The importance of being earnest: Putin, Trump and the politics of sincerity

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Vladimir Putin's 'ordinary bloke' appeal is cultivated through calculated breaches of political decorum. Donald Trump's transgressions also cement his popularity, even if he lacks the traditionally masculine self-restraint of his Russian counterpart.

The virtues of 'sincerity' and the ills of 'political correctness' loom large in today's populist rhetoric. Presenting themselves as 'strongmen' who have the balls to say aloud what others are only thinking, populist politicians challenge the social norms of political correctness in the name of free speech. Some try to please the conservative public by openly despising the notions of racism and sexism, and by playing with nostalgia for 'natural' gender roles. Donald Trump's election campaign provided many examples of this. Though different from Trump in many ways, Vladimir Putin also employs 'sincerity' as an instrument of power, and attacks 'political correctness' as the hidden ideology of the liberal West. In this respect, the similarities and cross references between the Russian and the US political discourses are striking. In what follows, I compare American and Russian political masculinities as exemplified by Putin and Trump and look into features common for male political leadership of two declining superpowers.

Vladimir Putin: an ordinary bloke (*normalnyi muzhyk*)? Source: Kremlin Photo Bank

The concept of 'political masculinity' refers to the intrinsically gendered nature of political institutions, norms and traditions. These include, of course, political leadership. While there is a rich literature on the US presidency as a gendered institution, such studies are only emerging on Russia and focus mainly on Putin’s persona. In today’s globalized world, however, political masculinities cannot be considered merely national phenomena. While legitimizing claims for national leadership, they are often constructed and performed transnationally. Thus, Putin’s geopolitical machismo was originally a response to ‘war president’ George Bush’s self-styling as ‘America’s Cowboy-in-Chief’. Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin’s performance of power fascinates many western politicians
and media figures, from Donald Trump to Oliver Stone.

According to the organizers of a recent conference, entitled ‘Political masculinities and populism, ‘the most overt link between the concepts of populism and political masculinities lies in the figure of the populist leader.’ [1] Referring to Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, they hold that this figure is associated with a ‘charismatic strongman’ whose authority stems from a leadership cult and who is usually portrayed as masculine and potentially violent. Relying on anti-intellectualism and often using crude and vulgar language, the populist leader emphasizes action and demonstrates the courage to take difficult decisions. [2]

Political correctness has become a favourite target of populist attacks. Strictly speaking, the term refers to norms and policies meant to avoid discrimination of any particular social group. However, it is far from being neutral. Rather, ‘it is a pejorative term used to disparage and deride what is deemed to be unjust, excessive, liberal dogmatism’. [3] If populism is, as Jan-Werner Müller defines it, a form of identity politics that is anti-pluralist and critical of elites, and that makes a moral claim to an exclusive representation of ‘the people’, then it is clear why western populists oppose political correctness. [4] To them, political correctness appears as an ideology of the liberal political establishment that replaces ‘true national values’. It privileges minorities over ‘the people’ and alienates democracy from the ‘silent majority’ that populists claim to represent.

An aversion to ‘political correctness’ is also strong among the Russian elites. Here, it stands for the West’s political and intellectual hegemony. As conservative Russian sociologist Leonid Ionin puts it in his book Political Correctness: The Brave New World:

> Political correctness is the ideology of contemporary mass democracy, serving on the one hand to legitimize the domestic and foreign policy of western states and their alliances and, on the other, to suppress alternative thinking and impose consensus on ideas and values. [5]

For Ionin, Russia as a mass democracy is not immune to this ‘disease’. In the majority of Russian nationalist discourse, however, political correctness stands for the moral decline of the West, which only conservative Russia is able to prevent.

Intrinsic to populist political masculinity’s fight against political correctness as a form of liberal hypocrisy is the claim to ‘sincerity’. Here, sincerity means a particular style of political communication that pretends to directly express ‘genuine feelings’ and thus to transgress cultural conventions and political taboos, such as the ban on sexism and racism. This marks both the discourse of Trump and Putin. Yet despite all intriguing parallels between them as manifestations of political masculinity, there are also disparities. These, I argue, reflect differences between the Russian and US political systems and traditions of power.

