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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 legitimization 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.

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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.

start with militarism, itself tightly linked to masculinity. Photos of Putin's flight in a fighter jet in October 1999 while visiting a military base in southern Russia symbolized this effort.

As Putin settled into the first term of his presidency, the machismo campaign accelerated and expanded. By 2002, the Putin “manly man” brand was visible and audible in the Russian pop song, “A Man Like Putin.” Performed by a female duo who endorsed Putin as a politician and as an “ideal man,” the song rose to the top of Russia's pop charts and became a “propaganda song” often heard at state-sponsored pro-Putin rallies (Bloom, 2013). The chorus of this catchy ditty featured a frustrated woman in search of a man like Putin, “full of strength,” a non-drinker, who would neither abuse nor abandon her (Takogo ak Putin/One Like Putin, English Subs, 2008). As Putin remained in office as a two-term president, and then as prime minister for a term, followed by a third stint in the presidential seat, the singers got their wish. Putin seemed unlikely to vacate his position of power; desertion was not on the horizon.

By the mid-2000s, the Kremlin was regularly releasing images that reinforced Putin's reputation as a reliable and desirable state leader. Whether it was footage of Putin “saving” a crew of journalists from a Siberian tiger by shooting it with a tranquilizing dart (Putin Saves TV Crew from Siberian Tiger, 2008), a photo shoot of Putin enjoying a shirtless fishing or horseback riding trip (Drusinin, 2013), an image of Putin zooming around a track behind the wheel of a Formula One racing car (Vladimir Putin: F1 Driver, 2010), or hurling his martial arts opponents to the ground (Schwartz, 2008), Putin was being pitched to the public in strongly gendered terms that relied on the idea of masculinity. As his time in office wore on, Putin was increasingly portrayed by his public relations team and his supporters as a strong, decisive, tough, and manly leader, successfully defending Russian national interests at home and abroad.

This image of Putin, with its emphasis on physical masculinity, was not created accidentally. It is widely accepted that Putin's image is controlled by Kremlin image-makers. Their task is to ensure that Putin's public relations efforts target specific groups within his domestic audience, portraying him “as the ultimate Russian action man, capable of dealing with every eventuality” (Hill and Gaddy, 2012, 5). As Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy (2012, 4) note, each of these stunts or “performances” is “based on feedback from opinion polls suggesting the Kremlin needs to reach out and create a direct connection to a particular group among the Russian population.”

Putin's political makeover was reportedly the invention of Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov, who was in charge of “the transformation of the president's visage into a savior-of-Russia icon, gargantuan and granite-faced, gazing from billboards, television screens, and newspapers throughout Moscow” (Steve LeVine, 2009, 34). As an example of the ensuing public relations campaign promoting Putin's body, in 2007, the national newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda* published a series of photos of Putin on his fishing trip with the prince of Monaco, followed by an article titled “Become Like Putin,” containing advice for civil servants and elected officials on how to exercise in order to achieve a Putinesque physique (Danilova, 2007). Borenstein (2007, 226–227) similarly attributes the success of Putin's “brand” to the “political handlers...[who] created the image of a tough no-nonsense ‘man's man’ who was sober, athletic and decisive,” by contrast to his predecessor. The top-down plan, labeled “Project Putin” by Putin's deputy campaign manager, which aimed to re-consolidate power in the Kremlin “starting with the election of an unknown secret police chief” into Russia's presidency, had machismo as a centerpiece (Baker and Glasser, 2005, 6). As Helena Goscilo (2011, 40) has pointed out, photographers perpetually trailed Putin as he went about the travels obligatory to his official position, as well as on “vacations in Siberia, where a bare-chested Putin fishing, riding, and climbing trees became immortalized as a sexual commodity when snapshots of his leisurely self-flooded the Internet.” These pictures – along with women's fawning expressions of love and desire for Putin as reported in the media – reinforced the “sexualization” of Putin's image. By the end of his second presidential term, Putin was regarded as the “post-Soviet exemplar of seductive, reassuring virility” (Goscilo, 2011, 40; Goscilo, 2013a).

While some of Putin's displays of muscles and bravery may have been intended to appeal to the female population, a male politician's “manly” image can also be enhanced by portrayals of attractive young women's support for him. A number of cultural productions, many of which were likely backed by pro-Putin, regime-supported groups like Nashi, though that financial support is difficult to trace (Sperling, 2015, 98–99), thus asserted Putin's sex appeal indirectly, by highlighting Putin as the object of attention of traditionally feminine, attractive young women, and thereby reinforcing his masculine and heterosexual status. This began most dramatically in October 2010, when twelve female students and alumni of Moscow State University's prestigious journalism department published a calendar featuring photos of themselves in lingerie, each woman suggesting herself as a potential lover for Mr. Putin (Potupchik, 2010). This was not only a personal gift for then-prime-minister Putin, but was also sold in stores. In a similar vein, in July 2011 a group called Putin's Army announced an “I'll Rip [It] for Putin” contest with a video that got over 2.5 million hits. The clip concluded with a cleavage-boasting young woman ripping her tank top down the middle, while asking, “What are you prepared to do for your president?” (Porvu a Putina!, 2011). In October of that year, Putin's Army continued its activity by filming a video for Putin's fifty-ninth birthday. Promising that their birthday gift would be “the sweetest,” a handful of women wearing only underpants and white button-down shirts were shown baking their idol a chocolate birthday cake (decorated with a heart) while squirting whipped cream into their mouths (ArmiaPutina, 2011).

