Putin’s Gendered Political Discourse

In a pristine studio that is spacious enough to hold a sizable audience, a decked out call center, and a table that is placed just so, right in the middle of it all, Vladimir Putin addresses Russia in a unique fashion, an annual tradition for the president since 2001. Direct Line with Vladimir Putin is an opportunity for Russian citizens to engage directly with Putin through attendance at the live studio audience, calling in, or texting their questions to the “call center.” Throughout the entirety of the four hour and twenty-two minute event, Putin answered questions from a wide variety of categories that lend themselves to explicit categorization - healthcare and childcare, environmental concerns, business related questions, wages, the state of infrastructure, military engagement, and internal government affairs.

There were little to no questions or answers that addressed the concept of gender relations in Russia and how they come into play regarding citizen’s needs. It was not surprising that this did not come up explicitly, but gendered norms were easily observed in Putin’s unique style of discourse. Putin’s leadership style has been extensively studied in regard to its grounding in traditional Soviet and Slavic styles that contrast with the novelty of his more controversial speaking style. However, there is a lack of acknowledgement for the ways that his leadership language is deeply gendered. Due to the diverse array of people and topics that are addressed in this event, there is a wealth of material to assess how gender and gendered issues are prioritized by the Russian government, and a clear picture of the way that women and femininity become a political tool for Putin to assert dominance.

As a whole, Direct Line is an extremely useful tool for Putin. It allows him to showcase one of his biggest strengths as a leader: his talent for speaking in a way that resonates with a huge number of Russian people. Many have noted this phenomenon, but Michael Gorham (2005) puts it best: “his effectiveness, instead, stems from an ability to speak in a variety of voices depending on the context of his utterance, to shift in and out of language registers or speech styles to reflect the broader ideological and political sentiments of his immediate interlocutors and broader listening and viewing audience - most importantly, his domestic constituency.”

There is no better or more enduring example of the way in which Putin impacted the language of leadership than his infamous “zamochit’ v sortire” comment in his early days as a leader in regard to a terrorist attack in Chechnya. This moment completely subverted the way that the new leadership was expected to interact with the Russian people. Many constituents expressed shock and indignation at hearing a head of state speak more like a “thug” than someone at a high level of government. However, this expression also struck a chord with everyday Russians, and for many, it communicated the kind of action that they wanted to see in their leaders. After many years of ineffective Soviet bureaucracy, the idea of a leader who was prepared to take extreme measures in a crisis was refreshing. This statement reflected a kind of unique, Slavic masculinity in which Putin portrays three unique personas that all play into his public image. The complete persona takes action when it is required, is allowed and expected to be vulgar, and is extremely patriotic (Gorham, 2005).

According to Judith Butler, gender is a performance rather than a trait that one possesses and one of the most powerful ways to perform one’s gender is through speech (2009). Putin fits neatly into this theory in the way that he wields his public discourse to build a performance that is distinctly masculine. Putin’s masculinity has often been discussed in relation to other forms of discourse surrounding him, including the highly publicized shirtless pictures he has posed for, as well as the pop song “A Man Like Putin” (2008), which holds him up as a standard for all other men to follow. In terms of gender, there are two directions that are of note during Direct Line 2019. The first is the gender of the audience and the differences in types of questions that are asked by each gender. The second is the way in which Putin interacts with the audience, in particular the disparity between his general demeanor when speaking to women versus men.

Out of the seven main categories of questions, there were two that lined up particularly well with what might be considered traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine concerns - healthcare/childcare and military/international relations and conflicts. A significantly higher percentage of women asked questions related to healthcare and childcare (about 33% of female participants versus 10% of male participants) and more men asked about military/international relations and conflicts than women (31% versus 19%). In addition to this disparity, men seemed to ask questions about more diverse topics than women did. Men asked questions in all seven of the categories while women did not ask any questions that related to wages or internal government. It is impossible to say exactly why this might be the case, but it is possible that it has something to do with the spheres that women are expected to occupy. Women are less expected to be concerned with issues like wages because traditionally, they do not work in the same capacity that men do. Similarly, women are not involved or represented in government in nearly the same capacity that men are.

