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# Right-wing populism as gendered performance: Janus-faced masculinity in the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Recep T. Erdogan

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## Abstract

Gender and populism have been extensively theorized separately, but there has not been sufficient study of the way that gender undergirds populism, strengthening its diverse manifestations. Focusing on the cases of Vladimir Putin and Recep T. Erdoğan, we argue that their political performance allows them to project a right-wing populism that hides much of its political program in an ostentatious masculine posturing that has the virtue of being relatively malleable. This political masculinity allows them to position themselves at different points in time as outsiders yet insiders, bad boys yet good fathers. In their early years Putin and Erdogan established themselves as transgressive outsiders who developed a profile of power by building up their masculine, working-class biographies. As their power became consolidated, they turned to a more paternal role, fostering a conservative gender order while attacking the masculinity of their opponents and casting them as outsiders. In this way over the years they have combined political performances that have both breached the conventional gender norms and also upheld and reinforced them. The result is a Janus-faced masculinity of outsiders-yet-insiders, bad-boys-yet-good-fathers, which establishes that the leader is both the same as other men and also different from them, standing above the citizenry, mediating and fostering a conservative political order. Understanding this gender performance also helps to explain the paradox of “electoral authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 51–65, 2002; Schedler 2006), demonstrating how performed political masculinity can support and connect the cult of a popularly elected leader with conservative social and political gender norms.

**Keywords** Electoral authoritarianism · Gender ideology · Gendered public performance · Nativism · Political leadership · Political masculinity

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Populisms of both left-wing and right-wing varieties have been proliferating around the globe with alarming speed, and academic specialists of all disciplines have responded since the 1990s with a variety of schema to try to analyze these phenomena. Yet “populism” remains an elusive concept in part because of the diffuse nature of the phenomenon itself. It has been described as a “Zeitgeist” (Mudde 2004, p. 541), “a conceptual mirage” (Taguieff 1995, p. 9), a “logic” (Laclau 2005, p. 117), a “Rorschach test” for different intellectual approaches (Waisbord 2003, p. 199), and as having a “chameleon-like nature” (Mazzoleni 2003, p. 5; Lee 2006, p. 355), even “a conceptual cacophony” (Müller 2015, p. 81).

Complicated though it is, this situation is not unlike the ancient Indian story of the six blind individuals who examined the proverbial elephant, each claiming to come to a different understanding of that noble beast depending on what part they were examining. Students of populism have focused on leadership styles (Weyland 2001), on political parties (Mudde 2007; Meret and Siim 2012), on mass communication and media (Ostiguy 2017; Canovan 1999; Moffitt and Tormey 2014), on ideologies and messaging (Hawkins 2010; Jaggars and Walgrave 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015), and on discourse and emotions (Kampwirth 2010; Wodak 2015). In this article we adopt the approach taken by Rogers Brubaker (2017, p. 360) to consider populism as a “discursive and stylistic repertoire” of heterogeneous elements. These diverse elements can be seen as having their own “logic” (Laclau 2005, p. 117 and *passim*) and “style” (Moffitt and Tormey 2014, *passim*) that is both recognizable and yet amorphous. To see how something so polymorphic as populism can nonetheless be so easily identified as belonging to a particular national or political context, we have chosen to focus on how and why the right-wing populisms of Vladimir Putin and Recep T. Erdoğan take particular masculine forms.

While there can be many repertoires in this hydra-headed phenomenon, one core element, we argue, consists of gendered political performance. Although a number of scholars have addressed gender in conjunction with populism, they have tended to focus on particular aspects without yet successfully drawing together the multiple layers of populism and gender. Excellent work has been done on a range of topics, including the gendered discourses of particular populist parties (Meret and Siim 2012); the machismo of particular leaders (Sperling 2014; Riabov and Riabova 2014); the role of paternalistic metaphors in right-wing populist rhetoric (Norocel 2010a, b, 2013; Conniff 1999); the othering of opponents as male homosexuals (Claus and Virchow 2017); the effects of populist policies on women (Fernandes 2007; Kampwirth 2010; Abi-Hassan 2017; Harteveld and Ivarsflaten 2018); as well as the “anti-gender” ideologies of some right-wing populist movements (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Perreau 2016). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015) have made perhaps the broadest attempt to bring together gender and populism, analyzing cultural and ideological factors in South American left-wing populism and Northern European right-wing populism, but they conclude that the results leave a “somewhat muddled picture” (p. 35). Still, they urge further research on the relationship between gender and populism as “the most relevant of the many understudied issues related to populism” (p. 36).

As discourse analyst Teun A. Van Dijk (1995, p. 33) has shown, “ideologies seldom express themselves directly in text and talk.” Rather, they work indirectly, often concealing both their origins and their effects (the locus classicus on this, of course, is Althusser 1968). We contend that it is not accidental that so many right-wing

politicians adopt what can in a broad-brush fashion be called “masculine” or “macho” approaches in their public pronouncements and actions. To test this hypothesis, we analyze the speeches and emotional acts (e.g., expressions of strong affect) of Putin and Erdoğan in three different areas: their self-presentation/biography, their presentation of their views on “the people,” and their work in defining the link between self and people. While it is not possible to be completely comprehensive in these areas, we have chosen to examine key moments in the two leaders’ demonstration of their power.

