CONTENTS

Introduction

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky was not a global celebrity before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Yet, as the invasion began, within days President Zelensky had swiftly captured many hearts worldwide. Through a powerful charm offensive on social media, he reached faraway audiences and delivered tangible results. His charm was neither superficial nor ephemeral nor incidental; it secured actual weapons for Ukraine. No other example shows better that charm is a defining feature of contemporary global politics.

When people discuss international diplomacy, they tend to characterize it in rational terms. They assume it is guided by "realpolitik," where national self-interest, narrowly conceived, determines decisions. Politics in this understanding is pragmatic and solely focused on tangible objectives. But nonrational factors enter human affairs and decision making in every corner of social interaction. Human social activities may be about money, power, or ego—but they often operate

by a smile, a gesture, a hint of affection that shapes decisions, attitudes, and preferences. Politics is not immune to this basic feature of human experience. The power of charm as it shapes contemporary global politics is the topic of this book.

I look at politics as a site of performance, where politicians present heroes and villains on a stage to audiences who clap or boo in response.[1] In theater and in politics, individuals appear more important than complex processes. Political scientists have indeed described the past thirty years as a peak time in political personalization: we pay increasing attention to individual politicians and their close associates at the expense of institutions and organizations.[2] We have a declining loyalty toward parties, believing that individuals are more to be trusted. And on a variety of media platforms we are bombarded by instantaneous visual and textual representations of individual politicians, making us feel like we "know" them. Under these conditions, the personal magnetism of leaders becomes a defining feature of political power.

A form of personal magnetism often mentioned in the political context is charisma. Charisma, originating in the ancient Greek term for "divine gift," had been strongly attached to the church since Paul's letters to the early Christian community. More than one hundred years ago German sociologist Max Weber borrowed the term from its religious context and extended it into the secular realm. Weber argued that charisma is "a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."[3] While the beginning of the definition clearly has religious origins, the second part allows a broader application in public life.

Weber also believed, in quite a modern way, that nobody is inherently charismatic. Audiences decide who possesses charismatic authority.

But Weber considered the perceptions of charisma in a world that had not yet seen the rise of Adolf Hitler, where mass media meant print newspapers, and when moving images of foreign leaders were confined to newsreels. We live in a radically different political and media environment. Professional political campaigns are now performed on a variety of media platforms for an international audience, and our everyday interactions, even with our close family, are represented and shared in a cascade of visual representations. We have the chance to interact with politicians online as if they were "just like us."

Contemporary leaders often appeal to our desire to see them as ordinary and authentic. Some win on the platform of being the person we would like to have a beer with. Their success is often tied to not the divine and supernatural quality of charisma, but something more relatable, more "everyday." This everyday magic spell politicians cast is what I call "charm." Charm is personal magnetism that rests on *proximity* to political "tribes" and manifests primarily through visual and textual communication on a variety of media platforms. To succeed in the current media environment, political leaders must appear as accessible, authentic, and relatable in their quest for power. Charm can also manifest in direct personal communication at parades, demonstrations, and political rallies.

This is distinctly different from how charisma has been traditionally understood. Charisma relies on *distance* to political citizens and is mostly expressed through exceptional rhetorical performances in a limited set of media.

Charles de Gaulle has been widely regarded as one of the most—if not the most—charismatic French leaders in history. He firmly believed that a charismatic leader should *not* appear as ordinary: he had to be somewhat withdrawn to create a certain aura of mystique or surprise around him. The ideal leader had to be grand, or even pompous.[4] De Gaulle's speeches reflected this view and centered on major concepts, lacking contemporary elements of relatability. The ten most frequently used terms in his speeches were (in this order): *France*, *the country*, *the Republic*, *the state*, *the world*, *the people*, *the nation*, *prosperity*, *peace*, and *future*.[5]

