Putin's Propaganda: The Effect of Russian Propaganda on Masculinity

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In the last few years, President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation has increased his grip on control in the country. Putin maintains high popularity amongst his constituents and, although he is not a member of any political party, the party of many of his closest allies, the United Russia party, dominates the publicly elected Russian legislative house known as the State Duma; they control roughly 75% of the seats. The Russian people's adoration of Putin has left him and the United Russia party without any significant political challengers, as Putin easily obtained more than three fourths of the vote in the 2018 Russian presidential election, while the United Russia party beat out the second place Communist Party of the Russian Federation by roughly 40% of the vote in the 2016 Russian legislative elections. It is also important to note that after a referendum in late June of 2020, Putin was given the right to run for President two more times and can remain in the position until the year 2036. Putin's popularity stems from years of manipulation and propaganda that has targeted the masculinity of Russian men. It is my goal to understand how the Russian government has used said propaganda and why it has been so effective as it has been. By directing their propaganda at male citizens' masculinity, the Russian government has succeeded in forcing their agenda onto their citizens, thus manipulating their views on nationalism and what a man should and should not be. While many world leaders have tried to replicate the Russian government's success, the case of Vladimir Putin stands alone as the most notable and triumphant example of using hypermasculine propaganda to gain political support.

In the late 20th century, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was on its last legs. After finally collapsing in late 1991, the U.S.S.R. broke up into smaller nation-states. The Russian Federation, one of the newly formed countries, was plagued by major economic downturn.

Unemployment increased and the quality of life in Russia rapidly declined. During the reign of the Soviet Union, many men were unable to serve as breadwinners in their families, and since a lot of Russians had become impoverished after the U.S.S.R. fell, feelings of inferiority and inadequacy became significantly more prominent amongst Russian men; this laid the groundwork for the impending demasculinization of men in the newfound Russian Federation.

After the country engaged in an unpopular war in Chechnya between 1994-96 that resulted in the Russian Army's defeat, and after the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, the Russian people began to feel more and more humiliated and embarrassed by their country (Ashwin & Utrata, 2020, p.18). To make matters worse, human trafficking was on the rise, resulting in Russian men further losing confidence in their abilities to defend the women of their country. In 1999, due to the aforementioned events, Russian President Boris Yeltsin had a 4% approval rating and was replaced by his Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, in the 2000 election (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p.25). The demasculinization of Russian men correlated with decreasing nationalistic feelings, providing Putin with a unique opportunity to revitalize Russian nationalism while also redefining the conception of Russian masculinity.

In order to spur nationalism, it was crucial for the Russian government to portray President Putin in a strong and manly way. This goal was accomplished through a vast propaganda campaign that focused on showing pictures of Putin doing athletic and masculine activities. Some show him riding a horse, or walking through a field, or just sitting down and relaxing, but in the overwhelming majority of these images, Vladimir Putin is shirtless. For instance, when examining the photo below, we see Putin, shirtless, brandishing a gun while walking near Russia's Mongolian border (Astakhov, 2007). His chest is fully exposed, and the lighting highlights it. He has a firm grip on his rifle and is walking with it in a very safe and

controlled manner. Additionally, hunting and guns in general are typically regarded as very masculine things. Prior to modern society, men were often hunters for their families, killing animals so their wives and children would have food to eat. By depicting Putin as a hunter, those looking at the image will associate him with their ideas of a strong patriarch, thus aiding in constructing a widespread belief that Putin is a masculine man.

This specific image of Putin and his rifle may include additional symbolism that implies that Putin is masculine: this being the rifle as a symbol for his penis. Phallocentric conceptions of masculinity place emphasis on the size of a man's penis; the larger the penis, the manlier the man (Clark, 2017, p.781). Depicting Vladimir Putin with a large penis would give off the impression that he truly is an incredibly manly man, thus showing that the leader of the nation is strong. With a strong leader, sparks of nationalism begin to fly, which is exactly what we see in the modern Russian Federation; as the people gained confidence that their leader was strong, they began to feel proud of their nation.

In addition to the images of Putin, the Russian government has pushed the idea of the "Russian bear." The bear is a strong and determined animal that will usually win its fights and has long been associated with Russia. Although originally far more popular in the Western world than in Russia itself, the Russian government has embraced the concept, as can be seen with the logo of the United Russia party. By embracing the bear, Russia is acknowledging that they put their strength as a nation above all else; this was reflected in the results of a 2003 study from a Russian sociological foundation where it was found that 48% of those that responded wanted their country to be "as mighty or invincible as possible" (qtd Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 28).

