (Colton & McFaul, 2003) showed once more that Putin's leadership style and personal appeal were the reasons for his popularity. His pro-Western orientation for overseas matters might also have been a factor for his popularity, as the people aspire to create a democracy similar to that of Western countries. However, there is another factor: increasing oil prices and alongside with it the increased income for the incumbents and for the economy in general that might have made the manipulation of the elections possible, leading to Putin's victory in 2004 (Colton & Hale, 2009).

Hale et al. (2004, p.285) argue in their article that the Russian elections of 2004 would be "the most constrained and least competitive since the Soviet period". They also mentioned that this election was more predictable than the one held in 1999. During Putin's first term, the country saw the economy grow, the number of people living in poverty declined, wages increased a little, so, voting for Putin in 2004 can be considered a reward for his achievements in the four years of his first presidency.

They also suggest that one of the reasons for Putin's long time popularity may be ascribed to the work of the mass media, which are under control of the Russian government. Another explanation to his popularity may be his intimidation effect (Hale et. al., 2004). This paper has already shown that Russia has received a great deal of criticism about its democracy, and Hale et al. (2004) have found in a survey that they conducted on Russian voters that also Russian people – two third of the United Russia voters – feel that their democracy is not developing in the right direction. Moreover, very few of these voters called the elections 'fair'. It seemed that people who voted for Putin looked at his past achievements, as well as looked at the future in a hopeful way. These voters thought of Putin as the most capable person to deal with problems and help move the country forward.

One can ask many questions about Putin, certainly about his political aspirations for his country, for instance, does he want to go back to Soviet times or not. Or, is he authoritarian or liberal. Either way, Putin originates from an ordinary background, and he understands 'ordinary' people, he speaks their language, however, at the same time, he is also called a bureaucrat (Rutland, 2000). Putin is a loyal person, he considers loyalty a very important principle, as well as stability.

Bearing all this in mind, it was no surprise for many Russian people that Putin had won the elections in 2004, yet his victory should not be underestimated. People voting for Putin did so as they see him as a symbol of national unity and aspirations for a better life (Sakwa, 2005). As he was chosen to become president by Yeltsin himself in 1999, Putin's first term was often considered illicit, but many people reconsidered this, as he was elected for a second term (Sakwa, 2005).

## 6. OBAMA 2008

When John Kerry was running for president in 2004, he invited Obama to give the key note speech at the Democratic National convention in the Boston Fleet Centre (Uylenbroek, 2007). At that time, Obama was relatively unknown in the US – as was the case for Putin before he became the president of Russia – and this was his moment to get the people acquainted with a candidate senator for the state of Illinois. His speech was called ‘the Audacity of Hope’, Obama’s hope of recapturing the American Dream. This title was used some years earlier by Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who delivered a sermon in the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago about hope in difficult times. It was a speech Obama would never forget. Obama spoke of the dividedness in his country, the black-and-white thinking, the cynicism, and of his hope for a country that fulfils its promises (Uylenbroek, 2007).

The night Obama addressed this convention was the impetus for his rising. Uylenbroek (2007, p. 7) mentions the word ‘Obamania’. Remarkably, during the first months of Obama’s hype, no one made an issue of his skin colour, he was seen as the first serious black candidate, a majority of people did not even see him as a black man – a part of America’s black population even accuses Obama of not being black, due to some of his statements – . Even before his inauguration in the Senate, party members of the Democratic Party began to fantasize about Obama running for president in 2008 (Uylenbroek, 2007). People even started to compare Obama with John F. Kennedy, while Obama once said that Robert Kennedy was one of his political idols.

Uylenbroek (2007) offers that Obama could be a candidate for everyone: for young people he is a man who understands contemporary times, while the elderly can see his optimism and share the American Dream that John F. Kennedy once expressed, white Americans consider Obama to be whiter than they are and finally, black Americans are able to tell their children that anything is possible in the US, regardless of race, religion, anything. The Republicans also recognized these things in Obama, they saw a man of hope and opportunity, a man with charisma, rhetoric appeal, a real man. It seemed that a great deal of people who had heard Obama’s speech at the convention thought they were listening to the future president (Uylenbroek, 2007).

