

MASCULINITY RESTORED?

PUTIN'S RUSSIA AND TRUMP'S AMERICA

by
sarah ashwin
and
jennifer utrata

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Since his inauguration U.S. President Donald Trump has been dogged by accusations regarding his relationship with Russia, culminating in the recent Mueller investigation. What appears to endure throughout the tumultuous news cycle is the tight relationship between President Trump and Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin. Given Cold War legacies of distrust, this unconventional “bromance” between the two world leaders may seem puzzling. Leaving aside accusations of corruption, they appear to be united by nationalism, a disdain for

the rule-based global order, and a particular approach to gender. Here we focus on the close affinities revealed by a gender lens on these leaders' strategies and performances.

Trump and Putin rely on similar projections of gendered power to maximize their appeal to voters. Both embrace an idea of masculinity that is crass and sexist, reveling in bad manners while openly violating norms of basic civility (let alone political correctness, which has not taken root in Russia). Certainly, Trump's boorish, brash, and impulsively petulant displays of manliness contrast somewhat with Putin's more controlled, restrained, "ordinary guy" demeanor in public settings. However, these differences are relatively insignificant. The key point is that both leaders rely heavily on gender—ideas of masculinity and femininity, in this case performances of almost cartoonish masculine bravado—in order to appeal to the broader public, and especially their base.

Because both Trump and Putin command attention on the world stage, these hypermasculine performances are not merely national in scope, but shape other places in our globalized world. For example, Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro, elected in October 2018, is another leader mobilizing misogyny and homophobia to advance his career. Gender is often mobilized in the service of state power, the nature of its deployment depending on the political project to which it is hitched. Trump seems to have stolen a page directly from Putin's playbook in his willingness to use hypermasculine bravado to appeal to men who are downwardly mobile or anxious about their status and feel nostalgic for a stronger, supposedly "greater" state.

Just as Russia's political sphere has become more masculinized since 2000 under Putin's leadership, in Trump we witness a push for a more masculinized United States? What might Russia teach us about politicians who mobilize gender as a tool of state power? Given Russia's authoritarian tendencies and weaker democratic institutions, the Russian case is distinctive from the United States. Nevertheless, Russia can be seen as an extreme case of gender politics writ large. As Trump engages in increasingly authoritarian moves in order to solidify his power and diminish his many critics, this is an opportune moment to learn from Russia.

soviet legacies: a stalled gender revolution

Like Putin today, the Russian revolutionaries of 1917 mobilized gender, but rather than seeking to bolster the church and patriarchal family they were keen to destroy both as bulwarks of the old regime of Tsardom. Through "liberating women" from their officially-sanctioned subordination—prior to the Revolution women owed husbands complete obedience, marriage was a sacrament controlled by the Russian Orthodox Church, divorce was almost impossible, and fathers had the ultimate power and control over their children—Bolshevik revolutionaries aspired to



In support of *Pussy Riot*, a Russian feminist punk-rock collective that stages politically provocative impromptu performances in Moscow, on subjects such as the status of women in Russia.

create a new kind of individual. Just one year after the Revolution, the 1918 Code attempted to equalize the rights of women and men in marriage, made it easier to marry and divorce, eliminated men's rights to exercise power over wives and children in families, and abolished the church's authority over family issues. While these advances are important, and in many ways surpassed the legislation in Europe and the United States at the time, the liberation was always partial. Women were liberated from men in private families not for their own sake (women were still seen as more culturally "backward" than men) but in order to "free" them to serve the workers' state. This state-imposed emancipation of women led to women's full participation in the paid workforce. However, liberation mostly stopped there. The Soviet state did aspire to socialize domestic and care work, but never challenged the gender division of such labor, taking it for granted that women would staff the new services. Although the state developed a network of nurseries and kindergartens, Soviet women were still expected to combine paid work with domestic labor and childbearing, which was conceived as a demographic duty to the state.