According to a study concentrating on "real men" in Russian politics conducted by Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova in 2007, a whopping 44.8% of respondents put Putin as their first answer (2014, p. 26). This idea of Putin being a "real man" means that he embodies the ideal masculine qualities that respondents think of. Historic examples of leaders viewed in both Russia and the West as "real men" were often involved with warfare somehow; because of this, the Russian media highly militarizes Putin's image to make him seem stronger and more masculine. In addition to seeming physically tough, Putin has become known for his brutal verbal attacks on any politician attempting to challenge him (Ashwin & Utrata, 2020, p.19). By being above his rivals, he looks like the top dog to all onlooking citizens.

Another way the Russian government has rallied male support recently is by promoting the term "muzhik." Muzhik is a Russian word that was often used to describe a poor male peasant living in Czarist Russia. However, in modern Russia, the term has a different meaning. Russian government officials have popularized using the word Muzhik to refer to the average, masculine Russian man (Ashwin & Utrata, 2020, p.19). Unlike the original definition, this new usage has no reference to a man's class or to their income. The word has been spread throughout

Russia and embodies the idea of national masculinity. For example, when a politician by the name of Rustem Adagamov was being accused of pedophilia by his ex-wife, he made the following statement on his Twitter account: “Guys, you should understand that I am a muzhik. This is why I can’t speak about my wife. This is why I will keep silent” (qtd. Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 26). In this example, we see Adagamov using the term as a way to explain why he is not stopping his ex-wife from speaking. He reasons that because he is a muzhik, it is best for him not to get involved with the claims of his wife. By using this term, Adagamov is able to delegitimize what his wife is saying by simply relating himself to other men.

While men may want to be like Putin, women want to be with him. According to Levada Center polls, in 2012, 20% of Russian women surveyed stated that “they would not mind marrying the president” (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 26). What this shows is that by portraying Putin as masculine, and thus the ideal man for any woman, men that act like him will see the same results. This message appears again in the 2002 “A Man Like Putin” song by Russian electro-pop band, Poyushchie Vmeste. In the song, the lyrics tell a story of a young woman who is currently in an abusive relationship with a man that she does not love. Her boyfriend hurts her, gets very drunk, and is a waste of her time. Instead of her current lover, she wants to be in a relationship with a man like Vladimir Putin, who rather than doing any of the negative things her boyfriend does, would love and respect her. Additionally, throughout the music video, the camera cuts from the band to an actor playing Putin making some kind of deal with another dignified-looking Russian politician. When the song ends, Putin and the politician sign a piece of paper, shake hands, and respectfully leave the room together (Poyushchie Vmeste, 2002).

The “A Man Like Putin” song stands out because of the way women act in regard to Putin. Putin is a “real man” who lacks every negative quality of the average Russian man.

According to the song, Putin is not only a “real man” but he is a near perfect one; he is a role model for other men who often display negative personality traits like aggressiveness or alcoholism. However, just because Putin is kind and reliable does not mean that he is weak; the song hammers down that part of masculinity is being there for the women in your life, while also being mature, responsible, and having restraint when it comes to alcohol. The song never depicts Putin as being effeminate, and Putin is only shown acting courtly or laughing. It is finally important to note that the title of the song is “A Man Like Putin.” The title suggests that the girl in the lyrics yearns to be with a man that embodies all of the same positive qualities as Putin. If men change their lifestyles so they behave similarly to Putin, they will be more masculine, and thus they will be more desirable.

It is also of note that Russian men view men from other nations, especially those from the United States of America, to be less masculine than themselves (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p.29). Russian masculinity under Putin has developed differently than masculinity in the Western world, being far less tolerant and accepting of diversity and uniqueness. Russian masculinity is centered around the concept of acting strong and manly, often viewing any type of femininity to be weak and a fault. Masculinity in Russia is homogeneous, and if a man acts differently, then other men will think that there is something wrong with him. This is the case for homosexual men in the Russian Federation. In the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, sexual activities between men were criminalized in 1934, leading to thousands of Soviet men being convicted of sodomy and receiving a five-year punishment of hard labor in one of the labor camps in the gulag system, or being forced to visit a psychiatric hospital (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Since the Soviet people did not know very much about homosexuals, most trusted their government’s

claim that homosexuals were not normal and needed to be taken care of. Unfortunately, this seems to be the same course of action for people in the modern Russian Federation.