Obama tends to work across party boundaries as he does not like the political wars between the Republicans and the Democrats. He wants to seek a consensus and attract more potential



voters doing so (Uylenbroek, 2007). Working across party boundaries is somewhat like Putin, not being a member of a party as he claims.

In essence, Obama's approach of searching a consensus with both parties in Parliament, was to bond with them through late night poker games or gathering for a beer in a local café. It appeared that he made some good friends in the Senate, he had no enemies, and, if he did have any, it may have been out of envy (Uylenbroek, 2007). John Kerry let Obama deliver that keynote speech – his 'Audacity of Hope' – in 2004, as a favour. This speech is regarded by many as one of the greatest political speeches in the last forty years (Uylenbroek, 2007). The speech was addressed to the whole of America. Obama talked about the United States that could be, could exist, not of the fears and not about what the nation once was.

When Obama was running for president for the first time, people saw him as “ the politician who builds bridges between the Democrats and the Republicans” (Uylenbroek, 2007, p. 76). The man is a reconciler. Equally important in his message is his sense of hope that one day the United States could be the greatest country in the world again, which is something that a great number of Americans want and desire.

One can often read about Obama that he is black, however, not black enough, according to some people in America. Naturally, African-American voters voted for Obama, but their reasons are not clear, not even for themselves. Obama may not be a black politician, but merely a black man. He has often heard the reproaches of black organizations as well from white conservative journalists that he is just not black enough. Something with which he struggled a lot when he was growing up and exploring his identity (Uylenbroek, 2007). In 2005 Obama was installed in Congress, as the only African-American senator, and as the youngest senator. In 2003, when he applied for the candidacy, he was completely unknown in national politics and he had to compete against seven other Democrats. People thought he would not stand a chance, considering the black minority in the country. Yet, Obama was very popular with women, which he used to his advantage and, to the surprise of many, was elected as one of the youngest senators and fifth black senator in the US's history (Uylenbroek, 2007).

For Obama however, being black is not a qualification to win the presidential elections, in fact, he was not sure whether white voters were ready to elect a black president. He prefers to have an image of an ordinary American (Uylenbroek, 2007). He is also aware that most Americans are in favour of someone in whom they can recognize themselves, thus not in

some elitist person, although he has studied at Harvard, and also, he is willing to listen to anyone who has something to say, and gives the feeling that he understands everyone's argument. Within the first year after his arrival in Washington, America knew that Obama has what it takes, he transformed from being a 'nobody' in politics into the new hope for America, into a potential president (Uylenbroek, 2007).

Obama had been able to determine his own image towards the American public. His speeches, his bestselling books that he wrote and he was also able to count on the support from respected and famous Americans, such as Oprah Winfrey for instance. All these factors made him become the American Dream in person (Uylenbroek, 2007). However, because of all this, people presumably started to expect too much from him, as was the case for Putin during the Russian presidential elections in 2004. People raised their standards for their leader, and both presidents have had to deal with this, with these impossible expectations from their public.

For Putin, it was that the Russian public expected a democracy equal to that in the West, Putin had to secure this and make it work in a country that had not known something like democracy for a very long time in Russian history. For Obama, having dealt with racial barriers and having overcome them, people expected him to tackle and solve the war in Iraq, and in doing so, liberate the country from its dividedness over the matter. He was also to eliminate the dichotomy between rich and poor and to bring the left and the right together. All this may even be too much for Obama. Yet, it seemed that he was willing to meet these expectations, by promising even more (Uylenbroek, 2007).

Obama's campaign was rather vague, there were not any specific plans for his programme, which made it difficult for his opponents to attack him, while in the meantime, it does make him more vulnerable for criticism. People started to ask more and more questions about the young senator's specific plans (Uylenbroek, 2007). Yet, in order to make it more difficult for his opponents, he did not talk about details. For instance, about Iraq, he said that he wanted to leave Iraq, yet, has to have a plan first but already has a deadline: March 31, 2008.

Obama did not have much experience at that time in Washington, but he turned that into a strength by stating that some of the experienced men had made a mess in the past, so he thought that the time for a new generation had arrived. Another weakness that he turned into a strength was his vagueness about his programme.

