

work in the field has focused on Soviet and post-Soviet masculinities. His book also offers a useful model that may inspire further research: how would Goncharov's Oblomov or Chekhov's Lopakhin fit into Valentino's scheme, one wonders? Perhaps the book's greatest strength, however, lies in Valentino's innovative use of the virtue/virtuality paradigm, which generates inspired new readings of the Russian classics and allows them to speak afresh to our own virtual age.

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Valerie Sperling. *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 376 pp.

This book is a brilliant account of contemporary Russian politics, which offers a fresh perspective on what constitutes the principal underpinning of the current political regime in Russia. Valerie Sperling invites us to analyze the contemporary political processes in Russia through the lens of gender, demonstrating that there is something more than meets the eye to Putin's rule and the political processes occurring in Russia. In particular, the author reveals how the Putin regime makes adroit use of gender norms and stereotypes to uphold its power. Yet, as Sperling shows, Putin is not unique in his reliance on traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity, subordinate femininity, sexism, and homophobia. His opponents, notably, anti-Kremlin groups draw on the very same tactics in their efforts to contest Putin's legitimacy. In her monograph Sperling also examines how gender norms inform the pervasive homophobia and sexism in the Russian political domain (as well as in the Russian society as a whole). The author concludes with her reflections on what can potentially dismantle such patriarchal order, drawing on the case of Pussy Riot and suggesting that feminism can be a powerful instrument in overhauling patriarchy.

The monograph explores a number of issues, exemplifying the wide use of gender norms in contemporary Russian politics. Sperling opens her discussion with the Russian president, who has recently

come to be perceived as the embodiment of the hegemonic masculinity endorsed and upheld by his own regime. The author's endeavor to make sense of Putin's machismo is an attempt to fathom not only how the image of a tough and decisive man facilitates the legitimization of Putin's rule, but also which factors and recent historical developments have rendered machismo a viable and effective tool of political power in the Russian context. According to Sperling, the most critical factors underpinning Putin's macho image are: cultural context (the persistent patriarchy and feminism's unsavory reputation in the Russian society); economic factors (the new commercial capitalism, which brought about the sexualization of economic products); international context (Putin's desire to resuscitate Russian national dignity through "remasculinization" of the country's international image); and political factors (the country's perceived need for a "strong leader").

Sperling also showcases another realm of Russia's political life, where gender norms are readily harnessed as an efficient instrument of power contestation. According to the author, both government-sponsored organizations and their opponents extensively resort to gender stereotypes in order to bolster their own positions and undermine those of their political adversaries. Thus, pro-Kremlin organizations seek to present themselves as traditionally masculine and feminine, whereas the opposition is constructed as "atypically gendered." The author also points to gender norms as an important underpinning of the debates on patriotism, military conscription, and pro-natalism, raging between liberal and pro-Kremlin political activists. By offering illustrative examples of these discussions, Sperling demonstrates how stereotypical perceptions of masculinity and femininity are employed by the political activists against each other. In fact, Sperling offers an insightful observation: the use of gender stereotypes on both sides of the political fence is not regarded as something unacceptable or problematic, since these stereotypes are embedded in the society and thus remain "invisible" to the most of Russian people.

In her monograph, Sperling also examines the role of sexism and homophobia in contemporary Russian politics, topics which are

still a matter of concern for the world's feminist, LGBT, and human rights movements. Here the author draws on her interviews with Russian male and female political activists on sex discrimination, homophobia, and LGBT rights in Russia, demonstrating how the deeply rooted traditional understanding of gender norms prevents many people from noticing the occurrence of sex and gender discrimination.

In the concluding chapter Sperling argues that Russian feminist groups pose a significant threat to the patriarchy and to the legitimization strategies (employed by the Putin regime) arising out of it. Invoking Pussy Riot's activism and that of other (less prominent) Russian feminist organizations, Sperling shows how these groups' demonstrations, criticizing patriarchal gender norms and proclaiming in favor of unrestrained self-realization, undermine the main pillars of Putin's system. The public condemnation of feminism in Russia, she argues, is a result of the Putin regime's anxiety in the face of the potential breakdown of the patriarchal system upon which it rests.

All in all, this monograph is an outstanding account of the underlying gender dynamics of contemporary Russian political life and a thorough examination of gender norms and sexualization as instruments of political legitimation in contemporary Russia. Sperling's book demonstrates that traditional gender norms are deeply embedded in Russian society, which renders them an accessible and effective instrument of power contestation—this is why both sides of the political spectrum utilize them as a means of self-legitimation.

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