Homosexuality is an extremely taboo topic in Russia, and Putin and his allies vehemently oppose homosexuals. This has caused a widespread panic in citizens who fear homosexuality overtaking their nation, and since homosexuality is seldom discussed in the everyday Russian's life, the public knows very little of what homosexuals or homosexuality itself are actually like. The Russian government further fanned the flames on this issue with the 2013 law known as "For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values"; the law is often referred to by western media as the "Gay Propaganda Law." The Gay Propaganda Law made it illegal to discuss LGBT issues with children or educate them on homosexuality. The Russian government justified the law by saying that they were trying to protect Russian "family values." (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The Gay Propaganda Law has made it far harder for Russian citizens to receive a proper education on homosexuality, leading many Russians to believe the preconceived notion that all homosexuals want to destroy Russian familial norms by demasculinizing Russian men. In fact, a recent survey from the Levada Center in Moscow found that 32% of respondents wish to cast all homosexuals out of society (Kuhr, 2020). Opposition to homosexuals is growing in Russia, and the government's approval of those ideas is fueling the fire.

Homophobia has been a feature of the government's campaign to reinforce masculine stereotypes. In late June of 2020, the Russian Federation held a constitutional referendum that included allowing Vladimir Putin to run in two more presidential elections, which could result in him remaining president until 2036. If approved, this move would greatly increase the power that Putin and his allies had over the country. In early June, to advertise the upcoming referendum

and to raise the public's awareness of what they would be voting for, the Russian government released a piece of propaganda in the form of a television advertisement.

The ad, which has been blacklisted and blocked in most of the western world, follows an orphanage worker in the year 2035, as she is using her smartphone to film a young, orphaned boy meeting his new, adopted family for the first time. As the boy is packing, the woman asks him if he is excited to have a mother and father, to which the boy nods. The boy's new adoptive father walks into the room to meet him for the first time. His adoptive father gently caresses the boy's face, and then the two high-five before leaving the orphanage. As they get outside, the boy asks his father where his new mother is. His father looks out at the road towards a car and tells him, "here's your mom, your new mom." The camera then shows the audience the "new mom" that the father was referring to: a flamboyant homosexual man wearing skinny jeans and a very thin woman's coat standing next to a bright white Fiat with red stripes. The "new mom" gives the boy and his partner a slow feminine wave and a smile as the orphanage worker turns the camera away while looking disgusted. The boy is visibly upset by his "new mom" being a man, but the more masculine adoptive parent tells him to not be sad and that they will be a "proper family." As they approach the vehicle, the feminine parent opens the car door and takes out a dress he got just for the son. The gay couple proceed to escort the boy to the car before embracing each other with a hug. as a voice over asks the viewer, "is this the Russia you choose?" The voiceover then tells the viewer that they will be able to "decide the future of the country" and directs them to "vote for amendments to the constitution" (The Russian Government, 2020).

This example of propaganda uses fear tactics to try and manipulate Russian constituents to vote in a certain way. The way homosexual couples are portrayed is specifically meant to

scare voters; they are an abnormality when compared to the commonly accepted family dynamic in Russia, one that includes a heterosexual mother and father. We see this most notably with the adoptive father's diction. He says words like "proper family," which is the Russian government's attempt at triggering their audience. A family with two fathers is different than a family with one father and one mother, so the government wants the people to know that what they conceive as the standard Russian family, a patriarchal family with a father and a mother, is at risk of being erased if they do not vote for the amendment. Showing that something their constituents care about is under attack, in this case traditional family values, will mobilize voters to vote for the option that they believe will protect the thing they care about. This is depicted in the ad with two of the orphanage workers; both are shown to be disgusted by both the way the homosexual couple behave and the fact that they exist, so much to the point that the older one of the two literally is unable to handle watching them embrace each other and has to go back inside the orphanage. These employees are meant to show the audience that if they do not pass this amendment, they will have to live with what they perceive to be a disgusting reality where children can live with two fathers, rather than one mother and one father.

The "new mom" in the video is a prime example of the government demasculinizing homosexuals. The character is a flamboyant, over the top, feminine man that is portrayed like a woman in order to emphasize the idea that homosexuals are not masculine like heterosexual men. This is done to demean homosexuals and to show the audience that since this man acts feminine, his value is less than that of the average Russian male. The government wants the people to think that a family cannot be headed by two men, and showing one of them in a very effeminate way tells the viewer that homosexuals are all weak and unmanly, and thus cannot be parents of a child. Additionally, the "new mom" presents their adoptive son with clothing made

for a young girl. This insinuates that all homosexuals make children homosexual and that, because of this, they should be avoided at all costs. In the Western world, we know that this is completely and utterly false, yet in Russia, where the Gay Propaganda Law is in effect, children are not properly educated on what homosexuality is. Since discussion of homosexuality is effectively criminalized, Russian children and adults alike lack knowledge on whether this is true or false. All they have to go on is the word of their strong, trustworthy, masculine politicians who tell them that this lie is in fact the truth; because of the general positive conceptions of Putin and most of his allies, a Russian person cut off from all outside media about homosexuals would be an absolute fool not to trust them.

