

Cultural and social condition of Russian system of power. The role of strong leaders in Russia.



Masculinity of Russian President Vladimir Putin



Vladimir Putin in all his glory



Haven't you seen Putin riding a bear?
That's what you get to do when you don't
eat bread



My name is Putin, Vladimir Putin




A true man of the world



He loves aiming guns at things.



Putin is the most wanted man in Russia

- Levada Center:
 - Sex appeal - the most important quality Russians look for in a partner - topping the list with 60% of respondents.
 - “good looks” (59%) 
 - “even temperament” (42%)
 - “empathy” (5%)
 - “an ability to overcome ill fortune” (1%)

“The most eligible bachelor in the country!”

- Secrets of the Stars magazine:
 - Most of the Russian celebrities questioned by the magazine said they would consider marrying Mr Putin
 - except former gymnast Alina Kabaeva, long rumoured to be his mistress, who refused to comment. “I like Putin for his brain, his eloquence and his masculinity



Hypermasculinity and Power

- Putin's instrumental deployment of hypermasculinity is as a strategy for creating not just legitimacy, but also power.
- Putin's public scripts and behaviors have, in different ways at different times, been overwhelmingly derived and embellished from a masculine menu that would be impermissible for Russian women.
 - They also frequently demonstrate 🗣️, in words and gestures,
- His active and absolute dominance over his interlocutors in ways that would be unacceptable for other, subordinated men.
- The creation of Putin's image, his scenario of power, becomes a "hegemonic project,"



Putin - person of the ruler

- Vyacheslav Volodin, Russian official, speaking at the Valdai Club, 22 October 2014:
 - The attacks against Putin are attacks against Russia. Without Putin, there is no Russia.
- 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

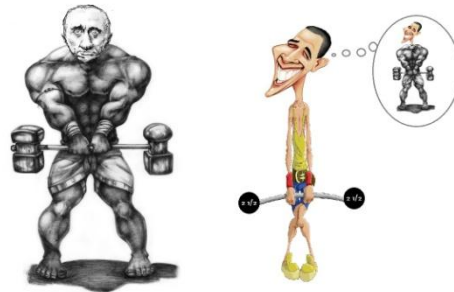


Putin and his image

- Putin's persona stands out as gendered in three distinct registers:
 1. visual imagery (the Russian Marlboro Man);
 2. domination of the political sphere through verbal attacks on other men;
 3. a series of crude, macho aphorisms which have been collected as "Putinisms."

- Richard Wortman - with regard to the Russian tsars and tsarinas, a “scenario of power” can be understood as a set of political messages conveyed as much through symbolism and signals, ceremonies and rituals, as through texts and doctrines.
 - Putin’s symbolic actions have been overwhelmingly derived from a masculine menu that would be impermissible for Russian women
 - (Russian has stronger gender differences particularly with regard to crude language than does English)

- The creation of Putin's image, his scenario of power, becomes a "hegemonic project"
 - is deeply imbued with implied gender dominance and at times even gender violence.
 - In mirror image to George W. Bush's hypermasculinization of the American, Putin creates a muscular equation of himself and the Russian state
 - he dominates both the internal and the external landscape by mobilizing language and imagery that carry deeply masculine overtones in the Russian political world.



Putin as the icon

- Putin and his handlers have used his display of masculinity to demonstrate his dominant position in iconic form,
 - a form that is highly stylized and repeated in order to instill a certain political sentiment and loyalty in the population at large.
 - This stylized representation or iconicity in turn works on three distinct, yet interrelated planes:
 - the pictorial/visual;
 - the interpersonal;
 - and the verbal.



- Putin “above politics”
 - a positive value in the Russian context where the political is usually viewed as “dirty,” rigged, unfair.
 - Because he disdains politics and uses tough language, Putin appears to be a heroic figure.



- A proto-ideology or set of defining ideas underlying the official ideology
 - it serves to fill the vacuum created by the Russian leader’s refusal to articulate an ideology that is more than strings of empty words (“sovereign democracy,” “dictatorship of law”).
 - the “masculinity” in the scenario relies on the preverbal, the emotional, the taken-for-granted, even sometimes the sexually charged.


- Putin appeals to different groups in the population:
 - He becomes the Everyman,
 - the regular Joe.
 - The masculinity at the core of his self-presentation tends to preclude political discussion rather than open up issues for public examination and contestation because it is made to appear “natural” and “spontaneous.”

- He is the heroic commander-in-chief:
 - claiming he will establish a “dictatorship of the law;”
 - he positions himself as the outlaw threatening to “rub out” the bandits. He is the high-handed autocrat dressing down ministers who appear to fail;
 - he uses adolescent, street language to chastise his viewers for “chewing snot,” that is, failing to accomplish anything.
- Putin favors the expressions of the lowest segments of society (iazyk podonkov , literally “the language of the scum”) in some contexts,
 - while emulating the elite in others, singing the American popular song “Blueberry Hill” and wearing designer suits.

