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Mixed signals: what Putin says about gender equality

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing wisdom among scholars of gender in Russia is that Vladimir Putin – as Russia's "strongman" president – has become an agent of traditionalism. Some political scientists, often without a gendered lens, have argued that Putin is not so powerful, compelled to deploy various tactics and ideologies to balance competing interests among elites and retain support from the general public. We systematically analyze Putin's statements about gender in two decades of his annual speeches (1999–2020) to better understand how Putin rules. Coding Putin's remarks on a spectrum from promoting to opposing gender equality, we find that there has been no shift toward an explicit traditionalism, but rather, an expansion of the gender-stereotypical/Soviet views that have dominated Putin's pronouncements all along. We argue that Putin's diverse remarks across the spectrum of gender (in)equality constitute an important part of his efforts to balance diverse elite interests and enlist mass support.

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Introduction

Over the last decade it has become commonplace in Russian studies circles to divide the Putin era into political periods based on ideology, with the most significant shift being the regime's "conservative turn" following the wave of popular protests over widespread electoral fraud in 2011–2012 (e.g. Laruelle 2013; Evans 2015; Bluhm and Brand 2018). Gender has been seen as central to this shift, with scholars and commentators alike characterizing Putin's attitude toward gender equality, along with LGBTQ+ rights, as retrograde (Moss 2017; du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy 2018; Andreeva, Drozhashchikh, and Nelaeva 2020; Gradskova 2020). His views are seen as either in sync with or bending to the will of the essentialist "anti-gender" attitudes of the Russian Orthodox Church, or (at best) as a pragmatic symbolic means of asserting a great Russian civilizational nationalism in opposition to the overly liberal and morally lax Western Europe (Foxall 2019; Usanova 2020). These conservative ideas are also seen as becoming more central to Russian official discourse and intensifying over time in concert with the growing authoritarianism of the regime (Gradskova 2020).

Policy changes since 2011 support these claims of a conservative and gendered ideological turn. Presaged by the maternity (family) capital program announced in 2006 (Rivkin-Fish 2010; Chandler 2013, 115–118; Bluhm and Brand 2018, 235), such policies include restrictions on abortion starting in 2011, and the 2017 partial decriminalization of domestic battery. The regime has also prosecuted feminist activists, from the arrest and jailing of several members of Pussy Riot in 2012, to the labeling of the domestic violence support groups ANNA (in 2016) and Nasiliu.net ("No to violence") (in 2020)

as foreign agents. In short, in the wake of the Soviet Union's state-sponsored rhetoric of women's emancipation, Putin's regime has appeared to embrace an anti-egalitarian perspective that encourages women to prioritize their heteronormative roles as mothers and homemakers and to eschew the dangerous if seductive promise of equality in the home, the workplace, and the polity that feminism offers.

At the same time, political science analysis of Russia's regime dynamics has become increasingly focused on the way Putin rules within a complicated system that belies the narrative of a single-minded strongman (Ledeneva 2013; Hale 2014; Johnson 2016; Treisman 2018; Sakwa 2020; Frye 2021). In this literature, the fraudulent Duma elections in 2011 and subsequent protests reveal the regime's need to not just coordinate elites, but also enlist the masses in managed elections (Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2013). By 2020, the Russian government was generally seen to be authoritarian, operating through informal practices and institutions, with elements of both personalism and populism as strategies to balance competing interests among the elites and masses alike.

The "strongman Putin" model would suggest that policies of top priority to the regime, such as the maternity (family) capital or the recent constitutional reform, are typically introduced and managed by Putin (Treisman 2018). This model is evidenced by Putin making speeches indicating his policy preferences, and then the relevant ministry, department, or agency heads working to interpret and implement those preferences (Schenk 2018). The alternative regime dynamics model captures policies that are not top priorities for the regime – these include all gender-related issues aside from those touching on demography – which emerge either from the interests of other elites, their constituencies, or broader popular pressures, and then are passed up to Putin, who decides whether to endorse them in his speeches. As such, scholars have found that the regime may be "selectively responsive" on policy issues (Rogov and Anayev 2018). This understanding of how the regime works suggests that Putin's statements may serve as a response or signal to elites or other constituencies within the population even when they do not result in policy change. But for the most part, this literature is gender-blind, not considering how statements about gender could be part of these regime dynamics.

