

# Let's Learn Judo with Putin. Sport, Power and Masculinity in 21st-Century Russia

by Leo Goretti and Sofia Mariconti

## ABSTRACT

Dedication to sport and physical prowess have been key elements in the construction of Vladimir Putin's image since his rise to the Presidency of Russia. Domestically, the Kremlin has promoted a public representation of the President as a strong, energetic, decisive leader who is 'fit for the job'. Constant emphasis has been placed on how sports – especially judo and those harking back to the Soviet past, such as sambo – forged the manly qualities of Putin, turning him into the living paradigm of Russian hegemonic masculinity. At the international level, Putin's vigorous and masculine leadership has been turned into a proxy for Russia's restored status: in the early 2000s, to mark a neat break from the 'decadence' of the 1990s; subsequently, to suggest the return of Russia to its great-power status. Hostility against human – especially LGBT – rights in sport has become central to this discourse, not only because they are suggestive of alleged Western decadence, but also because they threaten the gender norms and public image on which Putin's leadership has been built.

*Russia | Authoritarianism | Sport*

keywords

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by Leo Goretti and Sofia Mariconti\*

"Decisive, manly, firm, strong-willed, strong, calm, brave, clear-cut, self-confident, a real man": these are President Vladimir Putin's qualities that Russians like the most, according to a Levada Center poll carried out in October 2017. His "physical appearance, [the fact that he is] good-looking, athletic, doesn't drink, leads a healthy life" were also praised.<sup>1</sup> This widespread perception is the result of the depiction of Putin as a strong, high-performing, fit and thus 'manly' leader that the Kremlin has painstakingly crafted over the past twenty years. Since Putin's rise to the Presidency of the Russian Federation, state media have published an unending series of interviews, articles, photo-ops, books and even DVDs extolling the president's physical prowess and sports dedication – implicitly and explicitly underlining their positive implications for his leadership.<sup>2</sup>

The discourse about sport and masculinity built on, and at the behest of, the Russian president is part of a broader instrumentalisation of sports for political purposes in 21st-century Russia. It carries normative meanings about leadership, power and gender that have significant implications both domestically and internationally. Having the glorious past of Soviet sporting success as a constant reference point, this discourse is permeated by an obsession with sealing the restoration of Russia's great-power status. The latter comes to be personified in Putin's strong and hypermasculine leadership, which is pitted against the 'flaccid' bodies of

<sup>1</sup> This first group of features was mentioned by the largest group (19 per cent) of respondents to the survey, the second by another 6 per cent. See Levada-Center, *Vladimir Putin's Work*, 11 December 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=17265>.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Associated Press, "Putin Gone Wild: Russia Abuzz over Pics of Shirtless Leader", in *CBC News*, 23 August 2007, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/putin-gone-wild-russia-abuzz-over-pics-of-shirtless-leader-1.639179>; Jo Adentuji, "Vladimir Putin Releases Judo Instruction DVD", in *The Guardian*, 7 October 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/2xk29>.

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1990s Russian and contemporary Western leaders,<sup>3</sup> leveraging and reproducing traditional gender norms in Russian society.

## 1. Unpacking the debate

Since the early years of his presidency, Putin's 'strongman' image has attracted attention. The emergence of a real "mania" around him, the result not only of the Kremlin's propaganda 'from above', but also of its multifaceted appropriation and reinterpretation 'from below', has been noticed by scholars.<sup>4</sup> Photo-ops have especially contributed to the construction of Putin's public image as a strong, athletic leader, emphasising his exuberant physicality and conveying a militarised, nationalistic and sexualised type of masculinity.<sup>5</sup> Putin's "machismo" has to be read as part of a broader political discourse in Russia that rests on patriarchal norms and hierarchies. Within this discourse, the adherence to (or deviance from) specific normative gender roles is an important source of political legitimation (or delegitimation). Accordingly, Putin's macho posture can be seen as the embodiment of a hegemonic model of masculinity based on heteronormativity that ultimately underpins and buttresses his political authority.<sup>6</sup> The construction of Putin's hypermasculine leadership is relational: the president's (self-) representation as a strong and self-confident leader is often set against the "flabby" and "weak" leadership of Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s. More broadly, Putin's macho image is also a response to widespread Russian anxieties about an alleged "crisis of masculinity" linked to the rise of alcoholism, idleness and domestic violence in the late to post-Soviet era.<sup>7</sup> In the discourse about Putin's persona, power, gender and nationalism are intimately intertwined: his physical, energetic and macho leadership epitomises the re-masculinisation of the country<sup>8</sup> – and, ultimately, the restoration of Russia as a great power.

