

Spring 2020

## Porno-Putinism: The Politics of Sex in the Kremlin's War Against Gender Progress

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### Recommended Citation

Goldberg, Sarah Pavlovna, "Porno-Putinism: The Politics of Sex in the Kremlin's War Against Gender Progress" (2020). *Senior Projects Spring 2020*. 316.  
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Porno-Putinism: The Politics of Sex in the Kremlin's War Against Gender Progress

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies and the Division of Languages & Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2020

*This work is dedicated to my grandmothers: Grandma Julie, Nana Marian, Galina, Inna, and Sonya.*

## Acknowledgements

A massive thank you to my board members: To Jonathan, thank you for your guidance and for making time amid the pressing global affairs of this academic year to help me frame this project. Thank you for making my writing work and for challenging my arguments. To Marina, thank you for our meetings, your unforgettable classes, and thank you for your patience when the project question was still crystallizing. To Liz, thank you for your input on this project, and for introducing me to a treasure trove of literature along the way.

Thank you Kevin, for making me fall in love with political theory and political philosophy. You are, without question, the Roger Bochet of your time.

Thank you Olga, you have been an unrelenting constant in my time at Bard. I am forever grateful to you for contextualizing, enlightening and enlivening my love of Russian & Eurasian studies.

Thank you Jonathan Brent, Omar Encarnacion, Tabettha Ewing, Michael Ives, Oleg Minin, and Michelle Murray for your teaching through my time at Bard; for encouraging me to think critically and challenge my own notions, perceptions, and assumptions of how something is and should be.

Thank you to the archivists and librarians at the Houghton Archive at Harvard for their assistance in looking through the Elena Bonner papers.

Thank you to Eric Bronza and Valentina Konstantinova for speaking with me. Thank you to Aleksandr Daniel for his input on this project early on.

To my friend family: Hannah M, Fiona, Julia, and Sage, thank you for all the good times. Anna-Sofia, Caleb, Louisa, and Fyo: may the spirit of 37 Broadway live on in your mind. Addison, Alyssa, Anya, Celia, Charlotte, Emma F, Emma R, Hannah W, and Lucy Rock: always thank you. Ariadne, Kim Pham, Vlad; thank you for all being present as we wrote various rough drafts at Rough Draft. To the NPR-House: Kim and Jim, thank you for shelter, spirit, edits and meals in the time of Corona. Abe, wise fool, thank you for your many distractions.

And to my family, who I would not be here without, thank you always.



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**Abstract**

In this paper, I analyze the political legitimation of Russian President Vladimir Putin through sexualized media avenues and the resulting challenges this poses to producing effective women's policy. I examine the spectacle of Putin and the Duma in their handling of women's public health and economic issues, as well as female representation in spheres of power, by continuing the Soviet tradition of symbolic submission. I seek to answer the question of how these widely-produced images of the *nastoyashiy muzhik*, the real Russian man, influence political consciousness in contemporary Russia; and determine whether there are inroads to policy change outside of submission to the Kremlin.

Contemporary Russia has seen arduous regime change and economic upheaval—from the traumatic reorganizing of society's systems under Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika reforms, to the instability of the Boris Yeltsin years, to Putin's ascendance to power. Gender roles and the fulfillment of their performance, specifically the machismo of the male head of state and obligatory submission to his government, have maintained a continuous role in defining contemporary power and stability.

I hypothesize that policy-enforced gender inequality runs parallel to the machismo image of contemporary Russian power, and that this image has been woven through the political history of Russia as it stands today, emboldening its performative political relationship to women. I hypothesize that the concept of the "ideal," submissive political woman is not gone and is central to the treatment of women and women's issues in Russia's political culture today.

The term “performativity” here is taken from the gender studies context, meaning the active (be it unconscious or conscious) fulfillment of the performance of gender. This is best illustrated by philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler in her work *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*. Butler suggests that gender is a compliance with long-running norms and patterns of behavior: “gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it,” and that ultimately “the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame. Understood in pedagogical terms, the performance renders social laws explicit.”<sup>1</sup> In ultra-patriarchal regimes, this is amplified by the act of submission. This relates to the ‘slave soul’ mentality: Slavic studies scholar Daniel Rancour-Laferriere writes that among the peasantry, “a daughter was expected to be obedient to her father until he married her off, whereupon she was required to submit to the will of her husband.”<sup>2</sup> The use of the term “porn” in the title refers to the definition by legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon and feminist writer Andrea Dworkin—entailing “graphic sexual explicitness” and “the subordination of women”<sup>3</sup> as well as a long list of sexual acts. In this work, the subordination I refer to comes from the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1988): 526

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering*, (New York: NYU Press, 1995): 134

<sup>3</sup> James Lindgren, “Defining Pornography,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, vol. 141, no. 4 (1993): 1157



## Introduction

At the Moscow funeral ceremony of the famed Soviet dissident Lyudmila Alexeyeva, President Vladimir Putin made an entrance with flowers, laid them by her casket, and sat beside her son, Mikhail.

This was not the first time Putin brought Alexeyeva flowers. On a personal visit to her Moscow apartment on her 90th birthday, he came with a bouquet. This was filmed and televised: they exchanged words about Alexeyeva's legacy. Alexeyeva used this platform to ask for mercy for Igor Izmestyev, a former senator who faced life imprisonment on unclear grounds. Putin said he would see what could be done.

A founding member of the Moscow Group of Assistance to the Implementation of the Helsinki Agreements in the USSR—also known as the Helsinki Watch Group—Alexeyeva had been calling for accountability in the Soviet Union on an international scale since 1976. Her prominent role in criticizing the Soviet leadership transformed her into a human rights icon. Before taking a position of dissent against the Soviet system, Alexeyeva was studying Soviet key figures as a public lecturer. She hosted popular lectures in Moscow, attracting crowds as large as 500 people.

Most prominently, she lectured about the war heroine Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, colloquially referred to as “Zoya.” A posthumous recipient of the Hero of the Soviet Union award, Zoya was a partisan fighter in German-occupied territory during World War II. Zoya was setting fire to what were believed to be Nazi-occupied stables. The tale goes that Nazis found her, hanged her and disfigured her hanging body with bayonets. She is famed for her final words,

“You can hang me now, but I’m not alone. There are two hundred million of us. You can’t hang us all, they will avenge me.”<sup>4</sup>

Through her research, Aleexeva accidentally debunked this story. She met Zoya’s mother, who claimed that Zoya was turned over to the Nazis by angry Soviet farm laborers.<sup>5</sup> Zoya’s actions were reframed to Alexeyeva: Zoya was in the wrong territory, and the feud was between the Soviets themselves. Alexeyeva’s research led her to view Zoya’s canonization as demonstrating something deceptive in Soviet ideology, and caused her to reevaluate her own political consciousness, outside the pro-forma Soviet mindset.

The Soviet woman, as a symbol, was glorified in accordance with the Soviet ideology, in order to represent the ideal Soviet woman as a standard for behavior and compliance within the system. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the image of the Russian woman as a national symbol has been updated and adapted by passing political moments and ambitions. There have been several shifts in the Russian ideology of gender: women’s status within society has been impacted in terms of rights and policy, and concepts of the ideal have been adjusted. Literature about Soviet war heroines plays an important role in Soviet ideology: heroines epitomized the idea that the propagating of women was synonymous with the cause of the Soviet system. Idealized images and symbolic people were a force for stability. The literature of the political moment would shape the idealized Soviet woman.

Although the thread of hope and promise for gender equality runs through the political history of the Soviet Union, the path to women’s self-determination through socialism was cut

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<sup>4</sup> Encyclopedia.com, “Zoya Kosmodemyanska, 1923-1941.” Last updated April 8, 2020. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/kosmodemyanskaya-zoya-1923-1941>

<sup>5</sup> Lyubov Timofeeva Kosmodemyanskaya, *Povest o Zoe u Shure*. Lib.ru, accessed April 27, 2020. <http://lib.ru/PRIKL/PIONERY/zoyschura.txt>

short, along with aspiration for equal rights and freedom within society as a whole. Russian women were a driving force in the destabilization of the Russian Empire. Many bourgeois women, moved by Marxist ideology, became more politically involved in the lead-up to the revolution and within the revolution itself than they had been prior. Many prerevolutionary women joined the violent Marxist group *Narodnoya Volya* (The Peoples' Will) which organized and participated in political terrorism. Women were behind the assassination of Tsar Alexander II: Vera Figner, Sophia Perovskaya and others were made famous through their participation in revolutionary violence. The participation of women in political violence is a testimony to the disbelief that the Tsarist Empire could offer real change: women were signing on to a major shift in their social stature which was a tenet of the revolution—the elimination of bourgeois womanhood. Historian Gail Lapidus writes that, “rejecting the path of legal political reform, and therefore the tactics and goals of bourgeois feminism, the revolutionary socialist movement insisted that the full liberation of women was inseparable from a larger social revolution.”<sup>6</sup> After the Bolsheviks defeated the Empire, Soviet women were officially made into major symbolic representations of the cause and its promises—solidifying the idea that both Communism and equality were generally intertwined. The foundation of revolution rested on the promise for equality: the goal was to lay horizontal the harmful societal hierarchies from years of Tsarist authoritarianism, wherein women were of secondary stature and marginalized per their ethnic groups. The Bolsheviks, Lapidus writes, “insisted on their structural connection and proclaimed the achievement of ethnic and sexual equality to be inextricably entwined with the revolutionary reconstruction of society itself.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gail Lapidus, *Women in Russia*, ed. Atkinson, Dorothy; Dallin, Alexander; Lapidus, Gail Warshovsky. (San Francisco: Stanford University Press, 1977): 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Lenin called on women to participate in politics, stating that “the experience of all liberation movements has shown that the success of a revolution depends on how much the women take part in it.”<sup>8</sup> Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, helped pioneer the first women-centric bureaucratic institution, the *Zhenotdel*, meaning women’s department.<sup>9</sup> There were conferences of Soviet Women, organized by Bolshevik feminist<sup>10</sup> Inessa Armand. At the conferences, Lenin called on women to be active members in Soviet society.<sup>11</sup>

However, Lenin’s new statecraft and emancipation rhetoric only went as far as the locations from which it was proclaimed—it did not reach the women laboring in the provinces. In the early days of Lenin’s regime, provincial women, going about their daily tasks did not know that they could be emancipated from peasant life and its traditional gender roles by joining the party and moving up the ranks. Lapidus writes that Lenin’s statements only scratched the surface, as proclamation “was only a first step in their real emancipation.” That emancipation, however, was complicated by “the need to inform women of their new position and to draw them into active participation in public life was even more fundamental and posed far greater problems of innovation and leadership.”<sup>12</sup>

The position of the Soviet government on women’s emancipation was redesigned during the course of Joseph Stalin’s consolidation of power in the late 1920s. Stalin dissolved the *Zhenotdel* in 1930, saying that “the woman question had been solved.”<sup>13</sup> The position of the Kremlin was contradictory to the momentum of women’s involvement and engagement that had

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<sup>8</sup> Lapidus, *Women in Russia*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher J. Ward, “Working Alone, Women on the Railway,” 71.

<sup>10</sup> This is a retrospective use of the word. Many historians refer to Kollontai as a feminist, though the word would not have been attributed to her during her time.

<sup>11</sup> Lapidus, *Women in Russia*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Natasha Kolchevska, *Angels in the Home and at Work: Russian Women in the Khrushchev Years*, 115.

been established prior, and Stalin was calling for a return to traditional gender roles. Lapidus writes, “New obligations, roles, and opportunities for women were assimilated into older values and patterns of behavior,” such as the woman’s return to the nuclear family (something that had somewhat of a makeover under Lenin), and the fight against “Western ‘interference’ create an amalgam of tradition and transformation”<sup>14</sup> that did not signal progress under Stalin. The momentum under Lenin blended with the imperial past; emancipation became even more of a

performance than it had been prior. Women were to have children.

Emancipation *qua* performativity could be exemplified by the Soviet Women’s Committee.

Created in 1941, their role at the time was, “to convince foreign women’s delegations of Soviet women’s high economic and political



status.”<sup>15</sup> Despite international Soviet propaganda announcing the superior condition of the Soviet woman, on the home front, Stalin furthered pronatalism, producing domestic propaganda that urged women to reproduce for nationalistic reasons, that their most important role was to be

<sup>14</sup> Lapidus, 97.

<sup>15</sup> Varlie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 108.

mothers. This message was especially prominent in the lead-up to World War II—with posters depicting saintly mothers with Russian ethnic features, surrounded by children—mostly her sons.<sup>16</sup> These images of nationalistic maternity arrived in the context of the staggering death statistics which shaped the prerogatives of the Soviet governments. Military casualties from World War II, then still ongoing, were obscured by the toll of Stalin’s terror; the respective estimated death counts are 11 million soldiers and 26 million Soviet citizens lost.<sup>17</sup> Thus it was necessary for propaganda persuading reproduction to be pointed and sentimentally triggering, as Russia left the second World War in dire need of demographic regeneration. Reproduction was framed as patriotism, so propaganda displayed the woman in her nationally-appointed role as both idealistically Russian, and also as the admired object of her children and the nation.

After Stalin’s death, there was a power vacuum, ultimately filled by Nikita Khrushchev, who ushered a period of Soviet history called the “thaw,” a cooling down of the remnants of Stalinism—without much interest in addressing the stature of women. Women’s status in Soviet society “remained of little interest to the dominant patriarchy, with the notable exception that it lifted the prohibition on abortion in 1955,”<sup>18</sup> though state propaganda highly discouraged abortion, outlawed during the runup to World War II. The Kremlin’s messaging created the appearance that the woman question had been answered. A Soviet political scientist, Vera Bilshai, explained in 1959 in a state-sponsored work, *The Solution of the Women’s Question in the USSR*: “the practical experience of nations within the socialist camp clearly confirms that the complete liberation of women both as individuals and laborers has been attained as a result of the

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<sup>16</sup> Nina Vatolina, “Glory to the Mother Heroine!” Poster. 1944. Accessed from Life.ru, <https://life.ru/p/1227735>

<sup>17</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, “Don’t forget how the Soviet Union saved the world from Hitler,” May 2015 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/05/08/dont-forget-how-the-soviet-union-saved-the-world-from-hitler/>

<sup>18</sup> Ward, “Working Alone,” 72.

victory of socialism over capitalism.”<sup>19</sup> This came after years of Stalinist repression.

Emancipation was not that simple.