Barack Obama announced his candidacy for the presidential elections on February 10, 2007. It took him nearly one year before people started to realise how serious his candidacy really was (Simba, 2009). His “Yes we can” speech called for unity, not dividedness, in any way. Obama’s supporters were people from different groups: youth, black people, Hispanics and people from the white middle class. He also received support from celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and he could also count on his many volunteers who helped him campaigning. Even Hillary Clinton, who ended her candidacy in June, endorsed Obama for president. However, Obama also endured a number of challenges to his presidency, for instance when his pastor, Rev. Wright uttered controversial statements, these were then seen as proof that Obama held un-American beliefs. Obama reacted to this by giving a speech that was widely embraced throughout the nation, saying that to cut the reverent out of his life would be the same as cutting his mother out of his life for being white (Walker, 2008) , yet, the pastor continued making these controversial statements which eventually forced the Obama family to leave Rev. Wright’s church. (Simba, 2009).

Another challenge was the accusation of being a secret Muslim, as when he lived in Indonesia with his mother and stepfather he went to a religious Muslim school, a statement that Maraniss (2012) offers to be untrue. Few schools were exclusively Muslim at the end of the 1960s. Also, his grandfather Hussein Onyango converted to Islam, although he did not obey all the commandments, and Obama never met him. Obama’s father was an atheist, not a Muslim, which some people would say. Lolo Soetoro then, was even less religious than Hussein Onyango despite the fact that he was born and raised as a Muslim (Maraniss, 2012). His victory not only marked his ability to stand his ground when these and other challenges faced him, his words and his vision for America attracted so many people, even those who at first did not believe in Obama.

Not only his way of speaking to the people was new, Obama and his team made use of technologies such as the internet, using social network sites such as Facebook and Myspace, and also messaging via cell phones. Obama’s campaigning dominated the media, as he created the ultimate online political machine (Talbott, 2008). With this technology they especially reached out to the youth, to younger voters. Obama also got support from artists, such as Hip Hop artist Will.i.am from the Black Eyed Peas (Simba, 2009), Obama and his family appeared on many magazine covers as well and his presidential campaign broke the records of fund raising, he even outspend the Republican party’s campaign for the first time in recent history (Simba, 2009).

Obama did not only become a national iconic personality, he also was very popular overseas. He travelled to a number of countries where he gave speeches regarding his foreign policy, and his wish for a united world without walls (Simba, 2009).

Simba (2009, p. 3) states that “an enormous stroke of political luck” also helped Obama, no matter how brilliant his campaign was. This political luck refers to the financial crisis and the candidates, Obama and McCain were to give their reactions on this matter. Apparently, the majority of people believed that Obama handled it the best and in a more ‘presidential’ way.

When Obama ran for president public discussions of race in America increased and there was also more participation for all people. Sinclair-Chapman and Price (2008) argue that Obama’s presidential campaign was rather plain, apart from the notion of race. It evolved around the notions of ‘hope’ and ‘change’.

Stent (2012) offers that when Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012, anti-Americanism had grown in Russia. Putin, however, declared that he is willing to work together with the United States, saying he sees in Obama “an honest person who really wants to change much for the better” (Putin in Stent, 2012, p. 125). Obama was much criticized by the Republicans, they said that his reset policy with Russia was a failure, seeing the anti-American actions in Russia while Democrats on the other hand, argued that Obama’s reset policy with Moscow was a major success regarding foreign policy.

With Obama, who has roots in Africa, an Arabic middle name and was brought up in Hawaii and Indonesia, there sure would be a ‘breath of fresh air’ in the White House, a different president, and the first black one (Walker, 2008). The word ‘black’ however, was not always used by his opponents, as it was obvious enough.

Understanding the new politics, which was made possible by using the internet’s social networking sites such as Facebook, was one of Obama’s revolutions. As mentioned above, he made use of the internet for his campaign for fundraising, which paved the way for another of his revolutions; the transformation of fundraising. He raised a significant sum of money through small donations that were made over the internet (Walker, 2008).

When Obama was nominated, he moved his policies somewhat to the centre, despite the enthusiasm he created on the left. According to Walker (2008, p. 1102), “he significantly shifted his line on Iraq, abortion, Israel, free trade, health reform, campaign finance, the

wiretap security bill, church-based social work and exposing his daughters to the media”. However, the nature of his precise policies remained rather vague.

In contrast to McCain, Obama needed to raise more money during September and October, which was not quite easy and he received little help. Yet, the war, the deteriorating economic situation and Bush becoming less popular, are factors that made Americans think about voting for a Democrat, who then, had to be the utmost favourite candidate (Walker, 2008).