A last remark on Putin and populism. While there is broad consensus that Donald Trump is a populist, opinion is divided regarding Vladimir Putin. Some cite his crusade against the oligarchs and his attacks on corruption in the state, as well as his nationalism and
consistently high approval ratings. Others argue that Putin is not an outsider to the Russian political establishment, since he is a creature of Yeltsin and his entourage, and that Putin’s war on the oligarchs was not for the sake of the Russian people, but for the state. Moreover, unlike populism, Putinism is based on the de-politicization and de-mobilization of the people and discourages activism. [6] While populists treat the state as an obstacle between them and the people, Putin ‘worships a centralized state machine where professional technocrats do their daily jobs’. [7] In short, populism is the malaise of democratic regimes, while Putin’s regime is authoritarian. Although he is increasingly perceived as a godfather of contemporary populism in the West, his regime is itself vulnerable to populism – as the Navalny case demonstrates. [8]

Whether or not Putin is a classical populist, he has to some extent become a model for many western (and eastern European) populist politicians. Long before the current wave of populist rebellion against the ‘dictatorship of Brussels’, Russia had forwarded the idea of ‘sovereign democracy’, denying the right of the West to interfere in Russian domestic politics under the pretext of ‘promoting democracy’. More recently, Putin has become the poster boy of the global conservative movement – and indeed, he does call for the preservation of traditional family values and conventional gender roles. The discourse on ‘Gayropa’, which has become popular in Russian nationalist media (combined with the recent anti-gay legislation), portrays Russia as the last bastion of ‘normality’ to the sexually (and politically) perverted West. [9] All of this – sovereignty, independence from global elites, the courage to speak out against the liberal consensus – fits the model of a new political masculinity.

**On the benefits and harms of sincerity in politics**

How, then, is the notion of ‘sincerity’ related to populist masculinity? The debate on ‘sincerity’, both as a value and as a danger for democracy, is not new to political theory. The concept can be traced back to Rousseau, whose obsession with the fight against hypocrisy created the ‘modern cult of sincerity’. [10] In contemporary political theory, sincerity is a central norm in discourse ethics and a key virtue for a functioning deliberative democracy. So, shouldn’t we be happy if politicians embrace this virtue?

‘The trouble with being earnest’ is a chapter in *The Politics of Sincerity* by Elizabeth Markovits. [11] She shows how an unquestioned belief in the value of sincerity, or its abuse, can lead to a pathology that she calls ‘hyper-sincerity’ and the cult of plain speech. My argument is that the phenomenon of hyper-sincerity goes hand in hand with the hyper-masculinity of populist politicians.

In cultural and literary studies, the ‘new sincerity’ (sometimes associated with post-postmodernism) refers to a trend in music, literature and film. Interestingly, some US bloggers connect the ‘new sincerity’ to the style of populist politics that emphasises the value of ‘being oneself’ or speaking honestly about one’s feelings. Aaron Colton defines the ‘new sincerity’ as ‘a common outlook – ours is a culture oversaturated with indifference, and if there’s any hope for us, it’s in a return to honest expression, in saying what we really believe’. So who, asks Colton, fits the bill better than Donald Trump? [12] Another blogger underlines the danger of misusing sincerity by populists like Trump:

A return to affect and humanity is a noble pursuit, but ... emotions can be a
dangerous weapon. The populist agenda thrives on sincerity – its soil is fertilized with extremities and the emotions of the masses. Having detected the public’s need for emotional sincerity, populists like Donald Trump pluck their political fruits with fear mongering and finger pointing. [13]

References to the ‘new sincerity’ can also be found in the Russian discussion. The style of political communication with which Russian governing elites address the West is, it is argued, becoming self-assertive and often aggressive. [14] To be sure, the ‘new sincerity’ as a cultural trend is present not only in the American but also in post-Soviet Russia. Ellen Rutten argues that ‘Russia is a society that has historically maintained an excessive interest in the concept of sincerity’ [15] and that ‘today the Communist experience remains formative to sincerity rhetoric in the post-Soviet space’. [16] These observations echo in Aleksei Yurchak’s investigations of a renewed engagement with Soviet topics and aesthetics by Russian artists during the 2000s. As a reaction to the first post-Soviet decade, which was associated with cynicism, pragmatism and the disintegration of social solidarity, they argued for ‘non-ideological’ engagement with the Soviet era, which for them meant sincerity, idealism, purity, friendship and self-sacrifice. [17] Both authors, however, are uncomfortable with the political implications of the ‘new sincerity’ in post-Crimean Russia. ‘What does sincerity even mean in the cynicism and hypocrisy-laden Russia of Putin?’ asks Rutten. Citing a conversation she held with Yurchak in October 2014, she writes that: ‘Under Putin, the concept had “mutated” into “something that paved the way to cynical purism” and for uncomplicated, collectivist patriotism’. [18]