Nostalgia for the glory of Soviet times and the ambition to re-establish Russia's great-power status in the international system are central tropes also in the

<sup>3</sup> "Putin: Western Leaders Would Look 'Disgusting' Topless", in *AP News*, 30 June 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/6f900bb1c186cb69974b7d04f2e76c83>.

<sup>4</sup> Julie A. Cassiday and Emily D. Johnson, "Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality", in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 88, No. 4 (October 2010), p. 681-707.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Foxall, "Photographing Vladimir Putin: Masculinity, Nationalism and Visuality in Russian Political Culture", in *Geopolitics*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2013), p. 132-156, DOI 10.1080/14650045.2012.713245.

<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, in parallel, many opponents of the President have adopted a homonegative language where criticism of Putin overlaps with that of his masculinity and heterosexuality. See Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin. Political Legitimacy in Russia*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2015, esp. p. 1-6.

<sup>7</sup> Amy A. Randall, "Soviet and Russian Masculinities: Rethinking Soviet Fatherhood after Stalin and Renewing Virility in the Russian Nation under Putin", in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (December 2020), p. 859-898, DOI 10.1086/711382.

<sup>8</sup> Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, "The Remasculinization of Russia? Gender, Nationalism, and the Legitimation of Power Under Vladimir Putin", in *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (2014), p. 23-35, DOI 10.2753/PPC1075-8216610202.

Kremlin's broader sports discourse.<sup>9</sup> The hallmarks of Putin's sports policy have been, first, the constant pursuit of sporting success at the international level, to be achieved by all possible means (as demonstrated by the numerous scandals involving Russian athletes' use of doping);<sup>10</sup> second, the promotion of a series of megaevents in Russia, especially (but not limited to) the 2014 Winter Olympics of Sochi and the 2018 men's football World Cup, which have been exploited not only to enhance the country's soft power, but also as a means for strengthening domestic consensus as well as redistributing resources among the regime's allies.<sup>11</sup>

Less attention has been devoted to the unique function of sport (and the discourse about it) in the construction of an authoritarian masculine leadership in Putin's Russia.<sup>12</sup> Even among scholars, there rather seems to be a tendency to somewhat reiterate the Kremlin's narratives, without dissecting the hidden and explicit messages the Russian regime is trying to convey through them. A case in point is the constant repetition of the official story about the origins of Putin's passion for judo – the president's favourite sport and the subject of a few books and a DVD (known as *Учимся дзюдо с Владимиром Путиным*, *Let's Learn Judo with Vladimir Putin*) co-authored by Putin himself.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, the reference point is the book interview *First Person*, published in 2000 a few months before Putin's first electoral victory in an effort to make him better known (and assuage concerns) among the Russian and international audiences. As has been noted, everything that is in the book was written for political purposes.<sup>14</sup> In the interview, Putin describes his childhood in Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad) as a turbulent period marred by a propensity to behave as a "hooligan". In this troubled period of his youth, martial arts (sambo first, and then judo), which Putin started to practice at the age of 10-11, supposedly played a decisive role: "If I hadn't gotten involved in sports, I'm not sure how my life would have turned out", Putin states in the book. The practice of judo and the teachings of his trainer Anatoly Semyonovich Rakhlin allowed the future president to internalise that ambition and those dispositions on which he allegedly built his political career and leadership.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Richard Arnold, "Sport and Official Nationalism in Modern Russia", in *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2018), p. 133, DOI 10.1080/10758216.2018.1425093.

<sup>10</sup> See especially the statement delivered by Jim Walden, Attorney for Dr. Grigory Rodchenkov, quoted in US Congress, *The State of Play: Globalized Corruption, State-Run Doping, and International Sport*, Hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 25 July 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/event/115th-congress/joint-event/LC60142/text?s=1&r=4>.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Robert W. Ortung and Sufian N. Zhemukov, *Putin's Olympics. The Sochi Games and the Evolution of Twenty-First Century Russia*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017; Richard Arnold (ed.), *Russia and the 2018 FIFA World Cup*, London/New York, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> One of the few exceptions is: Natalie Koch, "Athletic Autocrats: Understanding Images of Authoritarian Leaders as Sportsmen", in Natalie Koch (ed.), *Critical Geographies of Sport. Space, Power and Sport in Global Perspective*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 91-107.

<sup>13</sup> On the DVD see Jo Adentuji, "Vladimir Putin Releases Judo Instruction DVD", cit. The full video (in Russian) is available at: <https://youtu.be/f62myM2iPjE>.

