Hypermasculinity as a Scenario of Power

Elizabeth A. Wood

To cite this article: Elizabeth A. Wood (2016): Hypermasculinity as a Scenario of Power, International Feminist Journal of Politics, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2015.1125649

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2015.1125649

Published online: 07 Apr 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 8

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Hypermasculinity as a Scenario of Power

VLADIMIR PUTIN'S ICONIC RULE, 1999 – 2008

ELIZABETH A. WOOD
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

Abstract
The image of Russian President Vladimir Putin riding bare-chested in Siberia has attained mythic status among journalists and the public, both Russian and non-Russian. The current article analyzes the Russian leader’s instrumental deployment of hypermasculinity 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, thus becomes a “hegemonic project,” in the sense developed by Meghana Nayak and Jennifer Suchland, one that is deeply imbued with implied gender dominance and at times even gender violence. Ultimately, this work shows that studies of hypermasculinity and militarized masculinity cannot be limited to war settings, but rather must be extended to questions of political leadership and especially to ways that politics itself is undermined by leaders’ and their handlers’ excessive reliance on masculinity as a substitute for genuine political dialogue.

Keywords
Putin, hypermasculinity, Russia, ideology, hegemony, scenario of power

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

Marxism was an ideology. Conspiracy theories are not an ideology. (Ivan Krastev on the comments of Volodin; Fidler 2014)
The image of Russian President Vladimir Putin riding bare-chested in Siberia has attained almost mythic status among journalists and the public, both Russian and non-Russian. Since his ascent to national power in 1999, Russian scholars have been debating the nature of his regime, increasingly calling it a personalist regime, that is, one based on the person of the ruler (Colton and Hale 2009; Ledeneva 2013; Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2013). Yet the masculinity and even hypermasculinity at the core of Putin’s rule have not been analyzed as a political phenomenon.¹

Obviously all politicians foster certain images of themselves, some more obviously gendered and others less so (Bederman 1995; Dean 1998, 2001; Spackman 1996). Putin’s persona too has aspects that are not explicitly gendered, particularly his evident professionalism (which can be considered gender neutral since it is accessible to both men and women) (Hill and Gaddy 2013). Still, his persona stands out as gendered in three distinct registers: visual imagery (the Russian Marlboro Man); domination of the political sphere through verbal attacks on other men; and a series of crude, macho aphorisms which have been collected as “Putinisms.”

The current article analyzes the Russian leader’s instrumental deployment of hypermasculinity, that is, an exaggerated set of cultural norms and behaviors usually associated with males, as a strategy for creating not just legitimacy, but also a scenario of power itself. As Richard Wortman (1995–2000) has shown 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). These actions also frequently demonstrate, in words or gestures, his active and absolute dominance over his interlocutors in ways that would be unacceptable for other, subordinated men as well.

The creation of Putin’s image, his scenario of power, thus becomes a “hegemonic project,” in the sense developed by Nayak and Suchland (2006), one that 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 state (Agathangelou and Ling 2004), Putin creates a muscular equation of himself and the Russian state, so that he dominates both the internal and the external landscape by mobilizing language and imagery that carry deeply masculine overtones in the Russian political world.

Furthermore, as Carol Cohn (1987, 1993), and Christensen and Marx Ferree (2008) have also found, the challenge of such an exaggerated and dominant masculinity is that it can close off reasonable discussion and, as I show in this case, provide a way to avoid politics itself if we define politics as the contestation of ideas as well as the contest of candidates (Fraser 1989).
Two questions form the core of this article: what is the work that President Putin’s masculine persona does for his political power? And what does his kind of highly politicized masculinity say about political power in Russia more generally?

Putin and his handlers have used his display of masculinity to demonstrate his dominant position in iconic form, that is, in 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. Because this representation is not spelled out in explicitly ideological terms, it can appear to be “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.

While appearing to be outside politics, even apolitical, Putin’s scenario of masculine power in fact operates as a proto-ideology or set of defining ideas underlying the official ideology (Duerst-Lahti 2002, 2008). Moreover, 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 (Connell 1987; Fraser 1989, 120; Poovey 1988). By relying on the multiple masculinities that are the subject of this article, Putin appeals to different groups in the population. He becomes the Everyman, the regular Joe. Yet 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.” In other words, because his scenario of power is based on values that are rarely made explicit and yet are omnipresent in society (especially the superiority of masculinity in the sphere of politics), Putin’s hypermasculinity remains simultaneously visible to his constituents yet unremarked. Putin appears to be a democratic ruler because he is a popular man, a regular Joe, not because he runs against other candidates and convinces viewers of his superiority. The people are asked to applaud the ruler through opinion polls that allege his popularity rather than to consider the political direction of the nation.