The Thaw and post-war reconstruction meant not only rebuilding infrastructure but, again, rebuilding the country through reproduction. Historian Christopher Ward writes that women “were asked to perform equally at home and in public life, to both rebuild the home and family and to step into the workplace as necessary”<sup>20</sup> during the dramatic reconstruction of Soviet society. Once again, women were responsible for upholding stability, but also demonstrating that Soviet women were emancipated through the Soviet system, when policy was not directly benefiting them:

women were placed at the center of ambivalent Khrushchevian pronatalist policies aimed at reestablishing domestic ‘normalcy’ while also being expected to play a prominent role in the public sphere, for example, in workplace unions and in political and social organizations.<sup>21</sup>

Then, in Brezhnev’s tenure, “the majority of Soviet women worked outside the home in addition to undertaking such responsibilities as childbearing and rearing, which the state declared to be the backbone of domestic society.”<sup>22</sup> Women made up 80 percent of the railway workers, and the railway became the icon of Brezhnev’s reconstruction progress. During this period, women also bore the brunt of reconstruction through reproduction. Before beginning their shift each day on the railway, women had to perform this affirmation:

I am a Komsomol woman. This gives me the right to choose my own career path. The Komsomol membership card is a mandate, one that opens the door to true happiness, real happiness both at work and leisure. I believe in Komsomol and I want to believe in me.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ward, “Working Alone,” 72.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 75.

At the same time, Women were the target of widely-circulated jokes about selfish females who wanted free time. This Brezhnev policy was one that had a significant and palpable impact: “Coping with the tensions arising between different generations in overcrowded apartments was primarily a female problem. This was because women had a greater investment in the home and domestic life.”<sup>24</sup> Again, women were tasked with the majority of reconstruction, all the while being met with ambivalence about their roles in society beyond reproducing and laboring. Would the majority male higher offices<sup>25</sup> respond effectively, or would response be a performance?

For some, there are gradual build-ups to opinion, or clairvoyant defining moments wherein their opinions crystalize. In Alexeyeva’s case, the Zoya incident made her realize more than ever that her views did not align with those of the party; it was her self-proclaimed moment in which she realized that she was a dissident.<sup>26</sup> She knew people in Moscow circles who also disagreed with Soviet power, and ultimately, with physicist Yuri Orlov, Alexeyeva became a founding member of the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group. Alexeyeva helped to orchestrate a small handful of men and women openly calling for change; and as the Helsinki Watch Groups popped up across Soviet satellite states, she became the first of many female dissidents organizing in opposition to the system.

The response to Alexeyeva and other dissidents as time has passed from the Soviet era to today’s Putinist authoritarianism exposes a pattern between the image of male power and women’s policy centered around an image of women’s submission and fecundity. Expectations did not always reflect reality. But demands of accountability and better policy are placated by the

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<sup>24</sup> Lynne Attwood, “The Brezhnev Years” in *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 188.

<sup>25</sup> For numbers on women’s seats in the Duma and presence in the higher offices of the Politburo and Central Committee, see pages 48-49.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Goldberg tape archive, interviews with Alexeyeva.



government's ways of creating the symbolic woman through many regimes, and both Soviet and modern Russia's societal leveraging of symbolic, yet ideologically docile women.

How do widely-proliferated images of the Russian man affect political consciousness in contemporary Russia? To what extent do these images jeopardize women's issues and seek to further the imbalance of gender relations? In the following chapters, I assess contemporary Russia's political relationship with women's policy by analyzing the image of Russian power as it relates to women, and the Putin administration's performativity on women's legislation.

Putinist politics offer their own ideal: they depict the female as a sexualized pinup, the submissive supermodel, who is politically monogamous with amorphous Putinist ideology, who bears children to fix the current demographic problem. The notion of upward mobility for women exists in that it requires compliance with the Kremlin, and employs sexualization as a strategy to validate the Putin regime.

## Chapter One. Sex for the State

### 1.1 Putinism as Stability

Condoms were not sold at Seliger, a lakeside spot 200 miles from Moscow chosen for the now-inactive nationalist youth group *Nashi* (meaning “Our People”) annual camp summit. The Seliger summit began in 2005 with 5,000 campers, which exploded to 15,000 by 2011.<sup>27</sup> Young adults attended early morning group cardio, lectures, and met with like-thinking young adults. The Seliger attendees are encouraged to marry in mass weddings, buy Nashi-brand T-Shirts that say “I Want Three,” (as in, three children) and were encouraged to procreate in an armada of pink tents on a barge called the “Love Oasis.” Male opposition leaders were depicted on posters wearing women’s lingerie in what is called a “Red Light District” on camp base. Dissidents and oppositionists were depicted with their heads on sticks—one such stick portrays Alexeyeva in a Nazi Wermarcht cap. This is what state-funded political legitimation looks like: Putin’s cult of personality is consolidated and validated through Nashi—his attractiveness fortified by the motives of Nashi.

Putin’s relationship with power relies on these legitimation strategies. This is demonstrated by the political culture that surrounds him, that wields his image as a leader: the culture of unitary decision-making, futility of the democratic process, and the oligarchy that benefits from the structure of power in Russian politics. Putin’s image has been crafted<sup>28</sup> and consolidated by his allies; and furthered by interventionism and rhetoric<sup>29</sup> that confirms his role as a protector. The headquarters of *Set*—meaning Network—the youth group that followed in

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<sup>27</sup> Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 153.

<sup>28</sup> Sam Greene and Graeme Robertson, *Putin v. The People*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 31.

<sup>29</sup> Janet Elise Johnson and Aino Saarinen, “Twenty-First-Century Feminisms: Gender Regime Change and the Women’s Crisis Center Movement in Russia” in *Signs*, Vol 38, (Spring 2013), 548.

*Nashi*'s wake, has walls adorned with photoshopped pictures of the leader wearing a bear pelt as a hat, and a shocking image of him holding a strand of DNA.<sup>30</sup>

Putinism as it is today, however, would not have been possible without the tenure of Boris Yeltsin. When Yeltsin came to power in 1991, advertised as a staunch populist, he was seen as a possible bulwark of democratic change after almost 75 years of the Soviet system. But after some time, it became evident that Yeltsin would not bring the population of Russia to stability: his promises of returning wealth went unfulfilled, he created faulty policy and furthered the economic disparities posed by perestroika.

Yeltsin introduced “shock therapy,” which suggested that the new system would mellow after an obligatory shock period with the deregulation of all prices. With oversight from the economist Yegor Gaidar, Yeltsin’s government introduced budget cuts in order to achieve fiscal balance. These austerity measures led to deficits and inflation, government services stopped serving, and unemployment was rampant throughout the country.<sup>31</sup> Oligarchs bought out state companies for cheap, and their resources were sold cheaply in the international marketplace. Family savings were worthless: they held no value in Yeltsin and Gaidar’s economic experiment. As Russia scholar Fiona Hill writes, “the economy as a whole shifted from a growth and development orientation to pure survival. On a private level, Russian households did the same. But publicly there was outrage.”<sup>32</sup>

Then came the power vested into the Presidential seat. Despite parliament pushing through their own drafts of a new democratic constitution, Yeltsin’s team managed to forward a

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<sup>30</sup> Voice of America, “Pro-Kremlin Youth Group Creatively Promotes ‘Patriotic’ Propaganda,” *YouTube*, January 25, 2015. <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=MABie5BU7yA>

<sup>31</sup> Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, “Boris Yelstin and the Time of Troubles” in *Mr. Putin: The Operative in the Kremlin*, (Brookings Institution Press, 2013), 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

draft that gave the presidential seat domestic and foreign policy power, and “retroactively legitimized many of the steps he had taken (excluding the military action) to curb the powers of parliament.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, Russia was pivoting from a promise of democracy to a governing policy that upheld unitary executive power.

Chaos, poverty, and crisis was the mood of the Yeltsin administration; this atmosphere was responsible for creating the modern oligarchy. The word “embarrassing” is often used to



describe his tenure. As he ascended to power in 2000, Putin was packaged and sold as the savior of Russia, promising to end what Yeltsin’s critics called “the time of troubles.”<sup>34</sup> The Kremlin acts as the craftsman of the Putinist image—and with its control of news and media, Putin’s strongman

image is propagated to seem much larger than life—the quintessential Russian man.

Photos released and curated by the Kremlin and state-affiliated groups show Putin in action, and proclaim support. Among the many examples is the 2010 birthday calendar<sup>35</sup> (above)

<sup>33</sup> Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> A reference to the leaderless days of old Russia, 1598-1613, before the Romanovs’ Empire began.

<sup>35</sup> Left reads: “Vladimir Vladimirovich, every man should be like you.” Right: “Vladimir Vladimirovich, how about a third time?” Accessed from NY Daily News:

gifted to him by students and alumni of the journalism department of Moscow State University. In this calendar, women model underwear, and each has a speech bubble declaring their love for Putin, who is referred to by his first name and patronymic, Vladimir Vladimirovich. This project “served not only to publicly assert Putin’s support from a group of young women but also to highlight Putin’s machismo.”<sup>36</sup> British supermodel Naomi Campbell interviewed Putin for *GQ Magazine*, and of the calendar he said:

I like the girls a lot, they're beautiful. I like the calendar but it's not the most important thing. As for the other one, well, in almost any country, probably in Russia in particular, it's fashionable to criticise people in power. If you come out in support of someone like me, you're going to be accused of trying to ingratiate yourself. The girls in the erotic calendar were courageous and they were not scared. As student journalists, they couldn't fail to understand what might have been said to them after doing this. Nonetheless, they were not deterred and did the calendar anyway. So, frankly, that's what I liked the most.<sup>37</sup>

Russia historian Valerie Sperling notes that sexualization and gender norms become tools of both the pro-Putin groups and the oppositionist groups: the tools and rhetoric are deployed from either side. Activists on both sides “have chosen to wield concepts of femininity, masculinity, and homophobia (heteronormativity) as tools in their political organizing efforts.” Sperling continues, “political actors incorporated gender norms in their authority-building ‘toolboxes’ because of the accessibility and resonance of these aspects of cultural identity at elite and mass levels alike.”<sup>38</sup> The use of sex as a mechanism for debate is further discussed in the next section, 1.3.

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<https://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/happy-birthday-mr-putin-russian-college-co-eds-pose-sexy-lingerie-calendar-pm-birthday-article-1.191352>

<sup>36</sup> Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 95.

<sup>37</sup> Naomi Campbell, “When Naomi Campbell Interviewed Vladimir Putin,” *GQ*, November 11, 2017. <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/vladimir-putin-interview-naomi-campbell>

<sup>38</sup> Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 2.

In the context of women's issues, Putin is widely portrayed as reliable and reassuring, but behind this veneer are sinister mechanisms for legitimation. His political legitimacy is drawn from the solidification of gender roles:

One of the most frequently encountered strategies is to emphasize patriotism and nationalism, as the Putin regime chose to do. Nationalism and patriotism, in turn, are closely tied up with gender norms—perceptions about what constitutes “correct” sex roles about masculinity and femininity within a given national population.<sup>39</sup>

This is not a passive choice: Sperling argues that nationalism and patriotism are inherently tied to gender norms; as nationalism and patriotism are the idealization of the state as it exists. This is amplified by the many media machines in the country with validating power: state television, newspapers, and pro-state (and partially state-funded) groups, such as Nashi. Sperling writes of how those responsible for making Putin's image have “seized on a model of attractive, physical masculinity as a way to set Russia's current leadership apart”<sup>40</sup> from the physicalities of past leaders.

Political ads depict Putin's dominance, and portray him as a protector for women—but his campaigns sexualize women's votes by “tapping into a common heteronormative understanding of gender roles whereby women seek out male lovers to protect them (from harsh economic realities and from possible violence and sexual predation at the hands of other men).”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the legitimation model taps into sinister gender issues, and calibrates national issues (such as the widespread occurrences and lack of legal prosecution over domestic violence) to their benefit.

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<sup>39</sup> Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin*, 126.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 296.

The rhetoric of deeply pronatalist policies seeps into the home. Putin's brand of conservative nationalism "has pushed back against sexual liberalization, reanimated by Putin's campaigns to get women to have more children in order to save the nation-state."<sup>42</sup> Herein lies his manipulation of women's policy, bolstered by his image as a protector of women: "Portrayed as the 'toughest' political figure, Putin offered the best protection from dangers visible and invisible; women were 'safest' affiliating themselves with him politically."<sup>43</sup>

Of course, this regime change carried vast social implications. The comfort taken in the idea of stability—here: gender roles—can be understood in the context of the tumultuous era that preceded it. Perestroika and glasnost were the centrifuges of social change in the Soviet Union: Soviet everyday life was turned on its head on many levels—economic, social, and political. There was no roadmap for the everyday Soviet person in the upheaval of all things Soviet—there was no universal exit strategy for the lifelong welfare system.

## **1.2 Social Movements, From the Tumultuous 90s Onward**

A "brief broadening of sexuality and gender norms as the Soviet regime liberalized"<sup>44</sup> before Yeltsin's ascent to office. Years of enabling rhetoric and rampant political machismo impeded the ability of feminist movements to gain traction and affect policy. Women's movements were reluctant to call themselves feminist. Yeltsin's and Putin's "conservative nationalism" has, as political scientists Johnson and Saarinen argue, "pushed back against sexual liberalization, reanimated by Putin's campaigns to get women to have more children in order to

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<sup>42</sup> Johnson and Saarinen, "Twenty-First-Century Feminisms: Gender Regime Change and the Women's Crisis Center Movement in Russia," 548.

<sup>43</sup> Sperling, "Sex, Politics, and Putin," 296.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson and Saarinen, "Twenty-First-Century Feminisms," 548.

save the nation state.”<sup>45</sup> Yeltsin approached women’s policy with maternalism, and spoke of women’s issues as those solely associated with the production of children.

Contemporary Russian culture and social movement building cannot be understood without the dissident movement of the 70s. Between Krushchev’s Thaw and Gorbachev’s perestroika, the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group was created. The United States and the Soviet Union had forged a contract, wherein they became signatories so that they could trade again. Yuri Orlov, a physicist who had always been on thin ice with the KGB, had read the Helsinki Accords published in full in *Pravda* and had seen the potential for implementing his movement as an “assistance group” in 1975. He had asked Alexeyeva to join him in this. She became the backbone of the group, and her name later became a metonym for the movement. The Soviet human rights groups were often nicknamed by Western media the “dissidents.” Here, it is necessary to note the difference between outspoken dissent and passive dissent. Helsinki Watch was outspoken—they organized publicly (as well as took to means such as publishing *samizdat* and having private meetings) to express dissent from the government’s choices—while passive occurs in the minds of people as a personal state of disagreement. There are stages of dissent, and there are discrete dissenting actions performed by individuals unwilling to be publicly identified as dissidents.

At this same moment, society saw a rebirth of the women’s councils that had died out in the 1920s, the *zhensovet*. The purpose of those unions was to be “transmission belts.”<sup>46</sup> They were “to engage women’s support of Communist Party policies, and also took on service provision.” But on the whole, the office was not a legal organization concerned with women’s

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<sup>45</sup> Johnson and Saarinen, “Twenty-First-Century Feminisms,” 548.