This helps us understand the mechanisms whereby sincerity is appropriated by Putin’s regime. While, in the late Soviet era, the discourse of sincerity cultivated in the private space of the kitchen took aim at the hypocrisy of official Soviet ideology, the current Russian regime has used the widespread frustration with Yeltsin’s reforms of the 1990s to present the West and the Russian liberals as the embodiment of a new hypocrisy.

In what follows, I compare Putin’s and Trump’s performances of sincerity. What has to be stressed is that, in this context, ‘sincerity’ is not a personal quality but a cultural construct. ‘Sincerity’ is part of the political spectacle of masculinity and, as we will see, is performed in different ways in different political cultures.

**Super-Putin**

In December 2017, when Vladimir Putin made it official that he would be running for president for the fourth time, an art exhibition under the title ‘Super-Putin’ opened in central Moscow. [19] It showed about thirty works of art presenting the Russian leader in his various capacities as a superman: Putin riding a bear, Putin launching rockets, Putin petting a leopard. The exhibition, which drew on Putin’s already established macho image, was yet another signal that the Kremlin’s politics would hardly change in the next five years. However, it also allowed for a kind of irony that a decade ago, when Putin’s cult of personality was still in the making, did not exist. One would have thought that after the annexation of Crimea there would be no need for the president to fly with cranes or bare his torso publicly. Yet Putin 4.0 cannot be anything other than ‘Super-Putin’. The latter is not only a successful brand, but the constant of a political regime caught in the trap of personalized power.
Those who remember the start of Putin’s political career know that there was little appealing about this small, mousy man with thin blond hair. ‘How has a stolid bureaucrat metamorphosed into an international macho icon?’ asks Helena Goscilo. [20] Her answer is that Putin’s macho cult was carefully staged, mediated and turned into an everyday public spectacle. Before it became a successful political brand, Putin’s image was built from scratch by spin-doctors and the Kremlin-controlled media. The ‘masculinisation’ of Putin was a long process that went hand in hand with the Kremlin’s consolidation of power, the taming of the oligarchs, and Russia’s re-gaining its geopolitical status.

To understand the rise of Putin’s macho cult we also need to consider the ‘crisis of masculinity’ that was broadly discussed in the late Soviet and post-Soviet era. Soviet men were seen as infantile, incapable of taking responsibility for the family, and seeking refuge in heavy drinking. This ‘lack of masculinity’ was blamed on the Soviet ideology of female emancipation, which had supposedly distorted traditional gender roles. During perestroika, the de-masculinisation of Soviet/Russian men was often explained as a result of the abolition of private property and the paternalist culture under Communism. Market reforms and privatisation were expected to empower men economically. If anything, however, the neo-liberal reforms of the early 1990s exacerbated problems such as alcoholism, unhealthy living and self-destructive behaviour among Russian men. Post-Soviet Russian masculinity entered a crisis and Vladimir Putin – young, sporty and a non-drinker – appeared to promise both a new gender model and at the same time Russia’s national resurgence.