Judith Butler (1990) famously remarked on the performative and ritualized nature of gender as “an identity tenuously constructed in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (140). Gender is, thus, “not a noun” but rather something continually fashioned through repeated acts (24 – 25). In Putin we see an almost obsessive repetition and development of a hypermasculinity until it has become (in different ways at different times) one of his trademarks. In Putin’s first eight years this masculine “brand”
became, in fact, a kind of blocking antibody, substituting for a positive program for the nation.

It also bears noting that Putin’s masculine persona combines a number of unstable and even competing components. He is the heroic commander-in-chief claiming he will establish a “dictatorship of the law;” yet 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; yet he uses adolescent, street language to chastise his viewers for “chewing snot,” that is, failing to accomplish anything. In terms of class politics he 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.

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, although Michael Gorham in particular (2011, 2012, 2014) has given some excellent scholarly attention to them (without, it could be said, fully delving into the hypermasculinity of Putin’s persona). In utterances that sound like textbook cases of what Mary Douglas (1966) would call the “unclean” and Julia Kristeva (1982) the “abject,” 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, as 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 (Belikov 2009; Gorham 2014). 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” (Peterson 1996; Voronina 1993, 1994; Voronova 2009).

A number of scholars have focused generally on Putin’s cult of personality, including Colton and Hale (2009), White and McAllister (2008) and Ledeneva (2013). There has also been good gender analysis of the Russian leader’s masculine “celebrity status,” his appearance as “an action hero” and a “macho sex-object” (Cassiday and Johnson 2010, 2012; Goscilo 2011, 2012; Kolonitskii 2004; Ryabova and Ryabov 2011; Sperling 2012, 2015). However, with the partial exception of Riabov and Riabova (2014), who focus on gender and nationalism, and Sperling, who discusses legitimacy, there has been little analysis of the political work of this hypermasculinity, its contradictions and the ways that it becomes a substitute for political discussion.

Because it is impossible to study every aspect of Putin’s first two terms in office (2000–08), I have chosen to examine some of his most famous images and phrases, highlighting in the course of this article some of the
different masculinities he has employed, including militarized masculinity (Putin in uniform and in military contexts; also see Wood 2011); outlaw masculinity; pop-star virility; dominance over other men (especially in the famous Khodorkovsky case); the Marlboro manhood of 2007 in the run-up to passing power to Dmitry Medvedev; and the demasculinization, even feminization of Medvedev himself in the latter’s bid for election (winter 2007–08).

Each of these images and moments contains telling contradictions. The heroic law-and-order Putin appeared at roughly the same time as the outlaw Putin (1999–2000). The chic Putin of the pop song “I Want a Man like Putin” came at the same time as the Putin who attacked others (2002–03). The Marlboro Man appeared just before Putin appeared to cede power to Medvedev (2007–08). Several of these intensive image-making campaigns also took place in the months immediately prior to an election period (in 2000, 2004, 2008). Over and over again Putin has campaigned without campaigning by showing his different macho sides. At the same time his reliance on a hyper-masculinity has also demonstrated a frailty as seen in the protests of 2011–12 (Riabov and Riabova 2014; Sperling 2012, 2015).

Methodologically, this article particularly focuses on an examination of Putin’s distinctive phraseology, which has been facilitated by the Russian media practice of collecting “Putinisms” at every possible turn. Using the East View Universal Database of newspapers, as well as Google searches, I have made every effort to determine the greater context in which comments were made, as well as to find the most authoritative version of a particular phrase or photo. Interestingly, the Russian press has often tended to report “Putinisms” without commentary, especially from 2003, when a new law on mass media forbade the use of “any expressions denigrating human worth” (Golovinskaia 2003). While these examples cannot aspire to being comprehensive, they do show both moments of success and also a few moments when the image-making seems to have failed.