Nor did pro-Kremlin activists let Putin's sixtieth birthday pass without a new proclamation of young women's love for the president. In early October 2012, the United Russia party's youth wing, *Molodaia Gvardiia* (Young Guard), produced a video for the occasion featuring attractive young women mimicking a variety of Putin's manly exploits (flying a fighter jet, playing ice-hockey, and scuba diving for “ancient” pottery). In each setting, the women's femininity was exaggerated, and most of them were shown receiving a text message from Putin (“The Very One”) while carrying out their feats. The final scene, over the strains of “Blueberry Hill” (which Putin had sung at a celebrity fundraiser two years earlier), showed all the women standing

together on a city street, waiting in great anticipation — with a birthday cake — for Putin to arrive. The clip closed with the “Blueberry Hill” lyric ostensibly ringing in each woman’s mind: “My dreams came true.” The video playfully spoofed Putin’s stunts while upholding his image as a highly desirable man from the standpoint of the women who thrilled over his text messages and grew giddy at the prospect of seeing him in person (Molodaia Gvardiia, 2012).

The purpose of this “evidence” portraying Putin as a tough, desirable, heterosexual man, was to emphasize that Putin was the correct man for the job of leading Russia out of its temporary sojourn in the post-Soviet doldrums and toward renewed glory. Putin’s own machismo was closely linked to the popular desire for Russia, too, to be seen as strong and tough, and not to be pushed around the way that it was thought to have been in the 1990s. Likewise, Putin’s ideological position was founded on the reassertion of Russia’s strength and sovereignty. Putin would let the West dictate neither how Russia should be run internally, nor how to define Russia’s national interests abroad.

Masculinity in Putin-era Russian domestic and foreign policy

While an emphasis on masculinity may enhance a particular politician’s image, gender norms are also used to undermine political competitors. Specifically, politicians and their supporters may try to insult their opponents by suggesting they are insufficiently manly. For example, at the state-sponsored summer camp for pro-Putin youth at Lake Seliger in 2007, during Putin’s second term as President, a large poster exhibit of three male opposition leaders, Mikhail Kasyanov, Garry Kasparov, and Eduard Limonov, portrayed their faces photoshopped onto apparently female bodies clad in bustiers and thigh-high stockings, transforming them into a trio of most unmanly transvestite-prostitutes who had “sold out” Russia to the West (Maksim Stribnyi, 2007).

Gender-based efforts to undermine the authority of political opponents are by no means unique to Russia. In March 2014, when interviewed on Fox News, Sarah Palin compared Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin in gendered terms, remarking, “People are looking at Putin as one who wrestles bears and drills for oil. They look at our president as one who wears mom jeans and equivocates and bloviates.” Palin went on to condemn Obama for his “weak leadership” and inability to understand “peace through strength.” In so doing, she was questioning his manliness in conjunction with his policy choices (Villacorta, 2014). Likewise, in August 2014 a politically conservative website co-founded by Neil Patel, a former advisor to Dick Cheney, featured a headline intended to insult the US president in a misogynist and homophobic fashion. It read: “Barack Obama is the first female president.” The site further listed seven manly characteristics (“courage, industry, resolution, self-reliance, discipline, honor, and manliness”) on which Obama had ostensibly failed to pass muster (Gopnik, 2014).

As when countering domestic opponents, political leaders (and their followers) may try to project masculinity abroad in an attempt to impugn the relative manliness of the leaders in the states with which they are engaged in conflict or competition. This tactic was evident in the early Putin era as Russia reasserted itself in the “near abroad” — the region of the former Soviet states. Countries in Russia’s post-Soviet orbit that underwent attempts at democratizing revolutions (which were presumed to decrease Russia’s influence and enhance America’s power in the region) found themselves rhetorically demasculinized. Putin made clear that his regime would hold firm against the threat of a “color revolution” — such as Ukraine’s “Orange” Revolution, which nonviolently ousted the incumbent president after fraudulent elections in 2004, and the “Rose” Revolution in Russia’s southern neighbor, Georgia, the previous year. Following the Orange Revolution, when Russia raised the price of gas exported to Ukraine, on Russian television Ukraine was painted as America’s female mistress, a “greedy, kept woman,” and Russian protesters’ posters outside the US embassy in Moscow instructed the United States to pay Ukraine’s subsequent debts to Russia: “A Gentleman Always Pays for his Girlfriend.” Putin used homophobic terms to similarly dismiss the Rose Revolution, casting it as gay. Reacting to a reporter’s question following the Georgian events, Putin stated, “A rose revolution — next they’ll come up with a light blue one” (*To rozovaia revoliutsiia, to golubuiu eshche pridumaiut*). In Russian, “light blue” is slang for “gay male.” Putin’s ally in that conflict, the president of South Ossetia, likewise remarked of Georgia’s president, “Saakashvili is far from having democratic values — not to speak of male ones — he doesn’t have any of those at all” (Riabova and Riabov, 2010, 59–60).