<sup>46</sup> Sperling, “Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia,” 108



rights—rather, it reinforced performative roles that had suffused previous eras. Zhensoveti and the Soviet Women’s Council were not considered to be “defending women’s rights, or increasing women’s involvement in political or economic decisionmaking.”<sup>47</sup>

This ran parallel to the newly-attained ability to organize. On perestroika, Alexeyeva wrote: “no one could have predicted that his policies in the Kremlin would reflect the ideas of our younger days.” Before perestroika, social action came with major penalties. Society had been deeply atomized, and any sort of organizing was illegal. Alexeyeva continued:

Now, my contemporaries who have not rotted away in their hideouts have joined in *perestroika*. I wish them success. All of us shared the bitterness of the Stalin era, and that shared experience gives us hope that the current warming will be more than a thaw in the midst of winter.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, perestroika gave way to group organizing, and women’s groups took this into account when attempting to make their own spaces under the reforms of the late 1980s that introduced the possibility of freedom of speech and freedom of association. Until then, Sperling writes that “women in the Soviet Union had been essentially voiceless.”<sup>49</sup> However, these new groups advocating for transparency often did not address the nature of gender difference within political struggle.

In the dissident movement’s peak in the 1970s, there was a profound current toward equality and global attention to human rights-based accountability. Women’s rights were conflated with human rights: this was not unfamiliar to the Soviet tradition of binding women’s rights to the revolution. Within that context, the dissident movement did not have any special

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<sup>47</sup> Sperling, “Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia,” 108.

<sup>48</sup> Ludmilla Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent: Organizing Movements for National, Religious and Human Rights*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>49</sup> Sperling, *Organizing Women*, 5.

projects that addressed the issue of gender inequality. When asked about her beliefs in feminism, Alexyeva responded that fighting for women's rights and fighting for human's rights were the same thing.

But her criticism did not stray from calling the moment for what it was. In this new political space, social movements and groups formed as their own atoms in a space of general chaos and economic insecurity. In her book *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights*, Alexyeva writes of social movements in 1984:

Previously amorphous political dissent had crystallized into several trends, including political ones, a majority of them transitional between those that are political and those that lead away from it. As a result of the physical removal from social activism of the activists of the early phase of dissent, and as a result of its own politicization, the moral potential of dissent was lowered. The dispersal of the human rights movement led to an accentuation in the national movements of egoistic, chauvinistic and xenophobic moods,<sup>50</sup> and, in the religious movements, of a move away from concern about social problems.

Alexeyeva makes the argument that the authorization of social movements thus lowered their moral power—and that dissent itself was politicized to further self-interest rather than larger social issues of the moment. Social upheaval and social change were linked in unfortunate circumstances: the women's movement in Russia sought to “achieve a variety of cultural, political, and economic goals while suffering from insufficient resources and internal divisions and conflicts between activists.”<sup>51</sup>

There was space to build change and reliability, to be heard, but it was happening at the same time as the nation was going through a shocking shift. This challenging reality brought to light the social realities at hand, and mobilized people to think in a larger social context: “the changing economic situation and the stark appearance of unemployment, especially among

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<sup>50</sup> Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent*, 452.

<sup>51</sup> Sperling, *Organizing Women*, 18.

educated women, brought discrimination into the open, fueling changes in consciousness for activists, and possibly for women in the population at large.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, people mobilized according to their own beliefs on gender equality and social change: “Women activists across the political spectrum began to organize in their own interests, separately from men.”<sup>53</sup>

Several glasnost-era women’s magazines began to talk about patriarchal politics. In 1991, *Moskvichka*, a women’s magazine with a circulation of 175,000 printed valuable statistics on the amount of women in leadership roles in the new economy, the small percentages on upward mobility within jobs, and even percentages on women who were overqualified for their jobs. Many women’s magazines popped up, and discussed similar issues, such as *Delovia zhenshina* (meaning Businesswoman), *Novaya zhenshina* (New Woman).<sup>54</sup> Women’s studies as an academic possibility was opened, despite some opposition from academics and institutions. There had been past literature on gender roles in the USSR, a “huge outpouring in the 1970s of candidate degree dissertations on the position of women in the USSR,” but it did not disseminate as widely as the short-lived magazines. The idea of women’s studies, writes historian Mary Buckley, “had always smacked of ‘bourgeois feminism,’ and had thus been ideologically unsound.”<sup>55</sup> But their conversation was not universal, as the pressure of perestroika was taxing to those raised in Soviet mindsets. Many women, “worn out from the pressures of daily life, remained indifferent to new discussions of gender roles.”<sup>56</sup> Decades of the Soviet Union’s demonization of feminism—and the absence of a women’s right’s movement to criticize

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<sup>52</sup> Sperling, *Organizing Women*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Buckley, *Perestroika and Soviet Women*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1992: 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*.

them—made this seem normal. Again, even popular and provocative dissidents did not call themselves feminists.

Valentina Konstantinova, one of the first activists to label herself a feminist, wrote of the importance of the vacuum created by perestroika; this, she believed, was a moment to organize en masse, and a time of potential for immense social change. Konstantinova, though, wrote that not enough movement towards progress was being made by those passive to the cause: “We must admit that women have so far not made use of this historic opportunity to change their status. We must take into consideration that gender relations in politics are tied to gender relations in other fields.”<sup>57</sup> Many people were talking about the possibility of change, but not enough movement was being made.

Sperling writes of a meeting of a 1995 perestroika womens’ discussion group called *Klub Garmoniya*—Club Harmony. This was one of many small groups that took on issues of social change, “reclaiming their ‘femininity’ in a post-totalitarian world — one whose ideology did its best to eliminate gender distinctions, while in reality it reinforced women’s sense of inferiority in all areas of life: politics, society, the economy, the home.”<sup>58</sup> *Klub Garmoniya* and other groups like *Feminist Alternative*, and *Klub F-1* (First Feminist Club), had no cultural preparedness for the task of movement building outside of government structures, but they held actively-attended consciousness-raising meetings about feminism.<sup>59</sup> However, it was not so much about generating actor numbers, rather, initiating change through avenues that did not necessitate massive numbers.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Valentina Konstantinova, “No Longer Totalitarianism, But Not Yet Democracy: The Emergence of an Independent Women’s Movement in Russia,” in *Women in Russia*, ed. Anastasia Posadskaya Brooklyn: Verso, 70.

<sup>58</sup> Sperling, *Organizing Women*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

Sperling argued that the mid-1990s women's movement was "flourishing, even as it [struggled] within its social, political, economic, historical, and international contexts."<sup>61</sup> While, in its moment it did flourish, there was a lot at hand. There was the consequence that there may be hope for international accountability, thanks to the leadership and the prior dissident movement. However, grassroots movements did not build momentum as anticipated:

Simultaneously, the women's movement has emerged into an actively interventionist international and transnational environment, which provides intellectual contacts, financial support, and even a degree of domestic legitimation for activists in Russia. Driven by the lack of an economic infrastructure to support grassroots social movements, women's organizations in Russia are increasingly turning to international sources of support, which bring with them a host of benefits as well as unintended side effects.<sup>62</sup>

The shift to democracy did not entail a smooth transition to movement-building—the social and economic contexts were not allowing for the smoothest of transitions toward a women's movement like that of the women's movements in Western democracies: the argument being that too much was going on, people were barely making ends meet, that an immense social movement was not on the radar. People were looking for accountable leadership.

Sex and sexuality became a part of the open dialogue of the perestroika and postperestroika periods. In her 1994 essay *The Mythology of Womanhood*, Olga Lipovskaya writes: "Women are now no longer forbidden to be sexy—on the contrary, their sexuality is much encouraged." Sexiness is encouraged because, Lipovskaya argues, it is deeply rooted in patriarchal culture: "Together with the image of good wife and mother, this model is now being promoted as the real, feminine woman so dear to Russian male culture."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Sperling, *Organizing Women*, 14.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Olga Lipovskaya, "The Mythology of Womanhood in Contemporary Soviet Culture," in *Women in Russia*, 1994 123-134,:126.

These images cut even deeper, according to Lipovskaya. The Soviet system, though performative in its promises of equality, was able to offer women some benefits. The commercial moment did not do so: “Having stripped women of the military uniform and modest suits of the totalitarian past, our culture is now creating a conventional image of compliant, sexualized femininity so dear to men’s hearts—submissive, tender or passionate, as the client orders.”<sup>64</sup>

The Kremlin has since changed course about how to respond to this kind of open dialogue. Putin’s first-term chief political adviser Gleb Pavlovsky (fired in 2011) was quoted as saying: “The Kremlin tended to see its role as preventing [dissent] from emerging—avoiding ‘public excitement’—and thus maintaining the loyalty of all but the most marginal social groups.”<sup>65</sup> This was updated toward the end of 2011:

the Kremlin recognized that [suppressing opposition] was no longer working, and it soon set out to create and manipulate ideological cleavages to its own advantage. The goal was to find issues that could ‘weaponize’ an existing but dormant social consensus against the opposition to the advantage of the regime. This is an old political technique, commonly used in Western democracies, that political strategists refer to as mobilizing ‘wedge issues’—issues that are not central to the usual axes of political competition, but that can cleave off part of an opponent’s potential support. And in Russia, as elsewhere, wedge issues mean bringing up the previously unmentionable—religion and sexuality.<sup>66</sup>

Today, demonstration laws in Russia prohibit the public from organizing “unauthorized” protests, much like in the Soviet era. The ban has been challenged by the internationally known punk-dissent band Pussy Riot, at each of their Putin-slamming concerts. Harsh punishment and imprisonment followed. This correlates with something Pavlovsky said in the *New Left Review*, after years of working directly with Putin, commenting on the need for such a Putinist strongman image by the Kremlin since Yeltsin’s 1993 bombing of the Parliament; “there has been an

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<sup>64</sup> Lipovskaya, “The Mythology of Womanhood,” 127.

<sup>65</sup> Greene and Robertson, *Putin v. The People*, 31.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

absolute conviction that as soon as the power centre shifts, or if there is mass pressure, or the appearance of a popular leader, then everybody will be annihilated.” Insecurity about potential insurrection was and remains a motivating force in Kremlin psychology.

### 1.3 Making Putin Sexy and Humiliating Opposition

In a *Washington Post* piece of the power of the image of Putin as a leader, Pavlovsky stressed the importance of image for a leader of a weak state: “We intensified Putin’s mystery on purpose.” He said: “You need to create an image of power.”<sup>67</sup> This reveals much about the nature of his power, and the weakness of the state, that images of Putin must be curated. Taking a casual photo of Putin in Russia is not permitted. This says something about the staging and crafting of his presidential image. His images proliferate through the media and convey national stability and other moralistic messages. Externally, they convey Russia’s stance as a superpower, interventionist, and a force to be reckoned with.

Sperling writes of sexualization’s association with materialism:

The sexualization of economic products starting in Russia in the 1990s helped lay the groundwork for the sexualization of political products, such as candidates and their supporters. During the Putin era, the gender norms relied upon for advertising and image making in the economic sphere crossed into the political realm.<sup>68</sup>

By this token, images of women in leadership positions do not proliferate in the same way. In the Duma, the strongest image is of staunch Senator Elena Mizulina—who dresses very conservatively in pearls and skirt suits, and touts the importance of conservative values; an ideology that has shifted with time and opportunity,<sup>69</sup> like the waves between open dialogue and

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<sup>67</sup>Anton Troianovski, “Branding Putin: How the Kremlin turned the Russian president into a global icon.” *Washington Post*, July 12, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/putin-brand/>

<sup>68</sup> Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 60.

<sup>69</sup> Senator Elena Mizulina is further discussed in Chapter 2.

social conservatism. Sex politics are welcomed by the Kremlin—as long as they employ sex as an inroad to furthering Putinism. Mizulina represents a brand of conservatism which appears to be in contest with that of the women in Putin’s birthday calendar—but they work in concert with each other, in that they are politically monogamous with Putin’s administration.

Additionally, images of dissidents are highly sexualized. With “Red Light District” of Seliger camp alongside the images of dissidents on sticks in fascist attire, Putinist criticism has commercial value when it meets its willing audience. Thus, if one does not fit in with the Putin brand with their dialogue, one does not fit at all.

While the government uses sexuality to advance its practices, so do the dissidents—but their intentions are to subvert the Kremlin. An overt example is Pussy Riot’s 2008 orgy video, filmed in protest of interim-President Dmitri Medvedev’s call for families to have more children in order to fix the demographic problem.<sup>70</sup> Medvedev was at the time the Presidential candidate for United Russia—the Duma party which backed Putin until it was dissolved in 2020 as a strategy for continuing Putin’s tenure. The orgy strategically waged the rhetoric they expected to be waged against them, to the figures in power who employ it; demonstrating a lack of fear of retaliation. Pussy Riot founder Nadezhda Tolokonnikova was pregnant at the time of the filming, and to make matters more ironic, the orgy was at the Moscow State Biological Museum, and the video was titled *Yebis’ za naslednika Medvezhonka* (“Fuck for the Heir Teddy-Bear”). The Kremlin’s wielding of sexual image comes with an overt desire to advance conservative gender values, to show the activities of the real Russian man, and send them through the media. Images of Putin, shirtless, riding a horse, come with their own political agenda. Therefore, the

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<sup>70</sup> Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 154.



obsequious, ironic elements of the orgy video carried massive rhetorical significance, subverting the Kremlin's expectations of social behavior and submission. Making sex—group sex at that—a political protest that challenges pink tents for the nationalist *Nashi* newlyweds to procreate.

The “ideal,” then, maintains its place in Russian political culture through this kind of media saturation. This connects with the failure to adopt effective women's policy by creating the ideal, passive pinup. Thus, if you do not fit into the ideal subordinate, there is no place for you.

The images that have been woven through state media since the Soviet era have created model citizens whose needs cannot be addressed by the government. They can be met through adapting to subordination, or even bargaining within the system. Idealized imagery is a soft-power tool to subordinate real life—they operate as a Potemkin Villages to model something that is not present within society, something missing; and to placate real needs and real problems; proposing short-term or unreal solutions to real problems.

With Putin's ascendance to power came a return, once again, to women's traditional roles. From the still-present cultural memory of perestroika came many social movements, and some liberalization of gender and sexual norms. Political scientists Janet Elise Johnson and Aino Saarinen write of the power of his public image, which relies on “using his own brand of masculinity to embolden the national psychology and to legitimate more muscular intervention into all aspects of people's lives.”<sup>71</sup> Putin's government has crafted the look and behavior of the ideal Russian man after Putin himself.

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<sup>71</sup> Johnson and Saarinen, “Twenty-First-Century Feminisms,” 548.