Mobilizing Charisma Where There Was None

Initially in 1999, when Boris Yeltsin named Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister and his anointed successor to the presidency, Putin was by all accounts rather lacking in charisma. He was the fifth prime minister in eighteen months. Journalists from around the world asked repeatedly “who is Mr Putin?” One early article in the Russian press noted that ordinary people were not sure that this prime minister “without an image” even existed (Levina 1999a, 1999b).

While Putin aggressively pursued the war in Chechnya from the moment he came to power, he made a show of not developing an official ideology. In May 2000, political insider Vyacheslav Nikonov (grandson of Stalin’s foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov and himself a former head of an ideological division within the Soviet Communist Party) described the new president in terms of his absence of ideology: “He is not an ideologist – he did not write philosophical
treatises, he did not substantiate his system of values and he did not identify himself with any known theory” (Nikonov 2000).

Putin quickly solved the relatively superficial problems raised by the transition from Soviet to Russian anthem, national flag and coat of arms, but he still did not have an easy way to solve the larger problem of “the Russian Idea,” or national identity, a problem that Yeltsin had also struggled with (Fish 2001; Hill and Gaddy 2013). In fact, on 30 December 1999, in a piece that became famous as the “Millennium Manifesto,” Putin emphatically declared: “I am against the restoration in Russia of an official state ideology in any form” (Putin 1999).

It is easy to see Putin’s dilemma on the subject of ideology. The omnipresence of official state doctrine in the Soviet period had made “ideology” repugnant to many, especially those in the intelligentsia. The Russian Constitution of 1993 stated explicitly that Russia was not to have one single ideology, but rather to allow many to flourish.4 For Putin all the obvious ideologies had problems: “communism” was the property of his rivals, the Communist Party; “social democracy” was associated with the Bolsheviks; “monarchism” was dead; “liberalism” was associated with capitalism (still a topic of much ambivalence); “perestroika” was associated with anarchy; “nationalism” tended to be the province of extremists and could be highly divisive.5

In his autobiography, *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. (191)

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

In 1999–2000, Project Putin (Baker and Glasser 2005) got underway with photographs (clearly planned) (Foxall 2013) and language (apparently improvised but possibly also planned) to show Putin as all-powerful. 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. While initially focused on giving him visibility in fighting the war in Chechnya, this project soon became focused on campaigning without appearing to campaign.
Putin’s heroic persona included several media photos of him flying into Chechnya on fighter jets. On New Year’s Eve, 1999, as the rest of the world was worrying about Y2K and Russians were watching Boris Yeltsin’s televised resignation and nomination of Putin as acting President, Putin flew into the combat region of Gudermes with his wife, his Minister of the Press and a corps of journalists. There he presented the troops with hunting knives, a macho gift of gratitude and solidarity (“Russia: Troops Spend Their New Year’s Night” 1999; “Putin Thanks Russian Troops” 2000).

In March 2000, a week before the presidential elections, Putin’s handlers staged him flying an SU-27 fighter jet into Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, in full flight gear and helmet, appearing solo like a *deus ex machina*. On the day before, Russian television had showed an amateur video of a Chechen commander’s allegedly barbaric execution of Russian soldiers (Petrov 2000; “V izbiratel’nuiu kampaniiu Vladimira Putina” 2000). Putin, the hero, thus appeared posed to undertake a dangerous mission flying into battle against the savage bandits. As Maya Eichler (2006) has shown, by contrasting “the idea of militarized, ordered, patriotic Russian masculinity . . . to the notion of a racialized, aggressive, anarchical, criminal Chechen masculinity” (490), the Russian leadership bolstered its own legitimacy. Commentators were convinced that this alone won him the vote. Putin’s time in office was now becoming known as the “war presidency” (Eichler 2006, 2012; Kovaliev 2000; Wood 2011). Though in 2000 he lacked actual military experience, Putin (and his team) were clearly attempting to gain some of the reflected legitimacy (and glory) of the military by flying military planes into a war zone (see Messerschmidt 2010 for the obvious comparison to George W. Bush).

More powerful, however, than his flights into the war zone was 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 in the context of apartment bombings in Daghestan, Southern Russia and Moscow itself, Putin launched his famous tirade claiming he would catch the Chechen rebels wherever they might be. “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*). Analyzing this phrase (following linguist Rémi Camus 2006), one can see that it contains both vulgar, criminal language (to “rub them out”) and also humiliation/scatology (the bathroom, the outhouse where the bandits will not even have time to pursue their bodily functions). By ostensibly “excusing” himself (“Pardon me”), Putin accentuates the distinction between the permissible and the impermissible, allowing himself to move into an area not permitted to other members of society.