Putin’s machismo cult became tantamount to the strengthening of the ‘power vertical’ in Russia, the economic recovery of the country after the chaos of the 1990s, and the new self-esteem, not to say arrogance towards the West. Towards the end of Putin’s second term, all these achievements were tied to the personality of Russia’s leader. As Valerie Sperling argues, the macho cult became an instrument for strengthening the legitimacy of Putin’s political regime, particularly during the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea. [21] According to Nikolai Petrov, the nationalist mobilization fuelled by the annexation of Crimea invested Putin with the extra-electoral legitimacy of a military chief more prone to demonstrating strength, resoluteness and aggression. Putin’s legitimacy, Petrov argues, is based less on free elections than on the loyalty of a people convinced that they are under siege. The only way for Putin to maintain this legitimacy is through further confrontation and shows of strength, if only rhetorical. [22]

According to Elizabeth A. Wood, Putin’s deployment of hyper-masculinity is a strategy for creating not just legitimacy, but power itself:

> Putin’s symbolic actions have been overwhelmingly derived from a masculine menu that would be impermissible for Russian women ... These actions also frequently demonstrate, in words or gestures, his active and absolute dominance over his interlocutors in ways that would be unacceptable for other, subordinated men as well. [23]

Putin’s performance of dominant masculinity therefore has not only a visual but also a verbal aspect. To demonstrate his authority or to threaten an opponent, he sometimes
disdains politeness and diplomatic speech, using tough language or even adolescent street slang. These ‘moments of truth’, when ‘Putin – an ordinary man’ breaks through the veneer of political conventions, are also his ‘moments of power’. Putin’s ‘sincerity’ reveals itself in these moments of transgression, when he violates the protocol and becomes ‘one of us’, showing his emotions and allowing himself politically incorrect remarks.

In such moments, Putin appears as a normalnyi muzhyk – meaning ‘one of us’ or ‘one of the lads’, and at the same time referring to a heterosexual gender norm. Being a normalny muzhyk also entails performing straightforwardness, showing a ‘seductive combination of toughness and tenderness’ (Goscilo) and demonstrating a sense of humour, often at the edge of sexism and political incorrectness. Putin is a master of this genre of communication, making it easy for ordinary men to identify with him and for women to adore him.

Isn’t this how populism works in the West, too? Not exactly. Putin, if he can be called a populist, is first of all an autocrat drawing on a long tradition of sacralised political power. As the Kremlin official Vyacheslav Volodin famously put it in 2014, ‘attacks against Putin are attacks against Russia. Without Putin, there is no Russia’. This evokes what Ernst Kantorowicz referred to as the doctrine of the ‘king’s two bodies’ in medieval politics, notes Andrei Kolesnikov, [24] who cites another Kremlin loyalist, the pop singer Josif Kobzon: ‘Putin is married to Russia’. Seeking popularity among ordinary Russians, Putin is at the same time lonesome on his Mont Blanc of political power; he is a symbol rather than a man with a private life and a family.

Putin’s enigmatic divorce from his wife, along with the quickly supressed rumours about his subsequent, secret marriage to former sport star Alina Kabaeva, prove the persistence of the Russian pattern of political leadership that only Gorbachev was able to break: that a ruler must have no private life, because the presence of a woman would corrupt the sacred bond between him and his nation. [25] Last year’s violent protests by Russian Orthodox fundamentalists against the film Matilda, which depicted the love affair between the future tsar Nicholas II and the ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska, demonstrated how deep-rooted this idea of political power is. As a product of mass culture, Putin has become a sex symbol and an object of female desire, but as a politician he keeps his distance from women – unlike his former friend and macho Berlusconi, and his current counterpart Donald Trump.

How, then, does ‘sincerity’ fit into the public performance of Putin’s political masculinity? Can we even talk about the sincerity of a politician socialized as a KGB agent, someone who carefully hides all information about his private life from the public? My answer is that Putin’s sincerity has to do with the demonstration of power – both inside Russia and internationally – and with uncovering the hypocrisy of the West. From Putin’s perspective, western hypocrisy is about hiding realpolitik and national interests behind a moralizing rhetoric of values, human rights and the ‘promotion of democracy’. This ‘double talk’ is nothing but an instrument with which to humiliate and control Russia. Putin’s straight-talking, ‘tough guy’ image is often associated with the idea of Russia ‘rising from its knees’ and regaining the respect of western powers. Transgressing political taboos and norms of political correctness is one way of performing macho political masculinity, as the following examples demonstrate:
Putin struck back at former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for comparing his actions in Ukraine to those of Hitler, by saying that ‘it’s better not to argue with women’. He went on to suggest that Clinton is weak, adding that ‘maybe weakness is not the worst quality for a woman’. [26]