“Blueberry Hill”



Putin and street language

- The extent of Putin's street masculinity, in particular, is generally not well known in the West.
- His crude sayings are often not even translated in the western media,
 - “unclean” , the “abject” language
 - Putin's speech is strewn with references to sweat, snot, blood, bodily fluids, infection and castration.
- In Russian these are both transgressive in terms of class
 - the intelligentsia would not use such expressions 
- and privileged in terms of gender
 - Russian holds whole categories of sexualized and criminal language as outside the bounds permissible for women
- They also demonstrate his domination as the one person who can use this kind of language
 - the Russian Duma passed restrictive laws in 2003, 2005 and again in 2014 explicitly banning obscenities and vulgarity in both official language and in public media
- For women especially such language is taboo,
 - as they are subject to a strict regimen of “politeness,” prohibiting crude language and participation in politics as too “dirty” .

Putin's cult of personality

- Putin's "celebrity status,"
- "an action hero"
- a "macho sex-object"
- outlaw masculinity;
- pop-star virility;
- dominance over other men (especially in the famous Khodorkovsky case).



Putin about gays



Good and bad guy

- The heroic law-and-order Putin appeared at roughly the same time as the outlaw Putin:
 - “I Want a Man like Putin” came at the same time as the Putin who attacked others
 - Several of these intensive image-making campaigns also took place in the months immediately prior to an election period (in 2000, 2004, 2008)

Mobilizing charisma or without charisma?

- 1999 - Putin was rather lacking in charisma.
 - he was the fifth prime minister in eighteen months.
 - journalists from around the world asked repeatedly “who is Mr Putin?”
- Vyacheslav Nikonov described the new president in terms of his absence of ideology: “He is not an ideologist” – 2000
 - “I am against the restoration in Russia of an official state ideology in any form” (Putin 1999)

- *First Person* (2000), Putin himself commented on the problem of the weakness of the center in Russian politics:
 - *I think that many people believe the President had ceased to be the center of power. Before, they behaved quite loyally. If need be, I will simply act in such a way as to guarantee that no one has such illusions anymore.*
- This willingness to break people's illusions, often with threatening language, was the first step in the creation of the image of Putin as "tough guy."
 - This was not an ideology, in the classic sense of the word, but rather a stance, a form of posturing that demonstrated Putin's power (vlast') more than his authority.
 - It was also a stance that relied on a hypermasculine resort to the threat of violence.

A warrior and a tough guy

- Intertwining the heroic (in imagery) and the tough (in language), Putin's handlers made sure the media was saturated with the new scenario of **power of the warrior**.



- Putin's use of vulgar, macho language that both shocked and thrilled many Russians:
 - especially the famous “rub them out in the outhouse” (mochit' v sortire). - On 24 September 1999 :
 - We will pursue the terrorists everywhere. Pardon me for saying so, but if we catch them in the bathroom, we'll rub them out even in the outhouse” (Vy uzh menia izvinite, v tualete poimaem, my i v sortire ikh zamochim
 - One expert: no politician has ever been so fantastically vulgar. Ordinary people love it because it's the way they speak themselves.
 - They think he's less hypocritical than other politicians
 - Putin's language gave him credibility as someone “real” and therefore democratic, in contrast to the fancy but empty phrase-mongering Gorbachev and the bombastic Yeltsin

- The phrase “to rub out” began to be used by others:
 - In February 2000, when he was still a month away from the elections for the presidency, Putin met with 500 oligarchs and other notables, whom many in society considered to be one of his biggest problems (because of their wealth and general fractiousness). When someone asked if those who are parasitical on the government should be rubbed out (mochtit’), Putin answered
 - “Absolutely. We must exclude the possibility of anyone sucking up to power (prisosalsia)”
- At this same meeting he was adamant that he did not want his trusted people to make “a sweet, syrupy image” of him as a candidate (“Chto est’ chto” 2000).
 - Here he contrasted his gangster image (mochtit’) with a possibly feminine image (“sweet, syrupy”) and rejected “sucking up” (etymologically close to nursing, sosat’).

- Larry King asked Putin on American TV about the Kursk submarine incident of 12 August 2000.
 - “It sank,” Putin told.
 - Some commentators viewed this as a scandal (Putin’s “Kurskgate”), revealing his Soviet-style failure to protect the population of his country
 - Others, by contrast, viewed Putin’s response as “natural and human”.

Putin as a pop star

- In 2002, Putin's acolytes decided to try a "pop star" approach to the new President's image:
 - In the summer and fall of 2002 (on the eve of Putin's 50th birthday) a new song appeared out of nowhere entitled "I Want a Man Like Putin."
 - the narrator lambastes a recent boyfriend and praises the masculinity of Putin as a better alternative.
- The song's producer, Nikolai Gattello, at the time the official spokesman for the Russian Supreme Court and himself the grandson of a famous Soviet pilot, claimed that he sponsored the song as part of what he considered his civic obligation (obshchestvennaia rabota)
- The success of the song - the beginning of creating an explicitly civic (i.e. nonmilitary) masculine image for President Putin,
 - song has been repeatedly sung at gatherings of the Nashi youth movement, a group which also appeals to young people's group emotions and visceral patriotism.