Our tripartite analysis of the cases of Putin in Russia and Erdoğan in Turkey has revealed a repertoire of heightened masculine performances. These are not just “macho” or “strongman” leaders who have a kind of superficial, “celebrity” style (Goscilo 2011, 2012). Instead we have found that their machismo combines a deeper bullying, masculine set of performances with a paternalistic dominance that claims to protect their “own” people (*svoi* in Russian, *kabadayı* in Turkish). In coming to power, they have established their legitimacy but, even more importantly, their *power* through transgressive actions that demonstrated their outsider-yet-dominant status. Once in power, however, they have sought to use more centrist, but deeply conservative, heteronormative, and stereotypically masculine forms of behavior to establish that they are no longer the outsider bad boys, but rather are now the good fathers saving their nations by rejecting others whose masculinity they impugn, either emasculating them or showing them in a hypermasculine (and thus negative) light. This Janus-faced masculinity of outsiders-yet-insiders, bad-boys-yet-good-fathers thus combines performances that both breach the conventional gender norms and uphold, even reinforce them, establishing that this leader is both the same as other men and also different from them, standing above the citizenry, mediating and fostering a conservative political order.<sup>1</sup>

Why Putin and Erdoğan? We have chosen to focus on these two leaders because they combine right-wing populism and authoritarianism, what some scholars are now calling “populist authoritarianism” (Tang 2016). Initially coming to power as outsiders, they managed to gain official political and institutional power while never losing their status as populists. Almost all other studies of the dynamics of populist leadership have looked at political party leaders and contenders who are not in power rather than at state leaders who have gained office. As right-wing populists-turned-authoritarian leaders, Putin and Erdoğan share a media image as the ultimate bad boys who wield their anger and macho rhetoric in defense of their nations. But they are also, paradoxically, presented as the good fathers who protect those same nations.

While the two cases would appear on the surface to be quite different in terms of dominant religion (Russian Orthodoxy versus Sunni Islam) and recent past (a post-communist country versus a capitalist one), they share certain features. Both Turkey and Russia represent strong cases of electoral authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002; Schedler 2006) with ethnically diverse societies located at the edge of Europe. Heirs to empires (Russian and Ottoman), Russia and Turkey share feelings of resentment over their losses and being denied access to the European Union. Additionally, the

<sup>1</sup> One could, of course, also point to a number of other leaders (Silvio Berlusconi, Viktor Orban, Jarosław Kaczyński, Rodrigo Duterte, Nicolas Maduro, and Narendra Modi to name a few), but then the discussion would become extremely unwieldy. Also, it deserves to be mentioned that there is a rich literature on Putin’s masculine performances (Goscilo 2011, 2012; Cassiday and Johnson 2010; Kolonitskii 2004; Ryabov and Ryabova 2011, 2014; Sperling 2012, 2014; Gorham 2012; Foxall 2013; Wood 2011, 2016), and a small amount of research on Erdoğan’s masculinity (Korkman and Açıksöz 2013; Eksi 2016; Turk 2014).

1980s and 1990s were a time of deep anxiety in both countries. Liberal economic reforms destroyed citizens' life savings, creating turbulent economic conditions (hyperinflation in both countries). Thus, both countries underwent economic and political instability before Putin and Erdogan came to power, giving them openings for a more charismatic leadership based on populist appeals to their populations. For elites in both countries an appeal to the image of "tsar" or "sultan" has proven to be an alluring form of political PR.

In this article we use the term "political masculinities" to mean the conscious or unconscious (often semi-conscious) performance of masculine stereotypes by individuals operating in the political sphere (Starck and Sauer 2014; Starck and Luyt 2019). One can, of course, see the performance of public, visible masculinities throughout the world of politics, although the leading scholars of political spectacle and performance pay scant attention to it (Edelman 1988; Alexander 2010). What sets right-wing populism apart in the cases of Putin and Erdogan is the use of masculine performances to obscure the contemporaneous undermining of institutions of democracy in favor of a charismatic form of politics that is anything but democratic. These performances—in the most direct, literal sense of staged activities designed to form a spectacle—also divert attention away from serious socio-economic issues, including policies that directly harm the *demos*.

Of course, a few caveats are in order. Some readers may object that Mr. Putin's rule is not entirely populist. He does not claim, for example, to bash the elites in favor of "the people." He did promise early in his time in office that he would rein in the oligarchs or at least keep them at an equal distance, but he so deeply distrusts any hint of "people's revolutions" that he rarely invokes obviously populist emotions. Too much populism in Russia would be extremely difficult to manage, and Putin is well aware of this. Nor has he created a populist party to support him—United Russia is much closer to an old-style patronage machine than a party that tries to harness popular emotions in support of the leader. Lassila (2018) and March (2017) have referred to Putin as a non- or even anti-populist because they have relied on a more nationalist definition of populism, and, of course, Putin has not often played the purely nationalist card in contrast to both Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny and Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko.<sup>2</sup> In this article, however, we take a broader view of Putin as populist-identified in his reliance on an apparently populist biography, resorting to a xenophobic (though not necessarily explicitly nationalist) and anti-liberal nativism, and insisting on his personal connection to Russia and Russians (broadly defined).

