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ABSTRACT

Masculinity has long been Russian President Vladimir Putin's calling card. At the center of Putin's macho aura is his image as a tough leader who will not allow Western countries to weaken Russia or dictate what Russia's domestic and foreign policies should look like. This article draws attention to the role of masculinity in the Putin regime's legitimation strategy, and how it became more obvious during the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea. To the extent that there is a "personality cult" in contemporary Russia, the personality at the center of it is defined in highly gendered terms, shaping the tenor of both domestic and foreign policy.

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Since his third ascension to the Russian presidency, Vladimir Putin has attracted more attention than any other contemporary state leader. From the jacket of *Time Magazine* in September 2013, to the front pages of newspapers detailing Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, there has been no shortage of coverage of Putin in the international press. Putin's omnipresence in the Russian media is even more striking. While Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev chose the term "cult of the individual" (*kul't lichosti*) – often translated as "cult of personality" – to condemn Stalin's mode of governance and the pervasive and ingratiating worship of Stalin as leader (Khrushchev, 2007), it has been used more casually in the contemporary Russian context to describe the proliferation of Putin images in the press (Cult of Putin, 2015) and the extraordinary variety of "Putiniana" (Goscilo, 2013b) generated over the past 15 years that broadcasts his importance in the popular imagination (whether in support or parody of his political role). Whether these manifestations deserve to be considered as evidence of a "cult of personality" is debatable. As Cassidy and Johnson (2013, 48–49) write, elements of satire and the presence of both official and unofficial Putiniana distinguish the Putin "craze" from the personality "cults" that surrounded Soviet leaders.

In recent years, the phrase "cult of personality" has also been used in a way that hews more closely to the sense in which Khrushchev meant it; it is used to describe attempts to replace popular ideological commitments with a "pagan cult" of the leader (Goble, 2015, quoting Maksim Kantor), and to characterize efforts to maintain Putin's high approval ratings, such as by releasing sycophantic documentaries like "The President" (2015), a full two-and-a-half hours of "unrestrained... [glorification of] the achievements of Russia's national leader during his fifteen years in power" (Tsvetkov, 2015). Rather than speculating about the appropriateness of the term in application to Putin's leadership, however, this article draws attention to the mobilization of machismo in Putin-centered politics. To the extent that there is a "personality cult" in contemporary Russia, the personality at the center of it is defined in highly gendered terms, shaping the tenor of both domestic and foreign policy.

[☆] Parts of this article were excerpted from Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (Oxford University Press, 2015). I thank the publisher for granting permission to use that material here.

Gender is one of the most readily available and recognizable aspects of identity, which is one of the reasons that using the symbolism of masculinity works well as an aid to authority-building in the political arena. Indeed, politicians and activists often employ widely familiar cultural notions of masculinity, femininity, and homophobia (heteronormativity) as political tools in their performance of legitimacy, using gendered frames implicitly and explicitly to support their own positions and undermine those of their opponents.

In the quest for legitimacy and authority, political actors engage in all kinds of “performances” with the intention of winning the audience of attentive citizens over to their side. Regarding “formally democratic societies,” cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander writes, “Gaining power depends on the outcome of struggles for symbolic domination in the civil sphere” (Alexander, 2011, 107). All politics, in that sense, is a performance aimed at accruing legitimacy in order to rely less on forceful coercion (Alexander, 2011, 1, 89). When political actors make claims about their opponents, they hope those claims will be received as facts, whereas in reality these are largely “performative statements” that attempt “less to [describe] the world” than to “bring that world into being in the imaginations of their listeners” (Alexander, 2011, 102). Politicians also seek to convince their audience that an improved world will result – or has resulted – from their rule, making that rule legitimate. To that end, as Alexander shows, political actors use cultural understandings to bolster their power in democratic polities as well as authoritarian regimes (Alexander, 2011, 89). Popular ideas about masculinity, strength, machismo, and their opposite – femininity and the “weakness” typically identified with it – are among these cultural understandings.

