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As you may have noticed since November of 2016, presidents are the ones who spawn the moral climate in their countries. They are the senior legitimizers of what's allowed to say and what's not. They are the ones to draw ethical boundaries. Citizens of any given nation may be conservative, and intolerant, and prone to conspiracy, but a head of a nation is the one who normalizes this and sets a fashion for intolerance, barbarism, and misogyny which would otherwise be shamefully kept to peoples' private minds.

Trump and Putin are both very vivid examples of presidents who rule the roost and make sexism in their countries possible even in the age of political correctness.

Donald Trump's actions, phrases, and statements about women are widely known and it's already apparent how they influence the US current policies (the confirmation of Bob Kavanaugh at the Supreme Court is striking evidence). Putin's discourse is discussed much less since Russian independent media is almost non-existent. That's why I would like to share a few examples.

Putin is a guy who enjoys throwing some prison/army/street jargon into his official speeches. It makes him more likable, more strong. He talks like a ringleader. A woman in this masculine hierarchy plays a weaker part, she's not an equal player. She needs to be taught "to stew cabbage soup" (one of Putin's pearls of "wisdom"). Oh, she's a trophy, a sexual object. Just hear Putin's reaction to sexual harassment accusations of Israel's ex-president Moshe Katzav: "He turned out to be such a mighty fellow! He raped ten women! I never expected this from him! He surprised us all! We all envy him!"

Many people remember the Russian president's interview on French TV in June 2014. Hillary Clinton condemned the annexation of Crimea and compared him to Hitler back then. Putin's response was straightforwardly condescending and derogative: "You know, it's better not to argue with women, not to engage or wrangle with them. When people trespass certain boundaries of decency it tells more about their weakness, not their strength. But for a woman weakness isn't the worst quality."

In his interview to Oliver Stone, Putin bragged that he works without days-off because: "I'm not a woman. I don't have bad days. I don't want to insult anybody. This is the nature of things. There exist certain natural cycles..." Everything that's related to cycles or genitalia becomes one of Putin's favorite topics. Like Trump, he likes to talk about penises. "If a grandma had the external sex organs like a grandpa she would have been a grandpa, not a grandma" - he said in Milan in 2014, answering a question about the fall of the rouble. And when a foreign journalist asked him about suppression of freedom in Chechnya in 2002, he invited him to Moscow for a circumcision and added: "I will recommend having the operation done in such a way that you'll have nothing to grow up there anymore."

We all know that such macho rhetoric usually coincides with homophobia. While Trump cuts off LGBT-friendly policies, Putin frankly mocks sexual minorities. In 2013, at the Valday Conference, he said the following about Italian ex-leader Berlusconi: "They are trying him because he shacks up with women. But if he was a homosexual they wouldn't have touched him."

Erotic oddities and deviations – that is also something that our leaders have in common. Trump is known for objectifying his own daughters and Putin does not stop himself from weirdly caressing random children he meets. Since our president famously bared a little boy's belly and kissed it on camera, the media tracks the happy child from time to time. "Honestly, I just wanted to squeeze him like a kitten" – Putin confessed. When he visited a school in Kurgan, he entered a class full of children and immediately

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drew a strange picture in which most people recognized a female sex organ with a phallus. “A cat. Back view” – he said.

And, not to go on endlessly, I’ll give you one last example: Putin’s 2012 election campaign move, called “Putin paws womenvoters.” It’s a 20-minute video on the Youtube where a young supporter of Putin’s is groping the breasts of girls and women in Moscow streets – around a thousand women in all. After that, this groper shakes hands with Putin as if passing him the tactile information he gathered.

I don’t have time and space to dwell on how women played a puppet role in the parody of our election and what kind of women act in Russian politics. I’ll just mention that luckily these developments didn’t remain without any response from women. The #MeToo movement in the US sparked similar flashmobs on Russian social media pages. Posts with a hashtag #Imnotafraidtosay about experiences of being sexually harassed or raped went viral as well as posts with a hashtag #violenceinchildbirth in which women imparted dreadful stories about punitive obstetrics. Yes, staying at a maternity hospital still is one of the most traumatic experiences for Russian women. This is the place where they are exposed to humiliation, bullying, gaslighting, blackmailing, slapping in the face, nonconsensual vaginal cutting etc. But this topic is usually tabooed by society because women “have to bear it,” and the only goal is to keep a mother and child alive—the rest is not important.

Presidents do set the mood. But we know from physics that materials tend to resist the outer pressure. And though our presidents’ rhetoric unleashes the aggression and explicit sexism in society, it also organizes those who feel vulnerable. And sometimes, dominating patriarchal values even help to push some issues through. When the Russian government implanted an agent into a circle of teenagers who used to hang out at Macdonald’s and share their oppositional political views, when this agent rented a room for them, offered to create an organization for them, invented its name (“A New Greatness”), and wrote them a charter—in a nutshell when he did everything to get the teenagers jailed—everyone including two underaged schoolgirls who got seriously sick in prison—then women became the main force to save at least the girls. They organized a so-called Mothers’ March in Moscow in August, they came on streets carrying soft toys, and the police couldn’t use any force against them (due to the patriarchal perception that women are weak and negligible, and that mothers are sacred). As a result, the incarcerated girls have been relocated to house arrest, which is a miracle.

Thus, incursion on women’s rights creates a resistance, and the primitive backwardness of our leaders gives birth to progressive countermeasures on the Internet and beyond—which is to say, I really wanted to finish on a positive note.

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