The Russian population responded well to Putin’s self-assertion as a tough, patriotic leader protecting Russia from the nefarious plans of Western states to weaken Russia and take advantage of her oil and gas resources. By 2007, Putin was winning the hypothetical “real-man” competition; in one mid-sized Russian city 44.8 percent of Russians surveyed chose Putin when asked to name a “real man” in Russian politics (Riabova and Riabov, 2010, 51). A larger, national-level survey in 2009 also put Putin in first place with a plurality of 14 percent naming him as a “real man in Russia,” with the next closest contestant, the revered Soviet performer Vladimir Vysotskii, named by only 7 percent (Riabova and Riabov, 2010, 48).

National pride, too, had rebounded by the end of Putin’s first decade in power. A countrywide survey in 2010 found that only two percent of respondents claimed there was “nothing” for which to be proud of Russia, and only nine percent could not or did not provide a response (Gordost’ i styd za Rossiui, 2010). In 2002, by contrast, 20 percent had found nothing in “the modern life of our country” in which to take pride (this was the most popular answer at the time), and fifty percent of the respondents had provided answers deemed “not pertinent” or had simply left the space blank (Sperling, 2009, 218). Over the course of his first two terms in office, the emphasis on Putin’s patriotic machismo (as well as rising oil revenues) gained him popularity while also enhancing the Russian public’s perception of their country’s strength and influence abroad.

Putin’s third presidential term provided new opportunities for enacting machismo in the foreign policy sphere, particularly around the conflict between Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and Western Europe over the Russian seizure of Crimea and Russia’s involvement in the violence in Eastern Ukraine. Russian discourse concerning these events has not only

highlighted Putin's own patriotic masculinity, but also entailed public questioning of rival political leaders' masculinity in the context of the conflict.

Although the seizure of Crimea sparked condemnation of Putin's foreign policy choices within the European Union and the United States, it is clear that Putin's popularity at home increased as a result of that decision. After Russia's absorption of Crimea, Putin's approval ratings rose steeply, achieving record highs ([Increasingly, Russians See No Alternative to Putin, 2015](#)). In December 2014, despite a collapsing ruble exchange rate, 85 percent of Russians polled said they trusted Putin, which roughly matched the numbers in November, before the currency crisis ([Alexandrova, 2014](#)). Despite the economic downturn in Russia caused in part by the sanctions, and in larger part by the dramatic drop in oil prices, the number of people saying they wanted Putin to stay in office increased over the course of 2014. Fifty-five percent of Russians polled in December (2014) said they wanted Putin to remain president after 2018, compared with 32 percent in March of that year. In March 2015, 75 percent of Russians surveyed said they would vote for Putin if presidential polls were to be held right away, up from 70 percent in February ([Interfax, 2015](#)).

Part of the explanation for this popular embrace is that Putin had successfully come across at home as defending Russian national interests against the West, against the United States, and against NATO, all of which were painted as acting aggressively in the international arena and ostensibly trying to enfeeble Russia. In his December 2014 press conference, when asked by a BBC reporter about Russia's role in provoking a "new Cold War" by sending Russian military forces into Ukraine (starting with Crimea, and "then whatever it is that's going on in Eastern Ukraine," as the reporter put it) Putin responded by emphasizing US and NATO aggression in Russia's backyard:

You said that Russia, to a certain extent, contributed to the tension that we are now seeing in the world. Russia did contribute but only insofar as it is more and more firmly *protecting its national interests* [emphasis mine]. ... Now, US bases are scattered around the globe – and you're telling me Russia is behaving aggressively? Do you have any common sense at all? What are US armed forces doing in Europe, also with tactical nuclear weapons? What are they doing there? ... Are we moving our forces to the borders of the United States or other countries? Who is moving NATO bases and other military infrastructure towards us? We aren't. ... Is anyone engaging in some dialogue with us about it? No. ... All we hear is "that's none of your business. Every country has the right to choose its way to ensure its own security." All right, but we have the right to do so too. ... Finally, the ABM system.... Who was it that withdrew unilaterally from the ABM Treaty, one of the cornerstones of the global security system? Was it Russia? No, it wasn't. The United States did this, unilaterally. They are creating threats for us, they are deploying their strategic missile defense components not just in Alaska, but in Europe as well – in Romania and Poland, very close to us. And you're telling me we are pursuing an aggressive policy? ([Bol'shaia Press-Konferentsiia Vladimira Putina, 2014](#)).²

