



Book Review

Sex, Politics, & Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia. By Valerie Sperling. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 360 pp. \$24.95 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1743923X15000689

Carol Nechemias
Penn State Harrisburg

Many observers note with bemusement the macho images of a shirtless Putin fishing or horseback riding, flipping a judo opponent, or scoring eight ice hockey goals, but few consider the larger context or significance of this PR campaign. Valerie Sperling has written a groundbreaking work on gender norms and sexualization in contemporary Russia that explores “how and why activists on both sides of the Kremlin (pro and anti-regime) have chosen to wield concepts of femininity, masculinity, and homophobia (heteronormativity) as tools in their political organizing efforts” (2). Covering the first 12 years of Putin’s rule, Sperling’s research focuses on a key construct in political science — legitimacy — and argues persuasively that playing upon gender norms represents a serious “factor in regime legitimation and in political authority building in general” (46).

The author marshals an extraordinary wealth of information bearing on how Putin — and his opponents — have utilized gender norms and sexualization as weapons in the struggle for political power. Sperling draws on diverse sources, including an original set of interviews she conducted with young activists across the political spectrum as well as with a new generation of tech-savvy feminists. Through the judicious use of excerpts from these interviews, these young enthusiasts’ voices come alive. The author’s analysis paints a compelling picture of the place of gender norms in contemporary Russian society by examining political ads, placards carried at demonstrations, web sites, blogs, poster graffiti, street theater, livejournal (the Russian version of Facebook) and political

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/16 \$30.00 for The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.

© The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association, 2016

stunts like the video “Rip it for Putin,” which features sexy young women tearing off their t-shirts to show their devotion to the president. This is a highly informative and readable analysis focusing on gender and feminism under Putin’s rule.

Sperling’s research findings update our understanding of gender issues in Russia by highlighting elements of discontinuity with the Yeltsin years and/or the Soviet past. First, the sexualized emphasis on Putin’s masculinity is new in the context of Russian/Soviet leadership. The author cites feminist activist Natalia Bitten, who points out that Putin seeks not be the father of his people like Stalin but a kind of stud of the people, the alpha male, the lover, the prince, the man of your dreams (269). Second, the pervasive atmosphere of misogyny and gay bashing infects virtually all political forces, including the youth wings of political groupings across the political spectrum. The one exception involves Yabloko, a liberal party that has failed to exceed the minimum electoral threshold required to gain seats via the proportional representation system for the past three parliamentary elections. The misogyny exhibited by a wide array of political groups and by young people forms a disturbing element in Sperling’s narrative, suggesting that leadership turnover — Putin’s opposition coming to power — or generational change would have little or no impact on the level of sexism and homophobia in Russia. Third, a resurgent Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) now works in close harmony with the Putin administration, sharing overlapping agendas, promoting the view of Russia as a distinctive civilization, and championing traditional, patriarchal family values that serve as a unifying, new “national idea” defining what the country is about. These values foster a positive atmosphere for fulfilling one of Putin’s key goals — solving the demographic crisis by boosting the birth rate. Fourth, growing authoritarianism has shrunk the possibilities for independent civic mobilization and, along with official hostility toward feminism, kept a new generation of feminists severely marginalized. That new generation, however, shows a greater commitment to public outreach than the more academically oriented feminists of the 1990s; they engage in activities like street theater, public demonstrations, and, given the spread of personal computers, rely heavily on the internet to encourage feminist discussion and action. Finally, Sperling emphasizes how the virtual absence of a visible, strong feminist movement makes possible the unchallenged, widespread use and acceptance of misogyny as a weapon to seek political advantage. While

each of these distinctive features receives a thorough discussion, the author's fascinating analysis of Pussy Riot integrates all of these arguments, resulting in a superb rendering of the issues this punk rock protest group raised, including its withering critique of the alliance between the Russian Orthodox Church and the regime, its breaking with traditional ideas about the female role, and its defense of feminism and LGBT rights.

As an outstanding in-depth case study, this work will prove of interest not only to scholars specializing on Russia and/or gender issues but to the comparative field writ large. As the author notes, regimes across the political spectrum, from democracies to autocracies, exhibit the use of gender norms "as a means of justifying and challenging power" (4). Excellent research generates as many questions as it answers, and Sperling's work spurs multiple pathways for further research. While this volume focuses on explaining why masculinity, patriarchy, and homophobia flourish as a political tactic in Russia, there are, as the author acknowledges, other factors — difficult to disaggregate — that impact Putin's popularity (47), with the economy and the standard of living figuring prominently. This issue of "disaggregation" challenges comparative scholars to search for the factors — political, economic, historic, and so on — that contribute to the pervasive presence (or relative absence) of sexist and homophobic strategies. Contexts like resurgent authoritarian regimes and/or Eastern and Central European postcommunist countries seem likely candidates for comparative exploration.

A trail blazer, Valerie Sperling has forged new insights in the field of gender and politics, highlighting important links between gender and political legitimacy. If there is a weakness in this volume, it is the way Putin's personal standing and regime legitimacy are treated, seemingly interchangeably, which leaves open the question of whether Putin's high approval ratings rub off on support for state institutions. That does not, however, take away from the central achievement of the research, a masterful analysis of the ways Russian political actors and activists employ misogyny and homophobia to accumulate (or undermine) political authority.

Carol Nechemias is Associate Professor Emerita of Political Science and Public Policy at Penn State Harrisburg, Middletown, PA: c4n@psu.edu