President Erdoğan's populism also contains non-populist elements. While his use of transgressive language, his working-class background, and his promises to make Turkey (like its predecessor the Ottoman Empire) great again would qualify him as a populist, in his early years (2002–2007) he often portrayed himself as a champion of democratic reforms, as a leader focused on expanding civil and minority rights in line with the European Union criteria. Over time, however, and especially by the time of the

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Zhirinovskiy from the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and Gennady Zyuganov from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) are also, in fact, much more populist than Putin. See, for example, Zyuganov (2007) on the country being run by a "BOB, i.e., *bureaucrats, oligarchs and bandits*." Marlene Laruelle (2009) has done excellent work on the three quasi-opposition parties in Russia as having, in fact, two kinds of populist narratives, "protest" populism, which distinguishes the people from the elite, and what she calls "identity" populism, which contrasts the people and foreigners (broadly speaking) (p. 85).

Gezi protests in 2013, his emphasis on diversity and inclusion had faded in the face of opposition from different segments of society, and he grew increasingly demagogic with strong authoritarian and populist tendencies.

Despite these caveats, Putin's and Erdoğan's tenures in office (roughly 1999 and 2002 to the present) reveal three distinct populist dimensions that we analyze in this article. First, they each chose a populist image in their first months and years, casting themselves as men of the people, and as transgressive, angry leaders who would put matters to rights in their respective countries. Second, they roundly rejected "politics" and parties in favor of a nativist discourse that castigates outsiders as deficient in terms of their masculinity. And third, they have each played up a male-dominated and conservative set of ideas that appear to restore an imagined and idealized gender order based on male dominance that will provide stability and "greatness" to their nations. At the same time this has served to undermine and eviscerate public institutions on the grounds of building an apparently more direct line from the father to his people.

Although we focus on Putin and Erdoğan in this article, we argue that the theoretical framework suggested here could be applicable to other examples of right-wing populist leadership. The content of their masculine performance may vary, but we see three key parts of their populist masculine performances: macho leadership; nativism that rejects the masculinity of "others"; and an appeal to direct paternal rule accompanied by an authoritarian undermining of institutions. This Janus-faced masculinity based on the bullying and transgression of the "bad boy" that turns over time into the protection of the "good father" figure plays a key role in signaling the two men's legitimacy and also, perhaps even more importantly, their power.

In the first section of this article, we demonstrate how Erdoğan and Putin emerged as two charismatic saviors of their respective nations, posing as populist leaders and marking themselves as authentic men of the people. In the second section, we discuss how these leaders distinguish "real people" from Others who are either emasculated or presented in a hypermasculine (i.e., dangerous and aggressive) light, thus reinforcing the power of the leaders and the gendered character of the nativism they espouse. In the third section, we examine the populist leaders' establishment of themselves as fathers of the conservative nation. In creating that role, they deliberately undermine political institutions on the pretext that the direct and masculinized relationship between ruler and ruled obviates any need for mediating organizations.

## **Performing an authentic working-class biography as a man of the people**

In their rise to power Putin and Erdoğan relied on gendered stereotypes rather than institutional claims to authority in order to signal both their untrammled authority and, paradoxically, their democratic roots. Both leaders came to power as dark horses whom no one expected to win. The fact that they were outsiders, however, gave them opportunities to create new political styles, and above all, to mobilize the masses and foment an anti-elitist, anti-system populism that in turn reinforced their personal power. In building their personas as leaders, each played on a performed political masculinity that appeared to give them significant personal power that transcended their institutional authority.

In 1999 before Boris Yeltsin resigned and named Putin as his heir apparent, no one expected Putin to become the next President of the Russian Federation. A long list of likely candidates stood ahead of him in the minds of both the political elite and the general public, including Yevgeny Primakov and Yury Luzhkov (Hale 2004). Putin was so unknown in fact that journalists took to writing articles entitled “Who is Mr. Putin?” But the fact that he was unknown also meant it was possible to create a biography for him that emphasized his being raised in a working-class neighborhood of Leningrad where his teachers and friends remembered him as a rather scrappy, macho kid prone to street fights and he himself told of fending off rats in the stairwells of his apartment building (Putin 2000).

Erdogan had, unlike Putin, been active in party politics since a young age, becoming the first mayor of Istanbul from an Islamic party in 1994, but he had been banned from holding office in 1998 after he recited a poem by Ziya Gökalp that was deemed to have been instrumental in inciting religious hatred (Eksi 2016; Özel 2003). Moreover, his former affiliation with the Islamic party tradition (National Outlook-Milli Gorus) initially put him at odds with the staunchly Kemalist elite. One further way he played on his outsider status was by emphasizing his working-class origins. As he told his followers, he played soccer in Kasimpasa, a working-class district of Istanbul, and he sold simit (a bagel-like pastry) on the streets.