While there have been numerous world leaders in other nations that have attempted to manipulate their population through hypermasculine propaganda, none have seemed to be as effective as Putin has. Of all of Putin's copycats, the most notable is the 45th President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump. Trump has used misogynistic rhetoric to attempt to raise American nationalism and popularity for himself as a politician. For example, when on the 2016 campaign trail, he categorized bad trade deals with foreign nations as "rapes" and told Americans that he would protect them from similar deals in the future (Johnson, 2017, p.241). By doing this, Trump is showing his supporters that the country needs to be re-masculinized; his rhetoric argues that America was demasculinized by eight years of liberal rule, and now is weak as a result. If America can be "raped" by other countries and manipulated into making bad trade deals, it needs a strong man to lead and protect it; this is the type of leader that Trump wants the American people to believe that he is.

Another example of Donald Trump trying to portray himself like Putin can be seen with the music that is played at his political rallies. Patriotic music or songs about masculinity, such as

The Village People's "Macho Man" song, are frequently played at Trump rallies (Dolinick, 2019). While the implied meaning of the lyrics of "Macho Man" might not necessarily be what Trump wants to be associated with, the diction in the chorus is exactly what Trump desires his image to be: "Macho macho man, I've got to be a macho man!" (Belolo et al., 1978). This idea of being a macho man is to Trump as the concept of being a real man is to Putin. Trump wants his supporters to see him as a strong, macho leader and look up to him, similar to how the people of Russia admire Putin. However, unlike Putin, Trump's attempts at being seen as a macho man have been fruitless. His inability to handle criticism and immature behavior towards both his political opponents and the media have given him a weak appearance in the eyes of many Americans. Additionally, Trump lacks the charm and manly hobbies of Putin; Trump's frequent golfing trips and love of unhealthy foods add to the weak image that many Americans hold of him. If Trump was in shape and rode horses in Montana for his vacations, it is possible that the American people would view him differently, but alas, this is not the case. Although his rhetoric and playlist may say otherwise, unlike Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump is not a macho man.

It is crucial to note that Donald Trump entered the American political world at a time of relative stability, much unlike Vladimir Putin. Whereas Putin had seized power when the Russian people viewed their nation as very weak, the same cannot be said for Trump's election in 2016. The U.S. economy was doing well and there were few conflicts domestically. If anything, major domestic conflicts arose after Trump won the election, not before it. This may have been a factor into why Putin has achieved massive amounts of success with his real man image, while Trump's macho-man persona floundered. Putin brought his nation out of its incredibly weak infantile years and forged it into one of the greatest political powerhouses in the world. Due to the circumstances, Putin was able to mold Russia in his own image. In the case of

Donald Trump, America was already a strong nation when Trump became president in 2017; this means that he was in a drastically different position than Putin was when taking power. Additionally, America has more educated and liberal citizens than Russia does, along with a large and vocal feminist movement; Putin did not have to face similar roadblocks in Russia (Ashwin & Utrata, 2020, p.20). If anything, Trump's failure at maintaining his strong, macho-man image shows how perfect and specific the circumstances have to be for a leader to use masculinized propaganda as a way of rallying support.

Thanks in no small part to their propaganda campaigns, Vladimir Putin and his closest allies have been able to strengthen their grasp on power in the Russian Federation. By appealing to men and showing them what is and is not masculine, the Russian government has created an enormous number of die-hard loyalists who whole-heartedly believe every word they say. In the 1997 film, *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery,* the protagonist, Austin Powers, is described in the following way: "women want him, and men want to be him" (Moore et al., 1997). This describes Putin: Russian men want to be like him, Russian women want to be with men like him. Putin has become a role model to millions of men and boys in his country; he has transformed into a standard of masculinity that is unmatched by any other non-wartime leader in the modern world. He is a strong leader, someone who makes Russian men feel proud of the nation they live in, which is something they never could have felt just twenty years ago under Yeltsin. Additionally, the propaganda initiatives have succeeded in demasculinizing homosexual men. The Russian people have been convinced that homosexuals are hellbent on destroying the family values of the average Russian family, along with making their children gay. Through years of manipulation, the people's conceptions have fallen in line with what their government wants them to believe. It is a sad reality that we are forced to acknowledge, yet it is important to

take note of what has happened to Russia to prevent it elsewhere in the world. As seen with Donald Trump in the United States of America, hypermasculine leaders do not find massive success everywhere in the world, but struggling nations are specifically vulnerable to their manipulation. Overall, it is due to their propaganda campaigns that Vladimir Putin's government has been able to spur nationalism and form the public's conception on what masculinity should and should not be.

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