Along similar lines, in a January 2015 speech in St. Petersburg Putin asserted that the pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine were not fighting merely the Ukrainian regular army, but rather, a NATO-sponsored "foreign legion." As Putin explained, Ukraine's army was, "in effect ... no longer an army but a foreign legion – in this case NATO's foreign legion – which does not of course pursue Ukraine's national interests." NATO's proxy forces in Ukraine boasted a "completely different agenda" and a broader geostrategic goal, namely, "containing Russia" ([Whitmore, 2015](#)). Confronting these ostensible Western incursions in Ukraine, and fighting so-called Western "interference" in Russia – in the form of NGOs labeled as "foreign agents" – were seen as marks of Putin's toughness against an adversary attacking Russia from both inside and outside. Under such threatening circumstances, Putin was painted as the only possible leader for Russia; opinion polls in January 2015 suggested that the majority of the population believed there was no other politician capable of replacing Putin ([Increasingly, Russians See No Alternative to Putin, 2015](#)).

Putin's macho assertiveness has succeeded on the home front in part because of machismo's close tie to nationalism. Russian participation in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea are part and parcel of Russia's military action in defense of what the regime sees as its national interests – namely, putting a stop to other states' efforts to weaken Russia or deprive Russia of its rightful place as a key player on the world stage. The Kremlin's message has been that Putin will protect Russia's national interests, and the interests of Russians abroad, such as in Crimea – and will do so unapologetically. The Russian military forces *sans* insignia who took up strategic locations in Crimea in February 2014 in advance of the territory's annexation, who were acknowledged by Putin, post-annexation, to have indeed been Russian military personnel, symbolize this attitude. The transformation of the officially unacknowledged "little green men" into officially recognized and celebrated "polite people" was completed with the unveiling of the first Russian monument to those troops, a statue of a "heavily armed, insignia-free soldier" with a cat in his hands, in May 2015, shortly before Russia's Victory Day celebrations ([Sindelar, 2015](#)). Unlike Yeltsin, who was too quick to adopt Western advice in the 1990s, Putin has been presented as a leader who will not back down in the face of international pressure, symbolic or economic, and who shows in no uncertain terms that Russia is an international force to be crossed only at one's peril.

Russia's May 9th Victory Parade in 2015, marking the 70-year anniversary of Germany's surrender in the Second World War, was emblematic of this vision. The 2015 event was the largest parade to date marking the event, complete with a public component – roughly 500,000 people marched in an "Immortal Regiment" with photographs of their relatives who served in the Great Patriotic War – in which Putin himself took part, bearing a photo of his father ([Bigg, 2015](#); 'Immortal Regiment'

² Translation from Johnson's Russia List, December 20, 2014.

Marches Through Streets of Russia, 2015). Major weaponry had been restored to Russia's victory parades in 2008 on the eve of Russia's invasion of Georgia (*Gutterman, 2015*). Perhaps to emphasize Russia's preparedness to contend with any foreign aggression, the 2015 parade featured nuclear missiles as well as previewing a newly designed Russian Armata T-14 battle tank (*Grove, 2015*). Western European and US leaders boycotted the event. Putin ignored the slight and proceeded apace in the close company of Chinese President Xi Jinping as he had when President Obama refused to attend the Sochi Olympics in protest over Russian homophobic legislation on gay rights.

We can also see an instance of the Russian regime's ongoing efforts to highlight Putin's toughness in the face of Western challenges in the television spots advertising his "big press conference" in mid-December 2014. One of these ads featured clips from Putin's speeches, where, among other things, he pointed out that Crimea and Sevastopol were returning to Russia; that the destruction in Eastern Ukraine could not be allowed; and that "politically motivated" sanctions by the West were a mistake. Putin also noted that "Russia will not change its orientation" (with a sly smile – making an allusion to sexual orientation), and was shown firmly stating, "A bear doesn't ask permission from anybody" (*Bol'shaia Press-Konferentsiia Prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina, 2014*). The second ad echoed this resolute tone, using only short video clips and images over a dramatic musical soundtrack heavy on drums. Without any narration, viewers were shown various scenes of destruction, including Kiev's Maidan Square in flames, a beheading in the desert, and massive flooding, along with footage of falling ruble exchange rates. While these images were interspersed with more uplifting ones – of Russian cosmonauts and Olympic athletes – the overall message appeared to be that the world was a dangerous place. A strong leader was needed to confront the forces of chaos that were threatening Russia, and to manage to achieve victory over any foes despite such travails (*Vladimir Putin Press Conference 2014 – Teaser Trailer, 2014*).

The regime's contention that Western economic sanctions constituted an effort to weaken Russia, rather than to punish the regime's aggressive moves against a neighboring sovereign state, did not fall on deaf ears. Most Russians were not inclined to believe that the sanctions imposed by the United States and European Union were a response to Russian policy in Ukraine. As of December 2014, 72 percent of Russians polled said they believed that the main purpose of Western sanctions was "to weaken and humiliate Russia" (*Levada-Tsentr, 2014*). Only 14 percent thought that the sanctions were in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea (an effort "to restore the geopolitical balance that had been disturbed by the joining of Crimea to Russia"), while 6 percent said the purpose of the sanctions was "to stop the war, destruction and human casualties in Eastern Ukraine" (*Litovkin, 2014; Levada-Tsentr, 2014*).