When Oliver Stone asked Putin during a tour of the Kremlin if he ever had bad days, Putin answered: ‘I am not a woman, so I don’t have bad days.’ When asked whether he would be comfortable showering next to a gay man, he said no. ‘I prefer not to go to the shower with him. Why provoke him? But you know, I’m a judo master.’ [27]

However, this aggressive, often insulting style of communication, which implies sexism and homophobia, is not just a way to humiliate an opponent or win applause from a conservative-minded audience. Neither can it be explained by the social origins of the current Russian political elite - as attempted by Andrei Arkhangelskiy, who refers to the cultural trauma of the generation of ‘new Russians’, who arrived in the West with huge amounts of oil money but no idea about western cultural conventions. [28] A similar approach is taken by Mikhail Epshtein, who emphasises the subculture of the gopniki – the petty criminals of the 1990s – which in his opinion came to dominate Russian politics, diplomacy, business and media. [29]

I would argue, however, that this style of communication indicates not so much a lack of civilized behaviour than a calculated means to challenge the West and its liberal political consensus. The performance of aggressive masculinity, including sexist and homophobic statements, fits into a ‘counter-ideology’ that disguises itself as a ‘zero-ideology’ by appealing to ‘normality’, including a ‘normal’ gender order. This ‘zero-ideology’ connects political power, sincerity and the rejection of ‘political correctness’ as a form of western hypocrisy.

A recent expression of this zero-ideology is a column by Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin’s ‘grey eminence’, published on the Russia Today website in November 2017. [30] Surkov’s basic idea is that western countries are going through a severe political and social ‘crisis of hypocrisy’. He quotes from the song ‘Wash it All Away’ by the American heavy metal band Five Finger Death Punch, in which the words occur: ‘Done with all your hypocrisy’. According to Surkov, it ‘sounds like a prophecy, a verdict, and the motto of a new era’. He links the 2016 presidential election that led to President Donald Trump’s victory and the ongoing sexual harassment scandals in the US with a widespread desire among Americans to ‘wash it all away’.

And here we are back with Putin’s sincerity – an instrument of re-asserting Russia’s geopolitical status and its ‘sovereignty’ from the global elites. Commenting on an interview with Putin in the state-sponsored documentary Crimea: The Way Home (2015), which received broad resonance in Russia and abroad, the politician and academic Sergey Markov emphasised ‘the unprecedented sincerity of Putin’ in revealing sensational details about the Russian military operation in Crimea. Why, asks Markov, was Putin so open?

All politicians lie. Putin is also a politician and during the Crimean operation he
did not disclose the participation of the Russian military. But real leaders differ from ordinary politicians by sometimes telling the truth. Putin eventually told the truth. Obama, Biden, Cameron – until they retire they will never tell the truth about their special services’ participation in the coup d’état in Kyiv … That is why they hate and fear Putin so much – because he can tell the truth, he can say what he thinks. And they cannot. [31]

As we can see, ‘sincerity’ is a category of power, something one can afford, an exclusive right to transgress norms of communication and political taboos, the right that only an alpha man possesses.

Hyper-Trump

If Putin has become a celebrity and cultural icon, [32] then this is all the more true of Donald Trump. When Putin entered the Kremlin, his Superman image had to be built from scratch – however Trump was a media star before he even entered the presidential race. This meant not only a competitive advantage, but paradoxically gave him an aura of authenticity: ‘His supporters believe he says what he wants to say, with no PR shill telling him what the polls show’, wrote a commentator: ‘Like Sanders, Trump is his own man.’ [33] Of course, Trump has exploited the powerful American myth of the ‘self-made man’ who owes his fortune to initiative and hard work. The (self-fabricated) success story of the billionaire entrepreneur challenging the corrupt political establishment and hypocritical elites is what eventually won Trump the election.

Comparing Putin and Trump as media(ted) masculinities, a first difference between the American and Russian political systems emerges. Putin became ‘Super-Putin’ by taming the oligarchs and bringing Russian media under the Kremlin’s control. In today’s Russia, even the few oppositional outlets that still exist do not encroach on the taboo on criticising Putin personally, let alone on investigating his business or family affairs. The Russian media report on him no more than the Kremlin considers necessary; otherwise, the Russian president communicates with the country via the heavily orchestrated, annual TV show Direct Line.