To understand better how Putin rules, including understanding the shift in the regime's gender ideology, this article examines what Putin has said about gender equality in his annual speeches aimed at a general domestic audience over the first two decades of his rule. Rather than drawing selectively on examples of more extreme gender statements or from Putin's occasional speeches to narrower audiences, our approach is comprehensive and systematic, developing coding categories and then analyzing all the content of five speeches that Putin typically delivers annually to the nation: (1) his speech to the Federal Assembly (his "state of the union" address); (2) his New Year's Eve and (3) International Women's Day speeches; and his participation in (4) the annual Big Press Conference and (5) Direct Line live call-in show. We build upon the regime dynamics literature, incorporating a nuanced understanding of what Putin appears to be doing in these speeches when he makes comments that express an attitude toward gender equality and/or touch on gender issues and relevant policies. We do not assume that we can know what Putin believes or that what he says reveals his beliefs, but rather, that when he speaks he is selectively responding to various sets of elites and other constituencies. In other words, we are asking: What is the variety of messages that Putin has been communicating about gender equality to his various constituencies at these events, and how have those messages changed over time?

While we recognize instances outside of these speeches when Putin has made egregious anti-feminist remarks,¹ we find that his pronouncements in his annual speeches run the gamut from seemingly liberal feminist to mildly traditionalist, eschewing the "anti-gender" rhetoric of arch-conservatives when speaking about gender equality. They land closer to the middle, either in the "neutral" zone, or in what we describe as a gender-stereotypical or "Soviet" attitudinal territory that may emphasize women's particularly "womanly" qualities, but does so alongside a commitment to the notion that women are and should be creatures of the public sphere of paid employment and politics, as well as of the private sphere of hearth and home. We find that while there has been

a quantifiable shift away from statements embracing gender equality over the course of Putin's rule, there has been no accompanying shift toward an explicit conservatism; rather, we document the expansion of a gender-stereotypical/Soviet framework that has dominated Putin's pronouncements on gender-related issues all along.

Given Russia's gender-conservative turn in state policy, especially after 2011, the near absence of Putin's rhetorical endorsement of strong conservatism in gender roles and policy positions in his annual speeches aimed at broad domestic audiences appears puzzling, especially if one adopts the "strongman Putin" model. Why would an autocrat fail to use his powerful position to repeatedly rhetorically endorse the gender-conservative policies that his regime has adopted? Gender norms of masculinity have played a key role in his legitimization strategy (Sperling 2015), and Putin's careful management of these issues seems out of step with his persona as a decisive, even uncompromising politician who brooks no opposition.

To address these apparent contradictions, we suggest that the variation in Putin's communications on gender equality reflects his understanding of the public as a collection of constituents embracing both liberal and conservative norms, and that his varied communications should be understood as signaling to that diverse public, as well as to other institutions, officials, and elites whose potentially contradictory interests must be kept in balance in order for Putin to remain in power.

Analytical framework: Russian gender ideologies

Approaches to gender equality vary in any regime in multiple ways, but most obviously they vary along a spectrum that runs from feminist to anti-feminist. As described by Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2016, 1), these approaches are based on gender role ideologies, the sets of beliefs people hold about "how the roles of women and men are and should be shaped by sex." We argue that, in any country, each of the gender ideologies along this spectrum will have various sponsors and constituencies inside and outside of the state, from autonomous groups such as feminist NGOs and state-created organizations, to elites within the state who can use the ideology to justify public policy.

In the following, we build on the literature on gender in Russia to develop coding categories specific to Russia for our analysis of Putin's speeches. Each of the five gender categories we describe indicates a different position on gender equality along a spectrum: anti-gender/ultra-conservative; traditionalist; stereotypical/Soviet; neutral; and promoting gender equality. We also indicate what the existing literature suggests regarding the constituencies who would be receptive to statements in each of the gender ideology categories.

Traditional values: anti-gender/ultra-conservative vs. traditional gender ideologies

Putin's Russia since 2012 is commonly described as embracing or aiming to restore "traditional values," particularly with regard to the family (e.g. Pecherskaya 2012; Moss 2017; du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy 2018; Andreeva, Drozhashchikh, and Nelaeva 2020; Gradskova 2020). In this gender ideology, the family, assumed to be heterosexual, is founded on patriarchal principles, entailing "a sexual division of labor" (Doğangün 2020, 269). In other words, underlying the concept of the "traditional family" is a strong component of gender essentialism – a belief in biologically driven sex roles that presuppose gender complementarity rather than equality (Gradskova 2020). Proponents of this view thus prefer a "natural" division of labor in the family, as opposed to equally shared responsibilities (Bluhm and Brand 2018, 230). Adherents of traditional values endorse addressing Russia's "demographic problem" by increasing the birthrate among ethnic Russians (rather than through immigration or reducing mortality) (Rivkin-Fish 2010, 723–724) in the context of a heteronormative family (Pecherskaya 2012). Traditional values policies may thus reflect an antipathy to abortion and divorce as "anti-family" social trends (Muravyeva 2014; Wilkinson 2014; du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy 2018).