Indeed, Russians blamed the United States for the Ukrainian crisis. According to a Levada-Center poll in December 2014, 48 percent of respondents believed that it was the United States' "attempt to organize the next 'color' revolution in Ukraine" that had led to the crisis in that state, and 56 percent believed that it was mainly Western influence "trying to pull Ukraine into the orbit of [Western] political interests" that had brought people into the streets of Kiev (*Levada-Tsentr, 2014*). Likewise, 67 percent of Russians polled thought the Western reaction to the "events in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine" could best be explained by a "hostile attitude toward Russia, and the desire to seize the moment to exert pressure on Russia" such as by applying sanctions (*Levada-Tsentr, 2014*).

By the middle of Putin's third presidential term, an anti-Western tone had become popular and increasingly sharp. In September 2014, anti-American views had reached their "highest level since the collapse of the Soviet Union" (*Sherlock, 2014*). While Russia is not a democracy, the regime does have reason to care about public support (*Hale, 2014, 74*). And the Russian public, like publics around the globe, understands gender – ideas about masculinity and femininity. Thus an effective authority-building method was not only to portray Putin as strong and manly and therefore as a good leader for Russia, but simultaneously to paint Russia's American and other Western opponents as weak, effeminate and insufficiently manly compared to Putin, and thus deserving of disregard or even condemnation.

This tactic has been visible in the contemporary conflict over Ukraine in the depiction in the Russian media and social media of President Putin, President Obama, and other political leaders with regard to their relative masculinity. One emblematic example of the notion of putting down the masculinity of one's foreign opponents was in the Russian news in late July 2014, just after the United States imposed a new round of sanctions on Russia, and in the wake of the shooting down of Flight MH 17 in Eastern Ukraine, when Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's deputy prime minister, tweeted out a pair of photos side by side. One showed Putin holding and petting a leopard, while the other showed Barack Obama holding and cuddling a white poodle. The caption read, "We have different values and different allies," and the implication was that a mere poodle was all Obama could handle, whereas Putin displayed his calm mastery over a leopard – a potentially dangerous wild animal – and thus showed himself the stronger of the two men (*Hall, 2014*).

In an article examining the way Barack Obama has been portrayed in Russian political discourse, Russian social scientist *Riabova (2014)* pointed to a number of other examples where Obama had undergone de-masculinization. An October 2014 exhibit of political cartoons and drawings in Moscow, organized by *Molodaia Gvardiia* (Young Guard), the youth wing of Putin's political party, United Russia, included several artworks featuring Putin and Obama. One of these showed Putin having taken Obama down in a martial arts move, with the latter remaining on his back, arms and legs akimbo. On another poster, Putin held Obama by the ear, implying that Obama was a child being disciplined by the stronger leader. The caption read, "So, you're going to try to get your hands on Ukraine, too?" (*budesh' eshche Ukrainu trogat'*) (*Riabova, 2014, 68*). A third revealed President Obama napping at his desk in the Oval Office, while Putin, looking chipper, takes a selfie with the sleeping US leader in the background (*Molodaia Gvardiia, 2014*).

In interviews conducted by Riabova in Ivanovo (Russia), between August and September 2014, comparing Obama's and Putin's traits, respondents viewed the Russian president as having stereotypically masculine characteristics: "strong, rational,

coldblooded, taking responsibility on himself,” and regarded Obama as more feminine: “weak, emotional, indecisive, avoiding responsibility” (Riabova, 2014, 68). These results preferring Putin to Obama on the masculinity front generally reflected those found in 2007 and 2010 (Riabova and Riabov, 2010, 51; Riabova, 2014). Riabova concluded that the Russian media had made use of “representations of Putin’s and Obama’s masculinity with the intention of legitimating the authorities and justifying Russia’s right to an independent foreign policy” (Riabova, 2014, 68). This aspect of the regime’s macho-patriotic strategy was working on the public.

Charges of insufficient manliness can be applied to politically active women in opponent countries as well as to male political figures. Such rhetoric includes jibes at women for being weak (since weakness stereotypically describes the female sex, and thus makes women appear inappropriate as politicians), or for being too manly (that is to say, gender deviant), which sometimes takes the form of labeling female public figures as lesbians. The Ukraine crisis provided opportunities for several such statements. After Putin had justified the Russian occupation of Crimea as having been necessary in order to protect the Russians living there, Hillary Clinton compared Putin’s claims to statements made in 1930s Germany about safeguarding German minorities prior to Hitler’s appropriation of Polish and Czechoslovakian territory (Hillary Clinton Compares Russian President’s Actions to Hitler, 2014). Putin retorted in a French radio interview in June 2014 that it was “better not to argue with women,” adding, with regard to Clinton’s statement, “When people push boundaries too far, it’s not because they are strong but because they are weak. But maybe weakness is not the worst quality for a woman” (Schreck, 2014).