Although being a media tycoon, Trump can only dream of such control. In fact, he declared war on many influential American media outlets and journalists and uses his Twitter account to regularly denounce them. The irony is that no amount of negative media exposure was able to prevent Trump’s election. On the contrary, the political spectacle of an election campaign full of highly controversial statements and scandals added to his popularity. If Trump was a fictional character before, he now became a double fiction, a ‘Hyper-Trump’. ‘The “Donald Trump” we know, writes Paul M. Cohen, ‘is nothing more than a media cartoon. That Trump has never stopped playing himself on reality TV. He is what the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard would call “hyperreal”: the perfect image of himself.’ [34]

Another difference concerns the way political leadership is gendered in the USA and in Russia. Putin, in the old Soviet tradition, is a lonely ruler showing up in public with no family or women around him, and media outlets have been severely punished for leaking rumours about his private life. Putin’s image-makers know very well that a liaison would
not only diminish the president’s sex-appeal, but also that, since Yeltsin, ‘family’ has been synonymous to corruption in the post-Soviet space. Trump, on the other hand, is unimaginable without his family, whose members contribute to the soap opera of his political career. Despite performing an ideal nuclear family and a loving couple in public, in line with the American tradition of presidency as a gendered institution, the ‘Trumps’ are also a fiction. Married for the third time, surrounding himself with female supermodels and making money with ‘beauty contests’, Trump is anything but an ideal husband and father, a fact that does not seem to affect his popularity. Unlike the lonely macho Putin, who regularly ensures the media that ‘everything is OK’ in his private life, Trump has no need to hide embarrassing details – the more entertaining, the better. The American ideal of transparency has been perverted into a TV reality show, while in Putin’s Russia people must increasingly content themselves with watching old-fashioned puppet theatre, with the puppeteer showing up once in a while to collect approving applause.

While the rise of Putin’s macho cult can be seen as an answer to the crisis of masculinity in post-Soviet Russia, Trump’s popularity reflects the deep crisis of the white heterosexual American male. According to David Rosen, Trump ‘is the symbol of American masculinity’s last stand against a profound and irreversible crisis of traditional patriarchy’. [35] His victory can be explained as the revolt of ‘angry white men’. In his book with the same title, sociologist Michael Kimmel explains the rage of the lower middle and working class men who feel emasculated and humiliated by losing their traditional gender privileges as a result of the social and economic developments of the last decades. [36] Over centuries, Kimmel argues, American masculinity evolved around the ideology of the ‘self-made man’: ‘The promise of economic freedom, of boundless opportunity, of unlimited upward mobility was what they believed was the terra firma of American masculinity, the ground on which American men stood for generations’. [37] Now it is ‘like a carpet being snatched from under their feet’. While the reasons for these developments are manifold, it is usually feminism, the rise of minorities, and the indifference of the establishment that are blamed by the ‘angry white men’, who desperately seek to restore ‘a sense of manhood to which they feel entitled’.

If we approach Trump as an answer to the crisis of the white man, and as someone who seeks to exploit these sentiments, we can better understand his racism and above all his sexism and misogyny. The latter became obvious as the leaked Access Hollywood tape was released with Trump talking about forcibly kissing and groping women. Far from being ashamed, Trump has assaulted female journalists time and again, for example the Fox News host Megyn Kelly during the Republican Party primaries, when he hinted, using sexist and vulgar language, that her menstrual cycle drove her to ask tough questions. While many, even in his own party, believe that Trump has crossed the line of decency, his ratings did not go down, on the contrary. As one commentator explained: ‘In part, this is because he is running as a celebrity outsider who gives voice to the frustrations that many voters feel with the political system.’ [38] Ivan Kurilla argued along the same lines:

Americans sympathizing with Trump will hardly be appalled by his sexist jokes; they fit into his image and probably appeal to a certain part of his audience. Many people believe that Trump embodies the sort of America that despises the very notions of ‘sexism’, as well as ‘racism’ and ‘political correctness’. They think that Trump is sincere and not, like
his opponents, ‘hypocritical’. [39]

The difference between Trump’s blatant and personally offensive sexism and the subtler ‘Putinisms’ cited above is not only cultural, but also political. For Putin, they are part of his power performance as the alpha male of Russian politics, and a demonstration of independence from the West. Trump’s verbal assaults, on the other hand, signal his claim for the restoration of the gender privileges of white heterosexual men and a challenge to the rules of political correctness.

