

The Purpose of Putin's Machismo

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Since his return to the Russian presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin has grown increasingly popular at home while his foreign policy has raised blood pressures in the capitals of NATO's member states. At the center of Putin's macho aura is his image as a tough guy who will not allow Western countries to weaken Russia by dictating what its domestic and foreign policies should be. While masculinity has long been Putin's calling card, its role in his legitimation strategy became more obvious during the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 following the revolution in Kiev and the Russian annexation of Crimea. Putin has fused a patriotic nationalism with sexual politics to frame the Ukraine crisis as part of a cultural battle with an amoral and untrustworthy West.

This strategy arose against the backdrop of the Boris Yeltsin era. When Putin was elected president as Yeltsin's successor in 2000, Russia was regarded at home and abroad as a weak former superpower, suffering from a decade of economic breakdown. Russians suspected that the Western countries that had advised Yeltsin's administration were out to destroy the economy, undermine the country's military might, and gain influence in its "near abroad" (the former Soviet states). National pride had collapsed. In a 2002 survey by the Public Opinion Foundation, in which Russians were asked what they were proud of in "the modern life of our country," 20 percent said "nothing," the most popular answer. Half of the respondents gave answers deemed irrelevant or left the space blank.

Once he was in power, Putin's macho image was mobilized as a public relations tool, broadcasting both his legitimacy and Russia's strength. By the mid-2000s, the Kremlin was regularly releasing images that reinforced the president's reputa-

tion as a reliable and desirable national leader. Whether it was footage of him "saving" a crew of journalists from a Siberian tiger by shooting it with a tranquilizer dart or photos of him enjoying shirtless fishing and horseback-riding trips, Putin was being pitched to the public in strongly masculine terms.

Over the course of Putin's first two terms in office, national pride rebounded. The emphasis on his patriotic machismo gained him popularity while boosting Russians' perception of their country's strength and influence abroad. (Rising oil revenues also helped.) A nationwide Public Opinion Foundation survey in 2010 found that just two percent of respondents claimed there was "nothing" to be proud of about Russia; only nine percent failed to provide a response this time.

Putin's third presidential term, when he returned to the office after a four-year stint as prime minister, provided new opportunities for displaying machismo in foreign policy. After Russia's absorption of Crimea in March 2014, Putin's approval ratings rose steeply to record highs, and stayed high even when economic troubles set in. Despite a recession caused in part by Western sanctions and in larger part by a dramatic drop in oil prices, the number of Russians saying they wanted Putin to stay in office increased over the course of 2014. In a February 2015 Public Opinion Foundation poll, 85 percent of respondents said they trusted Putin, and 74 percent said they would vote to give him another term if a presidential election were held right away.

Part of the explanation for this popular embrace is that Putin had promoted himself at home as defending Russian national interests against Western Europe, the United States, and NATO, which are frequently portrayed in the Russian media as acting aggressively in the international arena and trying to enfeeble Russia. In his December 2014 press conference, when asked by a BBC reporter about Moscow's role in provoking a "new Cold War" by sending Russian military forc-

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es into Ukraine, Putin responded by emphasizing US and NATO aggression in Russia's back yard:

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. . . . What are US armed forces doing in Europe, also with tactical nuclear weapons? . . . Are we moving our forces to the borders of the United States or other countries? Who is moving NATO bases and other military infrastructure toward us? . . . Who was it that withdrew unilaterally from the [Anti-Ballistic Missile] 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.

Along similar lines, in a January 2015 speech in St. Petersburg, Putin asserted that the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine were fighting not merely the Ukrainian regular army but a NATO-sponsored "foreign legion." In Putin's reading, NATO's proxy forces in Ukraine had a broader geostrategic goal: to "contain" Russia, a term harking back to the Cold War. Confronting these ostensible Western incursions in Ukraine, while at the same time fighting so-called Western "interference" in Russia—in the form of nongovernmental organizations labeled by the government as "foreign agents"—was seen by many Russians as proof of Putin's toughness against an adversary attacking Russia from both inside and outside. Under such threatening circumstances, Putin was hailed as Russia's savior. Indeed, opinion polls in January 2015 suggested that a majority of the population believed there was no politician capable of replacing him.

