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Vladimir Putin and the rise of the new Russian vulgate

Ook tegenwoordig speelt de retorica nog een belangrijke rol in de politiek. Michael Gorham toont in dit artikel aan hoe een omslag in het beleid van de Russische president Poetin gepaard ging met een nieuw vocabulaire.

[**Soak** 1. To make wet, damp. 2. To hold in water, saturating with moisture for the infusion of certain qualities.]¹

Before August 1999, the Russian word *mochit'*, if appearing in the public airways, would be as likely to refer to either of the two literal meanings proffered in the definitions above. Take the following usage from a 1997 article in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* on methods of preserving wild berries: 'Many aficionados of preserving for some reason believe that only huckleberries are soaked (*mochat*). In fact, strawberry may also be soaked (*zamochit'*).'² Late in the summer of 1999, however, this all changed. At a televised press conference in Astana, Kazakhstan, Boris Yeltsin's most recently appointed Prime Minister uttered a six-word phrase that would not only change the semantic balance of the word for the foreseeable future, but would also catapult its speaker, Vladimir Putin, into the national consciousness and pave the way for his eventual assumption of the Russian presidency a short four months later. In response to a question on a recent spate of terrorist attacks in Russia and continued insurgencies in the Northern Caucasus, Putin boldly declared, 'We will follow the terrorists everywhere. If we catch them in the toilet, please pardon the expression, then we'll bump them off in the shithouse once and for all. That's it. End of issue.'³

- 1 Мочить 1. Делать мокрым, влажным. 2. Держать в воде, пропитывая влагой для придания каких-либо качеств. *Novyi slovar' russkogo iazyka* (www.rubrikon.ru, retrieved 16 April 2006).
- 2 Aleksandr Zelenkov, 'Retsepty ot Komsomolki,' *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* 188 (13 October 1997).
- 3 In the original, 'Мы будем преследовать террористов везде. Значит, Вы же меня извините, в туалете поймает, мы и в сортире их замочим в конце концов. Все.'

The key phrase that filtered its way through the media, 'we'll bump them off in the shithouse,' drew immediate national attention not only because of the new tough line on terrorism, implying that Russia would now proactively seek out potential insurgents, rather than waiting for them to act yet again. Arguably as seismic was the language Putin chose to communicate this new hard-line policy, combining the vulgar, sub-standard reference to the outhouse or the 'loo' with the equally shocking *mochit'*, slang from the criminal underworld meaning 'to kill', 'waste', or 'bump off'. Some journalists and commentators took the PM to task for perverting the Russian national tongue in a manner more fitting for a common criminal than for the second most powerful politician in the country.⁴ But for the most part, the quote turned out to be enormously well received among the broader Russian electorate – those scheduled to elect representatives to the Russian Parliament in December of that same year, and then a successor to Yeltsin in the spring of 2000. One commentator described it as 'an absolutely perfect campaign slogan,' as it reflected the latent aggression in that electorate: 'The cowardly aggression of the voter has finally, at least for a moment, received open encouragement and justification from a politician.'⁵ According to the pollster, Yurii Levada, 'with that comment [Putin] enchanted (*obaial*) the people, showed his decisiveness, his approachability. And many people believed that he would really be able to achieve what nobody else thus far had been able to do.'⁶ Within months the phrase *mochit' v sortire* had earned a place in the common lexicon of public discourse. Other politicians, as one commentator put it, passed along the baton from hand to hand: 'They've declared war on me,' grumbles Boris Fedorov, 'they say that they will bump me off (*zamohat*), cover me with dirty....' 'It's all the same to me who you bump off (*kogo mochit'*) – the yellows, the greens, the reds or the blues,' joins in Aleksandr Nevzorov. Even Aleksei Podberezkin, forgetting about his own 'spiritual legacy,' pronounces: 'On what can we rely? On the tax

Вопрос закрыт окончательно'. Transcribed by the author from a video recording of the comment in *Putin: Stairway to power*, Films for the Humanities and Sciences (2003).