The landscape of gender roles in Putin's government policies and reforms, Johnson and Saarinen write, "is a gender ideology similar to the maternalist script employed under Yeltsin, albeit newly fortified with pronatalisms, the language of self-help and neoliberal individualism, and Orthodox Christian Nationalism."<sup>72</sup> Russia, from Brezhnev onwards, has been concerned "that the emancipation of women (such as it was) had feminized and weakened men." In place of Soviet heroines and symbols came a focus on heroic men in the period of transition: "there were prominent stories of heroic masculinity, exceptional real Russian men who had done the impossible for their nation."<sup>73</sup> The patriarchal values of Soviet society are correlated to the legacy of Soviet gender role expectations. Historian and Gender Studies scholar Ludmilla Popkova argues that "researchers should pay more attention to the subjective and discursive constraints on women's political choices from a perspective of post-Soviet cultural transition."<sup>74</sup>

The order of Soviet society in the transition from perestroika to the present moment required the adjustment from explicit gender roles to implicit ones. Popkova writes that the state, during the Soviet era, "institutionalized a distinctive order in which the roles of men and women were defined according to the needs of the communist state. The state-prescribed Soviet gender order had a significant impact on the subjective perceptions of men and women."<sup>75</sup> This has not been undone with time. The way in which the state has constructed the ideal human, both Soviet and post-Soviet, illustrates the legacy of the ideal within Soviet culture. With every new leader,

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<sup>72</sup> Johnson and Saarinen, "Twenty-First-Century Feminisms," 547.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 548.

<sup>74</sup> Lyudmilla Popkova, "Women's Political Activism in Russia: The Case of Samara," in *Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition*, ed. Kathleen Kuenahst and Carol Nacheimias (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004) 172-194: 173.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 173.

gender roles have been molded to fit the issues of the moment. As for Putin, he has restored traditional values by appealing to idealized sexuality.

This has worked intergenerationally and across several contexts within gender identity and sexual preference. Popokova writes:

Many researchers have shown that the gender identities even of the younger generation are still strongly influenced by Soviet values. There are certain common themes in their perceptions of women's roles. These include the acceptance of supposedly natural sexual differences, which leads to perceiving a woman's secondary position in all spheres as natural. Sociological surveys show that despite negative assessments of their chances in the labor market in politics, women rarely claim that they face discrimination.<sup>76</sup>

The patriarchal system leaves no room for an honest reckoning with contemporary women's issues. Scholar and former director of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies, Olga Voronina writes in her 1993 essay, *Soviet Patriarchy: Past and Present*, "In the framework of a patriarchal culture, a strong man can exist only in conjunction with a weak woman; her weakness is the basis of his strength."<sup>77</sup> This is exactly what idealized images of gender roles seek to do. It's as if Putin is Russia's one and only role model:

Patriarchy, the masculinist paradigm, is a system of standardization of the individual through gender, the ascription and prescription to a person of certain sexual parameters in behavior, thought, feeling and perception. This relates to men as well, who are likewise not free from gender prohibitions (for instance, the open expression of feelings) or prescriptions (always to be active and successful). In the framework of a patriarchal culture, a strong man can exist only in conjunction with a weak woman; her weakness is the basis of his strength. For all intents and purposes, the patriarchal culture creates the woman as a victim and the man as an aggressor, but both the one and the other suffer from this.<sup>78</sup>

Voronina argues that patriarchal culture breeds a system that subjugates the sexes to be organized within society. With the strongman image comes the image of the woman who is

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<sup>76</sup> Lyudmilla Popkova, "Women's Political Activism in Russia," 173-4.

<sup>77</sup> Olga Voronina, "Soviet Patriarchy: Past and Present" *Hypatia*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 111.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

unable to be as strong. This is in association with something said by Pavlovsky, Putin's former image-maker, that the image of a leader of a weak and challenged state needs to be that of a strongman.

Society has not seen a female leader of similar stature in the modern era. Female leaderly images, like that of senator Mizulina, are prim and pearl-wearing, conservative—in a state organ that puts forth hard-line policies that do not prioritize gender equality.

Per Pavlovsky, the wielding of image in a weak state is important to the state's internal and geopolitical stability. Putin's brand is part of a careful, patriarchal playbook. Highly defined sex roles are a state necessity. Those that contribute to his branding through various campaigns, youth groups, and the like weave these roles into the fabric of government.

#### **1.4 Commercializing Legitimacy**

Creating media featuring women as prizes, depicting supermodel-like women making gifts of themselves for Putin, is a popular way of aligning oneself with the state and gaining respect of peers. Sycophants buy into Putin's affections through the creation of media that features him as desired, or sexualizes him. As discussed in the introduction, the Putin birthday calendar is a case in point. Groups of women, aligned to the image of supermodels with ethnically Russian features, like "Putin's Army" and the "Medvedev Girls"<sup>79</sup> are examples of this. These widespread gimmicks carry their own agendas; and many have state funding.<sup>80</sup>

*Nashi* ran a state-funded ad campaign for Putin in the 2012 elections, depicting a woman seeking advice on "doing it" for the first time, saying that she needed to be sure it was with a

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<sup>79</sup> Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 99.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

man she cared about, who would treat her right.<sup>81</sup> It became clear that “doing it” meant voting. Each person from whom the woman sought advice told her that she had made the right choice, that she “would be ‘safe’ with the man she chose.”<sup>82</sup>

In 2013, when Medvedev was interim President, he signed a bill banning public alcohol consumption, specifically beer sold in park kiosks, and the Medvedev Girls responded with a campaign in a public park where they had men pour out cans of beer into a bucket. The higher liquid in the bucket got, the more items of clothing the Medvedev Girls took off.<sup>83</sup>

This propaganda in its many forms acts as a legitimation tool for the state. Though the state does much of its own legitimation, this kind is legitimation at a remove, that evokes a sense of stability within an otherwise insecure political leadership.<sup>84</sup> Sperling writes about glamour’s role in modern Russia, stressing the value of this kind of gift:

Glamour played well in the new capitalist economy, though it would rise to the fore in politics only after Yeltsin’s exodus, when Putin evolved into something of a glamour object. Putin became ‘a major—indeed, perhaps the ultimate—sex symbol’ of a new political regime resting on a new economic order. Glamour was now a selling point, and political leaders as well as economic goods could be desired and consumed.<sup>85</sup>

Women, gifting themselves to Putin and Medvedev, locate themselves in the Putinist legitimate order. If sex sells, then why not capitalize? Branding oneself alongside the state becomes a lucrative practice. Appealing to the Putinist brand is a way for one to garner power in such a system. Glamour and branding that validates the government is an asset to the Kremlin; which is why it comes as no surprise that both *Nashi* and *Set* had their own fashion designers. *Set* even

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 296.

<sup>82</sup> YouTube, “Krasotka gadaet na pervi raz,” February 20, 2012. <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=Noo0lzJILaM>

<sup>83</sup> YouTube, “Moscow. Anti-beer. Medvedev Girls vs. Putin Army 2” August 6, 2011. <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=zTGOLFmJ6zY>

<sup>84</sup> Julia Ioffe, “Surreal Politik,” *Foreign Policy*, August 11, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/11/surreal-politik/>

<sup>85</sup> Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 62.

held a 2015 fashion show, displaying attire by “patriotic designers.”<sup>86</sup> Defense Minister Sergei Shoygu thought to create a brand to popularize the military and generate a fanbase. This resulted in the outlet store, *Armiya Rossii*.<sup>87</sup> The marketing of patriotism taps into cultural memory and emotion. For the younger patriots, it markets sex and war as excitement. Such commercial excess is no problem to the Kremlin when it validates the state, and effectively generates propaganda at a remove.

### 1.5 Hegemonic Masculinity

Sociologists R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt offer a valuable tool for analyzing contemporary Russia through the concept of “hegemonic masculinity.” The structure and system of contemporary legitimation strategies can be analyzed through each of these three frameworks, offered by Connell and Messerschmidt:

1. Local: constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interaction of families, organizations, and immediate communities, as typically found in ethnographic and life-history research;
2. Regional: constructed at the level of the culture or the nation-state, as typically found in discursive, political, and demographic research; and
3. Global: constructed in transnational arenas such as world politics and transnational business and media, as studied in the emerging research on masculinities and globalization.<sup>88</sup>

Concepts of masculinity within the realm of wealth and power in Russia can be applied to the current hegemony of male power today through the local, regional and global distinctions. Even

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<sup>86</sup> Howard Amos, “Corps Couture: The Rise of Russia’s Patriotic Fashion Industry,” *The Moscow Times*, August 15, 2016.

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/08/15/corps-couture-the-rise-of-russias-patriotic-fashion-industry-a54983>

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” in *Gender and Society*, no. 6, (2005): 849.

with the ambiguities associated with definitions of hegemonic masculinity and non-hegemonic masculinity, one can understand the proliferation of power with the lack of any cohesive pushback. Emboldened by alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church and the Putinist brand of leadership, hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Russia operates on each level of Connell and Messerschmidt's distinctions.

Nonetheless, it would be misleading to attribute this to "Russian culture." Several analyses of Putin's style of masculinity have shown that his chosen brand is one that is manicured and focus-grouped. This aligns with the concept posed by Connell and Messerschmidt that the masculinity at play does not necessarily have to represent all masculinities—just those that can benefit from spreading a masculine image, in order to obtain certain gains from systematic gender placements. Putin's solidification of masculinity within Russian leadership runs parallel to the issue itself: the stability of the leaders' masculine image with the perceived stability of his very leadership. The proliferation and popularity of Putin's image—with the help of such images of him and his various adventure-seeking hobbies—display a gender performance used for political propaganda. Political scientist Tatiana Zhurzhenko asks in an article for *Eurozine*, "Can alternative masculinities in Russia point to political alternatives to Putin?"<sup>89</sup>

Instilling normativity rather than normalcy, Putin struck a chord by addressing through his own hobbies and habits what society was lacking, modeling himself as the ideal to what Russian men ought to be. The motivating principle was that "it embodied the most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men."<sup>90</sup> The machinery of structured gender

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<sup>89</sup> Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Capitalism, autocracy, and political masculinities in Russia." *Eurozine*. May 18, 2016, <https://www.eurozine.com/capitalism-autocracy-and-political-masculinities-in-russia/>

<sup>90</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 832.

roles and performances was keeping “traditional” roles in place. Such actions, and the lack of oversight through cohesive checks and balances, showed that gender politics in Russia could continue as such.

Thus, that which is left ambiguous and unsaid is precisely what makes all the difference. Connell and Messerschmidt write of male images at the regional level: “There is a circulation of models of admired masculine conduct,” and such models can be “exalted by churches, narrated by mass media, or celebrated by the state. Such models refer to, but also in various ways distort, the everyday realities of social practice.”<sup>91</sup> These models idealize certain masculine characteristics, in order to produce more of them and celebrate certain gender performances of masculinity over others. This can be seen in the meetings of various nationwide youth groups, especially in the days of the Nashi Summit at Seliger, when male campers were encouraged to bend cast-iron pans with their bare hands.

The counterargument to this phenomenon is that Putin is offering a model of responsibility and behavior in a state where alcoholism and domestic violence run rampant. Incident reporting is complicated by the lack of legal protections. A study in 2014 estimated that every year 14,000-15,000 women were killed annually by abusive partners.<sup>92</sup> Authorities do not disclose these numbers definitively and abuse statistics are likely much higher than their annual estimates.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 838.

<sup>92</sup> Venera Zakirova, “Gender Inequality in Russia: The Perspective of Participatory Gender Budgeting.” in *Reproductive Health Matters* 22, no. 44 (2014): 203.

<sup>93</sup> Domestic violence is discussed further in Chapter 2.



Such ambiguity makes space for stagnant policy. With the power of hegemonic masculinity; policy neglect is not a symptom of such governance but a product. Connell and Messerschmidt write:

Because the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on practice that permits men's collective dominance over women to continue, it is not surprising that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men's engaging in toxic practices—including physical violence—that stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, the absence of a deeper look and analysis of women's policy issues is problematized by the fact that this situation works for men in leadership positions, and perhaps even for the women that have taken steps to orient themselves within it. Hegemonic masculinity within the context of domestic violence, which will be discussed in Chapter 2, is one such problem where stagnant policy and the image of male power work in unison. Permitting male dominance, which the Putin administration has encouraged, parallels with the global appearance of Russia.

The mass-produced images of Putin carry their own political agenda: they seek to impress upon people a sense of stability after years of discomfort. The images also seek to show one type of person: a man, with ethnically Russian features, who is sovereign in the sense that he can fish, he can hunt, he can even scuba-dive. He is a man who hunts, fishes, rides motorcycles and horses, plays hockey, engages in extreme sports, drinks in moderation if at all, attends Russian Orthodox church services—and acknowledges beautiful Russian women, who reciprocate by giving him their support. The Kremlin's image-makers depict him as an updated "Real Russian Man." That model is dependent upon the normative gender order instilling desire

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<sup>94</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 840.

in men to be like Putin, and for women to desire Putin. But it also seeks to subvert other modes of being; and impose strict gender order.

## Chapter Two. Performative Policy and Political Vanity

### 2.1 Bedroom Politics

The function of Putin's branding is two-fold. It works as a soft power tool to display the sovereignty and strength of Russia, and also as a tool for intervention into private life through mass media that beckons validation through normative male and female behavior—exacerbating the social implications of imprudent policy. Johnson and Saarinen argue that there is a comparison to be made between Putin's physical appearance and his interventionism in post-Soviet states like his annexation of Crimea in the Ukraine, the Kremlin's cyberattacks in Estonia, and the invasions of Georgia and Chechnya.

Johnson and Saarinen categorize Russia as a “gender regime,” a government which evokes and furthers stratas based on gender, “from private to public, in various domains (such as economic, political, and civil society) as well as social relations.” They define gender regimes as “the constitutive structures that (re)produce gender relations.”<sup>95</sup> Governmental structures, in their case, further gender norms in society, and therein affect how society interacts.

In this tableau, Putin is cast as the protector. This image operates on the international scale, in that the theater of operations must look stable—Russia maintains a strongman image internally by intervening in surrounding states, and adopts an anti-civil-society rhetoric in the media. Johnson and Saarinen cite a 2010 study by political scientist Amrita Basu which asserts that “women's movements are less likely to emerge when states are weak and repressive and there is a chasm between official pronouncements and actual politics and practices.”<sup>96</sup> Women's movements, as discussed in 1.2, have emerged in Russia, but they have issues with cohesion. The

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<sup>95</sup>Johnson & Saarinen, “Twenty-first Century Feminisms,” 550.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid, 543.

lack of an organized women's movement is naturally beneficial to the gender regime. Without a cohesive feminist opposition to call out the gender regime, the gender regime can maintain its norms and stratifications without challenge.

