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Evaluation of the MA Thesis *The Men's Movement in Post-Soviet Russia* by Lyudmila Sharko

In this thesis Lyudmila Sharko examines the men's movement that has emerged on online platforms in post-Soviet Russia over the past 20 years. The thesis is informed by Raewyn Connell's conceptions of masculinity that attend to the dynamic practices, configurations, and struggles of different masculinity projects and their buttressing by gendered institutions and gender regimes. Methodologically the study employs digital ethnography and content analysis of activists' blog posts, online videos, and key texts. Given that these 'masculinist' platforms thus far have not become the subject of academic inquiry, a first analytical chapter maps their development, including the limited dissemination of masculinist ideas into mainstream media, and contextualises the platforms' emergence with reference to Russia's postsocialist social and economic transformation. A second chapter examines the ostensibly more 'liberal' or progressive break-off group called the Egalitarian Men's Movement (EMM) by analysing the reformulation of actual and desired gender relations and policy claims through the postings of nine influential activists.

A key merit of the thesis is that it lays the groundwork for addressing this overlooked phenomenon. This will allow further differentiations as well as comparisons with other formations of Russian masculinity, whether alternative, queer or 'traditional' as in the current promotion of a hierarchical binary gender order 'by authorities and Orthodox church' (73). In line with Connell's focus on struggle, Sharko attunes to conflicts and contradictions in the activists' choreographed performances and views that are examined in the final section of chapter 4 ('Tensions and Contradictions'). And yet, I find that in her quest not to be dismissive or biased towards the activists, Sharko sometimes appear to take the utterances of the EMM activists at face value. For example, she does not comment much on the irony that 'feminism and its consequences – man hating' (44), so often deemed a foreign ideological import from the West, are now located *within* and as the Russian state as an (originary) communist legacy; that the men take up the metaphor of being a doormat famously attributed to British writer Rebecca West in the early 20th century ('People call me a feminist whenever



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I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat'), and more significantly that the activists' critique of 'real men' as 'losers' and 'weaklings' (60) leaves intact their pervasive disdain for vulnerability and interdependence, that are arguably qualities that would ground any politics of gender equality (a term itself under-defined in the thesis).

In view of this I would like to invite the Ljudmila to briefly clarify and expand on the following three issues.

First, genealogy. Sharko explains the emergence of the Russian Men's Movement and its misogyny chiefly by reference to how men from educated middle class families were affected by socio-economic and status losses. This would suggest that Russian women as a group fared better in the transformation than men did. What is the evidence and what are additional or complementary explanatory factors for the emergence of RMM and of EMM in 2018?

Second, EMM's promise and the feminist state. What more specifically are the 'social programs' (68) and legal changes - including the curtailing of alimony for dependent children - that EMM activists advocate and how would they benefit women and gender equality? Is there evidence of unacknowledged homosociality that is now attributed to other platforms ('the pack of gay men' (65))?

Third, methodology. What are the challenges and lessons learned in doing digital ethnography of a volatile environment where content might unexpectedly disappear or be censored? Is there anything that the visual and aesthetic layout of platforms and videos add to the content analysed?

Overall, the thesis is competently written and informative, I recommend the grade 1-2

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Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, Ph.D., supervisor