This famous phrase has been credited more than any other with raising Putin’s popularity rankings. As one member of Russia’s Council for Foreign and Defense Policy commented, “[n]o 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” (Chazan 1999). 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. Although Putin himself has claimed on several occasions (in 1999 and 2011) that he blew up because the journalists were pushing him too hard, several political observers have argued that he was too smart and too politically experienced to have made such a comment by accident (Kuznetsova 1999; “Mochit’ v sortire” 2011; Bershidskii 1999). Only one week before the outhouse comment (on 17 September), he had publicly exhorted his government to “strangle the beast at its root” (zadushit’ gadinu na korniu): “We must neither drool nor drip snot, but rather act harshly and energetically at all levels” (Akopov 1999; Efimovich 1999). Contrasting running body fluids with decisive action, he mobilized one of Stalin’s favorite phrases, “to strangle the fascist beast.”

The phrase “to rub out” immediately began to be used by others as well. 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 (mochit’), Putin answered “Absolutely. We must exclude the possibility of anyone sucking up to power (prisoalsia)” (Germanovich 2000). 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 (mochit’) with a possibly feminine image (“sweet, syrupy”) and rejected “sucking up” (etymologically close to nursing, sosat’).

In this same pre-election period Putin frequently criticized those he said were “just” campaigning. On 8 March 2000 he told a group of women in Ivanovo-Voznesensk (a city associated with women’s textile labor) that he would not be trying to figure out which was more popular, “Tampax or Snickers” (Belton 2000; Piontkovski 2000). Openly trivializing the elections (vybory) as mere choices (also wybory) between consumer goods, he simultaneously established his gender dominance. On International Women’s Day (8 March) he showed he was not afraid to say the word “Tampax” or to refer to women’s internal bodily processes and fluids.

His disdain was also famously visible when Larry King asked him on American TV about the Kursk submarine incident of 12 August 2000. “It sank,” he told King. Some commentators viewed this as a scandal (Putin’s “Kurskgate”), revealing his Soviet-style failure to protect the population of his country (Sturua 2000). Others, by contrast, viewed Putin’s response as “natural and human” (Vasil’kov 2000). Either way, his laconic style, which Russian voters had previously appreciated, now came under fire and had to be rectified by a more personal meeting with the grieving families ten days after the accident.
BRINGING ON THE POP VIRILITY

In 2002, Putin’s acolytes decided to try a “pop star” approach to the new President’s image (this had first been tried with Boris Yeltsin disco dancing as part of his campaign in 1996). 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.” In it the narrator lambastes a recent boyfriend and praises the masculinity of Putin as a better alternative. The origins of the song tell a great deal about the quasi-ideological nature of the Putin masculinity project.

Aleksandr Elin, the man who wrote the words to the song, claims that he thought up the song as a way to win a bet. Someone had said that you could not get into show business unless you had a million dollars. Elin wrote the song to prove that he could. Later, significantly, he went on to become the producer of a rock group called “Charisma” [Kharizma] and one called “Chimera” [Khimera] (Geraskina 2005; “Aleksandr Elin” 2005).

The song’s producer, Nikolai Gastello, 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). In Soviet times such volunteer civic activism was required of all ambitious individuals who hoped to get ahead. “I like to do civic work,” Gastello told an interviewer from Izvestiia; “we should revive this tradition.” He even referred to the new musical group Singing Together that he had created for this song as an “agitbrigade” (a Soviet group formed for propaganda purposes). Besides fishing, he noted that his main hobby was “ideology.” According to the newspaper, his apartment was lined with volumes of Stalin, Cicero and Machiavelli. A pop group, he concluded, could be an excellent vehicle for contemporary ideology (Braterskii 2002).

