Millennials and the Putin Cult

Shelby Ranger

Abstract

Much literature about the unique qualities of particular generations exists, as does literature examining the cult of personality surrounding Russian President Vladimir Putin. This article situates itself within the study of the Putin cult, taking a perspective based in generational theory that distinguishes millennials as a unique group, and seeks to examine the ways in which millennials in particular engage with the Putin cult. The Putin cult is not a uniquely millennial phenomenon and cults of personality have existed for ages. However, millennials engage with the Putin cult in an interesting and unique way due to the digital era within which they grew up and live, along with the spread of activist ideas into Russia. This examination uses qualitative methods and finds that millennials use tactics related to these peculiarities to engage with the Putin cult in a manner that is tongue-in-cheek, while preserving an image that would retain favorability with the Kremlin. This is of particular importance given the increasing spotlight on US-Russian relations as well as the presence of cyber-issues and the Putin cult within this subject.

Introduction

Cults of personality are not new to Russia. Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin both had powerful cults of personality in the Soviet Union. Russian President Vladimir Putin's cult comes about in a time of increased western influence and Internet/meme culture, which gives the cult a different character from those of Lenin and Stalin. The Putin cult seems to embody more public engagement and less direct government control, but the element that really makes it unique is millennial involvement. In *Generations*, scholars William Strauss and Neil Howe examine patterns in history and determine sets of people in time who have shared characteristics as a result of shared experiences. Generations, they explain, are "people moving through time, each group or generation of people possessing a distinctive sense of self."[1] Every generation includes unique individuals and particular "age locations" in history and collective mindsets link them to others in that group. This creates a generation.[2] Millennials, like prior generations, have certain characteristics, some of which are effects of previous generations' influence, and others due to environmental factors like technological advances.[3]

Generational theory allows for the examination of millennial engagement with the Putin cult separately from the overarching Russian involvement with the cult. In particular, millennials' Internet/meme culture, activism, and use of humor in their

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[1] William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 32.
[2] Ibid., 9.
[3] Michael Wilson and Leslie Gerber, "How Generational Theory Can Improve Teaching: Strategies for Working with the 'Millennials,'" *Currents in Teaching and Learning* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2008); Lindsey Gibson and William Sodeman, "Millennials and Technology: Addressing the Communication Gap in Education and Practice," *Organization Development Journal* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2014).

engagement with the cult makes Putin's cult of personality distinct from other personality cults of the past, and even creates a distinction along generational lines within the Putin cult's following. The Internet/meme culture and activist types of millennial engagement with the Putin cult are two distinct types of engagement, but millennials engage in both, though not always together. These digital natives interact with Putin's personality cult in a tongue-in-cheek manner while maintaining certain standards. For example, targeting Putin's masculinity is off limits, and embracing and enforcing it through jokes is instead the acceptable norm within Internet/meme culture. This shows how millennials—even beyond the more blatantly pro-Putin youth groups like Nashi—are engaging with the cult.

Defining Millennials and Memes

Generational Theory, as discussed in the introduction, places people into groups according to similar historical experiences and mindset features that occur within people born within a certain period of time.[4] These generational distinctions help to explain why certain patterns emerge in history and why living groups sharing a similar age tend to possess a particular identity.[5] It is difficult to create an exact date that determines membership in the generation of "millennials." Strauss and Howe suggest in their 1991 book *Generations* that millennials are those born after 1982. For the cut-off date, we may look to the US President's Council of Economic Advisers definition of millennials as those born between 1980 and mid-2000, which bases this date choice on the theory of social generations Howe and Strauss have proposed.[6] The council then states that the millennial generation is significant in that it is the first to have had Internet access it its formative years.[7] This paper examines millennial involvement with the Putin cult and in part how it relates to the Internet/meme culture of millennials. For this reason, Strauss and Howe's beginning date and the Council of Economic Advisers end date for defining millennials is the most suitable for grouping the generation for the purposes of this discussion, as it focuses on the Internet element of what it means to be a millennial, as these dates place the coming of age and development of millennials in the realm of the technological boom.

Although millennials are digital natives who grew accustomed to using technology in their everyday lives from a young age, some modes of digital communication have decreased in popularity while others have increased, just within a span of a few years. A study published in 2010 by Lenhart et al. that began tracking data in 2006 showed that fewer teens and young adults blogged in 2009 than in 2006, while the trend was the opposite for older adults.[8] Increasingly, youths use "microblogging" methods like status updates, rather than "macroblogging" through blog sites like Wordpress.[9] Memes are good example of a microblogging method that appeals more to youths than to older adults. Adults have increased their creation of shared content somewhat, but they produced less shared content than teens in either 2006 or 2009.[10] Memes appeal to the microblogging sensibilities of a millennial more than to those of older adults, but as the Internet becomes more accessible, the involvement of older generations in meme culture may become even more prevalent. Researchers Michele

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[4] Strauss and Howe, *Generations,* 9.
[5] Ibid., 16, 32.
[6] The Council of Economic Advisers, "15 Economic Facts About Millennials" (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2014), 3.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Amanda Lenhart et al., *Social Media & Mobile Internet Use among Teens and Young Adults: Millennials*, Pew Internet & American Life Project (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2010), 2–4.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid*.,* 23.

Knobel and Colin Lankshear define memes in their chapter "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production" in their publication *A New Literacies Sampler* as "contagious patterns of 'cultural information' that get passed from mind to mind and directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behavior and actions of a social group," including a broad range of physical and non-physical pop-culture items such as songs, catchphrases, "ways of doing things," and clothing fashions.[11] In the general study of memetics, "meme" carries this highly generalized definition.[12]

Knobel and Lankshear write of Internet memes more specifically as "the concept of a 'meme' itself has become something of a meme online. Among Internet insiders, 'meme' is a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move,' or some other unit of cultural 'stuff.'"[13] In Internet culture, the term "meme" can refer to a particular type of image that holds meaning and is circulated around the cybersphere in order to connote a particular meaning. An example of this narrow definition would be the "but that's none of my business" aka "Kermit drinking tea" meme, which is a picture of Kermit the Frog drinking Lipton tea with a changeable sentence of text, often using slang words to point out a negative irony in everyday life or popular culture and the line "but that's none of my business" or some variant of the phrase at the bottom of the image.[14] In common Internet-slang usage, meme connotes this specific image-communication method. However, as Knobel and Lankshear point out, meme can include text, images, or any other cultural stuff circulated in mass quantity around the Internet that carries some meaning. This can also include viral videos and gifs, not just the picture-text combination that holds the name "meme." In this paper, meme will generally take the broader definition, in order to encompass aspects of Internet culture that do not meet the narrower definition of meme. This paper will examine the ways that memes are used in Putin's personality cult. A cult of personality can be defined as "the deliberate fixation of individual dedication and loyalty on the all-powerful leader" who embodies values and goals of a particular society.[15] Major personality cults have existed surrounding leaders like Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong, Lenin, and Stalin in the past. In order to better understand Putin's personality cult within the Russian cultural context, it is helpful to examine prior cults of personality in Russia.

Cults of Personality in the Soviet Union: Lenin and Stalin

Russia, and its predecessor the Soviet Union, has a history of involvement with cults of personality. Lenin and Stalin each had a cult of personality in the Soviet Union, and Putin similarly has one in modern Russia. Cults surrounding leaders are not a new phenomenon. Monarchies and religions dating back to ancient times had cult followings, and religious and political power were connected in that the monarch's claim to the throne was based on the belief that God placed him in that position of power.[16]

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[11] Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production," in *A New Literacies Sampler*, eds. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 199.
[12] Ibid*.,* 200.
[13] Ibid*.,* 202.
[14] "Kermit the Frog Drinking Tea Memes," *imgur*, accessed April 10, 2016. http://imgur.com/gallery/ULRor.
[15] Steven Kreis, "Stalin and the *Cult of Personality,*" *The History Guide*, 2000, accessed April 22, 2016. http://www.historyguide.org/europe/cult.html.
[16] E. A. Rees, "Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions," in *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc,* eds. Balazs Apor et al. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 5.