In arguing that “traditional values” is the ideology being adopted by the state, scholars often point to Putin’s 2012 and 2013 speeches (Laruelle 2013, 2; Bluhm and Brand 2018; Usanova 2020). Evans (2015) argues that by 2013, Putin’s regime was openly endorsing an ideology of conservatism, contrasting Russia’s “traditional” values regarding sexuality to Western European and American values regarded as excessively liberal and morally corrupt. Temkina (2020) likewise argues that the “main force behind [gender] conservatism in Russia is the state, not civil society,” and that the “right-wing turn has been orchestrated from the top,” and Moss (2017) agrees that “the government, the ruling party, the oligarchs, the state church, the state educational and scholarly establishment, and the media all speak with one voice.” By contrast, Bluhm and Brand (2018, 224) believe these values have been only partially adopted by the Putin administration, and are “contested within the elite.”

Scholarly opinion is also divided on the degree to which the Russian public endorses traditional values. Muravyeva (2014) argues (based on public opinion surveys) that Russian society, though homophobic, generally holds a “rather modern attitude toward family values,” accepting abortion, divorce, and sex before marriage as facts of life. As Nelaeva, Andreeva, and Drozhashchikh (2020, 4) point out, “very often the family relations and intimate practices of people run counter” to the “heteronormative ideal of a family,” and the “traditionalist” norm of registered marriage in Russia is on the wane. Likewise, Gradskova (2020) argues that the ideas endorsed by organizations promoting “women’s rights, family planning, and LGBT rights . . . had support in many parts of the population” and that “the new official agenda on ‘traditional values’ could not have developed without strengthening the authoritarian pressure over these actors.”

We argue that the concept of “traditional values,” especially regarding gender relations, covers too much territory, contributing to this lack of consensus. Part of the problem is that gender and sexuality are conflated, and while these do intersect, such as when homosexuality is regulated to uphold traditional gender roles, feminist and queer theorists hold these to be analytically distinct structures (Weldon 2008; Rubin 2011). Focusing in this article on the status and roles of women and men, we identify two different prescriptive gender ideologies on the traditional end of the spectrum, with different constituencies, even as Putin’s occasional use of the language of “traditional values” may signal to both of them. Of the two ideologies, we label the more extreme one – meaning more nationalist and explicitly religious – as “anti-gender/ultra-conservative.”

This ideological strand emerged in Russia following the appointment of Patriarch Kirill as head of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2009 and the blossoming of Russian Orthodox parent groups in the mid 2000s (Höjdestrand 2017; Luehrmann 2019; Usanova 2020). Fundamentally, those who adopt this perspective believe that the (heterosexual, multi-child-producing) family is in crisis due to laxity of morals, as manifested in abortion, pre-marital sex, and divorce (Pecherskaya 2012; Muravyeva 2014). However, moving beyond a traditional family values agenda, they also take a stand against what they see as Western intervention in Russian values, especially with regard to sexuality and gender (Höjdestrand 2017). Their ideology is anti-gender in that – along with the anti-gender movement spreading across Europe – they oppose what they call “gender ideology” and explicitly reject the feminist idea that gender roles are socially constructed (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Bluhm and Brand 2018).

In addition to support from the Russian Orthodox Church leadership, the anti-gender/ ultra-conservative adopters of traditional family values are backed by a handful of highly placed Russian elites, including a billionaire banker (Konstantin Malofeev), a close ally of Putin’s who headed the Russian railway system (Vladimir Yakunin), a small number of academics, and Senator (formerly Duma Deputy) Elena Mizulina (Bluhm and Brand 2018, 224–227). They also receive the support of Orthodox Church-adjacent paramilitary groups such as Sorok Sorokov (du Quenoy and Dubrovskiy 2018).

Over the last decade, Russian proponents of an anti-gender/ultra-conservative perspective have advocated a variety of specific ideas and policies. Among these are pronatalism and a strict opposition to abortion (Bluhm and Brand 2018, 237). Most proponents of the ultra-conservative position believe women should not work (or only work part-time) outside the home, leaving the breadwinning to men (Luehrmann 2019). Likewise, they generally do not support payments to women for opting out of the paid labor force in order to care for children, preferring a more significant, long-

term support strategy for families over the one-time “maternity capital” payment that Putin’s government initiated in 2007 (Bluhm and Brand 2018, 232, 236). Beyond state financial support for large families, the ultra-conservative vision largely prefers that the state stay out of the private sphere of the heterosexual family. They therefore assailed the creation of Russian “juvenile justice” and foster care systems, seeing them as embodiments of Western influence, and supported the regime’s decriminalization of some forms of domestic battery in 2017 (Sherstneva 2014; Højdestrand 2017, 48; Bluhm and Brand 2018, 239).