- 4 Cf. Aleksei Filippov, 'Bodalsia kanal s kanalom,' *Izvestiia* 184 (1 October 99), who notes ironically that 'rudeness and aggression were always dear to the Russian man's heart.'
- 5 Leonid Radzikhovskii, 'Shchedraia na razushenie dusha,' *Segodnia* 254 (10 November 1999).
- 6 'Putin mozhет delat' vse, chto zakhochet,' *Segodnia* 44 (28 February 2000).

cudgel. With its help we can “bump off” (*mozžno* “*zamochit*”) and single banker.⁷ Several commentators noted how the utterance jacked up the rhetoric of already volatile T.V. talk-show hosts such as Dorenko, Leont’ev, and Nevzorov.⁸ Journalists and ‘op-ed’ writers commonly invoked it not only in discussions of policies toward Chechnya and terror, but in broader contexts as well, such as in characterizing Putin’s electoral reforms of September 2004 (*‘Gubernatorov v sortire zamochili..’* [‘The Governors have been bumped off in the shithouse...’]).⁹ As a sign of true codification, it took on a life of its own beyond politics. A 1999 article on aggressive advertising strategies in *Delovoi Peterburg* appeared under the title ‘Advertiser will bump off consumer even in bus and outhouse’; the title of a 2000 *Literaturnaia gazeta* article uncovering local government corruption in Sochi announced, ‘Poor pensioner is “bumped off in the shithouse” by Sochi authorities.’¹⁰ Russian reading audiences actually saw the rhetorical gesture brought to life in Aleksandr Olbik’s action-adventure novel, *Prezident*, which features Putin as president, secretly joining a division of special forces to root out Chechen leaders in a remote mountain hideaway in the Caucasus. The book’s climax describes the president face-to-face with one of the leading Chechen warlords, Garaev, in the very room he invoked in his 1999 threat:

‘Swiftly retreating along the corridor, he adjusted the barrel of his sub-machine gun and “inscribed” a large portion of its contents into Garaev’s stomach. Garaev was not able to grab onto the ringlet with his teeth, as he had no more strength left for the extraction of a pin. He took several steps, his muddled consciousness leading him to the side, into an open doorway where he fell to his knees and, losing his balance, collapsed face forward, stretched out, exhaled a mix of air with bloody ichor, and froze in perpetuity. When the president stepped through doorway of the room, he realized

7 Aleksandr Shchuplov, ‘Kanaet vor, nasadkoi laviruia.... Nadolgo l’ nynche zadremala dusha v ob”iatiakh kriminala?’, *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* 169 (16 August 2002).

8 Radzikhovskii, ‘Shchedraia na razushenie dusha’; Filippov, ‘Bodalsia kanal s kanalom.’

9 Mariia-Luiza Tirmast, ‘Partiinaia zhizn’ ‘Neobkhodimo opuskat’ “Edinuii Rossiui” gde tol’ko mozžno. Oppozitsiia gotovitsia k ulichnoi bor’be s rezhimom,’ *Kommersant daily* 188 (8 October 2004).

10 *Delovoi Peterburg* 136 (13 December 1999); *Literaturnaia gazeta* 24 (14 June 2000). The phrase has also predictably provided fodder for neo-nazi, nationalist groups who see in Putin an ally (eg. ‘Mochi ikh, Putin! Sait v podderzhku Prezidenta,’ <http://suicide.lenin.ru/putin/> [retrieved 9 November 2005]).

that he had come upon a bathroom.¹¹

Russia's age-old love for and pride in her national tongue is axiomatic. The 'great and mighty' Russian language has enjoyed sacred status at least dating back to the days of Pushkin, if not earlier. So why is it, then, in the Russia of 1999, that a lion's share of those who speak the language so eagerly reach out and embrace rhetoric that could have been uttered by a common thug, or at least craven boor? It is this question that I am examining in my ongoing investigation into the origins of what I call the 'new Russian vulgate' during a period beginning with the advent of glasnost.