Cults of the twentieth century in Russia resembled monarchial and religious cults of old.[17] Both ancient and modern personality cults connect the leader with the people and the nation.[18] Power-hungry leaders enjoy the sense of security in their post that comes from having a cult following and the godlike power it bestows upon them.[19] The people follow the cult, as it gives them a sense of purpose in life, treating leaders like Lenin as deities.[20] Lenin and Stalin's cults of personality involved Russians both old and young, and although the government created policies to bolster the power of the cult, the movement was not one-sided and required the support of the people, which it gained.

The cults of Stalin and Lenin resembled one another. Just as with religious cults, cults of personality involve certain beliefs and rituals.[21] Russian culture prior to the revolution of 1917 was highly intertwined with Russian Orthodox Christianity.[22] Russian culture sanctified its heroes, seeing them as more than human, with an air of divinity.[23] The Bolsheviks, the communist party that gained power following the 1917 Russian revolution, recognized this highly religious element of Russian culture and used this in its creation of the cult. Because legitimate political and religious power had been intertwined for so long in Russian culture, the Bolsheviks recognized the challenge of establishing the legitimacy of their own rule without a religious element. Creating a cult of personality around Lenin would satisfy this hunger for a religious icon for the people and encourage the image of the Bolsheviks, headed by Lenin and his ideals, as a secure and stable leadership. Lenin's administration used the Russian populace's religious sentiments in order to establish the legitimacy of their own political power. Although Lenin hated religion, his government placed him as a cult figure who could be worshipped in a sense; just as saints in the pre-revolutionary era had a place for their icons in the "beautiful corner" of a room, suddenly images of Lenin arose in their place.[24] Both the Lenin and Stalin governments set up education systems that taught children to respect and admire the leaders as family to be loved more dearly than one's own parents—ensuring maximum loyalty to the state.[25] Icons showed images of the leader with children, much like religious icons of the past, and schools taught children to love the leader through ritual practices.[26] This method was highly effective, so that children even continued to feel the same devotion to the leader after maturation.[27]

The Soviet personality cults of Stalin and Lenin consecrated their leaders like religious cults in the past. One example of this that lives on is Lenin's tomb.[28] The tomb sits in Red Square and resembles a shrine to a saint, which people visit as though on a pilgrimage.[29] Lenin did not want to be deified.[30] His cult began after his death and did not portray his true personality.[31] Lenin had no children, but he identified closely with the

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 12.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!: The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 2.
[22] Ibid., 4.
[23] Ibid., 14.
[24] Ibid., 23.
[25] Catriona Kelly, "Grandpa Lenin and Uncle Stalin: Soviet Leader Cults for Little Children," in *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc,* eds. Balazs Apor et al. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 103.
[26] Ibid., 102.
[27] Ibid., 102-103.
[28] Rees, "Leader Cults," 6.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!,* 24.
[31] Ibid.

Communist Party and in speeches referred to Russia as "child," as if to claim fatherhood over the nation.[32] The Bolshevik government created a cult of personality surrounding Lenin because his strong leadership qualities were attractive to the people and the party required symbols and images favorable to the people for use in propaganda to bolster the government's power and legitimacy.[33] The Lenin cult began as a result of many factors, including Russian religious culture, as previously mentioned, and the Bolshevik government's search for legitimacy. At first, Stalin and his government used the Lenin cult to bolster their own legitimacy and Stalin made a point of emphasizing his close relationship with Lenin.[34] The same aspects of Russian culture, its religious and monarchial historical ties, which gave Lenin's cult power, also gave power to Stalin's cult.[35] The Stalin cult used propaganda to differentiate between the culture of the capitalist west and that of the Soviet Union.[36] His pipe became a symbol of communism in contrast with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's cigar, which represented capitalism.[37]

Putin's cult is similar to Lenin and Stalin's cults of personality in that it uses visual and physical tools to propagate Putin's image as an ideal Russian super-deity, similar to the way Stalin's strong communist symbolism in propaganda emphasized his strength and communist leadership, and Lenin became a sort of "Holy Father" through the education system and his tomb. Putin's cult engages with youths in a way that is somewhat different from the Lenin and Stalin cults. Putin's cult engages with youths in a more voluntary nature, as with the Nashi Youth Movement, which the Kremlin finances and advertises, unlike the youth movements under Stalin and Lenin's cults where a departure from the organization could devastate one's career. Like Stalin and Lenin's propaganda posters, Putin uses photos to enhance his image as a strong leader. Unlike Stalin's pipe and Lenin's tomb, Putin's associated objects can also exist in the digital realm in the form of memes. Before delving deeper into the heart of the Putin cult meme world, it is helpful to examine the general development of the Putin cult.

Overview of the Putin Cult

This account of the Putin cult draws heavily upon the work of scholars Julie A. Cassiday and Emily D. Johnson. The Putin cult was born in 2000 when Putin came to power as the first strong national leader in the post-Soviet era. Prior to 1999 when he took over the presidency from Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Putin was almost unknown, but by early 2000 journalists already talked of his cult of personality. Soon after he won the March 2000 elections, bookstores began to sell portraits of him and professional, well-known artists used his image. By 2006 schools already had Putin's portrait on the wall, and by 2007 journalist Susan Glasser, a founding editor of *Politico* and Russian expert, pointed out that Putin's image could be found all over Russia.[38]

In the beginning of the cult, just after Putin came to power in 2000, the Kremlin involved itself in shaping the Putin cult. Putin "wrote" a book, based on interview answers, that sought to introduce Russians to their leader, portraying him as a humble, intelligent family man with an interesting and exciting past and promise for the

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[32] Ibid., 59.
[33] Ibid., 65.
[34] Rees, "Leader Cults," 9.
[35] Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 1–2.
[36] Ibid., 17.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Julie Cassiday and Emily Johnson, "Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of
Personality," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 88, no. 4. (October 2010).

future. This book, entitled *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self Portrait by Russia's President,* was published in 2000 as Putin was taking on the role of president, and consists of questions posed by three Russian interviewers and answers by Putin. The preface says they talked to Putin in an informal setting, usually around the dinner table, meeting a total of six times for four hours each.[39] Putin's agreement to participate in the making of this book shows his involvement in the creation of his own public image. The interviewers published the book in 2000, just as Putin was taking on the role of president for the first time after Yeltsin's sudden resignation. The timing is surely not random. The book provides a flattering image of a family man who has an interesting history filled with incredible adventure, but remains humble. Of course, no biography would cover a world leader and allow him/her to sound uninteresting. It introduces the Russian people to their new president, humanizes him, and sets up his public image so that the people see him as a transparent, positive figure at the very beginning of his ascension to power. Even into the late 1990s, Russians felt fear and distrust toward the Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (KGB).[40] This book helped to distance Putin from negative associations with the KGB, turning his spy background into a more glamorous one, but ultimately focusing more heavily on his family-man image. Given the subject of this paper, a biographical representation most helpful for understanding the Putin cult is one intertwined with the cult itself. Putin's own brief autobiographical summary, which the interviewers placed at the beginning of the book, provides the basic facts:

> In fact, I have had a very simple life. Everything is an open book.
> I finished school and went to university.
> I graduated from university and went to the KGB.
> I finished the KGB and went back to university.
> After university, I went to work for Sobchak.
> From Sobchak, to Moscow and to the General Department.
> Then to the Presidential Administration.
> From there, to the FSB.[41]
> Then I was appointed Prime Minister.
> Now I'm Acting President. That's it![42]

This simple autobiographical summary provides us with a brief overview of the major successes in Putin's career as he moved further up rungs in the power ladder. It also shows some level of real or feigned humility with "I have had a very simple life" and the "that's it!" at the end of his statement. His humble words help to make him seem more human, and, throughout this book, his humble, family-oriented nature turns the focus away from his KGB involvement. This book helped to distance Putin a bit from the negative connotations of the KGB, in favor of the positives of a family-centric lifestyle with a glamorous past.