<sup>14</sup> See Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin. Operative in the Kremlin*, 2nd ed., Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Putin et al., *First Person. An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President*, New



Although Putin's vaunted skills as a judoka have been questioned<sup>16</sup> and despite some minor contradictions in the anecdotal evidence,<sup>17</sup> the historical accuracy of the narrative about Putin's fondness for judo and sports more generally is not the point here. This narrative is an integral part of Putin's public self-representation that has been put forward since the beginning of his presidency. This self-representation, which is highly gendered and in which a nationalistic view of sports that goes back to the Soviet era plays a foundational role, is crafted to shape the public perception of Putin's leadership and to serve as a normative model for the population. A close examination of its principal tropes can thus contribute to an understanding of the type of leadership the Kremlin has been promoting through sport, as well as the underlying gender norms on which it is based and which it contributes to reinforcing.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Constructing a male leader through sport

A stark illustration of how important sports are in Putin's public image, is the page on the Kremlin's official website that is specifically devoted to the sports interests (and accomplishments) of the Russian leader. What Putin enjoys the most about sport, the website explains, is "novelty" and "the desire to promote an active lifestyle". The numerous photographs of the president during "an ice-hockey training session", while taking part in a "practice for Russian wrestlers and martial artists" or skiing "during a short holiday [...] in the Irkutsk Region" visually support this narrative.<sup>19</sup>

The benefits of sport for Putin's leadership are constantly highlighted. Martial arts, and especially judo, are given special attention since, according to the Kremlin's website, Putin "firmly believes that martial arts teach such knowledge, abilities and skills that every politician needs". In his view, judo "trains both your body and your

York, PublicAffairs, 2000, p. 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Hawkins, "Is Vladimir Putin a Judo Fraud?", in *The Washington Post*, 18 July 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/07/18/is-vladimir-putin-a-judo-fraud>.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the age at which Putin recalls having started practising judo varies in different sources: 11 according to the Kremlin's official website and the book interview *First Person*, 14 according to a 2001 interview: Robert Siegel, "Vladimir Putin: The NPR Interview", in *NPR News*, 15 November 2001, <https://legacy.npr.org/news/specials/putin/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> To this end, a qualitative analysis was conducted of different types of content – biographies, articles, interviews, minutes of official meetings; textual, video and audio sources – that have been published on the topic of sports and power in Russia, especially with reference to the President's persona, by the Kremlin on its official website and by the state-owned news agency TASS since Putin's rise to power in 1999. Analysis of English-language sources was complemented by that of Russian-language sources to look into similarities and differences in the discourses targeting international and national audiences, respectively.

<sup>19</sup> The section dedicated to Putin's sports interests on the official webpage of the President of the Russian Federation can be accessed at the following link: Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, *Interest*, <http://en.putin.kremlin.ru/interests/page-0>, last accessed 14 January 2023.

mind”, by “develop[ing] strength, reaction, endurance, teach[ing] self-control, the ability to feel the moment, to see the opponent’s strengths and weaknesses, to strive for the best results and constantly work on improving [your]self”.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, in his book interview from 2000, Putin describes judo as a “philosophy” based on “respect for your elders and your opponent”, in which “everything [...] has an instructive aspect”. The martial art, with its ethical universe and emphasis on self-control, is implicitly pitted against the more brutal boxing, which Putin remembers having briefly practised before sambo and judo, coming off with a broken nose. At the same time, Putin is keen to underline that judo is “not for weaklings”, “matches were a form of torture”, “training was hard”, and “people would break their arms or legs” and even die due to injuries.<sup>21</sup> In other words, in Putin’s account, judo is a highly ethical sport that develops character (notably, in his youth, he ruled out smoking and heavy drinking to be as fit as possible) but also necessitates physical prowess and conditioning. Thus, practising judo supposedly provided the future president – who reportedly was Leningrad Champion in 1976 and holds the title of Master in the discipline –<sup>22</sup> with those physical and moral qualities that made him a highly successful political leader. Notably, these qualities are also foundational to the type of masculinity that was hegemonic in Russia through the Soviet era: vigorous, disciplined, capable of self-control and able to successfully confront enemies (both internal and external to the ‘motherland’) by virtue of both strength and character.<sup>23</sup>

Putin’s favourite sports are presented not only as manly, but also as typically Russian. This is especially the case for sambo, a martial art that was originally developed for military training purposes in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, of which Putin was reportedly “multiple champion” in Leningrad in the 1970s.<sup>24</sup> Putin personally supported the campaign for the full recognition of sambo as an Olympic sport, which was eventually granted in 2021, and recently established a “Sambo day” to be celebrated annually on 16 November in Russia.<sup>25</sup> In his words, sambo – whose name is the Russian acronym of “self-defence without weapons”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Putin et al., *First Person*, cit., p. 19, 34.

<sup>22</sup> “The Biography of Russian President Vladimir Putin: A Story of True Leadership”, in TASS, 6 October 2017, <https://tass.com/society/969438>. Later in life, Putin was honorary President of the International Judo Federation from 2008 until his suspension due to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022: “International Judo Federation suspends Putin’s Status as Honorary President”, in TASS, 27 February 2022, <https://tass.com/sport/1412425>.

<sup>23</sup> Amy A. Randall, “Soviet and Russian Masculinities”, cit., p. 894-898.

<sup>24</sup> On sambo see R. M. Schneiderman, “Once-Secret Martial Art Rises in Ring’s Bright Lights”, in *The New York Times*, 19 July 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/19/sports/othersports/19fight.html>. On Putin’s sambo achievements see Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, *Interest*, cit.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Pavitt, “Six International Federations Granted Full Recognition at IOC Session in Tokyo”, in *Inside the Games*, 20 July 2021, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1110478>; Michael Houston, “Russian President Putin Declares Sambo Day Annual Celebration in November”, in *Inside the Games*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1131859>.

<sup>26</sup> “Putin Reiterates Russia’s Drive to Include Sambo Wrestling in Olympic Program”, in TASS, 23

– is a “a bold signature card of [Russian] national fitness culture”, a “national sport” that “incorporated the best achievements of the holds and takedowns from ethnic martial arts of the peoples of the Soviet Union”.<sup>27</sup> A nationalist and militarist agenda is explicit in the Kremlin’s effort to popularise sambo in the country. The President of the All-Russian Sambo Federation Sergei Eliseev, for example, describes sambo as a sport based on “discipline” and “national traditions” that helps “bring up strong and self-confident citizens” and therefore is “an element of the national security of Russia”.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, according to the Kremlin’s narrative, true sportsman Putin enjoys not only martial arts, but also non-combat sports such as ice hockey (which he reportedly began playing at the age of 58 through late-night practice sessions), skiing (a “dynamic” sport that requires “mastering a technique” and that Putin likes to practice on “Russian ski slopes”), horse-riding (the Kremlin informs us that “Putin feels confident in the saddle”), fishing and whitewater rafting.<sup>29</sup> Notably, there is no mention of football among his declared interests, despite the massive resources the Russian government put into the organisation of the 2018 World Cup.<sup>30</sup> Overall, the Russian president’s preferred sports are closely associated with the Russian – and Soviet – sports tradition, underlining once more his patriotism.

In the Kremlin’s discourse, the emphasis is not only on Putin’s love for sport, but also on his dedication. In 2018, in an interview with a Chinese media outlet, Putin stated that he spends “about two to two and a half hours” exercising every day.<sup>31</sup> A video of him working out in a gym along with then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev that was released by TASS in 2015 made headlines across the world.<sup>32</sup> Of late, in December 2022, after much speculation and rumours in foreign media about his health, the president reiterated that he continues to do sports in order “to be fit for work”.<sup>33</sup> In his own words, Putin’s fit body supposedly demonstrates to

January 2019, <https://tass.com/sport/1041404>.

<sup>27</sup> Russian Presidency, *Combat Sambo League Championship*, 22 February 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62847>.

<sup>28</sup> Russian Presidency, *Заседание Совета по развитию физической культуры и спорта [Meeting of Council for Development of Physical Culture and Sport]*, 11 October 2016, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53070>. See also Richard Arnold, “Sport and Official Nationalism in Modern Russia”, cit., p. 136.

<sup>29</sup> Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, *Interest*, cit.

<sup>30</sup> In a 2017 meeting in preparation for the upcoming event, Putin seemed to be quite sceptical about football being “a true Russian game”: Russian Presidency, *Joint Meeting of the Council for the Development of Physical Culture and Sport and the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia Local Organising Committee’s Supervisory Board*, 3 October 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55761>.

<sup>31</sup> “Putin Says He Dedicates Two Hours to Sports Daily”, in TASS, 6 June 2018, <https://tass.com/sport/1008152>.

<sup>32</sup> “Russia’s Putin and Medvedev Work Out Together”, in BBC, 30 August 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34102651>; Emily Jane Fox, “Putin Works Out in a \$3,220 Sweat Suit as Only Putin Would”, in *Vanity Fair*, 2 September 2015, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/09/putin-workout-gym-clothes>.

<sup>33</sup> “Putin Says Sports Help Him to Stay Fit for Work”, in TASS, 22 December 2022, <https://tass.com/society/1554817>.

Russian people that he is (still) fit for leadership.

Putin's athleticism also literally comes to embody the health, energy and strength of Russia as a nation in the international system. Since its president is represented as a manly leader who is vigorous, decisive and in good physical and moral health, under his rule Russia as a whole supposedly shares these qualities too. While in the early years of Putin's presidency this discourse was primarily employed to signal that Russia was back on track after the decadence of the 1990s,<sup>34</sup> after 2007–2008 and even more so after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in Donbas in 2014 the emphasis shifted onto Russia's fully restored great-power status and confrontation with the West. "We are stronger" than "everybody", Putin said in a long interview in November 2014, during which he repeatedly stressed the importance of "energy, strength and physical activity": after his own example, "doing sports is a must", as it helps strengthen the "immunodefense" (sic) necessary to suppress any "centrifugal forces seeking to pull the state down".<sup>35</sup>

### 3. Promoting mass sports in Russia

However exceptional Putin's persona may be according to the official narrative, his example is also meant to inspire ordinary Russians to have a "healthy lifestyle".<sup>36</sup> The Russian president and his government repeated on numerous occasions that they want to see a significant rise in the share of Russians who participate in sports. According to the Executive Order on National Goals and Strategic Objectives signed by Putin in May 2018, the declared aim is to reach a 55 per cent activity rate among Russian people through 2024.<sup>37</sup> Notably, while paying great attention to encouraging sports among children and youth, this much publicised push for expanded participation usually overlooks gender differences altogether.<sup>38</sup>

The stated reasons for the Kremlin's emphasis on mass sports participation – which echoes debates on the advantages of mass sports for the entire country that date all the way back to the Soviet era<sup>39</sup> – are several: demographic, social, "defensive" and

<sup>34</sup> See Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill. Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*, Itacha/London, Cornell University Press, 2008, esp. p. 225-227.

<sup>35</sup> Andrey Vandenko, "Vladimir Putin: We Are Strong Because We Are Right", in *TASS*, 13 November 2014, <https://tass.com/top-officials/761152>.

<sup>36</sup> Russian Presidency, *Interview to American TV Channel CBS and PBS*, 29 September 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50380>.

<sup>37</sup> Russian Presidency, *Meeting of the Council for the Development of Physical Culture and Sport*, 27 March 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60152>.

<sup>38</sup> For example, see *Ibid.* as well as Russian Presidency, *Meeting of the Council for the Development of Physical Culture and Sport*, 10 September 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66652>.

<sup>39</sup> See Andrea Franco, "Bystree, Vyse, Sil'nee: lo sport russo e sovietico dalle origini al disgelo" [Russian and Soviet Sport from the Origins to the Thaw], in *Mondo Contemporaneo*, No. 2-3/2020, p. 207-235, DOI 10.3280/MON2020-002011; Lyudmila Alexandrova, "USSR's Ready for Labor and Defense Fitness Promotion System Reincarnates", in *TASS*, 25 March 2014, <https://tass.com/opinions/763220>.



of international status.

With regard to demographic goals, the Kremlin's focus on sport and physical activity is meant first of all to increase the life expectancy of Russians and improve "the health of the nation".<sup>40</sup> In his 2020 State of the Nation Address, for example, Putin stressed that the rise in the country's life expectancy at birth to 73 years was also a result of "developing mass sports" and "promoting the values of a healthy lifestyle".<sup>41</sup> More generally, according to the Kremlin's discourse, expanding participation in sports – especially among youth – is a key contribution to the country's public health. In Putin's words, "the availability of mass sports, beginning from a very young age" is of utmost importance for "the future of the country, the health of the nation and the wellbeing of its citizens". In his view, it is obvious that "the more you exercise, the fewer pills you will take"<sup>42</sup> – the president himself being keen on setting the example.

Relatedly, Putin frequently emphasises the social and educational value of sports. In 2009, for example, during his stint as prime minister (2008–12) in-between his numerous terms as president, he said that it is crucial to keep kids off the streets at a time of economic hardship by encouraging a healthy lifestyle based on participation in sports.<sup>43</sup> Once again, the president's own experience as a restless child who found his way thanks to sambo and judo should serve as an example to Russian people. In July 2016, it was announced that around seven million copies of one of Putin's co-authored books on judo would be given out to Russian primary school children the next autumn, with the aim of "forming athlete fighters and a harmonious personal upbringing".<sup>44</sup> Learning self-defence is presented as another educational benefit of sport: according to Putin, thanks to sports, Russia's children will be able "to stand up for themselves, their friends and families, and ultimately, for their homeland".<sup>45</sup>

A 'defence' (that is, military) dimension is explicit in the Kremlin's discourse about mass participation in sports. References to the fact that a healthy and well-trained

<sup>40</sup> Russian Presidency, *President Vladimir Putin Chaired a Meeting of the State Council on Physical Fitness and Sports*, 30 January 2002, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/26935>.

<sup>41</sup> "Putin: Life Expectancy Exceeds 73 Years for First Time in Russia", in TASS, 15 January 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1108757>. For data on life expectancy at birth in the Russian Federation see: World Bank Data: *Life Expectancy at Birth, Total (Years) - Russian Federation*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=RU>.

<sup>42</sup> Russian Presidency, *Meeting of the Council for the Development of Physical Culture and Sport*, 10 September 2021, cit.

<sup>43</sup> Russian Presidency, *Prime Minister Vladimir Putin chaired a meeting of the Presidium of the Presidential Council for the Implementation of Priority National Projects and Demographic Policy*, 25 February 2009, <http://archive.government.ru/eng/docs/3473/index.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Alec Luhn, "Putin Judo Book to Be Distributed to Millions of Russian Schoolchildren", in *The Guardian*, 1 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/4ne8z>.

<sup>45</sup> Russian Presidency, *Opening Remarks at a Meeting on Developing Children's Physical Education and Children's and Youth Sport*, 13 March 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/17667>.

population would be better prepared and more easily employable in the army in case of necessity are recurrent, especially after the outbreak of the Donbas war. In October 2014, for example, Putin stressed that the “development of mass sports in the country is a vital military aspect giving Russia an advantage in the competitive struggle with other states in the economic and other spheres”.<sup>46</sup> On 24 March, right after the annexation of Crimea, he had signed a decree for the revival of the Soviet physical culture training programme GTO, whose acronym stood for “Ready for Labour and Defence” (of the Soviet Union).<sup>47</sup> The connection between mass sports and military training has become even more apparent since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In September 2022, a number of governmental bodies, including the Defence, Interior and Education Ministries, were instructed by the Kremlin to work together with the Russian Union of Martial Arts to create “a system of military and sports training and patriotic education of young people”.<sup>48</sup> Lately, in December 2022, Russia’s Sports Minister Oleg Matytsin emphasised that “sports is (sic) a very significant factor for our country’s security”. Interestingly enough, in the same speech, Matytsin pointed out the “significant contribution” to the country’s security provided by “the medals won by our athletes” in international sports event, drawing a parallel between national security and success in international sport.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. Restoring Russia’s great-power status through sport

In Putin’s Russia, and much beyond it, sporting success is regarded as a matter of national prestige. Since the birth of international sport, the performances of athletes and teams in events such as the Olympics or the football World Cup have been perceived and depicted as “proxies for the performance of the nation”.<sup>50</sup> Twentieth-century history is full of instances where governments, both authoritarian and democratic, have instrumentalised international sporting triumphs for political ends. This was very much the case for the Soviet Union, where sporting victories had long been a major source of international prestige. As James Riordan notes, sport was perhaps “the *only* medium in which [Communist countries] were able to take on and beat the economically advanced capitalist nations”.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> “Putin Stresses Importance of Mass Sports as Major Military Aspect”, in *TASS*, 23 October 2014, <https://tass.com/sport/756079>.

<sup>47</sup> Russian Presidency, *Executive Order on Ready for Labour and Defence Health and Fitness Programme*, 24 March 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20636>; see also “Putin Proposes Sport as Criterion for Evaluating Schools and Universities”, in *TASS*, 13 March 2013, <https://tass.com/archive/690804>.

<sup>48</sup> Russian Presidency, *Instructions on Establishing Military-sports Training and Patriotic Education Centres for Young People*, 20 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69394>.

<sup>49</sup> “Sports Contributes to Russia’s National Security, Says Minister”, in *TASS*, 20 December 2022, <https://tass.com/sport/1553025>.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Arnold, “Nationalism and Sport: A Review of the Field”, in *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (January 2021), p. 2, DOI 10.1017/nps.2020.9.

<sup>51</sup> James Riordan, “The Impact of Communism on Sport”, in *Historical Social Research*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2007), p.114, <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.32.2007.1.110-115>.

It is therefore no surprise that the Kremlin places great importance on Russian athletes' victories, which are explicitly framed as proof of the country's return to great-power. Already in 2004, in congratulating medal-winners in the Athens Olympic Games, Putin highlighted that Olympic awards are, "of course above all a personal victory for the athlete, but it is also always a national triumph and a great contribution to boosting its authority and importance in the world".<sup>52</sup> A few years later, while celebrating the medallists at the 2012 London Olympics, the president pointed out that the good performance of Russian first-time participants was "visible proof that our country's top-level sport, after going through a difficult time a decade ago, along with the whole country, is now gathering strength once more".<sup>53</sup> Stressing their contribution to the "glory of Russia", Putin usually celebrates on an equal footing the successes and "character" of female and male athletes alike, although a macho narrative occasionally resurfaces: for example, he described the member of the taekwondo team who won gold in the Tokyo 2020 Games reportedly with a broken arm as "a true hero and a real trooper".<sup>54</sup>

In addition to medals and victories, the Kremlin has also framed the ability to hold major events as a means of consolidating the position of a nation in the global order.<sup>55</sup> Since flying to Guatemala City in 2007 to personally support Sochi's bid to host the 2014 Winter Olympics, Putin's dedication to this cause has been relentless. On that occasion, he gave a speech in English during which he stressed that "we in Russia turn a sports competition into a really spectacular event. And we are good at it."<sup>56</sup> Once the event was awarded to Sochi, the Russian president highlighted that it was "without a doubt not only a recognition of Russia's achievements in sports", but also "an assessment of our country [...] an acknowledgment of its growing capabilities, first and foremost in the economic and social spheres".<sup>57</sup>

In several ways, the Sochi Olympics marked a turning point in Russian sports history – and beyond. Russia's organisational and sporting achievements allowed Putin to promote a narrative according to which the country had fully returned to

<sup>52</sup> Russian Presidency, *Speech at a Meeting with Medal-Winning Athletes at the XXVIII Athens Olympic Games*, 4 November 2004, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22674>.

<sup>53</sup> Russian Presidency, *Meeting with London Olympic Champions and Medallists*, 15 August 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16259>.

<sup>54</sup> Russian Presidency, *Meeting with Winners and Medallists of the XXXII Olympic Games in Tokyo*, 11 September 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66660>.

<sup>55</sup> See among others Scarlett Cornelissen, "The Geopolitics of Global Aspiration: Sport Mega-events and Emerging Powers", in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 27, No. 16-18 (2010), p. 3008-3025; DOI 10.1080/09523367.2010.508306; Jonathan Grix and Paul Michael Brannagan, "Of Mechanisms and Myths: Conceptualising States' 'Soft Power' Strategies through Sports Mega-Events", in *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2016), p. 251-272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2016.1169791>.

<sup>56</sup> A transcript of Putin's speech is available here: Russian Presidency, *Speech at the 119th International Olympic Committee Session*, 4 July 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24402>.

<sup>57</sup> Sophia Kishkovsky, "After Celebrating Winning Bid, Russia Has Work Ahead", in *The New York Times*, 6 July 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/06/sports/06olympics.html>.

the “great and glorious” heights of the Soviet era. The “honour” of Russia had been successfully “defended” and, finally, there was no longer any doubt that “the difficult period in Russian sport is behind us”.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, the Sochi Games were soon at the centre of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) major investigation into Russian state-sponsored doping,<sup>59</sup> and were almost immediately followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the Donbas war, ushering in an era of heightened Russian revisionism, inflamed anti-Western rhetoric and, eventually, the full-scale war against Ukraine.

As a result, since 2014, Putin’s discourse about international sport has become openly confrontational. The Russian President has brazenly championed the traditional argument that sport should be independent of politics, denouncing its alleged ‘politicisation’ by Western nations and entities, particularly the United States and WADA.<sup>60</sup> Notably, this narrative has been directed not only at the sanctions imposed on Russian sport as a result of the doping scandals<sup>61</sup> and, more recently, the invasion of Ukraine,<sup>62</sup> but also against efforts to link sports events to human rights, in particular LGBT rights.<sup>63</sup>

The ongoing debate on transgender participation in sports<sup>64</sup> is especially salient here. Remarkably, in 2021 Putin contemptuously dismissed the possible inclusion of transgender athletes in women’s sports as “the end to female sports”, adding: “Where is a common sense here?”<sup>65</sup> In effect, the participation of transgender – and more generally of openly LGBT – athletes in competitive sport is at loggerheads with the patriarchal and heteronormative view of gender roles promoted by the Kremlin, on which Putin’s leadership has been built. Not only are LGBT rights in

<sup>58</sup> Russian Presidency, *Meeting with Medallists at the XXII 2014 Winter Olympics*, 24 February 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20331>.

<sup>59</sup> World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), *WADA Statement: Independent Investigation Confirms Russian State Manipulation of the Doping Control Process*, 18 July 2016, <https://www.wada-ama.org/en/node/4309>.

<sup>60</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “Putin’s Swift Reaction to Doping Report Blames Anti-Russian Politics”, in *The New York Times*, 19 July 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/19/sports/olympics/vladimir-putins-swift-reaction-to-doping-report-blames-anti-russian-politics.html>; “Putin Says WADA’s Decision Against Russian Sports Unfair and Has No Common Sense”, in *TASS*, 19 December 2019, <https://tass.com/sport/1100935>; “Putin Slams Attempts to Politicize Sports as ‘Fundamentally Wrong’”, in *TASS*, 3 February 2022, <https://tass.com/sport/1396983>.

<sup>61</sup> Ava Wallace and Emily Giambalvo, “A Timeline of Russia’s State-Sponsored Olympic Doping Scandal”, in *The Washington Post*, updated 14 February 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2022/02/11/russia-olympics-doping-scandal>.

<sup>62</sup> Leo Goretti, “The Sporting Sanctions against Russia: Debunking the Myth of Sport’s Neutrality”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 09|22 (May 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/15324>.

<sup>63</sup> “Do Not Confuse Sports, Politics, Human Rights – Putin”, in *TASS*, 7 February 2014, <https://tass.com/sport/718077>; “Sports Should Not Be Used for Political Aims – Russian Delegation”, in *TASS*, 23 September 2015, <https://tass.com/sport/822973>.

<sup>64</sup> See Centre for Sport and Human Rights, *Sex and Gender in Sports Policy: A Human Rights Perspective*, 4 October 2021, <https://www.sporhumanrights.org/sex-and-gender-in-sports-policy-a-human-rights-perspective>.

<sup>65</sup> “Female Sports May Become Extinct with Male Transgender Athletes’ Arrival, Says Putin”, in *TASS*, 23 December 2021, <https://tass.com/sport/1380231>.



sports another proof of the alleged “moral decay” of the West, they are also a threat, as they contribute to questioning gender norms and debunking the macho image that Putin has carefully crafted for himself through sport over the years.<sup>66</sup> The use of sport to reproduce a hegemonic and heteronormative type of masculinity in Putin’s discourse is evident in his infamous interview with US filmmaker Oliver Stone. In the interview, the Russian president answered this way a question about being comfortable showering next to a gay man: “I prefer not to go to the shower with him. Why provoke him? But you know, I’m a judo master.”<sup>67</sup> Judo is mentioned here as a form of ‘defence’ from the ‘threat’ of gay people, somehow implying that only a ‘true’ (thus, heterosexual) man like Putin could supposedly master it.

## Conclusion

For more than twenty years, Putin has systematically used sport as a political instrument in both the domestic and the international arenas. The president’s (supposedly) healthy, athletic and strong body has been turned into a symbol of his fitness for leadership, marking a neat break from the decadent figure of Yeltsin in the 1990s. In books, interviews, photos and videos, constant emphasis has been placed on how sports (especially judo) forged the manly qualities of the president – strength, energy, character, self-control, discipline, decisiveness, reaction –, turning him into the living paradigm of Russian hegemonic masculinity. The other side of the coin is that, as the years go by, rumours of ill health must be constantly dispelled, since they threaten the very foundations of Putin’s exceptional, indeed yet exemplary, leadership.

Sport has played a key role also in the symbolic restoration of Russia to great-power status at the international level. Olympic medals, but also the successful organisation of mega-events, are framed by the Kremlin as evidence of Russia’s return to Soviet greatness. This success, however, is no longer presented as the result of a (socialist) system, as in the Soviet era, but rather of Putin’s unique leadership. Over the years, this discourse has shifted from a desire to be rightfully ‘reintegrated’ on an equal footing in the international community to increasing emphasis on Russia’s distinctiveness and might, with the 2014 Sochi Olympics marking the turning point. In the following years, the Kremlin’s sports discourse became defiant and confrontational, with scathing attacks on the ‘West’ due to its alleged attempts to politicise sports, including through human – especially LGBT – rights.

<sup>66</sup> Valerie Sperling et al., “Vladimir Putin, the Czar of Macho Politics, Is Threatened by Gender and Sexuality Rights”, in *The Conversation*, 11 April 2022, <https://theconversation.com/vladimir-putin-the-czar-of-macho-politics-is-threatened-by-gender-and-sexuality-rights-180473>; Amy MackInnon, “LGBTQ Russians Were Putin’s First Target in His War on the West”, in *Foreign Policy*, 7 October 2022, <https://bit.ly/3V9EIRo>.

<sup>67</sup> Shaun Walker, “Vladimir Putin: I Don’t Have Bad Days Because I’m Not a Woman”, in *The Guardian*, 7 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/6t8gz>.

While Russia's participation in international sports is currently on hold due to the ban recommended by the International Olympic Committee following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the implications of its future reintegration should be carefully considered, not only in light of the aggression on Ukraine, but also with regard to the ongoing debate on LGBT – especially transgender – rights to participate in sport competitions. Aggressive reaction by the Kremlin against inclusive policies is to be expected in all international sporting venues: not simply because it is consistent with Putin's narrative on the importance of "traditional values" and attacks against the West's "strange and trendy ideas like dozens of genders or gay pride parades",<sup>68</sup> but also because Putin's leadership is constitutively founded on a hegemonic model of masculinity that rests on heteronormativity. Questioning this model of masculinity in the international sporting domain – which is a key source of legitimation for the Russian regime – will arguably be perceived as a direct threat to Vladimir Putin's 'strong' and 'manly' leadership.

*Updated 18 January 2023*

<sup>68</sup> Russian Presidency, *Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting*, 27 October 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.

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