Both leaders have performed their working-class connections to the people on numerous occasions and in multiple contexts: by emphasizing their virility and youth in comparison to their predecessors (Putin in contrast to Boris Yeltsin; Erdogan in contrast to Bulent Ecevit); by wearing soccer jerseys (Erdogan) and by playing hockey in the Night Hockey League (Putin); and by using aggressive, even angry language to show their authenticity (again, in contrast to their predecessors, especially Ecevit and Gorbachev).

### **Masculine transgressions and playing the bad boy**

From the outset Putin and Erdogan used aggressive, working-class language to signal the tough stance of an aggrieved, underdog nation toward outside powers. For Putin heightened masculinity was at the nexus of his efforts both to prosecute the renewed war in Chechnya and to attract different segments of the Russian voting public (Eichler 2011; Wood 2011, 2016; Sperling 2014). Renewing the war in Chechnya (suspended from 1996 to 1999) helped him to consolidate his image as a decisive and masculine leader. In his speeches he dwelt on the terrible sense of humiliation left over from Russia's apparent defeat and the ignominious peace at the end of the first war in 1994–1996 (Eichler 2006, 2011). And he also made a point of distinguishing between the alleged cowardice of the previous Russian leadership (especially that of Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov) and his own resolute approach in the face of a series of tragic apartment bombings that shook Moscow and other cities that fall. Lambasting the putative Chechen bombers as bandits, he told Russians they would no longer be “second-class citizens” in their own home. “Russia can rise from its knees and fight back as it should” (Putin 1999). Similar to Donald Trump's claims almost twenty years later, Putin was telling the world that he was going to make Russia great again. He was also reinforcing a populist notion that he alone (not institutions, economics, or larger social forces) would be the champion for the nation. When he told television viewers a week later that he

would “rub out the bandits in the outhouse,” his popularity skyrocketed. As one member of the Russian government commented, “No politician has ever been so fantastically vulgar. Ordinary people love it because it’s the way they speak themselves. They think he’s less hypocritical than other politicians” (Chazan 1999).

Erdogan in turn famously blew up at the Israeli President Shimon Peres during a World Economics Forum in Davos in 2009, shouting “When it comes to killing, you know well how to kill children on beaches.” He then stormed out of the room stating, “And Davos is over for me. I will never attend Davos meetings again” (Bennhold 2009). For Turks, Erdoğan’s anger was not unusual. His losing his temper at an international meeting, nevertheless, seemed a new departure and excited many. He returned to Istanbul to cries of “Conqueror of Davos!” and praise for his “Kasimpasa attitude in Davos” (McCoy 2014). The crowd was angry not only over Israel’s Gaza offensive against fellow Muslims, but also over years of being offended by Europeans who thought Turkey did not deserve to join their union (Aydintasbas 2009). Numerous commentators referred to this blowup as giving Turks a “lost sense of pride,” even comparing his performance to that of Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe at the United Nations (Aydintasbas 2009). As in Putin’s case, the public perceived Erdogan as expressing the anger of the nation. This transgressive behavior helped then to reinforce the notion of identification between ruler and nation. Erdogan’s anger was not just personal; he was standing in for the nation as a whole. Almost a decade later, shortly before the presidential election in summer 2018, supporters of Erdoğan were still referring to this Davos performance as a marker of Erdoğan’s great qualities of leadership and state and his abilities as the only man who could protect and defend the country from its enemies, including the corrupt, humiliating West.

### **Building identification with the nation through masculine performances/metaphors**

These masculinist, angry performances give Putin and Erdogan an opportunity to sidestep more nuanced ideological questions, which both of them have said they want to avoid. Instead they build their own personal identification with their respective nations. They do this by using transgressive masculine performances to underline their democratic and autocratic connections to the people.

In his first campaign for public office (spring 2000), Vladimir Putin built his appeal to become Russia’s second elected president (after Boris Yeltsin) on a non-campaign in which he insisted that he was above politics, while appealing to veterans with speeches about defense of the Motherland as “a man’s affair” [*muzhskoe delo*] and speeches to women rejecting public debates on the grounds that he did not need to engage in public debates on which was better “Tampax or Snickers.” He also told potential voters that he did not want anyone to make “a sweet, syrupy image” of him as a candidate (cited in Wood 2016, p. 8).

In fall 2004, Putin spoke to the nation at the time of the Beslan school crisis, quoting Stalin and revealing paradoxically a victim mentality (“we showed weakness and the weak get beaten”), combined with assumptions of grandeur (he referred numerous times to the “might” of Russia), but above all, a view of the Motherland as the object of predators. The goal of those foreign powers, Putin insisted, was “to tear off a fatty piece” [*otorvat’ ot nas kusok pozhirnee*] (Putin 2004; Ken 2004). In this famous speech



he positioned himself as the strong man who would not show weakness and would not let others show it.