The campaign song “Man Like Putin” offers an image of Putin as a hero, a savior, an ideal, respectful partner. The lyrics—written by pop star Aleksandr Yelin as part of a bet—are derived from the fact that domestic violence is deeply prevalent in Russia, without any legislation that protects the victim from the perpetrator. The song, which became a cultural phenomenon, considers the culture of domestic violence in Russia, and offers Putin as an alternative to the archetypal drunk, abusive boyfriend:

*A man like Putin, full of strength  
A man like Putin, who won't be a drunk  
A man like Putin, who won't hurt me  
A man like Putin, who won't run away*<sup>97</sup>

These lyrics address the prevalent issue of domestic violence passively, and even place the responsibility for the issue of domestic violence on women themselves and their deficient abilities to choose partners. The song suggests that women need protection from men, and that they should put their faith in Putin's presidency, and cast him in the role of protector—another normative legitimation strategy. This became his campaign song.

According to a 2018 Human Rights Watch report, one in five Russian women has been, or currently is being abused by her partner.<sup>98</sup> Domestic violence is not legally an offense in Russia—there is no legal language to make a distinction between domestic violence and battery. Human Rights Watch wrote a policy recommendation in 2012 that the state adopt measures to

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<sup>97</sup> PBS, “A Man Like Putin.” Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/soundtracks/stories/putin/>

<sup>98</sup> Yulia Gorbunova, “I Could Kill You and No One Would Stop Me: Weak State Response to Domestic Violence in Russia,” (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2018): 22-23.

protect victims of domestic violence, and make partner abuse a criminal offense. After HRW drafted the recommendation, the organization worked with Duma officials to see that this bill passed. The federal offices of the Interior Ministry, as well as the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection approved it, and the Presidential Council on Human Rights formally recommended that the Duma adopt it. But in 2016, the measure stalled. An undisclosed senior official stated that the Duma was citing arbitrary errors, “bureaucratic pretexts, and that the committee rejected the draft because of a powerful pushback from religious leaders and other supporters of ‘traditional values.’”<sup>99</sup>

There was, however, a brief, six-month period in 2016 in which domestic violence was made a criminal offense, beginning in July and ending in February of 2017. This was in an effort to “lighten the criminal justice system’s burden.”<sup>100</sup> However, parliament fought back beginning in November of 2016—a team of lawmakers led by Senator Mizulina argued for family sovereignty and state sovereignty—citing danger stemming from Western NGOs:

They . . . have a very mercantile interest in promoting this agenda. The thing is, Western countries have grant programs for NGOs that fight domestic violence. Because of this, a lot of topics are being forcefully included in the political agenda. This applies not only to groups that receive foreign funding. Russia has a lot of its own programs on the federal and regional level. NGOs inflate the importance of this topic in order to increase the overall funds allocated to fight the problem and also as part of competition for the existing ones.<sup>101</sup>

Mizulina subverts the problem of lax policy toward domestic violence in Russia, with the argument that state sovereignty is under attack by Western NGOs, which seek to destabilize Russia. Thus, the power of Putinist rhetoric is two-fold: it takes the real, domestic issue to the global scale, and then succeeds in placating it by invoking outside threats that must be stopped.

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<sup>99</sup> Gorbunova, “I Could Kill You and No One Would Stop Me,” 23.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Mizulina's rhetoric called for sovereignty in the country and in the home, leveraging the Kremlin's contentious relationships with international watchdogs against the new policy changes. The domestic programs she cited did not provide the victim with protections, and in certain cases victims even were legally required to pay their abusers' battery fines. In the first week of February 2017, parliament adopted a bill that would decriminalize domestic violence, and the following week, Putin signed it into law, ending the brief period in Russia during which there was substantial legal recourse to domestic violence.

Mizulina's argument was rooted in the idea that in such a patriarchal society, domestic violence, when it is inflicted on a woman by a male partner, is "less" offensive than other behaviors:

Mizulina suggested that women "don't take offense when they see a man beat his wife" and that a man beating his wife is "less offensive" than when a woman "humiliates a man." She and other parliamentarians also argued, with no evidence, that criminal sanctions for certain forms of domestic violence would disproportionately affect parents who use "spanking" to discipline their children.<sup>102</sup>

The HRW report did not invoke suggestive language on child discipline as part of the suggestion to the Russian government to improve its domestic violence policies. The argument came to centralize the role of NGOs as agents of Western "interference," which the Kremlin cast as a threat to Russia's sovereignty. The HRW argument was blown out of proportion.

This is a tactic that is not only Putinist, but maintains a legacy in the history of Russian and Soviet leadership. The real problem of lack of equality is placated by the argument that foreign powers are out to destabilize Russia, and that internal politics are connected with external threats of intervention—especially that of Western, human rights intervention.

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<sup>102</sup> Gorbunova, "I Could Kill You and No One Would Stop Me," 23.

The Kremlin's brand of state sovereignty relies upon the development of a strong sense of nationalism: Putinism relies on manufacturing support for the claim that unity on the home front against the rest of the world is important to the fate of Russia, and then producing the solution to that problem in the form of a masculine figurehead. Considering the demographic issue,<sup>103</sup> the call on women to reproduce, the rhetoric and policy around abortion, and the lack of effective reprimand for domestic violence, invoking nationalism and patriotism makes an effective subversion tactic. Putin and his Kremlin allies obscure the problem and absolve responsibility for mishandling rampant national problem of domestic violence. The responsibility falls on the abused partner, and she is considered at fault, as the victim is blamed for putting herself in a dangerous situation. But the backdrop of abuse also works as a part of a legitimization strategy, which relies on the continuation of abuse to produce the image of Putin as the superior man. This scapegoats the violent elements of manhood to the abusive men, and casts Putin as the superior man.

Putin's policies and rhetorical stance on NGOs attack Western intervention in a similar way to how the West was portrayed during the height of the original Helsinki Watch Group's campaign to hold the Soviet Government to international standards of conduct. The "foreign agent" law, aimed at any NGO that is politically analytical or critical, requires NGOs to register as 'foreign agents.'<sup>104</sup> This requires scrutiny of spending and earning, and requires leaders of any group that holds the government accountable to report to officials every quarter. Memorial, an NGO which commemorates victims of Soviet-era repression and keeps records of totalitarian activity, was fined 600,000 roubles (\$9,000 approximately) for the distribution of their materials

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<sup>103</sup> See 1.1 for reference on the demographic issue.

<sup>104</sup> Laurel Wamsley, "Putin Approves Law Labeling Journalists 'Foreign Agents' in Russia," *NPR*, December 2, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/02/784220222/putin-approves-law-labeling-journalists-foreign-agents-in-russia>

without specifying that they were “foreign agents.” Any NGO that is angled toward record-keeping and information sharing, that is aimed toward human rights protections, or is critical of the government, is labeled and persecuted by the state. While all that takes on the Kremlin’s international relations, internal politics and policies remain stagnant, abstracted by the invocation of Western interventionism.

Johnson and Saarinen write of the effectiveness of Putinist pronatalism, that he “is using his own brand of masculinity to embolden the national psychology and to legitimate more muscular intervention into all aspects of people’s lives.”<sup>105</sup> Putin’s masculinity relies upon establishing and asserting his sex appeal. Johnson and Saarinen write that such images put forth by the Kremlin depict “a sexualized tough guy, a new real Russian man.”<sup>106</sup> Putin’s “real Russian man” image relies upon the failure of Russian masculinity in general, and the continuation of the domestic violence crisis. Voronina writes of the confluence of issues as private problems: “concerning only the ‘fair sex.’ But it is precisely here that the most important mechanism for the perpetuation of traditional patriarchal ideology is concealed.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, behind all of this imagery—the shirtless Putin, the ideal man, the woman who picks a man for safety—patriarchy, machismo, gender norms and inequalities pervade with force and call people into question for their individual choices, and how they can better benefit the state.

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<sup>105</sup> Johnson and Saarinen, “Twenty-First-Century Feminisms,” 548.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Voronina, “Soviet Patriarchy,” 100.



## 2.2 Abrasive Rhetoric, and Lacking Representation

In 2009, the head of United Russia’s political department attempted to make a point about economic modernization. To make this point, he made the choice to use rape as metaphor: “I saved a girl from being raped. I just persuaded her.”<sup>108</sup>

Rhetoric is a powerful tool for public political legitimation. Putin’s wielding and deployment of a rhetoric of masculine sovereignty has been successful for his party and his allies, as seen in Mizulina’s statements on NGO intervention. Such rhetoric is also a tool to influence society. Putin wielded the language traditionally associated with men in his new rhetorical form, that “signaled new public legitimacy for what had been private, male-only locker room talk, bringing the language of the *siloviki*—comrades from the police, military, and intelligence agencies—into public discourse.” This has materialized, as Johnson and Saarinen describe, in incidents like his first political crisis: “in summer 2000—when the Kursk submarine sank with a crew inside—Putin labeled some of the sailors’ wives as whores in response to their agitation for a government rescue operation.”<sup>109</sup> The language of fraternity thus became useful in terms of shutting down dissent by posing the state and its interests in masculine terms, and humiliating opposition in feminine terms. This para-political tactic allows the Kremlin to leverage misogyny to make attacks on opponents, critics, and policy suggestions without the need to engage on the opposition’s own rhetorical terms.

Voronina writes that “it has become almost improper to speak about women’s everyday family burdens, since this motif resounds so often (albeit without results), whenever the

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<sup>108</sup> Johnson and Saarinen, “Twenty-first Century Feminisms,” 547.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

discussion turns to women and ‘their’ problems.”<sup>110</sup> In the context of the masculinized political sphere and its rhetoric, the place for women’s issues and problems is not only absent, but almost rhetorically treated as if they aren’t a concern without a political dimension. In the backdrop of these rhetorical standards, advocacy for women’s issues is much harder to achieve.

This is also legitimized through the political and cultural hegemony of the Russian Orthodox Church. Within the church, there is very little space made for women’s issues. This is emphasized through the strong enforcement of gender roles within the church, where women are not allowed to serve within the structure of the church as priests or clerics. Historian Nadezhda Kizenko writes that when women go to confess, and are seeking priestly advice on issues of reproduction, non-marital sex, they are seen as committing “a crime against pastoral conscience; and they sow temptation among the other parishioners.”<sup>111</sup>

The legacy of the Soviet past may appear promising on women’s representation, but emboldens the lack of high leadership roles occupied by women. The Supreme Soviet, the legislative body for the Soviet republics, there was a quota that ensured there would be 33% female representation.<sup>112</sup> But in the higher seats, women were lacking: only two women held the ministerial seats between 1923 and 1991.<sup>113</sup> In the high offices of the Politburo and Central Committee, women retained 3% representation in the full duration of the Soviet era.<sup>114</sup>

Women in federal power are working within a context where machismo politics have gone unchecked. Women in the Duma are a minority: statistics from 2011 show that women then

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<sup>110</sup> Voronina, “Soviet Patriarchy,” 100.

<sup>111</sup> Nadieszda Kizenko, “Feminized Patriarchy? Orthodoxy and Gender in Post-Soviet Russia” in *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013): 599.

<sup>112</sup> Nivedita Kapoor, “Women in the Duma: Why Post-Soviet Russia Has Low Female Representation,” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2016: 61.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

occupied 61 seats in the Federal Duma, while men occupied 389 seats—making the Duma 13.5% per cent women.<sup>115</sup> As of 2020, women occupy 71 of 450 Duma seats. The Inter-Parliamentary Union’s tracking of women’s representation in federal power has depicted Russia’s steady plunging down the ranks. In a list of 189 countries, the Russian Federation ranks 133rd as of data from March 2020, a significant plummet from 100th place in 2015.<sup>116</sup> Of 170 upper chamber seats, 29 are occupied by women—making potential legislation inherently skewed and influenced by a male majority.

Women’s issues, then, only exist to the degree that women are seen as responsible for themselves; their reproductive health, their place in issues of domestic violence, their place in society as a whole. Importantly, it is a confluence of “responsibility” and agency. Through the machinery of the Putinist power model, women are held entirely responsible for domestic violence, while the failures of the government to protect through policy are not broached. Various movements and organizations challenge existing policy, but they are met with the masculine derision associated with Putinist rhetoric, which demean their political demands while also reinforcing the dominance of the male figurehead image that Putin embodies.

### **2.3 Policy suggestions: Do They Matter?**

The Kremlin has not integrated any policy suggestions generated by NGOs, i.e, the suggestions of Human Rights Watch in terms of domestic violence policy. These policy

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<sup>115</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union database, “Russian Federation State Duma.” Accessed April 22, 2020. [http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2263\\_11.htm](http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2263_11.htm)

<sup>116</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union database, “Percentage of women in national parliaments,” Accessed April 27, 2020. <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=3&year=2020>

suggestions have effectively been neutralized by casting them as extensions of Western intervention into Russia's sovereignty.

There have been experiments and attempts to ameliorate the system on the local level: an internationally-implemented policy suggestion, "participatory gender budgeting," is a tactic employed by over 70 countries worldwide as of 2014,<sup>117</sup> and was attempted in Russia as the Gender Development Strategy of the Russian Federation. International donors supported this process in conjunction with the Open Society Institute—hoping to put forth a playbook for gender equality in Russia within the systems and infrastructure of Russian bureaucracy. The pilot test for the program was undertaken in the Komi Republic of Russia, however, it was inevitably abandoned by the Putin regime. Research on the St. Petersburg state budget showed it "was not oriented practically to taking up gender issues,"<sup>118</sup> a claim which appears dubious in the general tableau of the Putin-led government.

This is part of a larger debate on community needs and budgeting. Gender Studies scholar Venera Zakirova explains that local officials are "hesitant to or afraid of encouraging citizen participation, as they believe it will lead to demand for more services and place additional burdens on already scarce resources."<sup>119</sup> This, then, becomes a civil society issue, with the government deciding social services without consulting and surveying the regions and people whom they serve: "Delivery of services by the municipalities and other government agencies still does not take account of people's opinions or include consultations with civil society organizations." The victims, Zakirova deduces, are primarily women, children, and the elderly, as well as large families. Zakirova cites the "top-down" approach of governance as the crux of

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<sup>117</sup> Zakirova, "Gender Inequality," 206.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

this issue, as it leaves officials vulnerable to the orders of the Kremlin. Both cities and provinces are affected by deprivation of resources, but provinces have especially limited government resources. There is “limited access to health care, schools, day care centres for small children, hospitals or maternity clinics, let alone good roads or well-developed public transport.” Above two thirds of provincial households live below or at the cusp of poverty. These numbers, as of 2018, estimate that 19.3 billion (one fifth of the population) live at or below the poverty line<sup>120</sup>—9,786 roubles, which as of 2020 is \$142.74. The tacit refusal of the Duma to entertain certain policy suggestions, even when tested on the local governmental level and accepted, are not accepted on the larger playing field of Russian politics, and then curbed altogether.

In terms of furthering reproductive policy through lobbying, anthropologist Michele Rivkin-Fish writes of reproductive legislation amid Russia’s demographic crisis, positing that any such lobbying for women’s reproductive rights is dangerous “amid Russia’s aggressively nationalist demographic politics.”<sup>121</sup> The Kremlin offers, again, no room for suggestions. The landscape of reproductive legislation is controlled by men, while Mizulina serves as the face of the anti-abortion brigade symbolically.