The Putin cult uses different parts of Putin's history—his school years, home life, etc.—in order to achieve a particular image that connects the ruler to the people. This connection comes about by allowing the reader to experience life with Putin starting in his earliest years and moving chronologically through his growth. Autobiographies sometimes jump between the issues that the subject finds most important or briefly touches upon his/her childhood, only for the purpose of explaining the context for the

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[39] Vladimir Putin, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self Portrait by Russia's President,* eds. Nataliya Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (London: Hutchinson, 2000), VII-VIII.

[40] Martin Ebon, *KGB: Death and Rebirth* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 121.

[41] Federal'naia sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii (FSB)—the Russian Federal Security Service—is the main successor agency to the USSR's KGB.

[42] Putin, *First Person*, 1.

following chapters detailing his/her success. *First Person's* chronological and highly detailed structure makes Putin seem more accessible, as though the reader is witnessing a family member grow up, rather than a distant celebrity. The content within this structure, however, maintains a sense of adventure and excitement that keeps the reader engaged even after Putin has begun to grow up, and upholds the image of Putin as a sort of superhero family man who fits the description of the most interesting, perfect Russian man. The chapters split his life into sections: "The Son," "The Schoolboy," "The University Student," "The Young Specialist," "The Spy," "The Democrat," "The Bureaucrat," "The Family Man," "The Politician," and "Russia At The Turn Of The Millennium," and include subheadings that sound more like the intro to a serial than the summary of a president's autobiographical interview. These chapter titles show the diversity of the identities that Putin's image holds. On one hand, he is a family man with a loving wife—who takes part in the interviews and lauds Putin's balance of family and work—and daughters, while on the other hand he is a spy, who serves his country with an aura of intrigue and adventure about him.

One excerpt from "The Bureaucrat" chapter reads, "Meanwhile, tension in the Caucuses is rising as Chechen rebels demand independence. Fearing a potential domino effect, Putin takes a hard line. He is willing to sacrifice his own political career to crush the Chechens and thereby avoid what he sees as a devastating, large-scale war."[43] This subheading reads almost like the prelude to a Star Wars film, keeping the reader highly engaged in the action and adventure aspect of Putin's life. The fact that these subheadings are not Putin's words, but the words of the interviewers maintains the image of Putin as a humble man, the kind who would never say braggingly about himself that "he is willing to sacrifice his own political career to crush the Chechens." Instead, the chapter subheadings give an exciting, exoticizing spin to the interview answers that follow. The first page in "The Bureaucrat," for example, starts:

> **[Interviewer:] What did you do for work after leaving Yakovlev's office, when no ambassadorial post materialized?**
> **[Putin:]** After we lost the elections in Peter, a few months passed and I was still without a job. It really wasn't very good. I had a family, you know. The situation had to be resolved, one way or another. But the signals from Moscow were mixed; first they were asking me to come to work, and then they weren't.
> **[Interviewer:] But who did make you an offer?**
> **[Putin:]** Borodin, as odd as it may seem.
> Chief of staff Pavel Borodin brought me into the presidential administration. I don't know why. We had met several times. That was essentially the extent of our relationship…[44]

The excitement of the preceding chapter subheading contrasts mightily with Putin's humble admission of unemployment. His concern for his family and his humble downplaying of reasons for getting the offer of employment with the government make it easier for the reader to connect with him and see him as one of the people—just another man who wants nothing more than to provide for his family, who does not brag about his merits, and in fact seems so saintly that he is even unaware of them. However, to be sure that this connectivity does not make the reader question his qualifications for being the leader, the interviewers assist him in a "humble-brag" so that in their choice of questions and his careful answer the reader learns about this interesting, amazing, and impressive man who is also humble about his own image. A few pages later in "The Bureaucrat," the reader finds an example of this careful literary choreography:

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[43] Ibid., 123.
[44] Ibid., 125.

> **[Interviewer:] How did they greet you at the FSB? There you were, a former KGB colonel…**
> **[Putin:]** I was greeted cautiously. Then things got better. As for being a colonel… Let's take a closer look… First of all, I was a colonel in the reserves. I had completed my service as a lieutenant colonel, ten years earlier. During those ten years, I had had a different life. And when I came to work at the FSB, it was not as a colonel but as a civilian who held the position of first deputy to the chief of the presidential administration.
> **[Interviewer:] That is, you in fact became the first civilian leader of the security agencies?**[45]

The interviewers' choice to leave in ellipses indicating hesitation shows the deliberate nature of the image production. Generally in interviews, people hesitate, pause, and use filler words, sometimes creating sentences that do not make sense or are fragmented. Putin's responses all appear perfectly phrased, so that the only time he does not complete a thought, the ellipses that follow indicate his pointed thinking about the topic at hand. In this example, the interviewers plop an impressive title within the question immediately after discussing the FSB, which carries its own exciting spy-based connotations. Putin's answer presents him as both humble and extremely impressive, but without seeming to try to be so. Then the interviewers follow up with a question that in fact is pointing out his accomplishments, which does not seem to be bragging because it does not come from him.

Putin's cult of personality means that every element of his life is carefully shaped for public consumption. Putin became the father of the nation as Boris Yeltsin said to him, "Take care of Russia." Putin also became a family man, a sex symbol, the manliest of men, and anything else the people desired.[46] The peppering of photos within *First Person* featuring Putin with his wife, daughter, and pets, dressed in everyday "dad-wear," sought to ensure at the beginning of his first presidency that Russians saw him as one of the people, with family values just like them. Even in the start of the Putin cult, the government sought to propagate this multifaceted image of Putin, where he seems to be nearly all things—certainly anything that Russia could need, and it continues this shape-shifting into the present with some constant features like Putin's masculinity.

Unlike leaders like North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un, who regularly sing their own praises in their attempt to create a positive image, Putin uses a subtler method. He surrounds himself with others who point out his accomplishments, like in the book *First Person*. He does not stand at a stage bragging about living an exciting life. Instead, the book interacts with the Putin cult using these subtler methods in order to propagate an image the people will respond positively to: a family man, exciting former spy, and intelligent government leader. Russian-American, Moscow-based Journalist Anna Arutunyan wrote of Putin, "what I saw when he stared at me for a few moments …was a reflection of whatever I wanted to see."[47] This real-life observation is transferable to the texts of the Putin cult, in which Putin takes on many positive, masculine identities ranging from family man to adventurer. The shape-shifting nature of Putin's image that he and his government produce, and which the people embrace in the back and forth of the personality cult, is evident even in the presentation of his history that emerged with the cult's beginnings as Putin rose to power.

After the publishing of *First Person,* Putin's approval ratings increased as his "all-embracing image" continued to morph like a chameleon. He seemed to be a blank

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[45] Ibid., 133.
[46] Ibid., 112–113.
[47] Anna Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia's Power Cult* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2015), 57.

slate upon which any image might be projected as needed. By 2004 there were definite traits that resurfaced within every representation of Putin. He was always attributed with, according to Cassiday and Johnson, "sobriety, intelligence, competence, vigorous physical and psychological health, and, above all, his manliness."[48] Putin has become the perfect man since the beginning of his ascendance to power with his initially "blank slate" persona, so that he now embodies the ideal version of a Russian man—the highly masculine, sexy, adventurous outdoorsman who also has wholesome values of being a family man and not a drunk or a smoker.