Democratic models of linguistic authority

The new policies and practices resulting from Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost reforms marked the first wave of changes to the language culture of the late-Soviet public sphere. Designed originally to permit the freer flow of information, glasnost opened up the public presses and airwaves to a broader range of alternative voices and messages. News programs such as *600 sekund* ('600 Seconds') and *Vzgliad* ('View') used relatively young, hip anchors with a more free-flowing delivery style to broadcast exposes that introduced a genre of independent critique previously unheard of in the Soviet era. Citizens cued for hours in anticipation for the latest week's issue of *Ogonek* and *Argumenty i fakty*, magazines that had become known for their hard-hitting, anti-system coverage. The closely scripted stories and screened texts of the Soviet era gave way to more spontaneous delivery of the news in television and radio.¹² Across all of the main media sources, glasnost gave rise to a general democratization

11 Aleksandr Ol' bik, *Prezident* (Donetsk 2002) 427. In the original, 'Быстро отступая по коридору, он подправил ствол автомата и 'вписал' большую часть магазина в живот Гараева. Тот не успел зацепить колечко резцами зубов, сил на извлечение чеки у него уже не осталось. Он сделал несколько шагов, помутившееся сознание повело его в бок, в проем открытой двери, где он упал на колени, но, не устояв, рухнул лицом вниз, вытянулся, выдохнул воздух вместе с кровавой сукровицей и навечно застыл.' 'Когда президент переступил порог помещения, он понял, что попал в туалет.'

12 Several linguists attribute the general coarsening of public discourse to the more unscripted nature of public speaking in all spheres. See Aleksei Dmitrievich Shmelev, 'Lozhnaia trevoga i podlinnaia beda,' *Otechesvennye zapiski* 2 (2005); Nikolai Samsonov, 'Komu nuzhna negramotnaia rech,' *Iakutiia* 70 (19 April 2002).



Vladimir Poetin: de redenaar.

of public language; a public language culture marked by a broader variety of voices, styles, and perspectives, which in turn were subjected to less editing and censorship.

The failed coup of August 1991 brought about the final death knell for the official discourse of the Soviet state, a clichéd and wooden language that Soviet bureaucrats and politicians essentially had to master in order to succeed. Boris Yeltsin's assumption of power in December of that year dramatically boosted the cultural capital of democratic political systems and market-style economies, a boost that manifested itself linguistically as well. Yeltsin's acceleration of the democratization process unleashed a flood of alternative models to fill the void in linguistic authority created by the demise of Soviet Communism and its censorship apparatus.

Beyond these fundamental institutional changes, the new, more democratic political landscape simply demanded new terms and phrases to account for the new realities, which in most cases meant borrowing terms from other languages (English in particular). Now that elections mattered, politicians had to worry about their *imidzh* ('image') and about building *konsensus*. National politicians hired professional *spichraitery* ('speechwriters') and *piarshchiki* ('PR men'). The same process occurred in the new pro-market environment of the business world.

Even beyond linguistic fields directly reflecting new political and economic reforms the official public sphere saw an influx of new language models for expressing and talking about various levels of identity and affiliation. The 1990's witnessed a flourishing of glossy magazines for a wide variety of target audiences. Magazines such as *Domovoi* told its 'New Russian' elite readers not only how to decorate their homes, it also provided new models of behavior, linguistic and otherwise. Alternative youth journals such as *Om* and *Ptiuch* filled their readers in on the latest trends in 'music, ritual, and style,' all in a specific speech style that reflected a new way of talking. And new glossy fashion magazines not only provide new looks for Russian women; they introduced new ways of talking about looks, men, sex, work, and home life.

While more traditional sources of Russian identity and spirituality, such as classical Russian literature and the Russian Orthodox Church, enjoyed something of a revival, they were largely handicapped by the power of the mass media and their initial love affair with the West. Church-sponsored conferences on the fate of the Russian language could not compete with American, Mexican and Brazilian soaps that glamorized violence and adultery. Dostoevskii and Berdiaev were no match for Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Willis. Punk rock and rapstars drowned out traditional folk tunes and Church liturgy.