MACHO NATIONALISM

Putin's macho assertiveness has succeeded on the home front in part because of machismo's close links to nationalism. The Kremlin's message is that Putin will protect Russia's national interests and the interests of Russians abroad, as in Crimea—and will do so unapologetically. The Russian troops who wore no insignia as they secured strategic locations in Crimea in February 2014 in advance of the territory's annexation, and

were later acknowledged by Putin (after his initial denials) to have indeed been Russian military personnel, symbolize this attitude. The deployment of these "little green men" represented a bald-faced disregard for Ukraine's territorial integrity, and made clear that the pursuit of Russia's interests took precedence over international norms regarding state sovereignty. In contrast to Yeltsin, Putin comes across as a leader who will not back down in the face of international pressure, whether rhetorical or economic, and who shows in no uncertain terms that Russia is a great power to be crossed only at one's peril.

Russia's Victory Parade on May 9, 2015, marking the 70th anniversary of Germany's surrender in World War II, exemplified this vision. To emphasize Russia's preparedness to contend with any foreign aggression, the parade featured nuclear missiles and also previewed a newly designed Armata T-14 battle tank. Western European and US leaders boycotted the event. Putin ignored the slight and presided over the parade in the company of Chinese President Xi Jinping, as he had done when US President Barack Obama refused to attend the January 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics in protest of Russian legislation banning the promotion of gay rights.

The Kremlin's contention that the economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union in response to the annexation of Crimea were part of a grand plan to undermine Russia found a receptive audience. Most Russians rejected Western assertions that the sanctions were a genuine response to Russian policy in Ukraine. As of December 2014, 72 percent of Russians polled by the Levada Center said they thought the main purpose was "to weaken and humiliate Russia." In a June 2015 Levada poll, 86 percent of Russians agreed that the United States was taking advantage of Russia's troubles to turn the country "into a second-rate power and a raw materials appendage of the West."

The Kremlin has made homophobia an integral part of the cult of masculinity surrounding Putin, and of its efforts to contrast Russian and "Western" values. Following the US Supreme Court's June 2015 decision to legalize same-sex marriage across the country, Russian Orthodox Church spokesman Vsevolod Chaplin cautioned that the US government's approval of this "godless and sinful thing" was a sign that America sought to impose its pro-gay rights values beyond its borders. Culture—in this case, the culture of human

rights—was portrayed as a threat to Russian morals. This narrative seems to have resonated with the Russian public. In June 2015, over two-thirds of the population thought Western culture was having a “negative effect on Russian life.”

LEOPARD VS. POODLE

The Russian public, like publics around the globe, tends not to question gender stereotypes—particularly the notion that strength is associated with masculinity, and weakness with femininity. The Kremlin set about building up Putin’s authority not only by portraying him as strong and manly, and therefore as a good leader for Russia, but by simultaneously depicting Russia’s Western opponents as effeminate and insufficiently manly compared with Putin.

During the conflict over Ukraine, this tactic has been apparent in portrayals in Russian media and social media of Putin, Obama, and other political leaders that focus on measuring their relative masculinity. One emblematic example was in the Russian news in late July 2014, just after the United States imposed a new round of sanctions on Russia. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin tweeted a pair of photos side by side. One showed Putin petting a leopard, while the other showed Obama cuddling a white poodle. The caption read, “We have different values and different allies.” The implication was clear: A mere poodle was all Obama could handle, whereas Putin displayed his calm mastery over a dangerous leopard, proving himself the stronger of the two men.

As Putin’s regime faced mounting diplomatic and economic difficulties and grew further entrenched militarily in Ukraine, his political position at home became stronger. In part, this domestic success can be attributed to perceptions about masculinity. 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 defending Russia’s national welfare. In that context, contrasting his masculinity with that of his rivals—whether Obama or the “gay” West—boosted his domestic popularity and his perceived legitimacy.

On June 15, 2015, the Pentagon announced plans to station a battalion’s worth of tanks and heavy weapons in the Baltics, Poland, and other former Warsaw Pact countries to make training with NATO member states easier. Putin responded the next day by declaring Russia’s intent to add 40 intercontinental ballistic missiles to its nuclear stockpile.

Masculinity is a mutable and relational quality; it exists only in relation to its opposite (femininity and the qualities associated with it, like weakness). That makes it hard—particularly in foreign relations—for national leaders to back down from a conflict, and the risk of escalation, without coming across as weak and losing some legitimacy. Defusing such situations requires leaders with sufficient courage to take that kind of reputational risk, as well as citizens willing to protest against the unacceptable risk that military escalation represents. ■