Putin's popularity extends beyond the realm of politics and into a hyper-celebrity zone, which the Kremlin propagates. His regime sets up photo shoots and events with which to spread his masculine Russian image. Some of these include photos that show him playing hockey with children, Russian officials, and NHL hockey stars before a youth tournament and again on his 63rd birthday; exercising; fishing in Siberia; flying a hang-glider for a project aiming to save a rare crane species; riding a Harley Davidson motorcycle to a biker convention in southern Ukraine; diving to archeological sites; beating opponents in judo competitions; and piloting a jet.[49]

A photo book was published in 2008 that included at least 220 pages filled with photos from his time in power, many of which show his engagement with his people, and two CDs containing more photos and speeches of his.[50] These photos include images of him riding a white stallion, being kissed by a small babushka, swimming with dolphins, and listening to a cell phone with an expression that looks more like a fictional spy than a president, with a giant, white helicopter in the background.[51] His regime uses these images to present Putin as a mix between a philanthropist who helps children and is beloved by the elderly, an environmentalist who is trying to save endangered species, an everyday man who enjoys the simpler bits of country life like fishing, and a James Bond/Indiana Jones-esque adventurer. These images allow the public to pick and choose which most resonate with them.

Although the images his regime is propagating might seem over the top, the public engages eagerly with these portrayals of Putin. All demographics of Russians interact with Putin's cult of personality, as this image of Putin as a sort of perfect Russian man-deity appeals to various societal groups. He can be father, son, brother, husband, boyfriend, and mentor. Sites like *Celebrity Mound* include biographies of Putin which emphasize his spy career, his perfect German fluency, his martial arts skills, and his chic fashion tastes.[52] Putin has had various products named after him, including kebab houses, milkshakes, vodkas, lollipops, ice cream, and carpets to name a few.[53]

The sex-god image has been particularly popular, especially with middle-aged women, though not exclusively.[54] Rumors have circulated linking Putin with various young, attractive women, and a tabloid in 2008 alleged that Putin had secretly divorced his wife and married Alina Kabaeva, a former Russian Olympic gymnast and deputy in

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[48] Cassiday and Johnson, "Putin, Putiniana," 686.
[49] "21 Photos: Cult of Putin," *CNN*, December 25, 2015, http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/02/europe/gallery/cult-of-vladimir-putin/.
[50] Vladimir Viktorov, *Vladimir Putin: luchshie raboty 33 fotografov, rabotavshih s Prezidentom Rossii v 2000-2008* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 2008).
[51] Ibid.
[52] Brian James Baer and Nadezhda Korchagina, "Akunin's Secret and Fandorin's Luck," *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia,* eds. Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov (New York: Routledge, 2011), 86.
[53] Hannah Goscilo, "The Ultimate Celebrity: VVP as VIP Objet d'Art," *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia,* eds. Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov (New York: Routledge, 2011), 30.
[54] Ibid.

the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian legislature.[55] Putin's regime shut down the tabloid after this allegation.[56] The existence of such a demand for Putin-romance gossip shows a sexual deification of Putin that is lacking in other world-leader celebrities. In 2007 the "Obama Girl" viral video showed that a bit of tongue-in-cheek sexualized support of a political figure is not a purely Russian phenomenon.[57] But the sexual deification of Putin goes beyond the level expressed in "Obama Girl." In 2003 Russian confectioner Konfael created a $700 chocolate portrait of Putin that weighed over three pounds.[58] When surveyed about what they would do with this portrait, "men claimed that they probably would hang it in their offices, whereas young women wished to kiss it while their middle-aged counterparts dreamed of eating a chocolate Putin ear."[59] The bare-chested fishing photo that showcases Putin's religiousness with his Orthodox cross necklace, his muscular physique, and his crotch-level fishing rod became so popular with women that one fan created a needlework pattern of the image that was published in the *Komsomol'skaia pravda* newspaper for others to use.[60]

Women are not the only demographic that are fans of Putin. Latvian author Alexander Olbik wrote a spy thriller starring Putin called *The President*, which has sold well to men.[61] In 2001 Russian artist Aleksandr Palmin sculpted a bronze bust of Putin and in 2004 he sculpted Putin in his judo clothing, which became the centerpiece in his art gallery.[62] Putin's government released photos of him doing interesting and masculine things, and these images became capitalized and sold to an interested public, signaling a male fan base that connects with his embodiment of masculinity. In 2001, a Moscow gallery held an exhibition of his portraits called "Our Putin," a 2002 calendar was sold with a different expression of his for each month, and men's watches with his image on the face sold in a kiosk in the Federation Council Building in Moscow for fifty-six dollars.[63]

Putin's personality cult interacts with the capitalist environment of contemporary Russia, which spreads his image in non-directly government controlled ways amidst the public, both with men and women. The Kremlin uses photo campaigns to propagate a particular set of images he seeks to embody—images which portray him as a loving father, a powerful leader, and a sports and philosophy guru—and in return the public engages with these images, showing their adoration for their leader.[64] This exchange embodies the Putin cult.

Engagement with the cult continues into the present. Putin's approval ratings skyrocketed to 89 percent as of July 2015, increasing from 65 percent before the Ukraine crisis.[65] His popularity does not match the much lower approval ratings given to the

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[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] "Obama Girl" was a fan-produced music video depicting a model singing she "had a crush" on him and expressed her support for his policy options with humorous phrases like "Barack me tonight." Leah Kauffman and Ben Relles, "Crush on Obama," YouTube video, 3:19, produced by Rick Friedrich for BarelyPolitical.com, posted by "The Key of Awesome," June 13, 2007, accessed March 19, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU.
[58] Goscilo, "The Ultimate Celebrity," 31.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 31–32.
[61] Ibid., 32.
[62] Ibid., 34.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Putin, *First Person*.
[65] Dimitri Alexander Simes, "5 Things You Need to Know about Putin's Popularity in Russia," *The National Interest,* July 21, 2015, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/5-things-you-need-know-about-putins-popularity-russia-13380.

government itself—58 percent of Russians think that government officials in general are just seeking to gain power and 60 percent lament that society cannot hold officials accountable for their actions.[66] This discrepancy shows the power of the Putin cult in Russian society. Putin's government has also increased its control of mass media and cracked down on opposition media campaigns—measures that have certainly allowed for an improvement of image, but do not entirely explain his popularity, which arose before these and manifests itself in many creative forms beyond those created by the government.[67]

The term "cult of personality" connotes a link with the Soviet personality cults of Lenin and especially Stalin, but the contemporary cult has some unique elements that distinguish it from those of the Soviet Union.[68] Putin's personality cult goes beyond those classical images of leadership which are propagated by his government through the media and mirror the Soviet cults.[69] Putin's image and related paraphernalia flood Russian markets and the Internet world, without the government's constant control.[70] Putin's government interacts with and encourages this public engagement with Putin, so the cult cannot be split clearly between government-propagated images and public-created images, but it also cannot be said that the government has absolute control over the Putin cult.[71] Instead Putin's cult of personality is a mix between the manufactured and the organic, each side feeding off of one another in a way that Soviet personality cults did not experience.

Millennials and the Putin Cult

Millennials, like other generations of Russians, also interact with the Putin cult. There are two major ways that millennials engage with the Putin cult. Some openly involve themselves in pro-Putin organizations and movements in the real world, while others interact with the Putin cult through humorous memes and videos in the digital world. This section will first examine the physical involvement in Putin cult organizations. Putin's government sponsors various youth camps and groups aimed at increasing patriotic involvement. One such example of this is the youth organization Nashi and their summer camp in the Russian countryside, the largest of a few government-sponsored, pro-Kremlin camps, where youths can stay for free up to two weeks.[72] Nashi youths are a particularly good set of millennials to focus on, due to their clear ties to the government and the opportunities available for their engagement, like the Nashi camp, although they are not the only pro-Putin organization that attracts youth involvement. Nashi youths are overtly pro-Putin and sincere in their belief that what the organization is promoting is good.[73] Through the organization many millennials work on civil society projects such as ones to improve children's homes and general living conditions for disadvantaged children.[74]

Within the Nashi Youth Movement, which the Kremlin sponsors, millennials have the opportunity to attend a Nashi camp, with all expenses paid by the government. The Russian national anthem serves as a wake-up call for attendees of the camp, who