## 7. SYRIA

In illustration of what we have just discussed, we now consider Syria.

In 2013, Putin gave a speech concerning the crisis in Syria in which he addressed the American people and America's leaders. He stated that:

The potential strike by the United States against Syria, despite strong opposition from many countries and major political and religious leaders, including the pope, will result in more innocent victims and escalation, potentially spreading the conflict far beyond Syria's borders. A strike would increase violence and unleash a new wave of terrorism (Putin in The New York Times, 2013, p. 1).

According to Putin, the battle in Syria is not a battle for democracy, as he offers there are few Syrians who defend democracy. He states that, in this country, where people with different religions live, an armed conflict is going on between the government and the opposition. The weapons are foreign, and are being given to the opposition so that they could fight the government (Putin, 2013). As for a solution, Putin argues that Russia would prefer a peaceful conversation, facilitating the Syrian people to make plans for their future, and he clearly says that Russians are not supporting Bashar al-Assad's government, but international law. Putin claims that any force used, would be a violation of that international law, that it would be an act of aggression.

Putin blames America, who was once an ally of Russia against the Nazi's, for always using 'brute force' instead of choosing a democratic way, and the black and white thinking of "us and them". He wants to invite president Obama for further debates in order to come to a solution together and in doing so, create a way for further cooperation on other critical matters (Putin, 2013). At the end of his speech, Putin noted that his relationship with Obama, both personal and political, is benefitting from its growing trust. However, he dislikes Obama's stating that America is exceptional, he finds it rather dangerous to think of a nation to be exceptional, as God created everyone as equal (Putin, 2013).

Fiona Hill (2013) offers that Putin will keep blocking an intervention as he wants to solve the crisis through a dialogue. Some people, including Putin, share the idea that, when the West will support Syrian rebels or bomb parts in Syria, the situation will only further deteriorate.

Hill (2013) argues that when the crisis in Syria will be solved, Putin will praise himself and take the credit. However, in the opposite case, he is likely to blame Washington. Putin wants to support the Syrian regime by fighting the terrorists, which is the opposite of what Obama and other leaders in the West want, they support the rebels and want Assad to step down. Fighting the rebels is not what Putin had in mind, he made it clear that he wanted to hold peace talks. In this understanding, Ghilès (2013) argues that already in the beginning of 2013, senior US and European leaders recognized that the only way to prevent a catastrophe, would be to come to an understanding with Moscow.

Both presidents are willing to cooperate, however, their opinions still differ when it comes to the Syrian president Assad. As mentioned before, Putin wants to fight ISIL together with the Syrian military, while Obama opposes this. In his speech during the UN General Assembly in 2015, he stated that he wants Assad to step down. Obama told Putin that he is to fight ISIL, and help those who are trying to do this (Bishara, 2016). However, cooperating with Assad may be necessary to end the civil war, it may even be the only possibility in short term (Vanoost, 2015). Observers do agree that the man will have to step down in the long term, even Putin does not rule this out. It seems that the points of view of both Russia and the US are not totally irreconcilable. Russia and the West will have to collaborate with Assad in order to defeat ISIL, leaving Assad no choice to agree with his resignation.

However, Russia and the United States are taking their time to decide whether or not to cooperate. A reason for this may lie in Russia's intention to escape the economic sanctions and to try to achieve an official recognition for annexing Crimea (Vanoost, 2015).

Putin chose to ignore Obama's opinion to support the rebels as he continued to help Assad. Bishara (2016) notes that Putin's acts in Syria were decisive, similar to his action in Chechnya at the turn of the millennium, while Obama has been indecisive and feeble. He was not able to find a consolidation with Putin, however, this now seems to be changing. The reason for this may be because Putin does not really seem to care about the international public, while Obama does, playing a major role in the world. Putin is considered a risk taker, a man of direct actions, while Obama is often regarded a more careful personality.

Syria is now where Putin and Obama came together, politically. Time and place are all of importance in situations like these. Obama cannot be re-elected, so maybe he is now willing to do something that he would not do in other circumstances. Putin does not really seem to

care about the opinion of the international public, while Obama does, as he plays a major role in the world.