At the same time, while the foreign barbarisms were blatant and among the most commonly criticized sources of language contamination, a variety of internal, organically Russian linguistic factors added to the sense of verbal depredation and chaos. Among the more significant of these was the influx of taboo language that had been strictly censored in Soviet times, but now not only enjoyed free reign, but actually grew into something of a cottage industry – in many cases, in the name of democracy itself. This pertains not only to Russian *mat*, or cursing, but also to criminal slang, or *blatnaia muzyka*. Among the more commonly cited culprits from the latter group: *krysha* (lit. 'roof,' protection from a criminal group), *bespredel* (state of extreme lawlessness), *razborka* (settling of scores between enemy crime groups), *kinut'* (deceive, swindle), *naezzhat'* (carry out some kind of aggressive action) and *mochit'*.¹³

13 Tsao Iuekhua, 'Zhargon v ovremennoi gazetnoi publitsistike,' *Russkaia rech'* 4 (31 August 2005); M. A. Grachev, 'V pogone za efektom (Blatnye slova na gazetnoi polose),' *Russkaia rech'* 1 (2001) 68-69.

Critics of the contemporary language culture often characterized these interlocking political, economic and social trends in terms of ‘criminalization’ – both of language and of everyday life. According to the linguist Mikhail Grachev, the link between the two works as follows: ‘Thieves’ terms denote a lexicon of aggression.... When they cross over into common usage, they gradually influence our psyche negatively. The word commands a powerful energy and charges everyone who uses it with either spiritual health or, on the contrary, a propensity for diseases.’¹⁴ The logical corollary to the equation between the criminalization of society and language is one between the degradation of language and of values:

‘The influx of utterances borrowed from criminal jargon or simply lowered, semi-criminal speech [...] also imposes a certain “criminal” view on life and a corresponding system of values: “Today you die, tomorrow, me.” In this system authentic values become devalued and replaced by criminal analogues. It is impossible to express pure feeling, true faith, or selfless love in “*fenia*,” “*blatnaia muzyka*” [both slang terms for criminal argot – MSG], as it is all indelibly colored by cynical tones.’¹⁵

Most lay blame on the media for propagating vulgar language in a manner that promoted it from the realm of taboo to the realm of merely ‘colloquial’ language.¹⁶ Although at least one commentator puts the blame squarely on the shoulders of the ‘multitude of pseudo-scholarly guides, manuals, and dictionaries on criminal jargon sold in stores’¹⁷ ‘When street cursing becomes published and sound from various tribunes,’ concluded another, ‘it acquires, in a sense, the right to citizenship.’¹⁸

For a variety of interlocking reasons, then, the process of linguistic democratization that characterized the language culture of the 1990s brought along with it a concurrent process of ‘vulgarization’. A quick look at the entry for ‘vulgar’ in a standard English-language dictionary suggests there is little reason we should be surprised by this and that, in fact, the

14 In an interview with Sergei Anisimov in “‘Tusovka’ – eto sbor ugovnikov,” *Novye Izvestiia* 61 (8 April 2004). For a more detailed discussion by Grachev himself, see ‘V pogone za efektom.’

15 Aleksei Dmitrievich Shmelev, ‘Lozhnaia trevoga i podlinnaia beda,’ *Otechesvennye zapiski* 2 (2005).

16 Grachev, ‘V pogone za efektom,’ 69.

17 S. G. Fedorov, ‘Prestupnost’ i molodezh,” *Pravda-5* 26 (18 July 1997).

18 Elena Bernaskoni, ‘Iazyk, kak zhenshchina: ego nado liubit’ i zashchishchat,” *Ekho Planety* 8 (16 February 2001).

link is etymologically embedded in the term itself. Looking in the *American Heritage Dictionary*, we find, as the first two definitions, associations most commonly held today: '1. Crudely indecent. 2a. Deficient in taste, delicacy, or refinement. b. Marked by a lack of good breeding; boorish. See synonyms at "common". It's the third and fourth definition, however, that reveal the history of the term and its original, less negatively charged meaning: '3. Spoken by or expressed in language spoken by the common people; vernacular: *the technical and vulgar names for an animal species*. 4. Of or associated with the great masses of people; common.'