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Cassiday and Johnson, "Putin, Putiniana," 684.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] "Putin's Patriotic Youth Camp," *Time,* accessed March 20, 2016, photo gallery, slides 4–5, http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1646809_1416341,00.html.
[73] Julie Hemment, "Nashi, Youth Voluntarism, and Potemkin NGOs: Making Sense of Civil Society in Post-Soviet Russia," *Slavic Review* 71, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 236.
[74] Ibid.

have activities available to them such as working out, social mixers, canoeing, military drills and martial arts training to encourage young men not to dodge conscription, political education classes, and hiking. No smoking or drinking is allowed.[75] The camp also encourages young patriotic men and women to become couples, and many members get married during their stay—sometimes in large groups of multiple couples at one time. Attendees can sometimes talk to special guests like Dmitry Medvedev or Vladimir Putin himself when they visit the camp.[76]

While the activity list may make the event sound more like a Boy Scout and Girl Scout summer camp than a government-run propaganda machine, certain aspects betray the more serious purpose. Camp lectures are mandatory and attendee nametags each contain an electronic tracking chip that allows the organization to tell if anyone has skipped an activity.[77] A giant poster of Putin and another with the picture of a large group of Nashi youth and the words "Forward, Putin Generation! The 7th of May! We have been with the President for 7 years" overlook the tents in which campers sleep.[78] The camp also displays larger than life posters featuring opposition leaders like former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and former chess champion Garry Kasparov, whose faces have been photoshopped onto the bodies of female prostitutes wearing lingerie.[79] The organization is government-funded and has said that its purpose is to prevent a pro-Western revolution like that which occurred in Ukraine in 2004.[80] The Nashi youth camp, and the movement in general, exemplify the strong efforts of Putin's government in trying to increase youth support for the leader and patriotism/nationalism. The movement's popularity and voluntary nature, in contrast with "voluntary" involvement in the Soviet period, prove that it is not a purely one-sided propaganda feeding-tube, like the Stalin and Lenin cults' childhood education curriculum that taught young children to love the leader. Instead there is a youth population that actively engages with the government's pro-Putin programs, which gives these organizations more than the title of "camp" or "organization" and instead allows them to become "movements," which implies a level of eager and willing involvement as well as belief from millennials that goes beyond tracked mandatory class attendance.

Why do millennials take part in these sorts of nationalist camps and pro-Kremlin youth movements? In Scholar Julie Hemment's research on Nashi, she interviewed one twenty-one-year-old Nashi member in 2009 who talked about how the group wanted to fix a broken society and replace corrupt officials—the same things on which Putin's speeches focused.[81] Hemment argues that Nashi and Putin's civil-society project came out of the foreign democratizing influences of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of the 1990s, which Putin and his supporters saw as motivated more by foreign self-interest than a genuine wish to help the Russian people.[82] Nashi arose as a response to the perception that the US was involving itself too highly in Russian affairs and it seeks to "maintain Russia's sovereignty and values."[83] It taps into a fear that Russian youths are being seduced by Western materialism and offers millennials a way to keep in touch with their Russian identity and meet others in their generation who do the same.[84] Putin's government funds these organizations and maintains a level of fun

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[75] "Putin's Patriotic Youth Camp," 1–14.
[76] Ibid., 7, 11.
[77] Ibid., 12.
[78] Ibid., 5, 3.
[79] Ibid., 8.
[80] Ibid., 14.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., 234.
[83] Ibid., 248.
[84] Ibid., 249.

in the interaction with the Putin cult.[85] This ensures that youths are not turned off by a presidential image that seems to take itself too seriously and instead allows millennials an opportunity to have fun while supporting the Putin regime.[86] Nashi also involves some carnivalesque elements in its campaigns: for one campaign, 60,000 Nashi youths wore Santa suits and congregated in the streets of Moscow.[87]

Not only are there pro-Putin groups, but also anti-Putin youth activist groups, though generally with fewer members.[88] The large number of youths involved in political organizations regardless of the side shows the tendency for millennials to become involved—a trend that seems to be true in other parts of the world as well, like in the United States. Arguably, these trends are connected, as Western democratizing influences brought a millennial spirit of activism to Russia through NGOs, which groups like Nashi officially renounced, while modeling their own organizational tactics and structure after these NGOs. The youth involvement in groups like Nashi shows the activist element of Russian millennial identity, which seeks to promote a better Russia created by Russians—a nationalist take on the Western model. Putin's regime recognized the millennial activist spirit, creating the Nashi group and others like it in order to harness this element and increase support for Putin through Putin cult engagement.

Millennial activism does help to explain why youths are involved in openly pro-Putin movements like Nashi, as they publicly display their activist mindset in order to do what they see as helping Russia. However, activism cannot entirely explain the more humorous online presence of the Putin cult, where digital natives can sometimes post memes and gifs of Putin anonymously. An even larger portion of the millennial population, compared to those who take part in Nashi, engages with the Putin cult through online means—which take an increasingly tongue-in-cheek form. The humorous element helps to soften the appearance of the Putin cult and make it much more palatable for newer converts. Much of what exists online is far more independent from government control than the Nashi movement, although not everything in the digital realm is completely lacking in government involvement and nothing is without government influence, as the cult remains a give-and-take/call-and-response between Putin's regime and the people—youths in this case—in the digital world as well. YouTube videos, songs, memes, gifs, and fake Twitter accounts are just some of the online manifestations of the Putin cult.

One example of a government-involved, though not controlled, Internet hit with millennials was Russian rappers Sasha Chest and Timati's music video "Luchshii drug," which translates as "Best Friend" released in celebration of Putin's 63rd birthday with #MoiLuchshiiDrugEtoPrezidentPutin, which translates to "my best friend is President Putin," written in the information section of the YouTube video.[89] The video features a set of athletic, acrobatic, break-dancing millennials, some of whom are wearing Putin masks, dancing in Red Square, riding speedboats down the Moscow River with the Kremlin in the background, skateboarding and doing bicycle tricks in a stake park, and dancing in a nightclub.[90] These youth culture elements, along with the use of Putin masks on athletic, breakdancing men, helps to establish a connection between millennials and the leader. It brings the adventurous Russified James Bond version of Putin that is popular with middle-aged and older Russians, as previously discussed, into the millennial

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[85] Ibid., 251.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Valerie Sperling, "Nashi Devushki: Gender and Political Youth Activism in Putin's and Medvedev's Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 28, no. 2 (2012): 238–239.
[89] Sasha Chest and Timati, "Luchshii Drug," YouTube video, 3:21, dir. Pavel Khudiakov, posted by "TimatiOfficial," October 6, 2015, accessed March 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp9pfvneKf4.
[90] Ibid.

context with influences of hip-hop and skater culture evident in the video. There's a sense of jest in the video that keeps the tone lighthearted, so that it does not seem to actually suggest that Putin is indeed Chest and Timati's best friend. It also shows a gymnast dancing in front of a giant mural of Putin's face, which is obscured in shadow. This woman is meant to look like Kabaeva, the former Russian Olympic gymnast and a rumored mistress of Putin's. The director shot the scene well enough to cause debate among fans regarding the likelihood that the woman is indeed Kabaeva.[91]

It is unclear how much government involvement went into this music video. This music video was not produced by the government, nor was it a fan-made, low-budget video. Instead this video seems to ride somewhere in between these tiers of society, as it is in the upper echelons of pop culture where the rappers sit. Producer and director Pavel Khudiakov's website lists this video alongside Timati's other music videos and does not explicitly mention any production information for the music video.[92] In fact, the production company's "about" page focuses more on ties to the US music video industry than the Russian one.[93] It is unclear whether this was actually filmed in Red Square and on the Moscow River. Tourists are visible in the background of Red Square visiting St. Basil's Cathedral, but no barriers are visible that would prevent those tourists from walking into this video, so it may have been filmed using advanced digital techniques. *The Guardian* claims this video was indeed filmed in Red Square in front of the Kremlin, although it is difficult to find any other sources that either support or challenge this claim in both Russian and Western media.[94] Professional camera use in Red Square is prohibited without a permit.[95] Any sort of event or gathering in Red Square that might inhibit public access to the square requires permission from the Kremlin.[96] If it was filmed in these places, the production team would have needed to acquire permits for the space, especially given that they kept tourists in the far background, taking the majority of the square for themselves. Even if the music video was created entirely independently of Putin's government, however, its commercial existence and popularity shows the depth of the Putin cult within the Russian millennial online culture that already exists. Timati is a successful Russian rapper who would not produce a video about a sixty-three-year-old world leader if there were not a receptive audience. Although the cult itself is widespread across generations, rap music is more popular with millennials than with their grandmothers, so the target audience is quite clear. Also interesting to note are the lyrics to the rap. Some of it focuses on his sex appeal, saying that girls beg for and go crazy for him, and he could take any he wishes.[97] It also talks about his love for country and calls him a superhero, emphasizing that he is Russia's "son" and that "we are all, with the whole country, for him."[98] The patriotic fervor glossed over with a cool, catchy hip-hop song is a prime example of the Putin cult's engagement with millennials.