In contrast to de Gaulle's traditional, distance-based charisma, contemporary leaders must appeal to the ordinary even if they are sometimes admired as gods unconditionally. They aim to become "one" with their "tribe." Even if a politician is an American multimillionaire who owns Trump Tower in the heart of New York City, he must rally voters with messages they can identify with. Even if the politician's actual lifestyle could not be more different from that of his voters, he must perform as a person "just like you," for instance, by wearing a red "Make America Great Again" hat. Is this requirement for politicians to appear as our next-door neighbor absurd? It is. Yet this is the test they have to pass now. If politicians succeed and their performance fuses with their audience, we will identify with them, and this identification will trump other considerations. The followers will stay with the magnetic character through the ups and downs of political life, without checks and balances, cheering on as soccer fans would do for their favorite players.

Charm is two-faced: it embodies both the positive features of seduction and the negative features of deception. Charm comes from the Latin "carmen" (song, verse, incantation);

even in its etymology it refers to mediation and to the power to seduce, and sometimes mislead, through sound, text, and appearance. In politics and in everyday life, seduction and deception walk hand in hand, highlighting two sides of the same coin. There is a constant tension around charming interactions, as people are drawn to the seductive magic of charm, but at the same time express deep suspicion of it, fearing deception or charm's proximity to the uncontrollability of magic.

In early twenty-first-century politics, charm is constructed and presented in mass media and social media. Offline charm translates to mediated charm, and there are forms of charm that are specific to particular media environments. Those of us who live digital lives often move from offline presentation of charm to online and back. We talk to our family in the morning over breakfast, then post to social media, then meet somebody at the office or strike up a conversation with a stranger at a bus stop, then participate in an online meeting, then take a nap, followed by watching a presidential debate or the latest season of our favorite television show, and so on. Our presence and personality are continuously constructed in a variety of settings and on a series of media platforms. Politicians operate in a similar way, with the exception that almost all their presented personas appear in mediated contexts. Most of us never meet the "real" politician, only the politician's constructions in and by the media. Any understanding of political charm must take the "media" into consideration as a core ingredient. Social media are by no means the whole of how political leaders or would-be political leaders communicate, but they have become indispensable and form the main focus of my book.

The old charisma of the distanced and elevated leader has not completely disappeared. Even today, politicians sometimes appear larger than life, striving to be twenty-first-century messiahs,[6] and some followers behave more like worshipers than voters. As politicians present their identities to people on a number of platforms, they deploy their personal magnetism in various forms to fuse with targeted audiences.[7] They mix tools of charisma and charm to reach their goals as both charisma and charm rely on personality as a justification for authority. In some ways, contemporary politicians strive toward the role of superheroes, mixing ordinary and extraordinary qualities.

Outline of the Book

I begin by exploring the building blocks of charm. The heart of the first chapter is a new understanding of "charming interactions." Charm is everywhere—at day-care drop-offs, in factories and cafés, universities and grocery shops. But here I focus on how charm shapes national and international politics worldwide. I will discuss five techniques politicians often use to charm their audiences in the media: (1) performing authenticity—when politicians adjust their performances to appear "real" and relatable to audiences; (2) demasking—when politicians attempt to remove their official "masks" displaying either vulnerability or strength; (3) breaking from routine—the interruption of the flow of time to create minor, substitute "pseudo-events" for the media; (4) restaging—creating a controlled environment and space, an ideal stage where charm can particularly shine through; and (5) equalizing—when politicians present diverse audiences as a coherent community. While not all charming

interactions of politicians include all these techniques, they are often present in moments of mediatized political charm.

I will then discuss five politicians as they present themselves in contemporary media. These politicians range from liberal to illiberal to authoritarian. Most of them use charm as a tool and occasionally as a weapon. The first is Jacinda Ardern, the youngest-ever elected prime minister of New Zealand and a famous "anti-Trump" female icon on the global stage. By the time of the publication of this book she had left politics, but not without leaving a lasting mark. Her Facebook activity presented vulnerability and mistakes as features rather than as bugs in politics. She argued for "kindness" as a keyword of twenty-first-century public life. Her leadership raised key questions around gender and political charm. She quickly became a global celebrity, an icon of the politics of kindness and the challenges of juggling motherhood and work as a millennial professional. "Jacindamania" as a term appeared in almost all articles about her as Ardern triggered admiration, but also intense rejection, likely leading to her early burnout.