Erdoğan's nationalist masculinity plays into a xenophobia that has grown steadily in his time in office. He often refers to his supporters or the nation in general as "my people," implying a patriarchal connection between the leader as head of the nation and the father as head of the household. Erdoğan draws a clear connection between the virtuous real people and himself while separating the *Others* (the elite) from *the people*. In an attempt to accentuate the divide between his support base and himself, on the one hand, and upper-middle class, urban Istanbulites, on the other, he lambasted the latter during the Gezi protests:

According to them we don't understand politics. According to them we don't understand art, theatre, cinema, and poetry. According to them we are uneducated, ignorant, the lower class who has to be content with what is being given, needy; meaning we are a group of negroes.... In this country, there are Black Turks and White Turks [i.e., nonelites and elites]. Your brother Tayyip belongs to the Black Turks [the non-elites]. (Erdoğan 2013b)

Not only does he refer to the pious majority as the Black Turks to underline their historical marginalization under the previous Republic, but he also appeals to them by portraying himself as one of them, an underdog, irrespective of the political and personal power he has amassed.

In 2014 in the midst of corruption charges against his family members and the government, Erdoğan made special efforts to portray himself as an authentic leader. "We are the people. Who are you?" (Biz halkız. Siz kimsiniz?), he asked in an aggressive tone, drawing a direct connection between the people and himself as synonymous with the nation (Erdoğan 2014). Instead of addressing the corruption charges, Erdoğan challenged his critics by questioning their credibility and authenticity. By asking "who are you," Erdoğan often criticizes his opponents, including intellectuals and political opponents, as a way of establishing hierarchies between himself as the hero of the people and the allegedly disengaged elites. In Ottoman times *kabadayis*, tough guys claiming to be responsible for protecting women and the wellbeing of the neighborhood from outside bullies, often used this exact expression to start a fight. The *kabadayi* masculinity has survived, although transformed in Turkish culture today (Çetin 2015, p. 57). Often young and unmarried men claim to perform *kabadayilik* (bravado) by protecting the neighborhood and women's honor. Thus, by appropriating this phrase, Erdoğan suggests that he is the only one who cares about the people. This questioning of others' identity and authenticity in a *kabadayi* manner—"Who are you?"—positions Erdoğan as dominant over his critics, closing the discursive space for others to respond.

## The gendered performance of nativism

To bolster their claim that they are chosen by the people, populist leaders turn to a set of ideas that are usually condensed under the single term "nativism." But nativism has

multiple components, each with its own gendered underpinnings. At its core, nativism rests on a distinction between “the people” and “the others,” including elites and minorities (sexual, ethnic, religious, and political). As is well known, the populist leader must define the nation by casting out some people and groups as “others.” He creates a hierarchical relation between himself and the nation, we argue, by using gendered performances that emasculate or hypermasculinize the Other. The elites are often feminized, even “sissified,” i.e., identified by their not-male or derogatory female qualities. Other groups outside the “real people”—usually historically disenfranchised groups such as ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities—are painted with the hyper-masculine brush of dangerous masculinity (they are ready to rape and maim the real people and especially the women of the real people). As populists engage in constant work to demarcate who is included in and excluded from the nation, the resulting antagonism between the regime’s supporters and the opposition serves to strengthen the leader’s hold on power. Far from discrediting populist leaders for their part in dividing and weakening the nation, this polarization gives them more credibility as “real” or essential while also shoring up the regime’s power through the unconditional support by the ideal citizens (*makbul vatandas*).

Neither Putin nor Erdogan resorted to nativist nationalism at the beginnings of their time in office. They, in fact, made very Western-oriented, liberal claims about social reform and commitment to democracy. Initially they both rejected formal ideology in favor of a more pragmatic approach to ruling. However, in rejecting ideology, they left open the door for nativism, which has served more as a Gestalt than a formal program and which can therefore more easily infiltrate and penetrate a party program.

While hints of nativism can be seen during the early parts of their rule, it came into full force during and after the protests of 2011–2012 in Russia (the so-called Bolotnaya protests) and 2013 in Turkey (the Gezi protests). At that time and, we argue, in direct response to those pressures, Putin and Erdogan both chose to intensify their masculine performances. Now more than ever they positioned themselves as the masculine saviors of the (by implication, feminized) nation under threat.