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[91] Alina Woks, Chistyi Gorod page discussion, *Odnoklassniki*, October 8, 2015, accessed March 20, 2016, http://m.ok.ru/profile/570881469350/statuses/64319103658918.
[92] "Khudiakov Production: About," Khudiakov Production, accessed March 20, 2016, http://hoodyakov.com/about/.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Alec Luhn, "Vladimir Putin Celebrates Birthday on Ice in Celebrity Hockey Match," *The Guardian,* October 7, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/vladimir-putin-birthday-ice-hockey-match.
[95] "Question: Moscow," *Localyte,* accessed April 22, 2016, http://www.localyte.com/answers/159590
[96] "Tank Triumphs over Trunk! Putin Permits Just Seven Annual Red Square Events," *Russia Today,* December 11, 2013, accessed April 22, 2016, https://www.rt.com/politics/red-square-vuitton-putin-057/.
[97] Chest and Timati, "Luchshii Drug."
[98] Ibid.

While Chest and Timati's video may have had government involvement, other pop artists have created pro-Putin songs without government approval. In 2002 the female music group Poiushchie vmeste produced a song called "Takogo kak Putin," which translates to "One like Putin" that laments the good-for-nothing nature of the singer's current boyfriend and wishes for a man like Putin who is strong, is not a drunk, will not abuse her, and will not leave her.[99] The song played on many radio stations when it first came out.[100]

More organic, millennial-created, and non-government-funded songs and music videos that are pro-Putin exist as well. In 2012 just before presidential elections in Russia, Tolibdzhon Kurbankhanov, a Tajik immigrant to Russia, posted a song on YouTube called "VVP"—Putin's initials—in which he calls Putin "a godsend."[101] This video is obviously far more of a fan production than Chest and Timati's. It features Kurbankhanov standing near the edge of the Moscow River opposite the Kremlin, as cars pass in the background and the camera shakes, while the rest of the video is either a series of photo montages of Putin or a side-view of the singer as he is driven around Moscow.[102] This song exemplifies the way that fan-produced, pro-Putin art interacts with the Putin cult through the Internet.

A more recent pro-Putin song posted to YouTube in early 2015 is called "Moi Putin," or "My Putin," by Mashani, a pop singer from Siberia. It features the singer dressed in a white, blue, and red dress that looks like the Russian flag, as well as a blue and yellow dress to represent Ukraine.[103] She sings of Putin's strength in facing war on different fronts, his confidence, and says that she is enchanted by him with a chorus that says, "You're Putin / yes you are Putin / I want to be with you / I'm screaming after you / my Putin, my dear Putin / take me with you / I want to be with you."[104] It also features a man on a motorcycle who represents Putin, and she lauds him for returning Crimea and planning to restore their union, wearing her Russian flag outfit, while her Ukrainian-flag self looks pleadingly at the camera and sings the chorus, asking for him to take her with him.[105] It certainly does not have the high production quality that "Best Friend" has, and it has only about a third of the views, at almost 3.5 million in comparison with Chest and Timati's 9 million. These songs show how pro-Putin products contribute to the Putin cult and spread to other millennials through the Internet.

There are also many less serious fan-art productions that millennials produce and circulate via the Internet that contribute to the Putin cult. These fan activities take government-produced and promoted images that already carry some level of tongue-in-cheek humor and add meme-culture flair. One example of this is the "Putin on the Ritz"[106] picture and gif sensation that even spread to regular American millennial Internet

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[99] Nikolai A. Zen'kovich, *Putinskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: OLMA Media Grupp, 2008), 165.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Claire Bigg, "New Pro-Putin Song Gets Panned Online," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty,* January 29, 2015. https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-pro-putin-song-mashani/26820282.html.
[102] Tolibdzhon Kurbankkhanov, "VVP," YouTube video, 3:42, posted by "SergeiRaevskii," February 4, 2012, accessed April 10, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcnQ9imDrWk.
[103] Mashani, "Moi Putin," YouTube video, 3:31, dir. Igor' Shukshin, posted by "Mashany Music," January 28, 2015, accessed March 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v6Jw9rsWCE.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ellen Houlihan, "Putin on the Ritz," YouTube video, 1:17, from GIF by SadandUseless.com and song by Taco, posted by "Ellen Houlihan," February 10, 2014, accessed March 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLMTMK-mp7w.

use. The website *Know Your Meme*, a database for memes, uploaded "Putin on the Ritz" within the last three years, and still no one has claimed authorship.[107] The gif of the "Putin on the Ritz" meme shows a shirtless Putin riding a giant Ritz cracker across a blurred countryside, and various videos playing the song "Puttin' on the Ritz" over the gif exist on YouTube and other social media platforms. The image of Vladimir Putin riding the cracker shirtless and wearing sunglasses comes from a photo of him riding a horse in the Tuva region of southern Siberia from a photo shoot published August 3, 2009.[108] This meme is just one of many examples of Putin's macho image circulating the Internet in a lightly humored way, without actually insulting him. His government did not create the meme, obviously, but did produce a series of macho-looking photos that were so over-the-top that they invited fan engagement. On the other side of the coin, the strange fan involvement that Photoshops Putin onto things like Ritz crackers, sharks, and bears, or has created a Tumblr page called "Shirtless Putin Doin' Things,"[109] shows the extent and unique nature of the Putin cult's Internet presence. It uses humor to find an increasingly global audience and assert Putin's place as one of the world's most powerful leaders, regardless of any realistic support for that position. It also highlights the effectiveness of Internet/meme culture for gaining an audience and engagement with millennials.

There is one more example that is interesting to note. The "Ia drug Putina," translated as "I am a friend of Putin," campaign shows an intersection between millennial Internet engagement and real-world Putin paraphernalia. The company Hearts of Russia produces clothing with Russian "patriotic symbols," and in 2015 released a t-shirt they say celebrates veterans of war, as part of the sale goes to a charity fund for veterans.[110] In Russian, the shirt reads "I am a #friend of Putin" and features a headshot photo of Putin winking next to a winking bear. The shirts went on sale along Nevsky Prospect in Saint Petersburg around the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory in World War II. The hashtag #iadrugPutina shows up on Twitter with references to the t-shirt, the t-shirt stand, or general support for or disagreement with Vladimir Putin. The t-shirt has sparked an Internet conversation and the use of a hashtag invites the viewer to see this as a physical part of the digital discussion. Not only Russian millennials have engaged in the conversation. Russia's local News Channel 5 ran a story in June of 2015 that showed a group of Americans who were introducing Russian culture at an event in Times Square and selling the t-shirts to millennial Americans who found the image humorous and unique.[111]

The t-shirt and hashtag campaign definitely has a more serious and meaningful Russian usage as well. The National Liberation Movement is a nationalist organization that is pro-Putin and anti-West, and particularly anti-US.[112] In October of 2015, the organization's website shared a set of photos that one young millennial named

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[107] "Vladimir Putin – Putin on the Ritz," *Know Your Meme,* accessed March 20, 2016, http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/702078-vladimir-putin.