As the editors of this special issue point out in their introduction, an exacerbation of Russian state authoritarianism and a propaganda machine to support it emerged in the wake of Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 and escalated a decade later with the Ukrainian Euromaidan Revolution and the Russian annexation of Crimea. The patriotic enlistment of Putin's machismo, too, was heightened in the aftermath of the successive Ukrainian revolutions. At the center of Putin's macho aura is the celebration of Putin as a “tough guy” who stands up to the Western “liberal-fascist” enemies who are allegedly trying to weaken Russia at home and abroad. While masculinity has long been Putin's calling-card, in evidence almost immediately after his first presidential term began, that aspect of his leadership strategy became even more obvious in tandem with the escalation of the recent conflict in Ukraine. This article explores the use of gender norms (masculinity, femininity, and homophobia) as an element of Putin's rule in domestic and foreign policy. After briefly tracing the Putin-era flourishing of machismo to the Russian politics of the 1990s, I examine the construction of a macho “personality cult” around Putin. I then explore instances of gendered discourse in Putin's political legitimation strategy in domestic and foreign policy, and consider the actions of pro-Kremlin patriotic youth groups – such as *Nashi* (Ours) and *Set'* (Network) – and of other “grassroots” Putin-supporters, as an element reinforcing the surges of masculinized and patriotic nationalism in contemporary Russia.¹

From collapse to conquest: building the macho personality cult

Putin's aggressive foreign policy, and the way that it is interwoven with a nationalism-inflected machismo, must be understood in the context of Russian domestic politics. In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet regime, Russia's loss of superpower status, the introduction of commercial capitalism, and the initiation of political pluralism combined to dramatically change the way that foreign policy was packaged for the domestic population in Russia. Although the Soviet collapse meant that Russia became an independent state, the country lost its ideological *raison d'être* and simultaneously suffered an economic crisis, accompanied by Russians' sneaking suspicion that the Western countries advising Yeltsin's administration were out to destroy the Russian economy and access its natural resources on the cheap. Meanwhile, the end of single-party rule meant that Russia's politicians experienced newfound opportunities to try to appeal to the population, rather than simply being presented to the populace *de facto* by the communist party. These transformations altered the way that politics and foreign policy were pitched to the Russian populace. Unlike the Soviet period, Russia's state policies would now be discussed in public (even if still being decided upon behind closed doors). Under this new system, however, the population found little solace in the Yeltsin regime, which presided over a collapse in Russia's economic stability, military might (as witnessed by the Russian army's failure to subdue the mid-1990s rebellion in Chechnya), and international status.

Given this situation, when Yeltsin resigned at the end of 1999, leaving then-prime-minister Putin as the acting president, the population was ready for a new kind of leader. As appealing as Yeltsin had been in 1991 standing up for democracy against his communist party rivals, by the mid-1990s he had become something of a boozy embarrassment, and was widely regarded as having sold Russia out to the West. Putin, by contrast, was literally a sober leader, and the agency he had worked for and headed, the Federal Security Service (FSB, formerly the KGB), exuded an aura of strength.

By the time Putin arrived in the Russian presidency in 2000, Russia was regarded at home and abroad as weak, suffering from economic breakdown, and no longer a superpower. Both the population and the Kremlin sought to resuscitate the country's pride and international image – what Goscilo and Strukov (2011, 1) refer to as “rebranding the nation – and particularly its leadership,” and what two Russian social scientists referred to as “remasculinizing” Russia at home and abroad (Riabova and Riabov, 2010, 56–57). Once Putin was in power, his macho image was mobilized as a public relations tool, broadcasting both his legitimacy and Russia's strength. As Wood (2011) notes, the public relations campaign accenting Putin's macho status kicked off during his last few months as prime minister under Yeltsin in late 1999, and was associated from the

¹ To find the material for this article, I explored the websites of pro-Kremlin patriotic youth organizations and news reports about Putin's foreign and domestic policy, analyzing the materials through a gendered lens.

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