If 'democratization,' then, involves giving more voice to the people, then that logically necessitates some degree of 'vulgarization,' which means public discourse will become more 'common,' closer to the 'vernacular.' It also means it will have a tendency of becoming, at least in the perception of some, more boorish and crude, tasteless and unrefined. In her 2001 essay on the criminalized state of the Russian language, Elena Bernaskoni nicely makes the connection between crude language and democratic language when she explains the contemporary vulgate as a reaction to the inflated rhetoric of the Soviet state:

'If we use Lomonosov's delineation of "styles", then today linguistic taste is governed by the lower style, strongly seasoned by nasty little jargon words. It has arisen as a protest against the Soviet order and its cant, the soaring rhetoric of Party meetings, lead articles, and slogans.'¹⁹

There is no doubt that, especially in its early stages, the phenomenon was somewhat reactionary in nature. But this oversimplifies the new Russian vulgate. This initial 'reaction' was compounded by a process of democratization that gave broader, unfiltered access to a wider variety of voices and views, a process of Westernization that led to an inundation of loan words and by the perception that both of these processes unfolded in an excessive, distorted, perverted, corrupt, or criminal manner, leading, by the late 1990s, to a culture – language and otherwise – commonly characterized by such terms (themselves taken from criminal slang) as *proizvol* ('all-permissiveness') and *bespredel* ('limitlessness'). One Russian critic writing in the late 1990's summed it up nicely when she wrote that 'there are no words that can properly characterize the situation in the country! All that are left are expressions.'²⁰

19 'Iazyk, kak zhenshchina: ego nado liubit' i zashchishchat.'

20 'Dlia otsenki polozheniia v strane net slov! Ostalis' odni vyrazheniia.'

Putin's tough talk

Which brings us back to Mr. Putin and his *sortir*. For all the flak that he has taken from language mavens for his *mochit'* phrase and several others subsequently, Putin reflects rhetorically, through these phrases, the general sense of desperation that has come to dominate, while at the same time demonstrating a willingness to use the new Russian vulgate and a certain modicum of mastery over it. Whether or not this language was part of Putin's personal vocabulary from the start, by using it he tapped into an ever-rising flood of verbal discontent among the 'common people,' and elevated that common boorishness to a level of prominence hitherto unknown.²¹

In fact, the greater part of his speech style can actually be described as the drone of a competent technocrat. But when he does slip into the spicier 'low-style' vulgate, his listeners take note. And the two most likely contexts in which Putin invokes the new Russian vulgate are arguably the two most common sources of popular anxiety, resentment, and blame for the criminalization of Russian life – terrorism and oligarch wealth. His second most notorious comment in connection to the conflict in Chechnya is actually directed toward a journalist (and a foreign one at that) who asks an unpleasant question about Russia's apparent indiscriminant use of land mines and their impact on the innocent Chechen population. After a long excursus outlining the harsh exclusionary perspectives of Islamic fundamentalists, he concludes:

'If you want to completely become an Islamic radical and take the step of getting yourself circumcised, then I invite you to Moscow. We have a multi-faith country and have specialists on that "issue," and I recommend you have that operation in such a way that nothing more grows.'²²

21 Some have insisted that Putin employed the *mochit'* expression quite consciously (e.g. Maksim Anisimovich Krongauz, 'Zametki rasserzhennogo obyvatelia,' *Otechestvennye zapiski* 2 (2005)).

22 'Если вы хотите совсем уж стать исламским радикалом и пойти на то, чтобы сделать себе обрезание, то я вас приглашаю в Москву. У нас многоконфессиональная страна, у нас есть специалисты и по этому 'вопросу', и я рекомендую сделать эту операцию таким образом, чтобы у вас уже больше ничего не выросло.' Quoted in *Putinki*, page 49, from a Brussels press conference following a Russia-EU summit (*Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 13 November 2002). The official transcript of this press-conference at www.president.ru omits Putin's closing 'recommendation.'