While the song says merely “I want someone like Putin” (takogo in Russian is not an explicitly male term), it nonetheless differentiates between the singer’s boyfriend (moi paren’) and Putin, who would not lead her into trouble. Like Putin’s own speech, the song relies on colloquialisms. The boyfriend, for example, swallowed kakoi-to muti – literally, some kind of slime; in other words, some kind of drugs or alcohol. Putin is made to look virile through the contrast to both the boyfriend (a failed male) and the young women singing. In the most popular video version of the song Putin actually watches the young women singing this song. He and an unnamed man sit in leather chairs, bonding with each other through gestures and eye contact, while watching the women on a screen. The success of the song, which seems to have fostered the beginning of creating an explicitly civic (i.e. nonmilitary) masculine image for President Putin, 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 (Sperling 2012).
In fall 2002, Putin’s masculine image showed a decidedly unglamorous side, however, as he 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” (Kolesnikov 2002). 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.

Putin’s street masculinity now began more than ever to show an obsession with the unclean and the abject. 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” (Kolesnikov 2003). Once again Putin pointed his finger at politicking, comparing it to chewing snot, an expression typically used by young people to mean doing nothing.

The oligarchs as a group now became Putin’s target in fall 2002 when he likened the work of the government to taking up a club in order to beat its enemies on the head. Then in November 2003 he told Italian journalists, “[e]veryone must always obey the law, and not only when they’ve been grabbed in a certain place,” making it clear he meant a part of the male anatomy (Babasian and Iusin 2003). After Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the businessman who became his leading scapegoat in this period, was arrested in a blazing display of military masculinity (twenty masked men toting assault rifles seized him in Novosibirsk), Putin responded to the barrage of media articles by calling on everyone to stop “the speculation and hysteria.” His own response was restrained, he implied, while that of the media was feminized as hysterical.

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” (“Stenogramma press-konferentsii” 2006). Two years later, furious at journalists, he rejected the notion that he held a secret fortune in foreign bank accounts as “nonsense, excavated from someone’s nose and then smeared on bits of paper” (“Ezhegodnaia bol’shaia press-konferentsiia” 2008). Here bodily functions (snot and excrement) are referenced both directly (through naming them) and indirectly (through mentioning the diapers and bits of paper where they might be smeared).

The most egregious case of Putin’s hypermasculine display before other men can probably be seen in his praise, in October 2006, for then Israeli President
Moshe Katsav, who was under investigation on charges of rape and sexual harassment. At a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Ehut Olmerd, 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!14

Putin continues here to play on the outlaw image, claiming to envy the prowess of a man under investigation for his violence against women.

THE MARLBORO MAN AND THE FEMINIZATION OF DMITRY MEDVEDEV

In late August 2007 the media, both Russian and western, began carrying a barrage of publicity photos from Putin’s vacation in the Tuva region of Siberia with his friend Prince Albert II of Monaco and Emergency Minister Sergei Shoygu, himself half-Tuvan (Danilova 2007). In them the often bare-chested Putin rides horseback, fishes and drinks tea from an aluminum cup. Wearing army fatigue, shades, a cowboy-style hat and a knife at his belt, he projects an ultramasculine image. The photos almost always picture him alone, dominating the photographic space and, by extension, the political space as well (Foxall 2013).

The appearance of this set of photos at this time was hardly accidental. Putin was once again campaigning without campaigning, fueling speculation about who would be the next Russian president in 2008. Putin repeatedly told observers that he would not stand for a third term since that was not permitted by the 1993 Constitution. That, however, did not stop the political elites from speaking about him as “national leader” and “father of the nation” (Wood 2008). The heroic Putin astride his Siberian horse combined clichéd views of the Russian love of nature with the iconic imagery of the Marlboro Man, whose poster had dominated the Moscow urban landscape from the late 1990s onward. The new pageantry made a concerted visual argument that Putin should remain at the head of the Russian polity whatever he and the Kremlin decided about who should run for office in 2008.

In the fall of 2007 Putin’s image shifted again, this time focusing on depicting him as “father of the nation.” “For Putin” (za Putina!) 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. The phrase “Putin’s Plan” was sprinkled liberally through the political news and on television without mention of any specific content. The United Russia Party Congress now staged a number of demands “from below” (in true Soviet style) that Putin should remain in power. A woman weaver from Ivanovo, Elena Lapshina, led the charge, pleading her own ignorance and Putin’s greatness: “I see so many big bosses and just smart people at
this congress. I appeal to all of you – let’s think of something together so that Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin will remain the President of Russia after 2008 as well” (Chivers 2007; “Putin soglasilsia vozglavit” 2007). The staging of this scene deemphasizes the political and explicitly ideological in favor of the apparently personal. It removes politics from a highly political situation (the potential changing of the constitution) by having an ordinary woman attempt a natural and spontaneous appeal to those in power.

