

Group Balalaika key concepts prepared by John D

From "Sex, Politics and Putin: Political legitimacy in Russia" by Valerie Sperling

Chapter 2 Putin the Sex Back in Politics: Gender Norms, Sexualisation and Political Legitimation in Russia

Ideas

All political regimes (including authoritarian examples such as the Dear Leader's) need and use legitimation strategies, the balance of coercion and consent varying from authoritarian to democratic models of government.

On his ascent to power, Putin's Kremlin advisors wished to demarcate him from his immediate predecessors by presenting him as young, healthy, capable and masculine-to distinguish him from his immediate predecessor Yeltsin-overweight, boozy and in frail health and the gerontocracy of the late Brezhnev era.

In the US too (with male presidential candidates) four aspects of masculinity are stressed:

- i) military prowess
- ii) athleticism and sporting prowess
- iii) male bonding with running mate
- iv) patriarchal family

Putin's PR team influenced by the West stressed similar themes

- i) military /KGB/FSB membership and leading the country to military intervention in Chechnya
- ii) sporting prowess (ice hockey, martial arts, outdoor pursuits)
- iii) bonding with his tandem governing partner Medvedev
- iv) portrayed as "man of the House" looking after Russia at home and abroad (but kept his own family in the background)

PR team created a "Muzhik" or earthy "real man" persona for Putin complete with tough and colourful criminal underworld language. Taciturn, *not* politically correct, stands by his "word". A patriot, prefers his own culture and ready to defend the motherland.

Putin also portrayed on the internet and TV as sober, athletic and decisive and an attractive marriage partner. Polls showed him always more popular with women. Documentaries showing Putin following his personal fitness regime on TV allowed the conflation of his physical fitness with his capacity to lead the state.

Was talk in 2012 (his 60th birthday) of changing the focus to wise patriarch, not adopted.

To explain the phenomenon of gender norms and sexualisation in Putin's Russia the author proposes "a multiple opportunity structural model"

She asserts patriarchy and sexism to be ubiquitous societal conditions, but that the relative balance of opportunities and obstacles to the use of gender norms and sexualisation as tools of legitimation in politics, varies across states and political periods.

In Putin's Russia she finds a perfect storm of opportunities and few obstacles.

Three facets are described:

i) political opportunities-equated with the presence of a strong women's movement-hardly existent in Russia

ii) economic opportunities-Russia embraced the free market in the 90s and was deluged with adverts-sex used to sell everything, and helped lay the ground for the sexualisation of political products, such as Putin.

iii) cultural opportunities, in Soviet society "natural" gender differences and the perceived inferiority of women were widespread. In Putin's time the Orthodox church has lent support to the regime and espoused stereotypical roles for men and women and anti-gay sentiments.