Curiously, a similar castration theme echoes in Putin's most frequently quoted aphorism involving oligarchs – this in response to Mikhail Khodorkovskii's belated offer to pay back taxes:

'So now they've finally brought concrete charges against him. He says, "Well okay, I agree, how about if I pay up now." This kind of trade, this sort of collusion, is impermissible. Everyone needs to understand once and for all: you have to obey the law all the time, and not just when they've got you by the balls.'²³

Numerous other vulgar or violent rhetorical moments stand out from Putin's otherwise non-descript speech. In some cases they come in the form of the verbal realization of non-verbal gestures, such as in his reaction to the idea of turning Kaliningrad over to Germany to pay back foreign loans: 'You know, that is a completely unexpected formulation of the issue. I would really like to give the finger straight into the camera to everyone wishing such an outcome, but I cannot on account of my upbringing'.²⁴ In other cases they emerge in expressions of what he *would* feel or do were he a) not entirely in control of his emotions ('When you look at it [violent criminal acts – MSG] then you feel like strangling them with your own hands – but that's just emotion.'),²⁵ b) not being broadcast on television ('I have other definitions [for Osama Bin Laden – MSG], but I cannot use them in the mass media'),²⁶ or c) mimicking criminal speech of oligarchs, ('Put up 250 thousand dollars and you won't hear another bad word during the election campaign' ... What's that? Its called blackmail').²⁷ Another, perhaps more adolescent strategy is simple name-calling. Terrorists and Chechen rebels

23 'Вот сейчас ему предъявили конкретное обвинение. Он говорит: «Ну ладно, согласен, давайте сейчас заплачу». Вот такая торговля, такой сговор, он недопустим. Все должны раз и навсегда для себя понять: надо исполнять закон всегда, а не только тогда, когда схватили за одно место': Interv'iu ital'ianskim informatsionnomu agentstvu ANSA, gazeta "Korr'ere della sera" I telekompanii RAI, Moscow (3 November 2003).

24 Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy v khode sovmestnoi press-konferentsii s Prezidentom Frantsuzskoi Frantsuzskoi Respubliki Zhakom Shirakom, Paris (15 January 2002).

25 Quoted in *Putinki*, page 149 from a conference on judicial and legal reforms, ITAR-TASS (9 July 2001).

26 'Vstrecha s shef-korrespondentami moskovskikh biuro vedushchikh amerikanskikh SMI' (10 November 2001).

27 Kremlin press conference (24 June 2002).

commonly receive derogatory, dehumanizing monikers such as 'bandits', 'fanatics', 'mercenaries' and 'rats' who must be 'rooted out of their caves and destroyed'.²⁸ Oligarchs are also frequently likened to bandits and thieves, not to mention such sub-human creatures as leeches and fish.²⁹

Ascribing to Putin a mastery of this 'low' style, of course, does not necessarily mean that Putin himself is a product of this new Russian vulgate. Far too many of his public pronouncements feature the dry bureaucratese of a polished technocrat to conclude that the Russian people have chosen a leader cut from the same vulgar cloth. And he can be exceedingly diplomatic when he wants. Instead, while Putin may well be earnest and relatively spontaneous in his deployment of these juicy phrases, he uses them more as 'special effects' than the only available option under the circumstances (which of course differentiates him from the classes and voices whence the new vulgate originated).³⁰ Trained originally 'as a specialist in human relations' (his own self-description), Putin is a master at engaging his interlocutor, as well as his national viewing and listening audience, in their own terms, even when it is the source of those terms he seeks to eradicate.³¹

28 'Stenogramma 'Priamoi linii' s Prezidentom Rossii,' Moscow, Kremlin (19 December 2002); 'Mochit' w peshchere,' *Kommersant* 22 (8 February 2006, retrieved on 16 April 2006 from: www.kommersant.ru/doc/html?docId=647638); *Putinki*, page 167 quoted from ITAR-TASS (7 July 2003).