The protests in Russia took many forms, but at their core, one key aspect was a contest over masculinity between Vladimir Putin as the macho leader and the opposition, which strove to show him in a feminized light. In part this occurred because of Putin’s mistake in characterizing the white ribbons adopted by the protesters as condoms. In doing so, he both sexualized and demeaned the protesters. The response was swift: protesters now showed Putin wreathed in condoms, attempting lift off as a condom (“Let’s Go,” the about-to-be-airborne condom-shaped balloons announced in imitation of the famous Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin), and sporting a small white condom on his lapel. “We are not sheep,” protesters’ signs read. Rock musicians sang songs about demeaned masculinity (“Putin is coming to Kholuevo”; “Our Nuthouse Votes for Putin”).<sup>3</sup>

Putin responded to this by ramping up his own masculine imagery, linking his role as president-to-be (he was about to be re-elected for his third time) with savior of the nation. On February 23, 2012, the holiday colloquially known as “men’s day”

<sup>3</sup> “K nam v Kholuevo priezhaet Putin” (Putin is coming to Kholuevo) (Oct. 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNJoPViDwrY>. “Nash durdom golosuet za Putina” (Our Nuthouse votes for Putin) (Oct. 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nARQdxIYMc>.

(formally, Defender of the Fatherland Day), just nine days before the March 4 elections, Putin met with his supporters in the largest stadium in Moscow. The Moscow Mayor, Sergei Sobyenin, accented Putin's personal connection to the nation when he introduced him to the crowd as "a real man, a leader, a person of word and deed" [*nastoaishchim muzhikom, lider, chelovek slova i dela*] (Pavlova 2012). Calling those present "true defenders of our Fatherland," Putin insisted: "We won't allow anybody to interfere in our internal affairs because we have our own will, which has helped us to be victorious at all times." Implying that those who organized protests were in the pay of foreigners, he went on: "Please, let nobody run abroad and betray their fatherland. We call on everyone to unite around our country, those who see Russia as their own motherland, who are ready to protect her" (Halpin 2012). In this way Putin distinguished between the loyal defenders—"we are the victory people" [*my s vami narod-pobeditel'*], he called them—and those who run away. He drew on a feminized image of the nation ("motherland" [*rodina*]) and masculinized the defenders by quoting the Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov:

We will die at Moscow  
 As our brothers died  
 And to die we promised  
 And our oath of loyalty we kept

When the nation-wide Gezi Park protests erupted in spring 2013, commentators on Turkish politics expected Erdoğan to compromise with the protestors. Contrary to expectations, Erdoğan chose to rely on tough masculine rhetoric to handle the situation. At the group meeting of his party in Parliament on June 11, 2013, during the ongoing protests, he asserted, "Now, they say the Prime Minister is so tough. What do you expect? Am I supposed to *bend over* [emphasis ours] before a couple of wanderers and ask them kindly to quit protesting? If you think that I am tough, sorry, but Tayyip Erdoğan won't change!" (Erdoğan 2013a). The symbolic meaning of Erdoğan's response implies one aspect of the metaphoric phallic power his populist leadership rests on. He will not be the one to bend over (assume a non-dominant sexual position). He further sought to delegitimize the protests when he reported that girls, as he called them, were sitting on men's laps in Gezi Park (Korkman and Açıköz 2013), alluding to gender norms about regulating unmarried young women's and girls' sexuality. In this way Erdoğan conveyed that he is the masculine father whose authority should not be challenged and who would seek to discipline his daughters for socializing with men outside the family.

The most recent, failed coup attempt of July 2016, when 242 Turkish people died, also provided ample opportunities for Erdoğan to reiterate the qualities of the real people and its others, using a distinct form of conservative, nationalist masculinity. Commending the Turkish people for apparently preventing the coup attempt, Erdoğan stated, "My nation is a veteran. The fact that the people prevented the putsch at the expense of their lives shows how important it is to have a consciousness about the idea of holy war [*gaza*]. Heroes of my nation acted like the heroes of the War of Independence [of 1923] on that night" (Erdoğan 2017). Erdoğan here draws a parallel between the "real people" and a glorious band of (obviously male) soldiers from the past. On

another occasion, he recalled what happened on the day of the failed coup by saying, “If they have tanks, my people have faith.... Two hundred and forty-eight of my citizens ran to martyrdom shouting ‘Allah, Allah.’ What could be more beautiful than being the President of such a nation?” and similarly, he noted, “On that night, my nation scared fear and killed death” (Erdogan 2017). By invoking an idea of a brave military nation, ready to sacrifice their lives to protect the state and their leader from the internal and external enemies, Erdoğan’s glorification of the real people is embedded in masculinist ideas of heroism, militarism, and sacrifice.

## Father of the conservative nation

Populist leaders often behave differently when they are on the road to power (attacking corruption from their position as outsiders) versus when they have actually attained that power (Rupnik 2007; Müller 2016). When Putin and Erdogan were striving to gain office, they tended to rely on masculine, transgressive, and aggressive behavior to demonstrate their outsider status. Once in power they still exhibited transgressive power but have sought to moderate their appearances by turning to a more conservative gender order to help them hold the center.