Similarly, in April 2014, a Russian television program about the female supporters of the “fascistic” anti-Yanukovich movement in Ukraine accused them of being sexually deprived, and hence politically badly behaved. The women labeled in this fashion included Dalia Grybauskaitė, the female president of Lithuania and US Assistant Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland, as well as Iryna Farion, a right-wing Ukrainian nationalist politician, Tatiana Chernovol, a journalist and Maidan activist, and Olga Bogomolets, who had coordinated emergency medical assistance on the Maidan. Labeled as “furies,” they were variously said to suffer of a range of supposed pathologies from lesbianism to sexual frustration, to account for their anti-Kremlin political inclinations. The ostensible “expert” presenting his analysis on the “Furies of the Maidan” program argued that female extremism was “always rooted not only in convictions but in some sort of sexual pathology” (quoted in Young, 2014). In short, women who publicly opposed Russian policy – whether in Ukraine or elsewhere – were deviants, clearly unsuited for politics.

As Putin’s regime settled into a fourth successive term in power, it seemed that the worse Russia’s situation got, whether diplomatically, economically, or by further military entrenchment in Ukraine, the stronger Putin’s political position at home became (Alexandrova, 2014). In part, this domestic success can be attributed to perceptions about masculinity, namely, that a “tough” leader was needed in order to prevent the West from succeeding at weakening Russia’s position internationally and economically. The vaster the enemy being confronted – from domestic NGO “spies” to NATO’s “foreign legion” in Ukraine – the better and more necessary Putin looked: strong, decisive, and dedicated to action in defense of Russia’s national welfare. And, in that context, contrasting his masculinity to that of his rivals – whether the rival was Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, or a metaphorical “gay” Europe – boosted his popularity and his perceived legitimacy at home.

Loving the leader: “grassroots” support for Putin

Putin’s popularity and the idea of his irreplaceability have been reinforced by propaganda efforts on the part of the regime and the so-called “grassroots” allies it constructs, such as the series of Kremlin-connected pro-Putin youth groups that began to crop up as soon as Putin had come to power. These groups and their public activities have helped create the impression of a communal outpouring of love and appreciation for Putin, with a focus on his strength, patriotism, and protection of Russia’s national interests. Masculinity constitutes an inseparable component of these concepts.

The first of these groups was a patriotic pro-Putin youth organization called *Idushchie Vmeste* (Walking Together). Created in 2000, it held its first mass action in May 2001. There, several thousand young people, most sporting Putin t-shirts and the slogan, “Everything is on track” (*vse putem* – a pun in Russian, as “on track” sounds similar to “Putin”), came together in Moscow to celebrate Putin’s first year as Russia’s president (Lassila, 2012, 43). The 2004 “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine served as a catalyst for the formation of Walking Together’s successor, *Nashi* (“Ours”), a youth organization designed to defend and enthusiastically support the Russian regime in power. The brainchild of Vladislav Surkov, *Nashi* was intended to help preserve the political status quo and prevent the onset of a revolution aimed at unseating the ruling regime and holding the incumbent Russian government to a more democratic set of political standards (Barry, 2011).

From the outset, *Nashi* consisted mostly of college-aged students, and soon became the face of pro-regime youth organizing (Molodezhnoe demokraticeskoe antifashistskoe dvizhenie NASHI, 2011; Borovikov, 2011). The “favorite son” of the Kremlin family, this politicized youth organization was the beneficiary of the many resources at the regime’s disposal. Having ballooned to 100,000 reported members by 2011, *Nashi* towered over the handful of liberal anti-Kremlin youth groups that managed to eek out an existence in Russia’s radically imbalanced political field (Sperling, 2015, 82–94; Jones, 2011). *Nashi*’s original purpose was to support Putin, promote Russia’s modernization, and bolster patriotism, particularly among youth. The group’s manifesto, penned in 2005, noted that Russia would need to be strong, as weakness would “turn the country into a victim of its stronger competitors.” But if Russia took advantage of its strengths, it would achieve a position of “global leadership – the task of our generation” (Manifest Molodezhnogo Dvizheniia ‘NASHI’, 2005).

Nashi’s manifesto also clearly identified the two threats to Russia’s success: the United States and international terrorism, both of which sought “to control Eurasia and the entire world.” For Russia’s youth, then, the task was to defend their state’s

“sovereignty” as their grandfathers had done against the Nazis in the Second World War. Not only did Nashi’s program statement imply parallels between Nazi fascists and the United States government, the manifesto also derided Russia’s liberal leaders in the decade after the Soviet collapse, who had “look[ed] to the West” for examples to follow, and who took Western “orders.” Rather than calling for a new regime, Nashi’s manifesto claimed that “political stability” was the linchpin of Russia’s economic progress. The group’s task was to endorse the political status quo under Putin, and prevent the return of those political forces that preferred to have Russia run from outside, “as was the case in the 1990s.” Those political forces, identified by Nashi as an “unnatural union of liberals and fascists, of Westernizers and ultranationalists, of international foundations and international terrorists,” wanted only one thing: “to undermine the first positive changes in Russia, and to permanently return the country to the era of ineffective, weak government and collapsing society” ([Manifest Molodezhnogo Dvizheniia ‘NASHI’, 2005](#)).