## 8. CONCLUSION

Are Putin and Obama warring political identities? In writing this thesis, beginning with their childhood years leading up to their first careers and portraying their presidential campaigns, there exist paradoxically a number of similarities between the two presidents. This is aside from the often well portrayed differences. Some of these similarities are visible and present in both Putin's and Obama's childhood as well as when I study their political careers. We notice the double story of Putin's father. A double story that is also replicated in Obama's childhood. Obama's father was born in Kenya and moved to Hawaii, only to leave again, and leave the young Obama behind. Father and son never really got to know each other, so Obama created a fictional idea about the man. His father also had another family in Kenya while he was married to Obama's mother, another double story. For Putin, the question is who is his real father. As I mentioned earlier, there exist two stories about it, a version in which Vladimir Spiridonovich is Putin's father and another one which tells us that it is Platon Privalov. Was Putin adopted or not, remains the question. Because of this, the story of their fathers and those circumstances at the time, they felt like outsiders and they felt quite lonesome.

From the research into the earlier lives of these two presidents, I have also found that Putin and Obama were both relatively unknown before they became president. Both studied law and felt somewhat alone while they were growing up and searching for an identity. As stated above, both men were in search of a father figure as Obama did not really know his father as he left when Obama was little, and Putin, having a very strict father, eventually found one in Anatoly Sobchak, and later in Yeltsin. Both men do not really know who their fathers are, whether their fathers were real or not.

Subsequently, when looking more closely at the elections of 2004 for Putin and 2008 for Obama, I have concluded that both personalities have had to deal with the public's unrealistic expectations, and with the pressure of trying to live up to them, to deliver their promises. Moreover, similarly I found is that both president's popularity was contested by several parties during the presidential elections. I also mentioned that Putin is 'an ordinary man', which can be linked to Obama preferring to have an image of an 'ordinary American'. It is a common theme in American campaigning that candidates want to be seen as one of the people, as an ordinary person. Putin may have used this imaging, this linking himself to the voters as well in his campaign in order to gain popularity.

I also stated in this paper that Obama tends to work across party boundaries, which can be linked to Putin saying that he is not a member of United Russia, but that he is supported by it. This makes their political careers somewhat similar as Obama is a Democrat, yet, wants to work with the Republicans, and Putin not wanting to be linked to one party in particular. They both seek to do what is best for their nation.

Putin and Obama can be seen as colleagues in a political way, so it is perfectly normal that they do not always agree with one another on some matters. They do try to compromise, however, and work together in order to find solutions, but that is not always shown to the public. Behind the curtains of the political scene, they work together, but the media are likely to be more interested in highlighting their disagreements. However, when Putin and Obama met each other in 2015 to discuss the crisis in Syria, it was displayed in newspapers and on the internet. I stated earlier that Obama often is portrayed as the ‘good guy’ while Putin is seen as a despot, an impression that seems to be unfair, according to my conclusions after writing this thesis. Both men try to look after the needs of their public, be it by handling matters differently.

Despite their different characters and different approaches in tackling problems, they eventually can succeed in working out solutions together. Putin is more aggressive and resolute in dealing with difficult situations, while Obama tends to be more careful and sometimes indecisive. This indecisiveness may be a result of being the leader of the free world, which means that he has to answer to the world, whereas Putin has no such limitations as he only speaks for Russia.

Obama offered a “breath of fresh air” as he entered the White House. This compares with Putin, who also offers a different perspective from his predecessors at the Kremlin. He was the young and healthy successor of Boris Yeltsin, who was regarded as weak and unstable at the end of his presidency. It may well be that both men were seen as better alternatives than the previous president. If one takes a look at the president’s individual aims and objectives, you will notice that they are grounded in the interest of their public. Hence, both presidents are trying to find what is good and possible for their nation, albeit in a way that might be adversely for each other’s nation. A clear example can be found in the matter of Syria. Both presidents wish to end the crisis, but of course through a process that reflects their nation state. They may seem to be accusing one another of being part of the problem, but both need each other to find a solution. Hence, they are both under a tremendous amount of pressure

from their public and the international world which may have an influence on their decision making. The media, however, mostly display their opposite opinions and actions. Maybe for a reason?

Finally, when we dig deeper and conduct more research on Putin and Obama in the future, the revealed similarities will give us a different impression of these two impressive leaders.

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