## The conservative turn

Once Putin returned to power after four years of Dmitry Medvedev’s rule as president and after the protests of 2011–2012, he began to rely on a right-wing, conservative ideology based on the idea of Russia as a “besieged fortress” in domestic policy (Lipman 2015, p. 110) and an increasingly “rogue state” in foreign policy (Baev 2015, p. 69). Until that moment, a word search of all his speeches reveals, Putin had never used the term “conservatism” to mean a desirable political movement. In January 2010, for example, he argued that any political system needs “a certain dose of conservatism,” but here he meant a resistance to change, since he went on to say that “a political system should not wobble like a runny aspic whenever anyone touches it” (cited in Wood 2015, p. 108). In his annual address on December 12, 2013, however, he lambasted “so-called tolerance” as “sexless and infertile” and fundamentally unnecessary for Russia with “its great history and culture.” In its place he defended conservative values as defending society against “moving backward and down toward chaotic darkness” (Putin 2013).

His new conservatism contained a number of gendered elements, especially gender polarization (men and women should be different so they will make more babies) and “protection” of the population, especially minors, from any teaching or discussion of “non-traditional sexual relations,” which is usually interpreted to mean LGBTQ relations.<sup>4</sup> “Western ideology” and gay pride parades are directly linked by Russian propaganda to suggest that Gay Europe (shorted to Gayropa in Russian) is threatening to come to Russia and undermine the country’s “historic” values (Novitskaya 2017;

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<sup>4</sup> The literature on Russian conservative ideology and so-called biopower (the politics of issues relating to population, the family, and gender) is enormous, including especially Sperling 2014; Stella and Nartova 2015; Makarychev 2018; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017; Riabov and Riabova 2014; Rotkirch et al. 2007.

Edenborg 2019). In addition, Putin has also displayed an ongoing and intense emphasis on homosocial bonding with male veterans, with Russian Orthodox priests and laymen, and with transgressive male groups like the bikers' club, the Night Wolves. He has also made common cause with the Russian Orthodox Church headed by Patriarch Kirill who has said that same-sex marriages are "a very dangerous sign of the Apocalypse" ("Russian Patriarch Says Gay Marriage 'Sign Of Apocalypse,'" 2013). Putin has made a special effort to reach out to other, more conservative and moderately religious governments, including Turkey and Iran. "Protecting" Russians against "pedophiles" in the Sochi Olympics in 2014, Putin positioned himself as both the father/savior of the nation and the one who would cast out those without the "correct," heterosexual masculinity.

Erdogan's conservative turn seems to have begun roughly in 2011, although he was using the term "conservative democracy" as early as 2004 (Tepe 2005, p. 75). According to his secularist critics, Erdoğan began to revert to his Islamist roots in 2011. At that time, he called for raising a religious youth, restricting abortions, and encouraging women to have at least three children. His Islamist masculinity based on traditional gender norms coheres with and complements his religious nationalism. Erdoğan has rebranded Turkish nationalism to include Islamic themes in recent years. When Turkey's armed forces took over the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in Syria in spring 2018, Erdoğan presented the victory as "Islam's last army" in a "jihad" (holy war). The overtly religious rhetoric used to describe the cross-border operations of a staunchly secular military force was compounded by Erdoğan's increasingly Islamic nationalist discourse that he uses to heighten a sense of enemies. He often calls on the Turkish people to protect their country from the penetration and attacks of the West and their domestic collaborators. Erdoğan's religious nationalism relies on militarized masculinity and fears about penetration by internal and external enemies. His populist nativism expects women to bear and raise the next generation of loyal people and men to uphold the nation's honor, suggesting that the wellbeing and honor of the family, nation and state go hand in hand. His nationalist Islamist masculinity maternalizes women and militarizes men.

The Turkish case illustrates that, with his Islamic conservative and nationalist populist discourse, Erdoğan and his counterparts in Europe share this attempt to rejuvenate a past based on a clear-cut gender order. The gender order Erdoğan seeks to establish is based on a binary idea of the public and the private. Erdoğan sets different goals for men and women of the nation. Piety and militarism are constitutive of the gender order he envisions. His praise of "the real people" for being ready to sacrifice themselves and to become martyrs or veterans for the well-being of the state and the nation indicates that the ideal of sacrifice should be accomplished by the men of the nation. Women, on the other hand, are seen first and foremost as mothers of the nation who should reproduce the next generation of pious Muslims. Erdoğan repeatedly mentions that "A woman who rejects motherhood, who refrains from being around the house, however successful her work life is, is deficient, is incomplete" (Erdogan 2016). Obviously, in this traditional gender order, men are imagined as public actors and military subjects, while women are responsible for the reproduction of loyalists.

The Turkish government's increasingly oppressive treatment of the LGBTQ community especially since 2013 also rests on an intention to establish an order based on a rigid gender binary. The police crackdown on LGBTQ parades since 2015, justified by

the claim that the dates of the parade coincided with the holy month of Ramadan and that they went against society's religious values, is a clear sign that divergent bodies and sexual identities are not welcome under the populist regime. This longing for a traditional, heteronormative gender order represents the populist leader's attempt to reduce alleged anxieties about chaos and insecurities that supposedly come with diversity, pluralism, and sexual and gender equality.