What Russia’s fascists and liberals had in common, Nashi’s manifesto explained, was their hatred for Putin. Nashi, on the other hand, assured its devotees that Putin, “having strengthened the state,” was the right person to take Russia forward to its “claim to leadership in the world of the 21st century.” This forward movement, however, was threatened by opposition from “internal and external opponents,” and embodied in opposition to Putin’s rule. Stressing the value of action rather than liberal “verbiage,” Nashi’s leaders encouraged youth to join in making Russia great again ([Manifest Molodezhnogo Dvizheniia ‘NASHI’, 2005](#)), and, at the national level, engaged its supporters in mass rallies and other manifestations of patriotic-political obeisance, reportedly including physical attacks on oppositionists ([Masked Men Attack NBP Activists, 2005](#)).

The pro-Putin discourse over Ukraine in 2014 embodied precisely the rhetoric of Nashi’s manifesto. The new government in Kiev was labeled as “fascist” (to link it to Nazism) and also as a set of flunkies beholden to the US State Department. Meanwhile, ongoing crackdowns against “foreign agents” within Russia bolstered the regime’s argument that Russia was faced by external enemies and an internal fifth-column. Russia’s anti-foreign-agent campaign began in March 2013. By April 2015, 52 Russian NGOs had been designated by the regime as foreign agents; these included women’s groups such as the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers and the League of Women Voters in St. Petersburg and a number of well-known human rights organizations such as Memorial and Public Verdict in Moscow ([Russia: Government against Rights Groups, 2015](#)).

Although Nashi itself crumbled after the grassroots surge of election protests in late 2011, a new pro-Putin group called *Set’* (Network), founded in 2014 ([Luhn, 2014](#)), carried on the tradition of youth support for the president. Following the “birthday gift” trend, in October 2014, for Putin’s 62nd birthday, Network produced two gifts emphasizing Putin’s achievements as an unshakeable national leader navigating a hostile international environment. The first gift was an art exhibit featuring renderings of “The Twelve Labors of Putin”, modeled after the Twelve Labors of Hercules ([Set’ Storonnikov Vladimira Putina, 2014](#)). Here Putin could be seen – among other things – shielding Russia from the foreign economic sanctions imposed after Russia’s takeover of Crimea – where the sanctions were portrayed as a multi-headed serpent (the Hydra). In the painting, Putin has wasted no time, having already chopped off the hydra-head that belonged to the US, and is wielding his shield and preparing a similar outcome for the EU, Japan, and Canada ([Rosenberg, 2014](#)). Network’s second gift was a series of giant patriotic murals painted on exterior walls in seven Russian cities, each illustrating one of Putin’s achievements for Russia: Strength, Remembrance, Arctic, Sovereignty, History, Security, and Olympics – making an impressive physical anagram for the Russian word for “thank you” (*spasibo*) ([Luhn, 2014](#)).

As Network’s press secretary explained, under Putin, Russia was a winning state: “We took Crimea, held the Olympics and started winning hockey championships ... Before, we were losing all the time” ([Luhn, 2014](#)). With Putin in charge, the state, like its leader, had become a unit that could not be pushed around, and that would not hesitate to use force, ostensibly in self-defense. Along those lines, in August 2014, during his visit to the annual Kremlin-sponsored youth gathering, Camp Seliger, when speaking to the assembled campers Putin noted that Russia’s military forces, with their nuclear weapons, were prepared for any “aggression” that might come Russia’s way from foreign countries, and added, “It’s best not to mess with us” ([Reuters, 2014](#)). This “tough talk” symbolically suggested that the speaker – like the state – was prepared to use violence in the event of threats. The annexation of Crimea earlier that year, and the acknowledgement of Russian military presence there (even if not in the fighting in Eastern Ukraine) matched this “tough guy” rhetoric.