There was, at one point, something called “maternity capital,” wherein women with new infants in families with more than one child were given vouchers in order to ease child rearing expenses. These vouchers amount to \$10,000. However, this is again a placation of larger issues of the state, such as lack of fundamental state resources and programs. This does not affect the

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<sup>120</sup> Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty. “One-Fifth Of Russians Live in Poverty, 36 Percent in ‘Risk Zone,’ Study Finds.” *RFERL*, November 21, 2018.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/study-22-percent-of-russians-live-in-poverty-36-percent-in-risk-zone-/29613059.html>

<sup>121</sup> Michele Rivkin-Fish, "Conceptualizing Feminist Strategies for Russian Reproductive Politics: Abortion, Surrogate Motherhood, and Family Support after Socialism." *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 589.

quality of childcare, nor has it furthered the idea that men are contributors to domestic labor.

These vouchers are a strategic distraction:

Instead, it has encouraged women to exit the workforce as a solution to the presumed barriers impeding women from bearing second and third children. Thus, despite Putin's framing of this entitlement as promoting women's needs, maternity capital ties the state's support for families closely to its own pronatalist goals, further entrenching a vision of women as mothers and linking them to the domestic sphere.<sup>122</sup>

The vouchers, ultimately, seek to return women to the home. In the debates on the demographic crisis, there is a line of thought of such maternity policies as stoking a masculinity crisis and rendering men useless. Male humiliation based on lack of finances and small salaries operates as a crux of the argument against maternity capital, that "a long-standing crisis of masculinity stands at the root of Russia's family crisis, including low fertility."<sup>123</sup>

Internal policy suggestions are more of the same pronatalist approaches to abortion. The demographic crisis made these internal policies exceptionally vicious. A 2011 draft legislation, put forth by Parliamentarian V.G. Dragonov, would have required women to receive letters of permission from husbands (and underage pregnant women parental permission) to receive abortions. This would also entail a 7-day wait period, "a mandatory ultrasound in which a woman was to see and hear the fetus's beating heart," and "a counseling session informing women about the harms of abortion and her "right to refuse" an abortion."<sup>124</sup> The language of this bill also entailed the elimination of any social needs for abortion except for a rape-induced pregnancy. Rivkin-Fish posits that "with ongoing support from the Orthodox Church and global antiabortion movements, further restrictions may emerge." The Orthodox Church has a hardline stance on abortion and, even, miscarriage. Priests have women who are looking for absolution

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<sup>122</sup> Rivkin-Fish, "Conceptualizing Feminist Strategies," 584.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 586.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 574.

for the sin of abortion to do the prayer for miscarriage, laying the blame on them: “for women who have actually miscarried, this prayer, which essentially blames them for their child’s death and bars them from the Eucharist, is more devastating than the penalties for abortion itself.” The penalty of abortion, in Orthodox doctrine, is the excommunication of the subject for ten years.<sup>125</sup>

Federal policies work in conjunction with the Russian Orthodox Church, and the concept of the patriarchy is taken on “more literally in Russia than it does in other Christian religious traditions.”<sup>126</sup> The Church, at the same time, furthers image of the ideal Russian man—a pious man of relative sobriety. But “there was neither a context nor an audience for discussing a greater role for women.”<sup>127</sup> The image of women within the Church is mainly of pious, conservative older women.

Policies, then, work to please the beneficiaries of the Putin regime, with the furthering of bills—some which claim to be helping women, like the maternity capital bill—that seek to keep women in the domestic sphere. But the reality is that women are left out of the policy through sinister means. This is a resort to living on welfare, and being dependent on the state.

#### **2.4 Averting Attention: “I’m a Girl, I Don’t Want to Hear About Politics”**

State politics, though maintaining the performative appearance of inclusion, are notoriously a no-woman’s-land. This is both in the makeup of the Duma<sup>128</sup> and in its policies.

Voronina posits that

women as a social group are, for all intents and purposes, alienated from politics, insofar as they are considered to have no particular political or social interest which differs from the interests of men, and, on the other hand, the latter are convinced that politics is

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<sup>125</sup> Kizenko, “Feminized Patriarchy?” 598.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 596.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 597.

<sup>128</sup> See 2.2, page 48 for reference on Duma makeup.

definitely not a women's affair. Thus, it is more a case of suppression of the interests of women than of their over-emancipation.<sup>129</sup>

This is emphasized through commercial means. In the spring of 2013, a television station called “You” (a play on the Russian letter IO) materialized, a channel for women, with advertisements featuring CGI cats with wigs of human hair and feminine outfits. One such advertisement read, “I am a girl [devushka]. I don't want [to hear about] politics. I want a channel that's for me.”<sup>130</sup>

The implication was the marketing message—that Russian girls and women are not needed in the political sphere, they can return to their shows. Similar ads by *You* ran about girls not being interested in watching sports.

This sort of allowance within the marketplace, making such gender disparity visible, is deeply telling. While independent news media takes to the internet,<sup>131</sup> the space is made for channel *You* on television.

The degradation of women in the media and in mass culture and the discrimination in all spheres of life, remains not only unpunished, for all intents and purposes, but is not even recognized by a society that is trying to become democratic. An orientation toward changing the position of women is nowhere written into the humanistic and democratic program for the transformation of society, because the myth of the emancipation of women under socialism is too deeply rooted in the social and individual consciousness.<sup>132</sup>

The market and the media help to show women in their places nonchalantly, and sew political consciousness in society. Marketing of Kremlin-aligned channels geared toward women makes it hard to legitimize women in the spheres of politics and dissent, and distracts from major policy needs.

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<sup>129</sup> Voronina, “Soviet Patriarchy,” 100.

<sup>130</sup> Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 309.

<sup>131</sup> This is further discussed in 3.4 and the conclusion.

<sup>132</sup> Voronina, “Soviet Patriarchy,” 101.



Additionally, gender-based marketing in this context is a distraction from the lack of resources allocated to the funding of gender issues, and the high level of disorganization in kleptocracy. “You” was created through psychologically persuasive means, utilizing focus groups of women and what they would like to see on television. This taps into the political consciousness that has been sewn, and exploits the current state of gender politics in Russia to market and monetize the lack of inclusion.

Such a political consciousness has created the space for the prevalence of sexism in politics, the giving of birthday calendars of pin-ups to the leader of the country, the lack of any policy change in terms of addressing gender inequality, the lack of federal funding for families, and the state-sponsored directives to procreate. And in this space, with unitary power, the status quo is maintained and proliferated through the media. The takeaway of this, then, is that women are cast in submissive roles, either overtly or through the psychology of entrenchment in male-controlled societies, which is emboldened by the lack of their representation in the Duma.

In her influential book, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, Sperling outlines the discrimination in parliament, and the roles of women within it. If discrimination was invisible to the Duma women, “it had not remained so to Russia’s feminist activists, who saw it as pervasive in the spheres of political, economic, social, and personal life.”<sup>133</sup> Putinist politics on the Duma floor operated with such legitimation strategies, Sperling writes:

Political legitimation strategies that rely on gender norms include ‘topping,’ or asserting masculine dominance over other men, enhancing political authority by claiming the sexual allegiance of attractive, feminine women, and undermining opponents’ positions by attacking their masculinity or femininity as deviant. These techniques only work effectively in a cultural-political context where sexism and homophobia are widely accepted or at least a little questioned in public.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Sperling *Sex, Politics, and Putin*, 169.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

Even though women working in the context of the Russian Duma are “in power,” they are working within these contexts which ascribe a dominance and pecking order, with an uneven gender balance. Many of the policies adopted in the Duma directly affect women—and are stamped by women in performative roles of Putinist allyship.

The scholar Deniz Kandiyoti offers analysis of this phenomenon in her work, *Bargaining with the Patriarchy*:

women in areas of classic patriarchy often adhere as long as they possibly can to rules that result in the unfailing devaluation of their labor. The cyclical fluctuations of their power position, combined with status considerations, result in their active collusion with the reproduction of their own subordination. They would rather adopt interpersonal strategies to maximize their security through manipulation of the affections of their sons and husband.<sup>135</sup>

Is docility within state power, then, a maximization of security? Certainly those working alongside Putin must be docile in their intentions, and ambitious to garner power through their associations with him and his Kremlin allies. Women who aligned themselves with Putin, then, “through their actions to resist passivity and total male control, became participants with vested interests in the system that oppressed them.”<sup>136</sup> There is a material base to state power held by men; there is no such similar experience for women. These considerations of gender power imbalance are deeply rooted, and increased, in the Putinist period.

Thus, Kandiyoti’s theory is applicable to the picture of Russian gender imbalance today. She argues, in her example of certain sub-saharan African societies adopting democracy, that “women often resist the process of transition because they see the old normative order slipping away from them without empowering alternatives.”<sup>137</sup> This is also an explanation for the absence

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<sup>135</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy” in *Gender and Society*, vo. 2 no. 3 (1988): 280.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

of a cohesive and successful women's movement during the perestroika period and the "time of troubles" under Yeltsin. People were struggling to locate themselves after years of perceived Soviet equality and a social welfare system. Intense branding, marketed to a people that has one through traumatic regime change, has created political opportunism: it becomes a game of loyalties, and a gaming of stability.

Benefits to ideological docility within the power structure of Duma run with the fabric of patriarchal bargaining: Mizulina, for example, gains reliability and reputation through being in step with Putinist policy of the moment—it is a strategic, if not outright blatantly opportunistic move. This opportunism has been expressed through how Mizulina started out: as a fairly progressive senator who opposed war with Chechnya. The Russian politician Boris Nadezhdin said to *Open Democracy* that "over the years she went with the flow, from Gaidar to Putin. She wasn't the only one, and she feels good about it. She has connections among the 'strongmen' surrounding Putin, and all this heady brew of Imperial Orthodoxy probably came from them."<sup>138</sup> In Kandiyoti's terms, Mizulina's steps are strategic moves in a system that is only in the recent past adopting an illusion of stability. The benefit to docility is job stability.

When asking the question of why women would forward policies that do not benefit major issues that are associated exclusively with their wellbeing: such as access to reproductive health centers, equitable pay, and other questions of equitable standing in society, one can look to this quote from Kandiyoti: "Patriarchal bargains do no merely inform women's rational choices but also shape the more unconscious aspects of their gendered subjectivity, since they permeate the context of their early socialization, as well as their adult cultural milieu."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Egor Mostovshchikov, "Yelena Mizulina: the creation of a conservative." *Open Democracy*, May 28, 2015. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/yelena-mizulina-creation-of-conservative/>

<sup>139</sup> Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," 285.

Short-term, material interests like social standing and salary take precedence. Kandiyoti writes of the presence of passivity within these contexts: “their passive resistance takes the form of claiming their half of this particular patriarchal bargain—protection in exchange for submissiveness and propriety.”<sup>140</sup> Protection is granted by docility.

Margarita Simonyan is another case study in ideological docility: the editor-in-chief of Russia Today, a state news outlet often described as a “soft-power tool” which was designed to improve Russia’s image abroad, also directly benefits from the Putinist structure. Simonyan was ranked No. 5 on the *Forbes 2017 Power Women: Most Powerful Women in Media/Entertainment*, right next to popstar Beyoncé Knowles.<sup>141</sup>

Journalist Julia Ioffe writes of the docility required to work within the context of the Kremlin news pool: “To be picked for the Kremlin press pool is an honor but also a sign of trustworthiness. The pool is a place for the most loyal of the loyalists.” This business required lenient morals and ideologies: “To be assigned to cover the Russian president, especially for television, a reporter has to be absolutely reliable in his docility, and in his ability to ask softball questions.”<sup>142</sup> The RT slant is deeply pro-Putin, and evokes a clever human rights rhetoric to qualify the slant in the eye of foreign news. One article discusses the popular movement to change heteronormative family terminology, and Putin’s mock of the movement: “While Western ‘human rights’ groups may be girding their loins to condemn Putin’s remarks as yet another example of ‘oppression’ in Russia, they should hold their horses before cashing those

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<sup>140</sup> Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” 283.

<sup>141</sup> “2017 Most Powerful Women in Media/Entertainment,” *Forbes*. Accessed April 19, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/pictures/59f3a0e84bbe6f37dda13e8e/no-5-margarita-simonyan/#2adfbe4964ba>

<sup>142</sup> Julia Ioffe, “What is Russia Today?” *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 2010. [https://archives.cjr.org/feature/what\\_is\\_russia\\_today.php?page=all&print=true](https://archives.cjr.org/feature/what_is_russia_today.php?page=all&print=true)

lobbying checks....”<sup>143</sup> Again, to make up for the lack of gender equality and even rhetorical equality, state-affiliated leaders tout Russian sovereignty and call out the West for hyperbolizing oppression and inequality. The RT article continues, “That would complicate the virtue-signaling morality plays that pay their bills, though, so we shouldn’t hold our breath.” Again arises the problem of placating within modern Putinist conservatism, with the means of the media and its capacity to incite fear-based opinion and gender anxiety.

Ultimately, this media serves as an avenue for diverting attention from the real, domestic needs at hand. The Kremlin manufactures political power through a theater of external threats and Putinist solutions. Inclusion and insistence that women are in fact represented does little to hide the overt statistics referenced above. The longitudinal data shows the strong decrease in women’s standing in Putin’s power sphere, both locally and federally. The uneven Duma, then, is tasked with womens’ public health and economic issues with women only being approximately 16% holding seats in the legislature and 17% in higher chambers.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> “Thanks, but we’ll keep ‘mother’ & ‘father’: Putin rejects politically correct ‘parent #1 & #2’ titles.” *Russia Today*, November 30, 2019. <https://www.rt.com/russia/474708-putin-mother-father-parent/>

<sup>144</sup>Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Percentages of women in national parliaments,” Accessed April 27, 2020. <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=3&year=2020>

## Chapter Three: Political Consciousness

### 3.1 Commercializing Gender

Women's leverage in the labor market requires tradeoffs that provide for upward mobility; often entrepreneurship means tapping into male desires. The lack of representation in entrepreneurial avenues results in a lack of representation in the political sphere.<sup>145</sup> In Kandiyoti's terms, in the context of her patriarchal bargaining argument, there is a tradeoff in marrying rich in a gender regime with a major wealth gap. This is the background for the popular phenomenon of gold-digging, and becoming a mistress to wealthy men. This is best outlined anecdotally in TV producer Peter Pomerantsev's book, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, where he recalls producing a reality show called "Gold Digging Academy" for the Russian TV channel "TNT."