[108] Alexei Druzhinin, "Putin's Macho Image," *Reuters,* December 5, 2011, accessed March 20, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/news/picture/putins-macho-image?articleId=USRTR2UVJN.

[109] "Shirtless Putin Doin' Things," Tumblr, 2013, accessed March 20, 2016, http://shirtlessputindointhings.tumblr.com/.

[110] K. Karavaev, "Hearts of Russia: Drug Putina," Hearts of Russia, accessed March 20, 2016, http://www.heartsofrussia.ru/catalog/druzey-ne-brosayu/drug-putina/.

[111] "V SSHA prokhozhim razdavali futbolki IA drug Putina 27 06 15 Novosti sevodnya," YouTube video, 1:16, from a News Channel 5 broadcast, posted by "BabkinKanal," September 16, 2015, accessed March 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cszXf7EWztI.

[112] "O dvizhenii," *Natsional'no osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie*, accessed March 20, 2016, http://www.rusnod.ru/index/o-dvizhenii/.

Galina Zuikova posted, showing herself, a friend, and random other sets of millennials along with one older woman holding a sign with the hashtag "Ia drug Putina."[113] The use of the hashtag shows the ability of the Putin cult to connect millennial interest in all things quirky with Twitter campaigns for serious political support. Hearts of Russia, which produced the t-shirt, describes itself as a "young, fast growing company, patriotic clothes and accessories market leader" with a store in GUM, the famous shopping mall on Red Square, close to the heart of Putin's government.[114] The humorous and therefore seemingly unthreatening nature of the artworks that carry the message of the Putin cult, and the ability for these messages to move beyond the physical world and into the cyber-world, give the Putin cult the power to spread among digital natives.

The influence of Internet/meme culture on millennials allows them to engage with the cult differently than any other generation, and so it is important to examine the way that Internet/meme culture impacts the Putin cult. Although millennials are not the only generation of society to use the Internet, this culture includes, but is not limited to, widely understood meaningful contextual images like gifs and memes which are uniquely millennial. The ability to be both serious and playful is an important characteristic of Internet/meme culture.[115] It uses irony to express deeper ideas and beliefs of the meme creator.[116] The widespread nature of memes indicates collective thought, as the millennials who distribute these images to communicate with other millennials use memes to indicate some understood message that fits within the context of their conversation. Internet/meme culture is an essential part of millennial involvement with the Putin cult because it allows youth of any background to engage in the cult. Memes are a form of participatory digital culture, which has low barriers for engagement and the ability to share one's ideas and creations.[117] Few millennials have the resources to create a music video like "My Putin" and even fewer still could create one as elaborate as "Best Friend." But the accessibility of Internet creations allows for greater millennial involvement.

Why do millennials post pictures of Putin riding crackers and bears and buy t-shirts with the hashtag "I am a friend of Putin"? Simply put, because Internet/meme culture is all about humor, and Putin's image can be made funny. The uniting factor between memes is that they use humor to convey serious messages.[118] But as always, nothing in the Putin cult is entirely fan driven. Putin's ridiculous photos doing manly things are no doubt calculated precisely to be absolutely ridiculous. Keeping the cult tongue-in-cheek is not only highly appealing to millennials, whose memes of Putin carry an underlying message about his strength and machismo, but also keeps the cult and Putin from seeming dangerous and authoritarian. Just like the Russian physical world, Putin reigns over Russia's Internet domain and regulates what memes are and are not acceptable for millennials to spread. In April 2015 Russia's media agency Roskomnadzor, which acts as an Internet censor, announced that publishing a meme that "depicts a public figure in a way that has nothing to do with his 'personality'" is illegal, clarifying and reminding Internet users of an existing policy.[119] Any meme that might

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[113] "Aktsii: #Ia Drug Putina," *Natsional'no osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie*, accessed March 20, 2016, http://rusnod.ru/aktsii-nod/2015/10/30/aktsii-nod_6418.html.
[114] "Hearts of Russia (GUM)," *Moscow Pass*.
[115] Jonathan Zittrain, "Reflections on Internet Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 392.
[116] Ibid., 393.
[117] Bradley Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, "Memes as Genre: a Structurational Analysis of the Memescape," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 11 (2015): 1891.
[118] Zittrain, "Reflections on Internet Culture," 393.
[119] Caitlin Dewey, "Russia Just Made a Ton of Internet Memes Illegal," *Washington Post,* April 10, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/04/10/russiajust-made-a-ton-of-internet-memes-illegal/.

violate the masculine, strong image that Putin has carefully crafted for himself is illegal. Internet-restriction bills have increased dramatically over the past two years, and the newness of the legislation means that no official reports exist detailing the actual enforcement and efficacy of this legislation.[120] The legislation passed, however, does give Russian law enforcement agencies the ability to intercept data and block it using various digital instruments including Roskomnadzor queries and SORM interception.[121] Although it is unclear how much the government will enforce these new policies, the tools are certainly in place for the Kremlin to do so. Future research will need to examine the efficacy of the new censorship tools. This allows his regime to assert dominance over the Putin-meme phenomenon and crushes all doubt that the Putin cult is ultimately a government-run operation with which millennials can engage, but only on Putin's terms.

Russia is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation organization, an intergovernmental organization whose members are China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan that supports intelligence sharing and military and counterterrorism cooperation.[122] Under the general topic of cybersecurity, the organization includes information security, advocating for national sovereignty, and non-interference in cyberspace.[123] This includes the prevention of "information and communications technologies which intend to undermine the political, economic and public safety and stability of the Member States, as well as the universal moral foundations of social life."[124] The organization affirms member states' right to have control of the information that flows through their countries' Internet.[125] Millennial engagement with the Putin cult from within Russia is not entirely fan driven; Putin's regime may have the ability, at least to some extent, to block images that do not uphold the image that gives Putin strength. These images can be made illegal under the guise that they violate laws of information security—laws with which none can interfere given Putin's agreements with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to disallow free speech in the Internet in favor of more authoritarian control. On the other hand, the questionable efficacy of Internet censorship enforcement means that images can and do slip through the cracks, which distinguishes the Putin cult from the strongly controlled cults in the past. While Stalin and Lenin's governments could closely control the physical images and force them to be in favor of their cults, the Putin cult's existence in the digital era leaves territory over which Putin does not have complete power. This gives millennials a bit more freedom in their engagement with the Putin cult.

It is also important to recognize Putin's memes as reaching beyond the realm of generic millennial memes, like Kermit drinking tea, and engaging with the Putin cult. Putin's memes are absolutely part of the Putin cult and serves to boost Putin's power.

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[120] Alexandra Kulikova, "What is Really Going on with Russia's New Internet Laws," *Open Democracy,* October 29, 2014, accessed April 22, 2016, https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/alexandra-kulikova/what-is-really-going-on-with-russia's-new-internet-laws.

[121] Roskomnadzor, the Russian Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications, oversees communicative cyber issues, and SORM, the System for Operative Investigative Activities, is the technical monitoring system. Ibid.

[122] Eleanor Albert, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Council on Foreign Relations,* October 14, 2015, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/shanghai-cooperation-organization.