As noted above, manifestations of political masculinity are bolstered by attractive women’s public allegiance to the leader. With regard to Ukraine, a “spontaneous” outpouring of love for Putin from a female fan appeared on YouTube in late January 2015 in the form of a new song by Mashani, a Russian female singer from Novosibirsk. The catchy pop tune, “My Putin” (*Moi Putin*), lauded Putin for his fearless ability to face the “war that threatens on all fronts,” and his willingness to “challenge” those who stand in the way of his goals. In the music video, a tall, slender, woman with ribbons in her long hair wears a tricolor dress patterned after the Russian flag, and proclaims her delight that Putin has taken Crimea, and – more surprisingly – that he’s going to “revive the [Soviet] Union.” She is also shown in a blue-and-yellow dress – the colors of the Ukrainian flag – looking alarmed and sad, trapped inside a bombed-out brick building, seeking help from Putin. The chorus, which she sings in the guise of both “Ukraine” and “Russia,” in her different outfits, brings together Putin’s machismo in foreign policy and his appeal as a man: “You’re Putin/I want to be with you/I’m calling after you/My Putin, my dear Putin/Take me with you/I want to be with you” ([Mashany Music, 2015](#)). In this artistic rendering, female sexuality was marshaled to illustrate Putin’s desirability as a man and as a state leader. According to “My Putin,” not only does Crimea “want to be” with Putin and his country, but so does the whole of Ukraine.

Conclusion

A personality cult is a political legitimation strategy. It may appear excessive or even absurd at times, but its function is straightforward: to secure the leader's position under circumstances where democratic methods of legitimation are absent or weak. Putin-era Russia falls into the latter category. As Colton (2007) showed, post-Soviet Russian presidential elections were both pluralist and competitive in the 1990s and early 2000s, but that competitiveness declined over time. In 1996, Yeltsin had been forced into a second round election (having won only 38 percent in the first round), and in March 2000 Putin won his first presidential election with only 53 percent of the vote – and multiple candidates with some appeal to the population had made earning that first-round victory far from a surety. By 2004, however, Putin won the presidential election easily, with 71 percent of the vote, confronting opponents of no significant stature; the voters either liked Putin and saw him as capable, or simply couldn't "imagine" anyone other than him occupying the position and handling its demands as well as Putin had (Colton, 2007).

The outcome of the next two presidential elections was hardly in question; Putin's handpicked successor, Dmitry Medvedev, pulled in 71 percent of the vote in 2008 during Putin's term off, and in 2012 Putin comfortably returned to office with the support of nearly 64 percent of the voters. Regularly held elections against the backdrop of an uneven playing field for political opposition groups, limited freedoms of press and assembly, and an executive branch that used its power to limit political pluralism while keeping the media spotlight on the incumbent president, signified Russia's descent into what Levitsky and Way (2010) call "competitive authoritarianism." Under these circumstances, an excessive focus on the leader – including a personality cult of sorts – serves to convince parts of the population of the incumbent's right to rule.

The way that Russia's national strength and brazenness in foreign policy and Putin's assertiveness about the superiority of his rule at home have been pitched to the public goes hand in hand with masculinity. Putin's visual and verbal displays of machismo are perhaps the most obvious illustrations of this phenomenon, but as we have seen, female sexuality, too, has been used in the service of male political authority in Putin's Russia.

Machismo has been mobilized as evidence of political leaders' legitimate authority in regimes of varied type and geographic location; it is neither peculiar to authoritarian regimes nor to Russia (Sperling, 2015, 19–26). What, then, can the Russian case tell us about the circumstances under which a "macho personality cult" might arise?

Part of the explanation may be individual. Putin—given his career trajectory and his lifestyle preferences for avoiding alcohol and embracing physical fitness—was well suited to be framed as a macho strongman who could reverse Russia's waning power and oversee the country's resurgence. But a larger part of the explanation goes beyond the Russian case and is rooted in a widespread, if not universal, phenomenon: the cultural framing of masculinity under patriarchy makes the assertion of masculinity a vehicle for power. Misogyny, which underlies patriarchal ideology, reduces women and femininity to a lower level of status and power than men and masculinity. Traditional masculinity therefore enables male political leaders to assert their power over others who can be identified or characterized as traditionally feminine. Political actors in contests over power, then, can readily adopt the use of gender norms—including machismo and homophobia — as a way to justify the power that they have or seek.

However, political actors' strategic use of masculinity as part of a legitimation strategy requires widespread societal acceptance of gender stereotypes, and a patriarchal culture that privileges maleness and masculinity over femaleness and femininity. Also, it works only when the public political use of those norms is not likely to be arrested by a strong feminist movement or another cultural force objecting to misogyny itself. In the Russian case, the availability of a patriarchal cultural idiom and the absence of a sizeable feminist movement made the use of politicized masculinity possible in a way that it would not be in a community where overt sexism was no longer seen as acceptable in the political realm (Sperling, 2015, 4).

To some extent, the choice to wield masculinity and other gender norms to devalue opponents and recruit supporters is conscious and, to some extent, unconscious, especially for people whose interpretative toolboxes lack a feminist analysis. Generally speaking, our choices are constrained by the dominant paradigms of discourse and action in which we are immersed. Political actors cannot help but engage gender norms in their actions and speech, whether they do it on purpose or not. But whether political actors' use of gender norms is conscious or unconscious, it is still an inextricable part of the context in which legitimation strategies are chosen. In the end, the more we learn about the links between masculinity and political legitimation strategies, the more complete our picture will be of how power reproduces itself – and about how power can be contested—in Russia and elsewhere (Sperling, 2015, 6).

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