Men were expected to realize themselves fully in their work for the state or in military service. There was no public call for men to share the load of the work at home or with children. Men were seen as having little or no place at home apart from contributing their paycheck. While this more limited expectation might seem more manageable than women's interminable double burden, men who had a hard time advancing or realizing themselves at work struggled to find an alternate source of identity. Many become demoralized and turned to drinking heavily—in Russia a culturally acceptable, compensatory expression of masculinity.

In spite of its radical potential, Soviet Russia's gender revolution was stalled from the very beginning. Without a revolution at home, many Russian women rightly considered their "liberation"

false. The Soviet state proclaimed the “Woman Question” solved by 1930. Instead the double burden of paid and unpaid work borne by women was normalized. Women’s struggles—working for pay while cooking, cleaning, shopping on public transport for groceries in stores with limited consumer options, and even managing their husbands’ expected leisure drinking of vodka—became invisible.

Traditional gender ideals of women’s “natural” propensity for domesticity and childrearing continued throughout decades of Soviet rule even though women were everywhere present in the full-time workforce. Such assumptions also informed gender pay and status gaps in employment. In a country where grassroots feminism was suppressed along with all other forms of independent organization, women mostly accepted that they shouldered more responsibilities than men. They could divorce an unduly burdensome drunken husband or complain to the state if a childcare slot was not made available, but women had to

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rely on the state and accept their many responsibilities for paid work on top of their hefty unpaid work in families.

Many men internalized their marginalized place in family life, accepting that society expected them to lead in the public sphere and focus on earning money. The events of the Second World War, where Russia lost over 20 million citizens, mostly men, further entrenched a normalized gender crisis where women ultimately bore primary responsibility for keeping families afloat alongside men’s absence or more marginalized place in families. In stark contrast to women in the West in the postwar period, who were pushed out of jobs to make room for returning men, Soviet women were expected to remain in the workforce—on top of all of their domestic and childcare responsibilities. Given such unbalanced gender relations, it is unsurprising that divorce levels rose steeply throughout the post-WW2 era. Nevertheless, the gender tensions of late communism were minor compared to what followed during the post-Soviet economic crisis.

post-soviet paradoxes: do russians need “a man like putin”?

While Russians’ experiences in the Soviet Union varied widely, most viewed the demise of the Soviet Union in late 1991 as a profound loss. Hopes that marketization would improve living standards were quickly dashed as ordinary Russians faced a catastrophic fall in living standards, sky-rocketing inequality, and symptoms of economic dislocation such as routine non-payment of wages. Rather than longing for “communism,” Russians instead felt abandoned by the state and mourned a secure and predictable way of life. During the tumultuous 1990s, “democracy” became a synonym for disorder, ethnic civil wars erupted, and many witnessed an unfair property grab during a privatization process widely seen as illegitimate. The failures of the first Chechen war (1994-6) and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 added to this cocktail of losses a feeling of national humiliation. And who was leading the former super-power? Boris Yeltsin, whom many Russians saw as a drunken and incompetent buffoon, kowtowing to the West rather than standing up for Russia.

Both women and men suffered during this period, but perhaps the challenge to men’s gender identities was greater. Women’s employment and household management acquired enhanced significance during the economic crisis, whereas

many men found it increasingly difficult to perform as primary breadwinners in the face of unemployment and falling real wages. Men’s life expectancy plummeted during the 1990s to an average of only 58, where it hovered until 2001. Russia still has one of the world’s largest gender gaps in life expectancy and in drinking rates, with men drinking more and dying, on average, 11 years earlier than women. Alcohol abuse is a major contributor to premature male deaths. Poor and unemployed men are particularly vulnerable. The humiliation experienced by many men thus paralleled the perceived national loss of status.

Enter Putin. Putin used these and other “losses” to remake Russia’s image as well as his own, demonstrating that Russians needed “Someone Like Putin” (also the title of a 2004 hit song) to turn things around. When he took charge in 2000, Putin’s focus was on restoring order and solidifying state power. He cultivated a sanitized version of hypermasculinity to downplay traditional excesses like masculine drinking and smoking while emphasizing athletic prowess and toughness. In marked contrast to the chaos of the 1990s, economic growth from 2000 to 2008 largely resolved problems such as wage delays and living standards began to rise.