Comparison of Putin and Trump as embodiments of political masculinity also raises the question of the role of emotions in public performance. Putin’s public appearances have always been well-orchestrated, leaving little space for improvisation. If emotions such as anger are allowed, they are part of the power performance. But, in general, emotions are associated with weakness and vulnerability in the traditional model of masculinity. They would also signal some uncertainty or instability ‘at the top’. Trump’s unleashed emotions during his public performances make him strikingly different from Putin, and the specificity of American political tradition explains this difference only partly.

‘Populism’, argues Michael Kimmel, ‘is more an emotion than it is an ideology. And this emotion is anger.’ Trump, like other populists, capitalizes on mass emotions by amplifying them with offensive sexist and racist remarks on social media. But should we not expect from a man, especially a politician, some self-control, restraint and rational argument, instead of unfiltered emotions and unpredictable behaviour? Trump, according to Paul M. Cohen, has been performing a caricature of ‘passionate masculinity’, a notion suggested by historian Anthony Rotundo:

In defence of the ostensibly imperilled virtues of manly toughness and autonomy, passionate manhood championed some of the very attributes – combativeness, impulsiveness, wilfulness – that had previously been stigmatized as ‘boyish’... [40]

The impatience, impulsiveness and combativeness of a boy, speaking his mind, his ‘lack of facade’, authenticity and, yes, sincerity – in contrast to the self-restraint and rationality of traditional masculinity – has been at the core of Donald Trump’s public performance of masculinity. As Trump himself admitted, he is fighting not women, but a bigger target: political correctness. ‘Above all else,’ writes Aaron Colton, ‘sincerity is for Trump an antidote to the ‘political correctness’ of democrats, pundits, and liberal arts majors alike ... Sincerity, as Trump imagines it, will cure American government of its characteristic dishonesty.’ [41]

**Conclusions**

At first glance, an impulsive, offensive Trump speaking his mind could not be more different from a Putin who is self-restrained, always in control of himself and his emotions. Some Russian commentators have compared Trump with Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the notorious clown of post-Soviet Russian politics, whose task has always been to absorb the innocuous marginal protest of those frustrated with the Kremlin. Although sometimes quite rude, Putin’s homophobic and sexist comments are more impersonal and dressed as anecdotes and folk proverbs. What both men do have in common, however, is the
performance of sincerity as a demonstration of power and a symbolic identification with 'the people' at the same time.

The same can be said for their attacks on 'political correctness'. For both leaders, the appeal to restore the 'normal' social order, which allegedly existed before feminism, migration and globalization, or the appeal to resist the import of 'political correctness' from the West, go hand in hand with the denunciation of liberal hypocrisy – the only difference being that, in the case of Putin, it is the hypocrisy of western elites and, in the case of Trump, the hypocrisy of the domestic political establishment and liberal public.

Putin's performance of political sincerity is to say openly 'what everybody is doing' – in other words pursuing national interests and securing geopolitical influence while talking about democracy and human rights. Trump's performance of political sincerity draws on racism and sexism, by saying aloud 'what everybody is thinking'. Both share the underlying idea of a recovery of 'traditional masculinity' victimized by the forces of globalization, (Soviet) modernization, and the extremes of (western) liberalism.

Footnotes

1. Conference Political Masculinities and Populism, University Koblenz-Landau, December 1-3, 2017, https://www.uni-koblenz-landau.de/de/landau/fb6/philologien/anglistik/Page/Research/PolMascCon/Polmasc%202017/polmasccallforpapers. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the conference. The author is thankful to the organizers for the invitation.


27. See: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/07/vladimir-putin-i-dont-have-bad-days-because-im-not-a-woman


35. David Rosen, loc. cit.


39. ‘Trump has chosen his way himself – to fight to the end’, Ivan Kurilla interviewed by