On 10 December the four leading “alternative” but loyal parties nominated Dmitry Medvedev for office in a classic example of what Andrew Wilson calls “dramaturgiia,” that is, conscious creation of a spectacle (2005; Wood 2008). Putin appeared to give his approval. A week later Putin appeared at a United Russia Congress meeting and formally nominated Medvedev, saying, “I am certain that Dmitry Anatolevich [Medvedev] will cope with the work of the highest post in government in a worthy manner” (Kolesnikov 2007). 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. He now actively 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” (вы) to Putin, while Putin used the informal (ты) to Medvedev (Aizenshtadt 2010).

Putin, moreover, proceeded to steal the limelight repeatedly from Medvedev, as if he were the one campaigning for office, not Medvedev. On 14 February, just a little over two weeks before Medvedev was to be voted in, Putin held a record-breaking press conference in Moscow with 1,364 journalists. Once again Putin sounded like the Presidential candidate. When asked about his successes and failures in the eight years of his presidency, he commented: “I am not ashamed before those who have twice elected me. For eight years I have plowed like a slave in the galleys” (“Ezhegodnaia bol’shaia press-konferentsiia” 2008). Although the metaphor was mixed (plowing and ship galleys), it conveyed the image of a hardworking and physically strong, male president who, like Stalin, worked all hours. Putin touched on every imaginable subject: from Kosovo to Chechnya, from nuclear power to relations with China. In so doing, he continued his dominance of the national agenda, ignoring the fact that the Russian Constitution defines the prime minister’s job, the one he had promised to take once Medvedev was president, as limited to the economy and national issues, not national security and foreign relations.

Putin even told the journalists that he had already laid out everything that Medvedev would discuss in his most important campaign speech the next day. In fact, when Medvedev gave that speech, he was 2,000 miles east of Moscow at the Krasnoyarsk Economic Forum in the middle of Siberia. In it he limited himself to economic matters with only a passing reference to civil liberties. His most memorable phrase was the not very resounding “freedom is better than unfreedom.” Ostensibly he was supporting freedom of the press. Yet his comments lacked conviction (Shevtsova 2008).
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 (“Dmitrii Medvedev pogovoril” 2007). On 14 February, the day before his Krasnoyarsk appearance and the day that Putin gave his huge Moscow press conference, Medvedev attended the Second Mothers’ Forum in Novosibirsk, Siberia where he announced the creation of the Order of Parental Glory, a prize reviving the old Soviet Prize for Mother-Heroines (those who had ten or more children). Medvedev rationalized the new prize saying that the President [Putin] had given a directive for it (Volkova 2008; “Medvedev predlagaet” 2008). Once again, his comments lacked bite: “After all, the main work is happening not in the Kremlin and not in the White House [the seat of the prime minister], but rather among you here, in the kindergartens” (Volkova 2008).

The event itself was held in a Soviet style. One mother of three children opened her presentation by saying, “[t]hank you to the President [Putin] and the government for what they are doing to strengthen the family.” Children sang Soviet-era songs. Video footage showed children explaining why they loved their mothers: “[m]y mother’s voice is like a zebra’s”; “I love my Mom from the tips of her feet to the top of her head” (“Gosudarstvo namereno” 2008). Two weeks later, three days before the elections, the newspaper Ekspress gazeta published some of the 1,000 children’s drawings from a contest called “Draw the President of Russia.” All the children drew Medvedev, assuming that Putin’s candidate would indeed be the next president. They depicted him holding hands with children, holding babies in a maternity hospital (“Even School Children” 2008). Putin had said Medvedev should be the next president, so even the children knew that he was the one. The lucky winners would receive a laptop, a smart phone and a teddy bear (Medvedev’s name means “bear” in Russian). It would be hard to think of an image further from the hypermasculine than the children’s drawing of Medvedev holding newborn babies in a maternity hospital.