### **Performing direct masculine rule and undermining mediating institutions**

Like their counterparts in other parts of Europe, Putin and Erdoğan have gradually undermined and appropriated formal democratic institutions through constitutional changes, limiting the freedom of the media, influencing the judiciary, and imprisoning opponents. These changes have led to limiting criticism, accountability, and transparency. As the populist leaders began to face opposition in 2011 and 2013 respectively, they came to rely more than ever on personalistic styles of rule in order to suppress the opposition and reassure their support base that it is not the various institutions that can maintain the well-being of the nation but the sincere and strong-willed leaders. While Putin and Erdoğan's patriarchal claim to protect and decide for the nation has been well received by their supporters, it troubles their opponents. The feeling of frustration at this one-man rule has grown so much that dissenting individuals and well-educated professionals have been leaving Russia since 2014 and Turkey since 2016 in growing numbers. While dissenters find it increasingly hard to see a future for themselves, supporters are pleased to see that their strong-willed leaders are dismantling the ancient regimes in both countries (Çağaptay 2018).

For Vladimir Putin, like several of the Romanov tsars, nationalism has meant establishing a strong state with a direct connection between ruler and ruled (Cannady and Kubicek 2014; Wortman 1995, 2000). He has demonstrated this personal connection by holding marathon three- to four-hour radio and television broadcasts of question and answer with voters known as "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin" on an annual basis (Schuler 2015). In addition, he has significantly undermined a wide range of institutions mediating between president and people (Fish 2005). Since 2007 when Putin chose to step down in accord with the Russian Constitution that prohibited a third term, he has made a particular show of being "father of the nation," an image that had been occasionally been used before but was now mobilized in a major way so that he could seem to be the senior adviser to the younger Dmitry Medvedev (Wood 2008). Since his return to power in 2012, his supporters have emphasized the ways that Putin himself is identified with the nation. As two of Putin's advisers quipped in 2014 when Russia and Putin himself came under verbal attack for the annexation of Crimea, "there is no Russia today if there is no Putin" and "any attack on Putin is an attack on Russia" ("No Putin, No Russia" 2014).

Similarly, Erdoğan has sought to undermine democratic institutions by controlling the conventional and social media, reducing the role of the parliament, ruling the country with decrees, encroaching on civil rights and liberties, including freedom of speech and property rights, and establishing and extending the State of Emergency. The list of enemies, including but not limited to critical journalists, academics, opposition party leaders and members, ordinary citizens, international financial institutions, and the Western governments, is so exhaustive that one might think that Erdoğan is engaged in a constant political warfare. His

Janus-faced masculinity has been quite instrumental in justifying bypassing of institutions. Following the military coup attempt in 2016, he repeatedly argued that the real target was not Erdoğan himself but the Turkish nation, that the West and their domestic collaborators are jealous of its thriving economy. While this rhetoric of enemies surrounding the nation allows Erdoğan to demonize everyone except his supporters, it also reinforces his image as the ultimate protector of the nation, allowing him to justify the suspension of democratic institutions.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have shown three principal forms of masculine performance that build the connection between populism and authoritarianism. Putin and Erdoğan have established themselves as the unrivaled, authentic leaders by creating a direct masculine link between their personae and the people, one that relies on working-class, male biography; on bullying; and on paternalism. They have also sought to create a conservative gender order based on heteronormative, dimorphic society in which men and women have very different roles, while LGBTQ individuals and groups are marginalized. And they have established themselves as the saviors of their nations for whom intermediate institutions are only a hindrance.

These different aspects of governance can be seen to be linked through the person of the ruler whose legitimacy does not have to be proven because his masculinity stands in for and demonstrates his dominance. The ruler—especially the neo-tsar and neo-sultan (Putin and Erdoğan)—emboldens the latent populist sentiments in the general population by making pronouncements about the “real people” who are shown to be brave and masculine versus those individuals and groups that are cowardly and emasculated. Others are rhetorically and sometimes literally pushed outside the heteronormative bounds of citizenry. At the same time, he (intentional pronoun) undermines national (and often international) institutions by claiming to go directly to the people who understand him through his direct communication and his unstated but felt, direct emotional link to them.

The result of their reliance on gendered signals in these three areas, we argue, is to create a Gestalt, an ineffable whole, that is larger than the (often contradictory) parts. At the core of this populism is not only an apparent commitment to “the people” in contradiction and in opposition to an elite (as populism is usually defined [e.g., Mudde 2004]), but also an obsession with the demonstration of power in a masculine leader, the reaffirmation of coherence in a population whose identity is affirmed in a heterosexual and hierarchical fashion, and a direct relationship between leader and population that relies on that very masculinity as both a form of communication and also as a kind of social glue. Masculinity thus performs a kind of work that is below the level of formal ideology. However, it is anything but “thin-centered” (Mudde 2004). Rather, it works in a thick fashion to infuse a number of layers of the populist Gestalt.

The challenge, of course, at the end of the day is that this Janus-faced masculinity must continually be performed to prove itself. Populism and authoritarianism based on such masculinity must seek enemies, internal and external, who can be dominated. When those external enemies are also in the grip of a masculinist set of ideologies used to justify their very existence, the danger of conflict and war increases exponentially.

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