One of the biggest differences between the way that Putin interacted with men and women during the course of the show was the frequency with which he interrupted women while they were speaking versus men. Putin interrupted a woman asking a question seven times and a man three times. While this may seem irrelevant, interruptions matter because it signals that the topic in question is not important enough to warrant completion of the thought.

While this level of analysis seems to suggest that Putin has more of an issue with women asking questions in a general sense, there were two interactions that involve women asking questions falling in the traditionally masculine spheres of business and military concerns. These exchanges opened up a new way of looking at how Putin asserts his masculinity as a speaker. The first was a woman who works as the general director of Yandex. The two had a fairly laid back exchange in which Putin often used phrases such as “you are absolutely right,” and “as you so rightly said.” These phrases tended to be reserved for men asking questions prior to this conversation. In another instance, a handful of young women training to be Air Force pilots is shown on a screen. One of them asks when women will be allowed to work as combat pilots. Putin does not interrupt her and agrees that women should be allowed to work in the military in any capacity. The nature of the conversation in both of these instances follows closely with what we would expect to see in an exchange with men asking questions, considering that he did not interrupt them and validated their thoughts. This is presumably because these women are occupying roles that are within traditionally masculine spheres.

However, these acknowledgements come with strings attached. In both cases, before getting into the meat of the conversation, Putin makes a comment on their appearance. The first is referred to as “the beautiful woman in the blue dress” and in his exchange with the younger girl training to be a pilot, he responds to her question with “well, I think that your beautiful, charming braid could fit in the helmet.” Neither of these things are within the realm of phrases that he would say to a man. While neither statement necessarily represents outright sexism, they do point to the idea that women’s appearances are important, while in a conversation with a man, there was no comparable deviation from the main point.

In addition to these subtly demeaning, if overall positive interactions in terms of results, Putin has another interaction with a woman that is significant because it is much more hostile. The woman in question introduces herself as the president of the group InfoWatch. She asks about how he plans to address some of the competition that Russia faces in other countries and from other companies, as well as how he will address Russia’s reliance on importation. Putin’s response is one of his most aggressive moments in the production. He talks over her multiple times, and impatiently explains that he has already discussed this and that the government has plans in place to address these things. At one point, he even shakes his finger at her. This reaction might be different from the others because of the way that she challenges Putin directly, which appears to require a less subtle response when it comes from a woman.

Putin introduces a new kind of interaction at the end of the show with a story prompted by the question, “Do you ever feel ashamed, and for what?” Through many sighs, he tells the story of a time that an old woman approached him at the end of a long day, fell on her knees, and asked for his help. She handed him a note and he promised her that he would read it. However, he lost the note and has apparently never forgotten about this woman and is ashamed of the fact that he was not able to help her. The most striking image in this narrative, is that of an old woman falling to her knees in front of him as if he is her personal savior. This heavily promotes the “protector of the helpless” image that is so prominent in traditional conceptions of masculinity. The idea that his greatest shame is not being able to help a woman who depended on him is also important to consider as it relates strongly to an image of him as a benevolent tsar who cares for even the weakest and most vulnerable of his people - namely, women.

The differences in these interactions are puzzling. We already know that none of these examples are entirely typical of the way that he addresses men during the performance. Men are generally addressed as “my colleague” and his statements to them are tempered with “you are right” and “as you so rightly said,” no matter the content of the question or style of address. However, there is a much wider range in the way that he speaks to women. In every case, Putin deliberately places the women speaking to him in a lower position than himself, whether that is by making an out-of-place comment about appearance, becoming aggressive, or literally providing a narrative of a woman on her knees before him. The differences in how he does this relate strongly to the topic in question and the way that these women address him.

Putin does not invent his masculinity from scratch. The gendered aspect of his political performance, especially in highly publicized events like Direct Line, comes from cultural and linguistic norms that are already highly gender dependent. Given that there are clear patterns in the gender dimension of the questions asked and the manner in which Putin addresses the speakers, we can see a precise framework for the way that societal issues are gendered and the level of perceived importance for each of them. Putin’s more common dismissal of women and his inclination to take traditionally masculine concerns more seriously has critical implications for how societal issues are prioritized by the government.

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