[123] "Information Security Discussed at the Dushanbe Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence*, October 27, 2014, https://ccdcoe.org/information-security-discussed-dushanbe-summit-shanghai-cooperation-organisation.html.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

Some political culture in the United States seems similar to the Internet presence of Putin. The example of "Obama Girl," was mentioned previously. Other examples include Hillary Clinton nutcrackers, which have their own website, and the appearance of presidential candidates on Saturday Night Live, often poking a bit of fun at themselves in exchange for a greater television coverage and memorable outreach, connecting to groups who respond positively to humor but negatively to debates and campaign speeches. [126] This mixing of humor and politics may seem superficially similar to some Putin cult aspects, especially where Internet/meme culture is involved. There are some differences between these American examples and the Putin cult, though: an important one is the lack of any real political control by these candidates over the humorous depictions of themselves that spawn from their engagement with the Internet/meme culture and humor. Putin cannot control all cult phenomena, including everything that appears on the Internet, which is what makes fan engagement with the cult possible. He could, however, disallow a non-flattering image from being posted on a state-run media agency or censor it, which does not mean eliminating it from the Internet, but at least means decreasing its Internet dissemination. The writers of Saturday Night Live can at any moment turn around and write a less-than-supportive sketch about the presidential candidates, and a Hillary Clinton nutcracker could be seen in either a positive or negative context. Putin does not have control over millennial involvement, but does influence it. Through funding and setting up camps and organizations through which millennials can express their activist culture, or by presenting meme-ready material through tongue-in-cheek photo shoots and then crushing any unfavorable meme depictions using harsh Internet control laws, Putin encourages the positive portrayal of the Putin cult.

As memes flood the Internet that depict Putin in a humorous, yet positive light, the Kremlin does nothing to outlaw the memes. Instead, it promotes this image by releasing more pictures and stories with over-the-top themes like Putin riding a horse shirtless through the countryside or Putin with a tranquilizer gun shooting a tiger that was about to attack the photographers. These photos are the Putin regime's response to the millennial cult engagement online. Then when millennials step too far and post a "Sad Putin" meme with a caption, "U Mad?" obviously making fun of Putin in a way that insults his masculinity and questions his strength, the government can make it illegal and possibly remove it.[127] Although it may pop up in other places on the web, given that Internet censorship is quite difficult to enforce, the censorship capabilities the Kremlin has could help to at least slow the spread of the image and discourage a sudden popularization of the image among millennials. The Putin cult uses its sense of humor to mask the government's involvement. This is important to recognize so that one does not mistake the humorous engagement of Internet/meme culture within the Putin cult for the light-hearted, free-Internet-speech invoking humor of American political culture.

Perhaps an even better example for comparison, and one that is timelier, is the meme presence of Senator Bernie Sanders, who ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016. Over 400,000 people joined the Facebook group "Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash," where they posted "dank" (i.e. high quality) memes about Sanders, with the only instructions being, "Post dank Bernie Sanders memes… Smash that 'SHARE' button. No permission required."[128] They shared support for Sanders through their meme language. Although not much meme opposition exists for this, Sanders's campaign did not have any control whatsoever over the memes. Putin may not be able to control the Internet as much as he might like, but his government does have the power to crack down on negative images in a way that Sanders does not.[129] Sometimes the meme-

[126] The Hillary Nutcracker, accessed March 21, 2016, http://hillarynutcracker.com/.
[127] Dewey, "Russia Just Made a Ton of Memes Illegal."
[128] "Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash," Facebook, accessed March 21, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/groups/berniesandersmemes/.
[129] Dewey, "Russia Just Made a Ton of Memes Illegal."

posters clashed with Sanders's campaign, particularly when the memes no longer supported Sanders's political ambitions and instead focused on him as a purely comic figure.[130] The "Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash" Facebook group is less interested in Sanders's politics and more interested in promoting him as a humorous icon because he is "cool."[131]

In the 2012 US presidential election cycle, Obama had the "memevantage," while in the 2016 election Sanders held the most meme support, which did seem to translate into actual voter support, though not necessarily because those voters thought his platform itself was great.[132] Millennials can become more politically engaged through memes, regardless of the level of political thought behind their support. Some millennials who do not normally pay attention to politics decided to look into Sanders's actual political platform after seeing memes about him across the Internet.[133] Memes in the non-cult setting also have the ability to spark political engagement, but the meme process in these cases is uncontrolled, more organic, and sometimes has the opposite effect when millennials just continue to share and create memes as humorous art rather than to spread the political message. Putin's online publishing of ridiculous, meme-ready photos; Internet crackdowns; and allowance of obvious political projects that use a bit of humor in order to widen their audience and diminish their perceived threat, like the #iadrugPutina campaign, show that Russian millennial engagement with memes in a closed Internet society is an entirely different animal than the meme culture celebrity of political figures like Obama and Sanders.

Conclusion

The Putin cult engages with Internet/meme culture and activist culture, broadening its outreach to Russian millennials. It shares many similarities with the Lenin and Stalin cults in the Soviet era, but the advent of the Internet, the breakdown of the Soviet Union, and the resulting increase in Western involvement and influence in Russia gave the Putin cult a different character. The Kremlin releases photos that lend themselves to humorous meme usage by millennials and funds youth organizations with Russian Nationalist rhetoric. The photographs are part of an effort to create the illusion that Putin's popularity in the meme world is an organic stardom created entirely by millennials. Likewise, the Kremlin seeks to give the impression that pro-Putin organizations are actually grassroots movements that have chosen Putin as their idol, not because they must, but because he seems to espouse the pro-Russia ideals that they support. In reality, these organizations are Kremlin-funded and they support Vladimir Putin not because he happens to want the best for Russia, but because the Putin regime has organized the movement around him.

Millennial engagement with the Putin cult is different from the engagement of other generations because of millennial activist spirit and Internet/meme culture. The Westernizing influences and involvement of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union created in the millennial generation a greater propensity for Western-style activism. Being the first generation to grow up using the Internet—to be digital natives—gives millennials a unique method and culture of communication. Internet/meme culture is part of millennial linguistic-cultural identity in a way that no other Internet-using generation can claim.

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[130] Caitlin Dewey, "How Bernie Sanders Became the Lord of 'Dank Memes,'" *Washington Post,* February 23, 2016, accessed April 22, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/theintersect/wp/2016/02/23/how-bernie-sanders-became-the-lord-of-dank-memes/.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

The Putin cult makes use of the millennial Internet/meme culture, spreading its message of deification of Putin to millennials through the Kremlin's photographs and allowance/support of music videos and Twitter and paraphernalia campaigns that paint the Russian President in a positive light. It also limits millennial Internet/meme culture by using strict Internet censorship laws to try to disallow Internet meme conversation with a negative view of Putin from entering the Russian millennial discourse. The use of humor to make the Kremlin's involvement in Internet/meme culture seem somewhat tongue-in-cheek helps to spread the idea that the cult is unthreatening and Putin is not authoritarian. In reality, however, the Putin cult is a powerful cult of personality with a strong central leader, much like those personality cults in the Soviet past.

The Kremlin faced huge protests in Moscow from 2011 to 2013 as Russians of different political leanings voiced their dissatisfaction with Putin's regime.[134] Western media quickly dubbed this the "Snow Revolution," as it began in the snowy streets in December 2011, and proclaimed that "Russia woke up."[135] Mark Beissinger, a scholar at Princeton, suggested that this protest movement was part of a larger trend of an increase in civil activism and volunteer work both in the real and virtual world.[136] This would suggest that millennials might be swayed against Putin using the same mediums—activism culture and Internet/meme culture—that entice them to engage with the cult. Following the Crimean annexation, however, Putin's approval rating suddenly rose, and then skyrocketed further in October, 2015 to a record 88.9 percent after Russia began bombing Syria.[137] One might conclude that as much as millennials and Russia as a whole may seem to be taking on activism and Internet cultures like that in the West, Putin's cult of personality is immune to the threat. The argument throughout this paper shows that the Putin cult involves the culture of activism and Internet/meme culture of millennials so that these elements actually strengthen, rather than hurt Putin's power over his people.

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[134] Julie Ioffe, "Snow Revolution," *The New Yorker,* December 11, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/snow-revolution.
[135] "Russia's Protests Researched by US Scholars," *Institute of Modern Russia,* February 13, 2013, http://imrussia.org/en/society/389-russias-protests-researched-by-us-scholars.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Scott Rose, "Putin's Approval Rating Rises to 88% in October, Levada Says," *Bloomberg,* October 28, 2015, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-28/putin-s-approval-rating-rises-to-88-in-october-levada-says.

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