The Gold Digging Academy is one of dozens of these schools in Moscow. One such school is the Geisha School, with classes with year-and-a-half wait lists for classes like "How to Marry in Three Months," "Oral Sex for Experts," and "How to Be Your Man's Number One Lover."<sup>146</sup> This all highlights that husband-finding is a competition, and because of the demographic problem, there are many women to one man. Yulia Varra, the instructor at the Moscow Geisha school, said to *Marie Claire* Magazine, "Relationships are like roulette for modern Russian women. They have a lot to win and everything to lose, so they can never afford to get complacent." Some women bring their daughters. Self-help classes and books, by no surprise, generate a profit from telling women how to marry rich—rather than become rich

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<sup>145</sup> Kapoor, "Women in the Duma," 62.

<sup>146</sup> Abigail Haworth, "Lessons in Love: The Millionaire Hunters," *Marie Claire*, March 31, 2008. <https://www.marieclaire.com/politics/news/a1324/geisha-school-russia/>

themselves. But even some of the women training women to be desirable are unwed: building profitable businesses in teaching traits of desirability.

The popularity of mistressdom and schools where women are taught to land oligarchs are not only a pop-culture phenomenon, but a product of political consciousness. This is a way out, and a tradeoff: many of these women are from poor families from the provinces, coming to Moscow in order to lead a different life.<sup>147</sup> Many of these women did not have father figures (a universal trope, but problematized by the connotations associated with Russian manhood), and seek male protection. Pomerantsev writes that the gold diggers he met were fatherless, and the fantasies of finding a “sugar daddy” were intertwined with the fantasy of having a father figure. Putin is wrapped up in this example: “All the shirtless photos hunting tigers and harpooning whales are love letters to the endless queues of fatherless girls. The President as the ultimate sugar daddy, the ultimate protector with whom you can be as ‘behind a stone wall.’”<sup>148</sup>

This is one of many explanations; others are the persistent demographic problem in Russia, the extreme wealth gap that generates disparity and joblessness, the life expectancy of males, and foremost the lack of political conversation and policy about anything beyond the traditional marriage and gender identity. Another issue is the added, unspoken requirements for women in their fields. Pomerantsev describes the job of translating as a microcosmic example, citing that a specific unnamed translation agency looks for women with “no complexes,” meaning “code for being prepared to bed the client.”<sup>149</sup> Sperling references a similar brand of “for hire” ads in newspapers in her 1999 book, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia*, clarifying that “no complexes” signals “either sex work, or that the woman in question should be

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<sup>147</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015): 10.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

willing to put up with sexual demands by bosses... an institutionalized form of sexual harassment.”<sup>150</sup>

In the case of the TNT show, there is notorious “matchmaking” with oligarchs, organized by Peter Listerman, a self-proclaimed “matchmaker,” but considered a pimp and associated with the Jeffrey Epstein sex-trafficking and molestation scandal. He had found teen girls for Epstein, and had sent text messages to a 14-year-old model, saying “Hey, Bride-to-be, have you been successful?” Listerman is quoted in the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* saying, “My Hollywood clients and oligarchs are sick of emancipated... women, who resemble robots. Everybody is sick of these evil women, they want gentle and romantic!”<sup>151</sup>

Another popular TV show was called “Insanely Beautiful,” a game show in which young, attractive women are asked trivia and logic questions, and men attempt to guess what the women would answer.<sup>152</sup> The introducer, a woman herself, provided that because the women were beautiful, it complicated their ability to logically answer the questions provided to them.

The playing field of image-making is inherently skewed by the state-controlled media. This serves as one of the many examples of how lack of policy fails a culture in its efforts to reduce its problems, and then seeks to ridicule the groups and internalize gender norms. This does not generate a result to the demographic problem, nor any of the pronatalist policies for women in Russia. Women’s upward mobility is considered as reliant on male power. Image holds ground: the wealthy male, and the female who imagines herself rising to luxury, and

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<sup>150</sup> Sperling, *Organizing Women*, 74-75.

<sup>151</sup> Anna Nemtsova, “The Russian Sleazeball Peddling Girls to Billionaires,” *The Daily Beast*, July 29, 2019. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/peter-listerman-the-sleazeball-peddling-russian-girls-to-billionaires>

<sup>152</sup> “Bezymno Krasivi, Seria 1,” YouTube, September 1, 2017 <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=k1aSZ1kSlso>



therefore safety are responses to past instability. Such images are projected and validated through media, in books, and through culture more generally.

Even Ksenia Sobchak, an oppositionist presidential candidate in 2018, reality show host, blogger and critic of the Kremlin and its media, published her own book on marrying rich, called “How to Marry a Millionaire, or Marriage of a Higher Sort.”<sup>153</sup> This book, co-written with socialite Oksana Robsky, is another one of the how-to guides on marrying rich. It is even from the oppositionists like Sobchak that such content is produced.

These tradeoffs make the Putinist legitimation system work: both as Putin’s masculinist, pronatalist legitimation system but also as the mechanism for instilling political consciousness. Therefore, lack of coherent policy is not a concern of the government. All may continue as such, and is not seen as a problem. The sexualized Putinist pin-ups and the Orthodox Church have their differences, but they all play the same game of validation in the Kremlin power machine.

### **3.2 Monetizing Inferiority**

As previously discussed, the economic realities of modern Russia have given way to a centralization of money in its “controlled democracy.” The system of beliefs in modern Russia includes faith in opportunity, which holds that money-making is a realistic prospect that is within one’s reach. While this can be true, economic mobility is nearly impossible in a wealth landscape where most of the population is living at or below the poverty line.<sup>154</sup> However, mechanisms of wealth-gleaning in Russia are associated with the state, and general political opportunism. Though there are many considerably wealthy actors in Russia who are “apolitical” or faintly

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<sup>153</sup> Ksenia Sobchak and Oksana Robski, “Zamuzh za millionera, ili brack vishevo sorta,” Book-online, <http://book-online.com.ua/read.php?book=4620>

<sup>154</sup> Refer to page 51 for poverty data.

criticize the system and its leaders, those that do cash out the most are those that align themselves with Putinist leadership.

The dream of Russian wealth is the dream of opulence, success, and freedoms, which is why so many of the sites in which women seeking wealthy men (and purportedly wealthy men seeking women) find themselves geographically closer to the Kremlin.

Fabricating propaganda is a maneuver to benefit from government money. Consider *Krymski Most* (in English, “Bridge to Crimea. Made With Love!”), a film written by Simonyan. The film tells the tale of a romance between a daring bridge-builder and a beautiful young archaeologist—while at the same time operating as state propaganda promoting the controversial bridge, which happens to be the sum of Putin’s annexation.<sup>155</sup> The oppositionist Alexei Navalny and his team led an investigation into the allocation of funds for the film, and payments, finding that Simoyan went to Alexei Gromov, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, who pushed the Ministry of Culture to provide taxpayer money in order to make the movie.<sup>156</sup> Both Gromov and Simonyan are paid in taxpayer money in their day jobs. The movie cost 100 million roubles to shoot (1.34 million USD). Included, Simoyan was paid 9 million roubles for the script of *Bridge to Crimea* directly to her personal account from the Cinema Foundation.

Thus, learning how to game the system is learning how to survive in an oligarchical economy. The same way in which the Kremlin employs its image-making machine to make Putin a brand that people want to subscribe to, the wealthy employ similar tactics, or even align themselves with already-present images in the system. In the case of the Kremlin’s women, Mizulina brands herself (though coming from a progressive past, advocating for women’s

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<sup>155</sup> See 2.4 for reference on Simonyan.

<sup>156</sup> Alexei Navalny, “Krimski Most. Ykradeno s lyobvyo!” YouTube, March 24, 2020. <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=0LAdAV-jHhw>

reproductive rights in the Yeltsin years) as a staunch conservative to a dramatic extent—having constructed a graveyard for aborted fetuses.

Thus, good behavior that aligns with the political moment is the way to survive in Russia, and performance generates revenue. Women—whether fully convinced by Putin or just trying to get by—are aware of this and are able to position themselves to game the system as per rules. Though this phenomenon is universal, it holds cultural weight with the performance of Soviet and post-Soviet citizenship in Russia.

### **3.3 Are Russia's Female Citizens Passive?**

The political history of women in Russia does not cast them in a passive role, so to call them passive in Russia's contemporary society is simply not enough of an explanation to make sense of why progressive gender policy stagnates. Kandiyoti's theory, that women are not passive political actors, but rather they locate themselves in short-term positions of safety in patriarchal societies, is key to understanding women's roles in contemporary Russia. Passivity is performance. It is an active choice to participate in one of the gold-digging schools, but is of course no locus for change.

The concept of "women's roles" in Russia has been constantly in flux—from being locked in monasteries during the Rurik dynasty to the reforms of the reign of Peter the Great, from the Tsarinas<sup>157</sup> to Marxist women of the People's Will who succeeded in toppling the entire status quo. Women's roles have fluctuated throughout the history of the Soviet Union: women

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<sup>157</sup> The female tsarinas in chronological order were Ekaterina I (1725-27, in the wake of Peter the Great), Anna Ioannovna (1730-1740), a short reign by Anna Leopoldovna (1740-41, until her deposal by Elizaveta), Elizaveta (1741-62), Ekaterina II, also known as Catherine the Great (1762-96).

were promised equality, and their efforts were truncated by the rise of Stalin, overtly returned to pronatalist values, all the while being touted as emancipated women.

In the peasantry, there was a saying, “*Muzh zhene otets, zhena muzhu venets,*” meaning “A husband is the wife’s father, a wife is the husband’s crowning glory.”<sup>158</sup> The overarching expectation of women and children was obedience to men, often met with the repercussion of violence in the home. The “slave soul” of Russia pertained to women in the household, emphasizing the entrenchment of the values which pervade in Russian culture and suggest that the woman is at the will of her father and husband. But all the while, there was no passivity; there was, rather, careful bargaining for stable roles in society. This is why political opportunism is unsurprising, but also provides a possible explanation for why social movements are perceived as axiomatic.

In a society that is ever-changing, and perceived as generally unstable, with a weak leader that is touted as a strongman, where poverty is astounding but opulence is the image that surrounds the Kremlin, people seek out that opulence for themselves in order to achieve proximity to power and an image of themselves as successful. The story of finding stable roles is eternal—opulence applies to the human mentality, but also the cultural longing for stability after the traumas of regime change. Images of Russian power that proliferate in the media are that of extreme, oligarchical opulence, which signals safety.

While there is a legacy of women choosing stable positions in a generally unstable society, there parallels a legacy of performativity toward women’s issues. The societal expectations of women fulfilling certain roles are entrenched; examples of this are the

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<sup>158</sup>Rancour-Lafferriere, “Is the Slave Soul of Russia a Gendered Object?” 134.

Brezhnev-era jokes about women feeling overworked with their double burden of laboring and taking care of their families. These expectations from the selective, brand-based Kremlin, are ideas of women that are congruent with the likes of leaders that place women in certain roles. Per Connell and Messerschmidt (see 1.5), a leading minority can appear as a majority.

It is not that Putin is more lax on the home front: it is that the fabric of this kind of repression is more ambiguous. Modern authoritarianism in Russia is vastly repressive, militaristic, and expansionist. This kind of authoritarianism does not hold its own overt ideology. Rather, it is amorphous, and this lack of shape is precisely what lends it the appearance of impenetrability. Its ideology is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. The historian Walter Lacquer writes, “there are periods in history in which the absence of a doctrine or belief system can be tolerated, at least temporarily, whereas during others it will be unthinkable.”<sup>159</sup> But as time goes on with the same leadership, “a process of routinization sets in, in which the demand for change becomes intense and frequent.” This is similar to what Russia has been seeing with the massive protests in major Russian cities, demanding fair elections, and the work of activists nationwide.

United Russia, the now-dissolved party which propped up Putin, had a manifesto, written in 2003, that carried language with no overt meaning or goals. It had no ideology, but rather language that suggested a binary between the party and the current state of affairs when it was written: “Democracy or authoritarianism? The market or regulation? Openness or closure of the country?” and continued “Decisive political language and aims should be focused on real problems... We plan to become the party of Russian national success... We believe in ourselves

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<sup>159</sup> Walter Lacquer, *Putinism: Russia and Its Future with the West*, (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2015): 158.

and in Russia!”<sup>160</sup> There was no real party ideology, but there was money and bureaucrats that could prop up the party: “It was a party of bureaucrats, conformists, and opportunists,” writes Andrew Jack in his book, *Inside Putin’s Russia*. “Even those advising it seemed cynical about the whole exercise.”<sup>161</sup>

Putin dissolved his cabinet in 2020, and appointed Mikhail Mishustin—the former head of Russia’s federal tax service—as his prime minister, with unanimous approval by United Russia. The constitutional changes that were cited as the reason for this move would further centralize Putin’s power and ability to stay in power.<sup>162</sup> Overall, the party was weak, and now the power is further centralized, and machismo remains in the seats of high office, while gender policy stagnates.

But this is all a product of the Putin package. On the outside, he is losing his base. As of April 23, 2020, Putin’s popularity is at an all time low in the past six years. According to a poll by the Levada Center, Putin’s approval rating is at 63%.<sup>163</sup> This is a large drop from his 83% approval after the annexation of Crimea. The Levada Center also ran a survey from March 19-25, 2020, asking people about their opinions of the Russian political system, asking if the center of power should remain as it is or if there ought to be new people in power, and most chose the latter.<sup>164</sup> The response to the publication of these statistics was controversy over their even being published. *Vedomosti*, a Russian paper, produced infighting when journalist Ksenia Boltskaya published the study by the Levada Center, and the new Editor-in-Chief Andrei

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<sup>160</sup> Andrew Jack, *Inside Putin’s Russia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 229.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

<sup>162</sup> Colin Dwyer, “Russia’s Government Resigns as Putin Moves to Change the Constitution,” *NPR*, January 15, 2020.

<sup>163</sup> Levada Center, “Indicators.” Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*.

