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Appraisal of MA Thesis

**The Men's Movement in Post-Soviet Russia**

by

**Lyudmila Sharko**

Lyudmila Sharko's thesis is an exciting work – it promises to compose a genealogy of the men's movements and to trace the transformation of their agenda and thus to potentially chart a new emerging mode(s) of doing masculinity (7). In this sense, her work is opening only scarcely research section of the post-socialist history of Russia and former SU. The research grows out of an incredible investment of the author – as she states, she has been monitoring and following the online presence of Russia's Men's Movement (and later its off-shoot EMM) for full 5 years, and has studied thousands of blogs, videos and posts. I am grateful for the opportunity to engage with the thesis and learn from it. I have expanded my knowledge on the gender politics in the postsocialist Russia/EE more broadly. The thesis follows two larger-scale questions: a/ What are the reasons for the emergence of RMM? And while this second question focuses mostly on the 'progressive' off-shoot of RMM, it asks if and to what an extent, the EMM manages to offer an alternative versions of masculinity. Methodologically, the author chooses unconventional way: after she was met with difficulties in finding respondents (and the pandemic), she creatively decided to work with "remote/online ethnography" (24). It is rarely the case with MA theses, but Lyudmila Sharko managed to write really engaging methodological section that considers methodological choices in their complexity and in the mutual relationship between theory, practice and ethics (2.3.1.). She also takes care to present the method of remote ethnography, explain its strong and weak points. Similarly comprehensive, careful and well-thought-out is her discussion of her own positionality vis-à-vis critical study of masculinities. I hope that the above praise attests to my appreciation of Ms Sharko's work, acumen and intellectual investments. For the defence, I have several questions, commentaries that I list below.

- Given the grounding of the thesis and methodological approach in the constructivist paradigm (in the most general sense), I have to say that I was a little thrown-off by the question 'whether a woman can study masculinity'. Later, Ms. Sharko explains that she includes the questions since they have been asked by other scholars and colleagues (21, 22). Thence, I understand the discussion of similar questions as a sincere engagement with and respect to those who have raised these questions. But

later on, Ms. Sharko makes a point about masculinities being mostly studies by men (and implicitly points out that this might be more ‘natural’ analytical connection)? Moreover, she – in my mind very problematically points to the biological sex of a prominent trans\* scholar. I find this treatment of biology in direct conflict with the declared paradigmatic grounding of the work and its perspective.

- I wonder to what an extent can the Q1 be actually answered by the chosen method and data. Can we really, when analysing only (or even predominantly) the auto-sources of the RMM’s representatives arrive at knowledge about the contexts from which the movement rose? What we learn are the reasons that these men give and their subjective explanations of why they need to engage in this political “fight”. Similarly, I find the chapter 3.3. heading – the socio-economic factors—similarly unfitting. The heading would suggest that the author engages with larger socio-economic contexts themselves, for which she would need to engage with a considerable amount of secondary literature and other sources. These issues might be partly language-based, but might also indicate methodological questions.
- Keeping within the realm of methodology, as much as I was excited about the idea of remote ethnography, I am not sure if this is really case here, when reading the analytical part. One of the analytical advantages of ethnography—to me—lies in the fact that it allows the researcher not to rely purely on what is being said/written/gestured to, but to actually link or juxtapose the complexity and contradictions of human behaviours, statements, embodied practices and also all that is not being said. I would therefore like to ask the author to make the point during the defence as to where she sees her method to go beyond a textual analysis, or a discourse analysis.
- Lastly, it is true that not much has been written on the subject of masculinities in Russia, but there are few important works that I would recommend the author to include (A. Kayaitos has written about the crisis of masculinities in relation to the austerity of the early 1990s, Valerie Sperling’s works analyses how gender discourses help to establish political legitimacy etc.) What I am getting at here is that the analysis would grow in depth and readability (perhaps would even land on different structuring) if it engaged with available literature and theorisation of gender in Russia.

I want to conclude by underscoring that Ms Sharko has presented a well-researched and well-written thesis that meets all standards for original academic work and proves her academic capabilities.

I therefore recommend the thesis for defence and suggest the preliminary evaluation of “very good” allowing space for “excellent” provided the questions raised above and by the other reviewers are responded to.

In Prague, September 18, 2022

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of stylized, cursive letters that appear to be 'K. Kolářová'.

Kolářová Kateřina