I Want a Man Like Putin



Unglamorous side of Putin

- In fall 2002 Putin began to attack the manhood of interlocutors who displeased him:
 - In Brussels he told a reporter asking about Chechnya that he should consider becoming circumcised in Moscow: “We have specialists on this question. I will recommend they do the operation so that nothing grows back
 - Putin’s threat of castration aggressively threatens the bodily integrity of the other man, enforcing his position as the one who can make extreme statements, again a taboo for other politicians, male and especially female.
- On 29 January 2003, Putin asked a group of students in Kiev why Russian – Ukrainian relations compared so poorly with the European Union with its common currency and visa.
 - “But what about us? . . . We’re still chewing our snot and dabbling in politics”.

- In a press conference in January 2006 Putin managed to use multiple vulgar phrases reminiscent of adolescent males, telling the audience that his government had not settled Ukrainian gas prices arbitrarily “by pulling them out of our nose”
 - and ending with a comment that the journalists present (presumably male and female) should probably end the long, almost four-hour session because he doubted any of them were wearing “diapers”.

- In October 2006 at a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Putin commented over an open microphone:
 - Say hello to your president [Katsav]. It turns out he's quite a powerful man! He raped ten women. I didn't expect that of him. He surprised us all. We all envy him!
 - (Israeli President Moshe Katsav was under investigation on charges of rape and sexual harassment).

Saakashvili's balls

- Putin:
 - "I am going to hang Saakashvili by the balls".
- "Hang him?," asked Mr Sarkozy.
- "Why not?," retorted Putin:
 - "The Americans hanged Saddam Hussein."

News Site of the Year | The 2008 Newspaper Awards

TIMESONLINE

November 14, 2008

Vladimir Putin 'wanted to hang Georgian President Saakashvili by the balls'



TIMES RECOMMENDS

- ▶ Putin 'wanted to hang Georgian leader by ba
- ▶ German car town falls to recession
- ▶ Nasa shuttle to take s into space

PARIS WEBLOG

- Putin after 2014:
 - Russia will not change its orientation” (with a sly smile making an allusion to sexual orientation),
 - “A bear doesn't ask permission from anybody”

The Marlboro Man

- Photos from Putin's vacation in the Tuva region of Siberia with his friend Prince Albert II of Monaco and Emergency Minister Sergei Shoygu.



- The heroic Putin astride his Siberian horse combined clichéd views of the Russian love of nature with the iconic imagery of the Marlboro Man
 - Putin as “national leader” and “father of the nation”
 - we was preparing to the end of his second term and Russia with new president (Medvedev)
 - The end of 2007:
 - For Putin” (za Putina!)
 - “Putin’s Plan”
 - » posters festooned the streets of all the major cities, urging people to vote in the December Duma elections even though Putin was not a candidate himself.

- December 2007:
 - Putin: “I am certain that Dmitry Anatolevich [Medvedev] will cope with the work of the highest post in government in a worthy manner”
 - Putin himself, he implied, would be the judge of what and who was worthy. Medvedev might only “cope” with the work, but he, Putin, would be checking.
- Putin patronized Medvedev as a kind of younger brother, a secondary male:
 - In fact, Russian observers noted that Medvedev often used the formal form of “you” (vy) to Putin, while Putin used the informal (ty) to Medvedev.
 - Medvedev as president was limited to the economy and national issues, not national security and foreign relations.

Feminized Medvedev

- Throughout the campaign period Medvedev was actively “feminized” in the press by association with the so-called “national projects”:
 - housing for veterans, healthcare, agriculture and ecology.
 - He opened maternity hospitals in the provinces, spoke about housing and healthcare, all projects of a distinctly less “political” nature than Kosovo or Chechnya, and none of them in Moscow.
 - Medvedev attended the Second Mothers’ Forum in Novosibirsk.

- At the United Russia Congress that nominated Medvedev in December 2007, a journalist from Kommersant asked delegates their reactions to the presidential nominee:
 - “I am satisfied,” answered Iosif Kobzon, a famous pop singer and Duma deputy. “I’ve always dreamed that a woman would become president.”
 - “But how is it you are satisfied?” the journalist asked with surprise.
 - “He’s perfectly suited,” explained Kobzon.
 - “Because in this position he will fulfill the role of a woman?” the journalist asked.
- “A woman,” repeated Kobzon, “is less vulnerable to moral failings than a man, you must agree. And it’s exactly the role of Medvedev in the government to take care of children, the family, the home. In that sense they have nominated the candidate I wanted.”

Conclusions

- Hypermasculinity:
 - the answer lies in the Russian political tradition of using iconography to demonstrate the superiority of the national leader, be it tsar or General Secretary of the Party
 - a personality cult is a political legitimation strategy
 - strategic use of masculinity as part of a legitimation strategy requires widespread societal acceptance of gender stereotypes, and a patriarchal culture.
- Aims of that politics:
 - (1) appearing to concentrate all power in Putin's hands as the dominant male;
 - (2) making it appear that he rules above the fray of ordinary politics and so is untouchable;
 - (3) establishing the connection of the ruler with the "masses" because of his rough and hence apparently "natural," unscripted masculinity.