A protester holds a poster at Russian Internal Ministry building in Moscow.

Given this context, Vladimir Putin was at first welcomed by many Russians as a force for order and sobriety, the kind of strong ruler that Russia needed given how unpredictable and challenging it had become to just survive in the post-Soviet period. Putin spoke of national pride and patriotism while promising to make Russia great again. Not only did he describe the collapse of the Soviet Union as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century,” he stoked Russians’ desire to regain prestige globally.

How has he done so? Putin deploys hypermasculinity using visual imagery—the iconic image of Putin riding a horse bare-chested in Siberia is the most famous example—alongside humiliating verbal attacks on other men and strategic punishment of rivals. Putin’s “street masculinity”—his use of crude sayings strewn with taboo references to sweat, snot, bodily fluids, blood, and more—is a major part of his persona as not only a man, but a “muzhik.” While *muzhik* originally referred to a male peasant, it currently refers to a national, high-ranking, “real” masculinity, implying a contrast to less authentic versions of manliness. Putin’s heroic masculinity is grounded in the body, appearing shirtless and embracing extreme sports.

Whether American or Russian, ordinary people, too, draw on commonsense ideas about gender as they make sense of what is happening on the evening news. In Utrata’s research in Kaluga, a provincial city in Northwest Russia, many women complained about Russian men’s weakness, unreliability, and affinity for drinking vodka while in the same breath comparing this deficient masculinity to Vladimir Putin’s sober, reliable version of stoic manhood. “We have so few real men in Russia!” Irina, a 36-year-old teacher, exclaimed. “Our country needs a strong leader who doesn’t drink and who knows how to get things done.” Similarly, Oleg, a 37-year old engineer, observed, “Putin will remake Russia if he can manage to get other corrupt people out of our government. We hope he’ll make us proud of Russia again.” Appreciation for Putin’s perceived strength

brought him approval ratings frequently over 75 percent for his first decade in power.

However, from 2011 on, the situation changed. Russia’s recovery from the 2008 global crash was sluggish, and Putin’s popularity began to dip. His return to the Presidency in 2012 was met with unprecedented protests. At this point Putin intensified his use of gender politics and “remasculinization” began in earnest. The regime, in alliance with the Orthodox Church, began constructing opponents as alien “others,” using gender traditionalism as a signifier of Russianness. Melding nationalist and patriarchal themes, both Putin and church leaders have presented demographic decline as a threat to national security, with abortion rights being restricted in 2011 as part of a pronatalist agenda focused on women’s maternal “duty.” The “punk prayer” of the feminist opposition group Pussy Riot, performed in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in February 2012, provided a focus for this neo-traditional backlash, which continued with new laws such as banning gay “propaganda” in 2013.

The backlash has continued recently with a February 2017 law decriminalizing domestic violence, in spite of Russia’s serious domestic violence problem. This elicited protests by local feminists and an international outcry. A new draft law defining (albeit inadequately according to experts) domestic violence was under discussion in late 2019. Nevertheless, those proposing

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the new law have faced intimidation and threats, with the law denounced by conservatives as an attack on the Russian family. In a country where the phrase “if he beats you, he loves you” is a familiar adage—indeed 1 in 4 of Utrata’s respondents brought up incidents of domestic violence without being prompted in interviews—the politicization of domestic abuse by conservatives is alarming.

Alongside such serious threats to women’s civil rights, the bravado continues at various levels from the most serious to almost comical. Played out with a tough guy demeanor, the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014—which was mainly greeted with euphoria in Russia—was an act of national

“restoration” with geopolitical implications. At the other end of the spectrum, a show that rivaled “Keeping Up with the Kardashians” (but with the staid title of “Moscow. Kremlin. Putin.”) follows the world leader on his weekly activities and presents them in hourlong episodes. Timed to address lower than usual approval ratings after government plans to raise retirement ages were introduced in 2018, the show attempts to bolster the cult of Putin.

lessons for trump’s america?

Ordinary citizens live in a world shaped by gender (as well as race, class, sexual orientation, and other structures influencing our lives). Understanding these divergent experiences reveals persistent inequalities. Russian women are in the paid workforce, and Russia has one of the lowest gender gaps in labor market participation globally. Yet in the short term, the prognosis for a more progressive vision of relations between Russian women and men looks rather grim. Russia is currently experiencing one of the most repressive periods of the post-Soviet era, alongside the resurgent power of the Russian Orthodox Church, rising traditionalism, backward domestic violence policies, and anti-LGBTQ legislation.

Though the forms of masculinity differ, both Putin and Trump have successfully melded and mobilized economic, national, racial, and gender anxieties. They have utilized a perceived crisis of manhood and breadwinning, portraying families and their respective nations as under threat in the face of outsiders. It has been a potent mixture. Trump stands accused of fanning the flames of white nationalism and encouraging anti-immigrant sentiment, while fears of immigration and ideas

of racial “purity” have infected Russia’s policy discourse in demography and beyond. Yet there are differences.

Trump’s remasculinization project faces considerably more popular opposition than Putin’s patriarchal revanchism. While the U.S. has a large, vocal, and influential feminist movement, all forms of independent organization were outlawed in Soviet Russia including feminism, which has faced an increasingly hostile climate in the Putin era, with feminists frequently branded as national traitors. For example, Pussy Riot was successfully “othered” and marginalized, and even Russia’s feminist movement was divided about them. Trump’s victory shows that feminism has not fully inoculated American society against the appeal of patriarchal populism. After all, many of his sexist and racist campaign motifs either resonated with voters or did not undermine voters’ support of him. Nevertheless, feminist opposition to his politics remains vibrant and is often effective. Witness, for example, women’s historic gains in the 2018 Midterm elections.

Responding to the patriarchal politics that link Trump and Putin requires understanding the source of their resonance. In both cases, the economic backdrop is deindustrialization, an insecure middle class, and rising inequality. Both leaders tap into the fears of status loss this generates among men, in the case of Trump, particularly White men without a college education who fear loss of gender, as well as race, privilege. Both leaders are prepared to mobilize gender traditionalism and racism to further their political projects. Thus, both have implicitly promised the restoration of men as patriarchs in the private sphere (note the willingness to normalize wife-beating in Russia and rhetorical “pussy-grabbing” in the United States). Both have symbolically identified the restoration of men’s status with the restoration of



Putin and Trump, June 2019.

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Vladimir Putin inspected the Sch-308 Semga, which sank during the Great Patriotic War.

the nation. However, the “restoration” of past glory they appear to offer is false. They offer no remedies to inequality which raises the stakes of “failure” and status loss for all, while their vision of a strong, masculine “nation” is based on exclusion rather than solidarity and fails to come to terms with women’s changing identities and aspirations.

Rather than restoring a gender order that is oppressive for everyone, addressing economic anxieties within a new gender order based on flexibility and mutual respect among men and women is imperative. This requires a feminist politics with the potential to liberate both men and women from constraining gender strictures. Not only is solidarity between men and women required but also progressive alliances between what would be called the “intelligentsia” and workers in Russia, and progressive leaders and the (especially rural) working and middle-classes in the United States in politics which eschew divisive nationalisms.

As progressives push for a green new deal, they should consider that a new politics also requires a gender new deal. Heeding the lessons of Russia’s unfinished gender revolution, a gender new deal would focus on degendering breadwinning, care work, and domestic labor, alongside a revaluation of domestic and care work whether provided privately or publically. Such an approach responds to modern challenges such as an aging population and growing “care gap” within a framework of gender solidarity. Without new alliances and a new gender deal, we might expect more extreme masculine antics in the future, in a crisis of gender that appears increasingly “normal” worldwide.

recommended readings

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Sperling, Valerie. 2014. *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*. Oxford University Press.

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Sarah Ashwin is in the department of management at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is editor of *Gender, State, and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. **Jennifer Utrata** is in the sociology and anthropology department at the University of Puget Sound. She is the author of *Women without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia*, winner of the ESS and PSA best book awards in 2016 and 2017.