Finally, there is one funny story about Medvedev’s accession to power in light of this question of masculinity. 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.” (Kolesnikov 2007)

In essence, as one Russian joke put it, if Putin was the father of the nation, then Medvedev must be the mother of the nation. Or in a more serious vein, as political commentator Gleb Pavlovsky put it, “We’ve gotten used to the idea that the president is the father of the nation. For Medvedev that won’t work, since we already have one father” (Budberg and Novikov 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

So why does Putin need this hypermasculinity? How does it contribute to his appearance of power? Part of 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 (Lane 1981; Wortman 1995–2000). In Putin’s case his masculinity also contributes to his personal scenario of power by: (1) appearing to concentrate all power in his hands as the dominant male; (2) making it appear that he rules above the fray of ordinary politics and so is untouchable; yet also (3) establishing the connection of the ruler with the “masses” because of his rough and hence apparently “natural,” unscripted masculinity. During the Medvedev years this same hypermasculinity signaled Putin’s continued dominance when he appeared heroically tranquilizing a tiger in August 2008, swimming breaststroke in Tuva in August 2009 and piloting a plane above Moscow putting out fires on the ground in 2010.

In these first years of power (2000–08), masculinity for Putin became a way of showing power without having to explain it. Only he could show his muscular body, resort to rude language and establish his dominance over other males. At the same time, through vulgar language he could impugn the masculinity and even the corporeal integrity of his interlocutors. Ultimately, the fact that Putin’s PR masculinity is both seen and not seen by the general population contributes to the disenfranchising of that population because they are not encouraged to reflect – in fact, they are actively discouraged from reflecting – on the political values and direction of the nation. It is entirely possible that the lack of a stated vision for the nation, one that would ideally be reached through political debate and contest, has created the political vacuum that makes the Putin regime vulnerable to extreme nationalism among the political elites and military structures in the current period (2013–15) and has helped to push the nation into the fraught and painful situation it is currently experiencing in Eastern Ukraine. Ultimately, this article shows that studies of hypermasculinity and militarized masculinity cannot be limited to war settings, but rather must be extended to questions of political leadership and especially
to ways that politics itself is undermined by leaders and their handlers’ excessive reliance on masculinity as a substitute for developing genuine political dialogue.

Elizabeth A. Wood
History Faculty
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139, USA
Email: elizwood@mit.edu

Notes

1 Sperling (2015) was published just as this article was going to press so her analysis could not be included in this article in a substantive way.
2 For information about the most recent law, see “Russian Law Bans Swearing” (2014).
3 One note about sources: since the Russian Internet is constantly being purged of articles critical of the regime, I have often used citations from the East View Database, which begin with the url “dlib.eastview.com.”
4 Article 13 states explicitly: “1. In the Russian Federation ideological diversity shall be recognized. 2. No ideology may be established as state or obligatory one. 3. In the Russian Federation political diversity and a multi-party system shall be recognized.” http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm.
5 As Marlène Laruelle (2009) has shown, Putin tended for his first two terms to rely on a “patriotic centrism” where patriotism, broadly defined, was positive, while nationalism was negative.
6 As early as 15 January, commentators predicted that Putin would make some kind of publicity (Iadukha 2000).
7 One radio station nicknamed the group “Licking Together” for their fawning attitude (Vandysheva 2003).
8 See “Takogo kak Putin,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zk_VszbZa_s.
9 This quote has been somewhat disputed. For discussion of the different versions, see Sciolino (2002) and Wines (2002).
10 Russian newspapers including Gazeta, Rossiiskaia gazeta and Zerkalo nedeli picked up on Putin’s comment, but the only western press that commented was Strauss (2003).
11 Another example of Putin and “chewing snot” is Melikova (2006).
Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the generous support and insights of Rochelle Ruthchild; Valerie Sperling; Betul Ekşi; Daniel Parker; Molly Nolan and the Gender and History Reading Group at NYU; Michael Gorham; Richard Wortman; Al Evans; Chris Capozzola; Jerry Wheelock; and the anonymous reviewers at IFJP.

Funding

Important institutional support came from the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard, the MIT History Faculty and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC.

Notes on Contributor

Elizabeth A. Wood is Professor of Russian and Soviet History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

References


“Chto est’ chto v predvybornoi programme V. Putina.” 2000. *Sankt-Petersburgskie Vedomosti*, February 29. http://dlib.eastview.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/search/simple/doc?art=0&tid=2130866&hl=%D0%9F%D1%83%D1%82%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B0


Elizabeth A. Wood/Hypermasculiniry as a Scenario of Power 19