A radically different leader is the lead actor of the next chapter: Viktor Orbán. In 2022 he was elected for a fourth consecutive term as Hungary's prime minister. Orbán describes himself as illiberal and presents a populist masculine charm but frequently also shares relatable moments on Facebook, such as images of himself diapering his grandchild. But most importantly, Orbán presents himself as the symbolic condensation of "Hungarian-ness," the embodiment of the nation on social media. While tasting Hungarian pastries or participating in folk rituals, he draws the boundaries of the nation and personally radiates a message of tradition, Christianity, ethnic homogeneity, and "Hungary first."

Orbán's case highlights that no political side has exclusive ownership over the power of charm. Personal magnetism will be weaponized by leaders from all corners of global political life in their quest for power.

The next two chapters will discuss so-called charm offensives. I define "charm offensive" as a strategic public relations campaign that weaponizes the personal magnetism of political leaders, selected negotiators, or other representatives to radically shift a country's international image.[8] First, we hear about Iran's attempt to alter its image as it negotiated a crucial deal with the United States on nuclear arms control in 2015. In front of Western cameras, Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif smiled, took intimate walks with the US secretary of state, and listened carefully to experts. His gentle and relatable behavior throughout the negotiations created an environment in which previous clashes between the two countries could be momentarily forgotten. The next chapter analyzes North Korean leader Kim Jong-un as he weaponized charm to temporarily shift North Korea's unsavory image in the West during the 2018 Korean Winter Olympics. From viral selfies to live-covered North-South meetings to even crossing the border hand in hand with the South Korean president, Kim created mesmerizing moments for Western journalists and temporarily shifted the tone of North Korean coverage. In these two chapters I focus on how charm offensives are perceived by international media.

And finally, I end with a countercase, former German chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel achieved authenticity with her audiences, while avoiding contemporary methods of political personalization. By showing a repetitive and predictable image on social media, she did not adhere to media

platforms' inclination for drama and spectacle. Merkel still managed to establish a strong and often admired political image on the global stage. She showed that it is possible to succeed without the weaponization of charm. But her case might be unique given Germany's exceptionally negative historical experiences with charisma in the twentieth century, leading to widespread distrust of charismatic political performances among German voting publics.

All these politicians show important aspects of how to use and how not to use charm in current public life to manufacture authenticity. Despite their differences, they often play with, or in Merkel's case almost ostentatiously play against, techniques to seduce their audiences. Depending on your political views you might perceive these attempts to charm as alluring seduction or destructive deception. Yet, it is hard to deny their political power.

Charm will shape the future of democracy worldwide, as political values and ideals will be increasingly embodied by people and personalities, presented to political tribes in a wide variety of media. As new actors enter the world stage, we will experience moments of hope when charm will support what we perceive as valuable causes, but also crushing times of despair when charm will become a tool for destruction. Charm will be a key method of twenty-first-century diplomacy, weaponized in the forms of charm offensives around the world in a wide variety of political systems from democratic to illiberal to authoritarian (and all the gray zones in between). Charm will always be two-faced, oscillating between seduction and deception, subject to individual and group evaluation. While I could easily paint either a dark or a rosy picture about charm's impact on global politics, the reality is more complex. Both seduction and

deception will be present. Charm will make a difference in human affairs and public life, especially in an era of direct and reciprocal verbal and visual communications between leaders and their audiences. Charm will also be a crucial element in the constitution of political leadership and political authenticity. This book is an attempt to give political charm its due, to portray its varieties on the international stage, and to suggest that this bit of political magic should be—and can be—better understood.

INDEX

Page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations.