

## Manosphere a la russe. The Male State as an Ideological and Financial Project

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# MANOSPHERE À LA RUSSE: THE “MALE STATE” AS AN IDEOLOGICAL AND FINANCIAL PROJECT

by Marlene [Laruelle](#) and Ivan Grek

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The manosphere has gained new impetus worldwide these last years. By [manosphere](#) we define a network of online communities who promote anti-feminist beliefs and encourage resentment or hatred toward women. Some groups focus on political changes slowing down or stopping women’s rights movements and promoting legal changes in favor of men (men’s rights activists, or MRAs); others advocate for men to avoid women (men going their own way, or MGTOW) or state that men are entitled to sexual relationships but cannot find partners (involuntary celibates, or [Incels](#)). The manosphere has also reached Russia, where several American ideological constructs have raised interest among radical right groups.

A vocal version of the manosphere *à la russe* has been the group the Male State (*mužskoe gosudarstvo*), which gained its maximal media visibility in summer 2021 before getting [banned](#) by the Russian judicial authorities for extremism in October 2021. Dismissing the movement as just wacko hides how the Male State embodied important trends of Russian pre-war society and capitalized on them. First, obviously, it highlights the transnationalization of culture wars and the fertile soil that Russia represents for them. Second, it confirms the central role played by [entrepreneurs of influence](#): by this term we define activists who promote an ideological agenda—in today’s Russia, mostly a conservative or reactionary one—connected to financial profitability, and hopes to get political rewards for it. Third, the Male State case illustrates the difficult equilibrium of the pre-war Russian authorities between promoting conservative values and repressing radical groups. The partial [decriminalization](#) of domestic violence in 2017 and numerous debates that followed on the impact of this decision played a role in the online visibility of this anti-women hate group. And last but not least, the Male State case reveals the understudied role of the corporate sector as an actor of these culture wars—in this case on the progressive side.

## The Male State as an Internet Scandal-Hyper

The Male State emerged in 2016. It was [inspired](#) by a misogynist group active on the Russian equivalent of Facebook, VKontakte, named PRO-Sh (About Whores), which had about 5,000 subscribers. Its founder, Vladislav Pozdniakov, never [finished](#) medical school, and worked as a fitness trainer for some years. He then first specialized in identifying social network pages of porn actresses and harassing them and then expanded his actions by trolling and cyberbullying interracial families, as well as Russian women dating non-Russian men, a “specialty” in which the group was particularly active during the 2018 FIFA World Cup. In 2020-2021, the Male State (masculist.ru) reached 170,000 members on VKontakte, and developed several parallel Telegram and Tik-Tok groups. His main Telegram reached more than [110,000](#) followers during its peak of activism in summer 2021.



The Male State's second-in-command, Dmitri Popov, [recognized](#) that the project had a commercial aim from the start: "we immediately planned to generate revenues on publicity, so we select themes raising resonance, which would attract polemics." The movement was, for instance, offering several parallel financially profitable projects such as a service through which a husband could commission a "fidelity check" on his wife. This commercial aspect is an important but largely under-studied aspect of the radical reactionary agenda activism in Russia: historically for the far right, generating benefits was usually linked to private security services working in parallel with ideological activists, or participating in some organized crime structures. With the Male State, it is the niche of internet advertisement that was used as a revenue mechanism. This explains many of the ultra-provocative online actions of the movement, including Pozdniakov simulating his own death to get media attention.

But the Male State also tried to move from online hype to offline political activities. In 2017, it started to convert its online regional groups in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Ufa, Yekaterinburg, Rostov-on-Don, and Samara into cells which would be able to launch physical hate-crime campaigns. Some groups got active in fist fighting and target practice. Several pickets were organized in different cities to defend men's rights. By this time the FSB has already infiltrated agents into the cells and collected evidence for a criminal case against the movement.

Podziakov was arrested for a few days in 2018 for hatred against women and [condemned](#) to two years jail, but he was able to leave the country for Belarus and then Poland. In 2019, the FSB started arresting some Male State members in Khabarovsk and [charged](#) four of its leaders with antifeminine hate speech and extremism. Their sentence got gradually reduced but they remained on the state agency for internet control Rosinformmonitoring's list of extremists. Pozdniakov is now said to be living in exile in Germany or Turkey and his second-in-command, Dmitri Popov, got arrested in Belarus and imprisoned for 16 years for having participated in the 2020 mass protests. He was administering the channels of Sergey Tikhanovsky, an opponent of Aleksandr Lukashenko who was arrested when he announced he would run against the Belarusian president; his wife, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, then became the main figure representing the opposition to Lukashenko.

### **The Ideology of a National Patriarchate**

Pozdniakov decided to structure his internet niche in a more ideological way by connecting misogyny with an articulate ultra-right political agenda. He seems to think of himself as a political blogger and made some attempts at publishing blogs in a style similar to those of Aleksey Navalny, without any success. Simultaneously with the trolling of women, the Male State published its [political program](#) called for a "National Patriarchate" (*natsional'nyi patriakhat*). It denounced the government, the oligarchs, the corruption of the administration, military conscription, protested Russia's open migration policy and against women in politics. The movement didn't hide more ideological statements that confirm its roots in neo-Nazism: it celebrated Hitler's birthday, regularly published posts with the image of the Führer—yet took pride in the Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War (as World War II is known in Russia)—and virulently denounced any form of interracial miscegenation. As with many Russian neo-Nazi groups, the Male State seems to have been positive about American white culture, especially as it existed mostly under the Trump Administration.

The culture-wars aspect of the national patriarchate ideology has nothing original and reflects many of the classic manosphere themes: women's rights are reducing men's rights, and the feminization of the world and the castration of men is contributing to the collapse of moral norms. The movement thus proposed to reduce women's rights—for instance: allowing polygamy, reducing the age of marriage for women, not allowing



abortion without a father's authorization, making alimony voluntary, forbidding women to divorce against their husband's will, equalizing prison sentences for both sexes, etc. It also advocates for some social issues specific to Russia's demographic context, for instance having the same retirement age for both sexes (in Russia women can retire five years earlier than men), and launching a specific healthcare program for men (in Russia men's life expectancy remains a decade lower than for women). The Male State has also launched MIST, the Russian equivalent of the Western MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way), inviting men to refuse the conventional role allocated to them and to avoid women as much as possible, with some appeals to incels (the involuntary celibate). It also created a so-called "antifeminist leftist front" requesting entitlement to sex with prostitutes who would be paid on state money to accept men's "vouchers" for free sex.

The Male State tried to enter the political field by affiliating with some [parties](#), without success. It attempted to partner with Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's ill-named Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDRP), which has included several of the Male State's key themes in its platform, such as freeing men from alimony obligations, even if Zhirinovskiy has also supported the idea that women should decide for themselves about abortion, without a father's approval.

### **Social media shaming and public defamation campaigns**

At least 150 complaints were submitted for cyberbullying by the Male State, [as reported](#) by the human-rights and gender activist Alyona Popova. In 2021, the Male State moved to another level of public defamation campaigns targeting Russian firms using their brands to promote tolerance toward sexual and ethnic minorities—this was its final blow.

The grocery brand Vkusvillia was the first to find itself under attack. Under the slogan "the receipts of happiness," it launched an advertisement campaign with photos of their clients, one of them being a lesbian family. The company and the family got rapidly attacked by the Male State, which released private information such as the family's address, inviting its members to harass them. After thousands of negative comments online, the family decided to leave Russia and ask political asylum in Spain. Under attack, the firm Vkusvillia decided to withdraw the advertisement and [apologize](#) for having "hurt the feelings" of its clients.

Only a few weeks later, the Male State targeted another brand, Ebidoebi. This restaurant chain [advertised](#) its sushi with a photo of a black man surrounded by three young women of European appearance. Pozdniakov denounced the vision of black people as "[a cultural occupation from the West](#)," and invited his followers to boycott the chain. Ebidoebi's social media accounts were flooded with negative comments against their so-called "propaganda of multiculturalism." Ebidoebi's founder's personal phone number was released, receiving hundreds of threatening messages. Here too, the firm [decided](#) to withdraw the photo and to apologize for having "hurt the feelings of the Russian people."

But another sushi company, Tanuki, took a more courageous stance. Standing in solidarity with its harassed colleagues, Tanuki decided to [publish](#) its own photos of a black man, this time with an open anti-discrimination messaging about the equality of all races, religions, and orientations. Tanuki got immediately attacked by the Male State too, with DDOS-attacks on its website and attempts to block Yandex Eda (the Russia equivalent of Uber Eats) to deliver Tanuki. The firm reacted by asking its clients to support them and [filed](#) a complaint at the FSB after they received threats of bombing their restaurants. The courageous stance of Tanuki generated a wave of support from other brands such as Viatskii kvas, which, too, released a publicity with a black person. The different complaints submitted by Tanuki and the resistance shown by several companies and Yandex Eda contributed to the Russian authorities' decision of banning of the Male State a few months later.



## Concluding remarks

The case of the Male State may seem extreme and marginal, yet it was able to get massive media attention and affect the public agenda during big events such as the FIFA World Cup. Thus, it offers several insights into the polarization of the values scene in pre-war Russia. The Male State is illustrative of the growth of radical far-right groups that function both as political cells and as commercial entities generating revenues through ideological provocations. It shows the intricacy of being mostly an online phenomenon, yet able to produce offline effects, including, obviously, above all, the suffering of all the victims of its cyberbullying actions. It also reveals the ambivalent stance of the Russian authorities, which promote what they call a moderate or reasonable conservatism but whose legal decisions such as the decriminalization of domestic violence sent signals to the most reactionary groups that there is room for them to push for more radical behaviors, thereby contributing to the indirect empowerment of such groups—until the authorities decide to repress them when they cross their “red lines.”

In the case of the Male State, the red lines had likely been crossed when they attacked the private sector and the political, social, and economic order in the eyes of the authorities. The private sector has become a key, yet under-studied, actor in cultural-values polarization in today’s Russia, with some private entrepreneurs standing alongside—and funding—conservative or reactionary groups, and some others taking up the flag of progressive values. Their choices may be directed by their corporate culture and the individual preference of their founder or CEO, but also follow a more commercial approach—securing a clientele with has its own ideological orientation. The actions of several catering companies of promoting food with pro-LGBT+ or multiculturalist advertisement confirmed the existence of an upper and middle classes in pre-war Russia’s big cities for whom this messaging was positively valued.

Russia’s radical ideological turn with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has consolidated the repressive toolkit of the regime. While Putin has mostly insisted on strategic (anti-NATO enlargement) and identity arguments (that Ukraine is not a nation-state and that it forms one people with Russia) to justify the invasion, Patriarch Kirill has explicitly [legitimized](#) the invasion as a metaphysical clash of civilizations, the one accepting and the other rejecting gay parades. One can thus easily guess that culture wars will continue to dominate the Russian state’s language and that entrepreneurs of influence with a reactionary agenda like the Male State will arise, but the whole internet culture and its financial profitability on which they were based has been so far largely destroyed by Western sanctions.