29 'Stenogramma 'Priamoi linii' s Prezidentom Rossii,' Moscow, Kremlin (19 December 2002); Kremlin press conference, 18 July 2001; Interv'iu Prezidenta Rossii teleganalu RTR, Moscow (23 August 2000); *Putinki*, page 119 (from 28 February 2000).

30 See Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language,' in: Idem, *Language & Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA 1991) 43-65.

31 Vladimir Putin, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President* (New York 2000) 4.

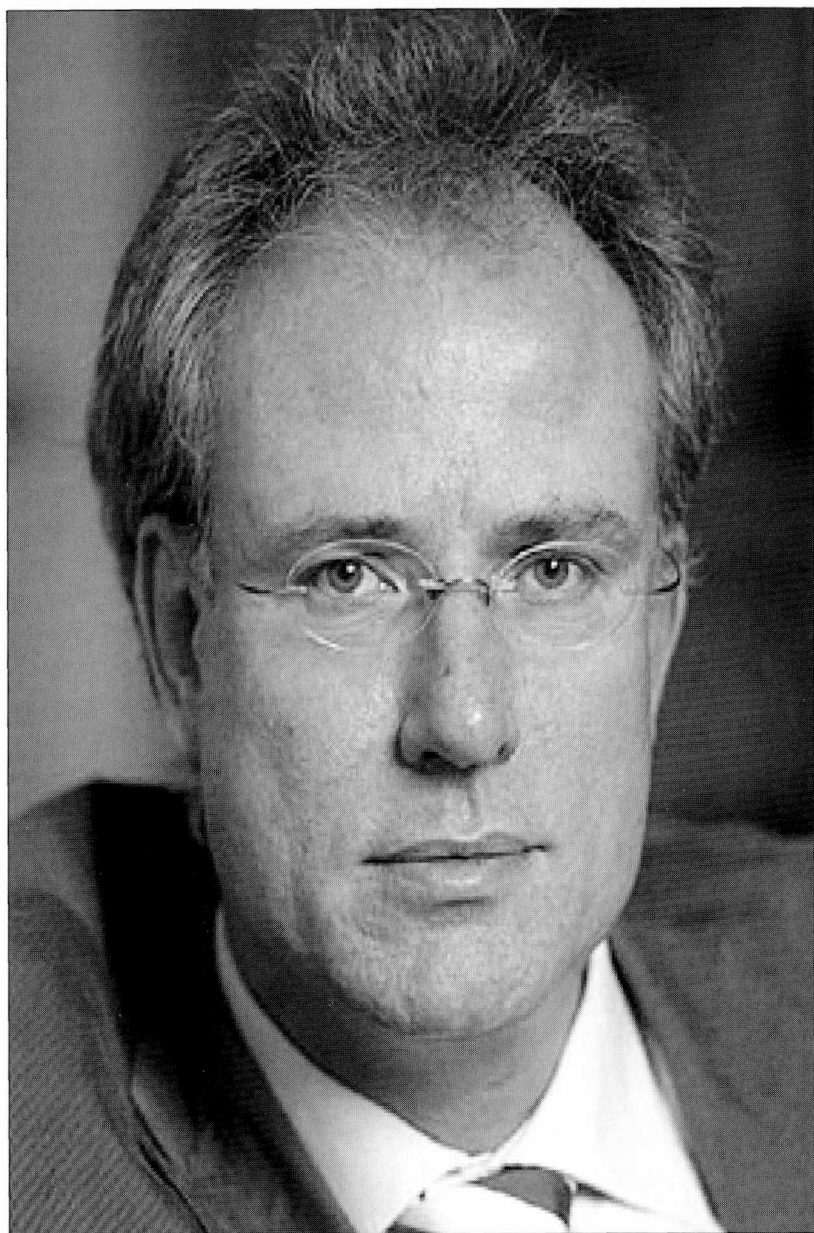
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