Shmarov deleted it. Boltskaya used the app Telegram to alert people and receive outside media attention on this matter.<sup>165</sup> *The Moscow Times* reported that Shmarov “banned articles that cite surveys from Russia’s last remaining polling agency... claiming that the orders came from the Kremlin.”<sup>166</sup>

At the time of this writing, the Kremlin is seeking to gather control of these new statistics while the country and its markets grapple with the effects of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Revenue in the Russian Federation is down 90%, and a petition for aid, launched on March 24, to small businesses has resulted in 347,177 signatures and counting.<sup>167</sup> The original package for April and May was to be a stimulus equating to only \$160 per person. *Time* magazine reported that a protest broke out in the southern Vladikavkaz region of 2,000 people, angry “over job losses and a lack of clear information.”<sup>168</sup> Putin and his administration were unprepared in facing the pandemic, according to the *Time* report. The situation has his political popularity very low as he takes refuge in his country home. His past crowning achievements are now rendered unimportant, and Putin, as of April 27, has only appeared on television four times to address the public. As of April 27, Russia has ranked 9th most affected by the pandemic, surpassing China in cases and deaths.<sup>169</sup>

As economic and public health instability ravages Russian citizens, gender imbalance becomes further exacerbated. With upward mobility already difficult to achieve in Russia’s

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<sup>165</sup> Telegram, Ksenia Boltskaya. April 22, 2020. <https://t.me/ksenyaboletskaya/1138>

<sup>166</sup> “Leading Russian Paper Vedemosti’s New Editor Bans Putin Criticism.” *The Moscow Times*, April 23, 2020. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/23/leading-russian-paper-vedemostis-new-editor-bans-putin-criticism-a70075>

<sup>167</sup> Change.org, “Poderzhite polygodovoe obnovenie nalogov dlya malovo i srednego biznesa,” March 24, 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yewysqyp>

<sup>168</sup> Madeline Roache, “Where’s Putin? Russia’s President Stays Out of Sight as Coronavirus Hits Economy.” *Time*, April 24, 2020. <https://time.com/5827078/russia-putin-coronavirus-economy/>

<sup>169</sup> Andrei Nikerichev, “Coronavirus in Russia: The Latest News.” *The Moscow Times*, April 27, 2020. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/27/coronavirus-in-russia-the-latest-news-april-27-a69117>

economic system, women face an extreme challenge to place themselves in this exceptionally tumultuous political moment. With the legacy of the economic challenges during perestroika and the Yeltsin-era reforms that exacerbated rampant nationwide poverty, women, again, are placed in a transitional position which tasks them to seek meager relief packages. This all harks back to the periods from which Putin's supporters sought refuge from, finding illusory safety in their leader's strong-man image.

### **3.4 Alternative Masculinities**

To talk about these phenomena without addressing the very key element of social change is a miss. Or, at least, the importance of youth culture. Younger and millennial Russians have seen regime change and Putinism, and are not swayed by the same longing for stability as their elders. The crux for change lies, in my belief, in the hands of the people who are at the forefront of change in Russia in activism that holds the state, the Orthodox Church, and the oligarchy accountable.

The similarities between informal social action groups in contemporary Russia and the dissidents of the Brezhnev and Krushchev eras are vast. Generational sociologist Hillary Pilkington writes that “where gender is brought into the youth debate at all at this abstract level, it is in order to give an added moral dimension to the symbolic role youth plays for society in general.”<sup>170</sup>

Consider Eric Bronza, a St. Petersburg based artist who makes art that challenges the state. He told me that with the given repercussions the government has taken against past

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<sup>170</sup> Hillary Pilkington. *Gender, Generation and Identity in Contemporary Russia*. London: Routledge Press, 1996. 3-4.



dissident groups, such groups have been hesitant to come to the fore as an entity. But Bronza practices acts of dissent to what he calls the “beautification” of things—the constant industrial improvements being made by the government, often in conjunction with the wealthy contractors working with the city. Bronza’s exhibits and performances, most notably “Nobody Loves Russia More Than Me,” features a live performance of him in a bathtub, surrounded by dirt, and him ultimately covering himself in the dirt.<sup>171</sup> Bronza tells me that because of the way in which the



government has chased out certain dissident art groups, such as Pussy Riot and *Art Group Voina* (meaning War), like groups are afraid to come to the fore: “There is basically no action, people are afraid to sit in jail.” But this is not to say people are doing nothing. He tells me, “I decided to revise these traditions in a light form,” doing street graffiti, painting a coat with the words

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<sup>171</sup> Photo courtesy of Eric Bronza.

“Putin, Go Away” under a spray-painted Russian flag and walking through the metro, and holding the “Nobody Loves Russia More Than Me” exhibit.<sup>172</sup>

This is to say that dissent under the repressive state is not gone even though groups are persecuted by the state. Dissent takes another form, rooted inside the individual; not unlike the beginnings of the Helsinki Watch Groups in the late Soviet era. Except the contemporary toolbox contains the internet, the limited power of organizing and self-publishing, and relative accessibility of international attention—something that the dissidents, smuggling *samizdat* with the statistics of political prisoners did not have in their disposal to find other like-thinking people. The abilities of people to convey their needs through the internet are something that the dissidents could not have imagined. The scope of dissent now is much larger; but is dependent on the mobilization of opposition.

### **3.5 A Playbook for Change**

Is the status quo unshakable? Or is there a pathway to changing it? Putin’s administration has been stagnantly in power for twenty years, and there is no cohesive movement except the informal organizations that have been advocating for change on the ground level, sparking protests.

First, grassroots movements are, and will continue to be, the most important nexus for change in the fight for change in today’s Russia. Dissident movements start out small, as historians know from the Helsinki Watch Group, even under the repressive Brezhnev era. Bronza, saying that though people do not seem to be gathering in oppositionist art groups anymore, illustrates that there is hope in individual acts such as lone protesters holding placards

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<sup>172</sup> Eric Bronza, Facebook message to author, April 4, 2020.

of political prisoners in parks, artists that tell a story about their experience of Russia through a critical lens. Bronza puts this to action himself, with graffiti and exhibits that challenge the status-quo of Putin's Russia. Though people are scared to speak out, does not mean they will not.

Second, the independent media, though heavily repressed and challenged by means diffused by the government, will be key in those understanding their own dissent. The Navalny YouTube Channel develops well-produced media with evidence on all kinds of Kremlin corruption, thoroughly researched and explained clearly. As of 2020, Navalny's YouTube channel has 3.4 million followers, with video views ranging from 2 million to 6 million on average.<sup>173</sup> Ksenia Sobchak—the author of *How to Marry a Millionaire*, see 3.2—also has her own popular internet following, though her internet brand is not solely focused on oppositionist politics, rather bringing various people in for interviews in order to deliver a wide range of media—famously with RT Simonyan walking out of her interview when challenged on her role as a propagandist. Sobchak has 1.4 million subscribers, and her videos range from 1 million to 6 million views. Media like theirs is key in mobilizing social movements; which they have. Both Navalny and Sobchak ran their own presidential campaigns in 2018. Navalny was detained by authorities<sup>174</sup> at an anti-Putin protest of 2,000 people. Satellite protests happened nationwide on the same day, as is now a trend with oppositionist protests. The internet media serves as a tool for inspiring and gathering civil society, while state media seeks to spin the facts. Additionally, this proliferates role models beyond Putin and the images that surround his party. Navalny and Sobchak both have their own carefully crafted brands.

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<sup>173</sup>Alexei Navalny, YouTube page. <https://www.YouTube.com/user/NavalnyRu/featured>

<sup>174</sup> Marc Bennetts, "Alexei Navalny detained at anti-Putin protest in Moscow," The Guardian, January 29, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/28/russian-police-raid-alexi-navalnys-office-on-day-of-anti-putin-rallies>

Third, the goals of participatory gender budgeting—experimented on local levels of government but met with by officials with ambivalence<sup>175</sup>—can be met through active engagement of those values on the corporate level, especially in corporations with female CEOs. Though it has tried and failed at the public government level from disorderly offices,<sup>176</sup> there is no reason—beyond entrenched notions of why it cannot proliferate in the private, corporate level.

Finally, I suggest that there is an inroad through performance. This is the approach to combating Putinism through the performance of compliance. This is what was done, initially, in the formation of the Helsinki Watch Group as an uninvited group of assistance to the Soviet Union. As Putin's fight with NGOs in Russia seeks out institutions that wish to hold Putinism accountable, there is a final possibility that small groups can form which define themselves as assistance groups to the implementation of laws but are in fact operations which are meant to confront the cult of Putinism through the means of independent media, grassroots organizing, and public oversight. Taking the constitution, the laws, and international human rights agreements, and insisting on their proper implementation is a way to hold Putinism accountable even in its most egregious manifestations. This would be the appropriate lesson from the human rights movement.

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<sup>175</sup> Discussed in 2.3.

<sup>176</sup> Zakirova, "Gender Budgeting," 206

## Conclusion

The current era—in which people who do not fit into the Putinist mold are excluded and persecuted; in which the government holds families sovereign but seeks their compliance with faulty policy, social norms, and calls to procreate; in which interventionism takes on a domestic meaning—has its own grim effect on political representation and consciousness. The Kremlin seeks to curb social movements and notions of civil society beyond the state. In my interview with perestroika feminist Valentina Konstantinova, she illustrated this phenomenon;

The trouble with the women's movement, and probably the democratic movement, is that there is no continuity. There is no continuity of tradition. It is clear that there are reasons for this caused by totalitarian structures and totalitarian consciousness before perestroika. Have women become more active in politics? I think that in official politics, at the decision-making level, no. But they are active in informal groups and movements.<sup>177</sup>

Konstantinova explains that rather than civil society being a constitutional given, discontent with the government breeds civil society. The fight has always been grassroots: in the past, small movements organized around specific issues, and larger movements organized around discontent over the larger issue of authoritarianism after being propelled forth by these small movements. This legacy continues today, and change generates from the grassroots level, while the Kremlin seeks to mitigate civil society.

In the course of my research, I examined the papers of a well-known dissident and human rights activist, Elena Bonner, which are preserved at Harvard University's Houghton Library Archive, and belong to the time of the Soviet dissident movement of the 1970s. Bonner's archive contained small cards with names of political prisoners and their addresses.<sup>178</sup> These

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<sup>177</sup> Valentina Konstantinova, Facebook message to author, November 11, 2019.

<sup>178</sup> Index cards with the names of political prisoners, 1975, Box 15, Folder 34, Elena Bonner Papers, Harvard University Archive, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

were to be smuggled across borders for the cause of publicizing names and holding the Soviet government accountable; attempting to halt the repressive punishment systems for dissenting thinkers and their relatives. Generating change came from small efforts like the listing and smuggling of names across borders—names of dissidents such as Dr. Sergei Kovalyov and geologist-turned-dissident Malva Landa.

Here is where the efforts of the dissidents and today's oppositionists parallel: the power of self-publishing. *Samizdat*, the term for self-published, individually distributed writings and information holds weight even in today's Russia. This is what Navalny and other independent media wielders achieve; generating audiences in the millions. All the while, they expose government corruption and mobilize thousands to protest their own dissatisfaction—the internet becomes a powerful tool for the opposition.

This is why the dissident movement of the 70s is relevant to this discussion. Putinism has been in place, and seeks to remain in place, yet many are dissatisfied—and organize be it in protests both sanctioned and not sanctioned. But the protests of the 70s were those of small groups—numbers now estimate in the thousands. The Levada Center study and the Inter-Parliamentary Union data<sup>179</sup> show discontent—which is why Putin's regime seeks to suppress the publication of any data indicating discontent in the media. These numbers are a depiction of truth: people are tired of Putin's governance.

But where there is a landscape for truth there is a looming reality. The current freedom of the internet, though powerful, may be temporary. The Kremlin has been strategically putting together regulations which would give the government autonomy to disconnect Russia's

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<sup>179</sup> Refer to page 49 for the IPU data, and to page 68 for the Levada Center study.

population from the global internet—meaning, websites which connect people internationally would no longer be accessible, and the Kremlin could access encrypted conversations, as well as citizens’ personal data.<sup>180</sup> The Kremlin seeks to ‘localize’ data, to keep it from the international sphere.<sup>181</sup> This would be a blow to the international transparency generated by the power of the global internet.

Mechanisms for change, however, have been crafted without the internet in the past and can, again, achieve their goals and mobilize actors through other means. As Konstantinova noted, informal groups and movements exist—be it under the controversial title of NGO or not—that generate change on various levels within the administration.

All the while, the Kremlin advertises ideas which advocate one’s political monogamy through the infusion of gender norms into the political conversation, deploying ideas of how to be. Moscow, like any center of power, locates its’ sycophants and directs its’ power-holders around the Kremlin. Within that center of unitary power, the conversation about gender is one-sided, coming from an administration that seeks to convey strict gender norms and sexualize womens’ support; of monogamous political loyalty.

Gender-normative discourse reinforces discrimination—and is a tool to alienate political pluralism, as it reinforces its’ in-groups and out-groups. The somewhat stale Putin brand continues; but brand-builders outside of the state models harness power, and like the dissidents of the Soviet era, spark change through their own brands of thinking.

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<sup>180</sup> Justin Sherman, “Russia’s Domestic Internet is a Threat to the Global Internet.” *Slate*, October 24, 2019. <https://slate.com/technology/2019/10/russia-runet-disconnection-domestic-internet.html>

<sup>181</sup> Justin Sherman, “Russia’s ‘Data Localization’ Efforts May Guide Other Governments.” *Defense One*, January 13, 2020. <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/01/russias-data-localization-push-may-guide-other-governments/162380/>

The case of Russia is not a hopeless one. However entrenched it may seem, the Putin regime is very fragile—thus it is manicured and fibbed through the media. Image-making is a response to lack of substance, and thus fills the empty space where policy should be. There is room for significant change in Russia, in terms of women’s policy under the banner of the Kremlin. On the ground level, opposition requires maneuvering through the weeds of state-crafted political consciousness.

There is a contemporary Russian band that plays secret shows, following a longstanding affinity for the dissidents’ kitchen concerts, where music icons like Boris Grebenshikov and Vladimir Vysotsky made their name. The band is called IC3PEAK—pronounced *icepick*, and they mobilize, like Pussy Riot, through intense music and art that challenges all social norms, operating outside of the Putinist sex-appeal landscape. Their shows are mostly attended by adolescent and young-adult women. Their songs express dismay with the system; they play as long as they can at underground music venues before local authorities come and break up the event.<sup>182</sup> Their videos are rich with powerful optics<sup>183</sup> of Anastasia Kreslina and Nikolay Kostlyev, eating raw meat by Lenin’s Tomb in Red Square, dominantly sitting on the shoulders of riot police in front of Lubyanka prison, and pouring kerosene on herself in front of the Russian White House building. In *Smerti bolshe net*, (meaning “Death No More”), with 42 million views on YouTube, Anastasia sings:

*I pour kerosene on my eyes.  
Let it all burn.  
All of Russia is watching me,  
Let it all burn.*

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<sup>182</sup> Andrew Roth, “Even a half-finished show is a Victory,” *The Guardian*, December 12, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/12/were-not-scared-bands-defy-russian-crackdown-on-political-music>

<sup>183</sup> Photo still from *Smerti Bolshe net*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBG3Gdt5OGs>



Kostylev throws a match, and the duo vanishes. Of the video, Kreslina says: “It’s a descriptive video, we’re not revealing anything new in it. We’re just saying out loud what people would like to say but are afraid to. We’re describing the state of mind of a person of our generation.”<sup>184</sup>

Online, millions watch. At venues, both the artists and their fans risk arrest. Regardless of one’s affinity with the music itself, theirs is a massive display of artistic expression intertwined with critical thought, something that, as the *samizdat* and Helsinki Watch era have demonstrated, can be dismissed only at one’s peril. Everybody, including the Kremlin, listens.



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<sup>184</sup> Lucian Kim, “Young Russian Musicians Struggle Under Government Scrunity.” *NPR*, January 17, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/17/685973630/young-russian-musicians-struggle-under-government-scrunity>



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