We label the second, less extreme gender ideology associated with traditional values as “traditionalist.” Its adherents support pronatalism and “traditional” heterosexual families. As a means to increase the population, they favor limiting abortion and promoting more than one child per family through Russia’s maternity capital program, without endorsing harsh bans on abortion or questioning whether women should work outside the home. Constituents for this position include some of the Russian Orthodox Church leadership (especially before Patriarch Kirill’s appointment in 2009), moderate religious adherents, and segments of the population whose beliefs are somewhat conservative and increasingly anti-Western (especially after the “return” of Crimea in 2014 and European sanctions on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine).

The Soviet gender regime

The literature on gender in Russia points to the Soviet legacy of women’s emancipation that has its own particular gender ideology with regard to women’s and men’s roles in household labor, childrearing, and work outside the home (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2005). By the late Soviet period, the Soviet conception of gender regarded sex-based hierarchies as unfair, while holding that the characteristics of maleness and femaleness were linked to biology, with women “distinguished as a specific category of citizen” (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2005, 99). The “Soviet” perspective thus entails stereotypical, essentialist views about men’s and women’s roles, inclinations, and abilities, particularly with regard to childrearing, which is seen as typically but not exclusively women’s responsibility – in coexistence with a somewhat egalitarian view that women are fully capable of public sphere accomplishments, except in jobs that are seen as too physically demanding or dangerous to their reproductive health, or that would unduly interfere with their motherhood duties (Temkina 2020). Motherhood (unlike fatherhood, for men) remained the most important of women’s roles in the Soviet conception, and was believed to shape a stereotypical set of women’s character traits, such as “sensitivity, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, softness, [and] emotion,” which, in turn, informed women’s behavior at work and elsewhere in public life (Iankova 1978, 123; Markowitz 1993, 181).

While these two sides of the Soviet gender ideology are contradictory in many ways, we argue that they are best seen as one distinct gender ideology that we term “stereotypical/Soviet,” as together they embody the messy compromise of the late Soviet period. Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2005, 109) suggest that this contradictory ideology that includes biological essentialism should be categorized as “neotraditionalism,” but we argue that there is an important difference between stereotypical/Soviet and traditionalist (and anti-gender/ultra-conservative) gender ideologies, because the former is descriptive (claiming that women and men are shaped by their physiologies) while the latter two are explicitly prescriptive (roles *should* be traditional and based on those essential physical qualities).

Constituencies for statements of this approach to gender equality include those who were raised under Soviet rule with similar expectations, and the “blue-collar majority” (Evans 2015, 411) who expect Soviet-style state-provided benefits and tend to be more socially conservative than the urban middle class (Evans 2015, 412, 419), as well as pragmatically minded elites, particularly those who staff the social service bureaucracies. There is evidence that the views of a large proportion of Russian citizens identify with the “Soviet/stereotypical” gender ideology. Over 60% of respondents in a 2019 public opinion survey believed that Russian gender attitudes overall consisted of some mix of patriarchal and feminist views rather than one or the other (Skorniakova et al. 2020, 3). Similarly,

a 2018 poll indicated Russians held mixed views on the statement: “A husband’s job is to earn money, while a wife’s job is to run a home and raise a family,” with a slim majority of respondents (54%) fully or somewhat agreeing, 23% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and 20% disagreeing somewhat or fully (Levada-Center 2018).

Gender equality

Russia has not been described in the academic literature as a state that aims to promote gender equality as the centerpiece of its gender ideology, but some scholars have seen elements of liberal feminism in the Russian state’s approach. For example, Morell and Gradskova (2018, 12) see gender ideology under “postsocialism” more generally as being “shaped by both impulses towards more gender equality and the renaturalisation/retraditionalisation of gender norms.”

To define the “gender equality” ideological category in the Russian context, we start by drawing on feminist political science more broadly, where gender equality has been described as a situation in which “all women and men have similar opportunities to participate in politics, the economy, and society; their roles are equally valued; neither suffers from gender-based disadvantage; and both are considered free and autonomous beings with dignity and rights” (Htun and Weldon 2010, 213). The ideological category embracing these principles is prescriptive, arguing that differences between men and women are socially constructed (“gender”) rather than biologically based (“sex”), and that biological differences should not constrain a person’s roles, behaviors, and choices. Pro-gender equality statements and policies should move society closer to equality of opportunity in all areas of life, encouraging women to be actively engaged in the public sphere (paid work, politics, culture), and men to increase their involvement in household labor and child-rearing.

The primary Russian legislation in this vein that has been proposed in the last two decades has concerned the implementation of the Constitution’s provision for equal opportunities for men and women, and comprehensive reform on domestic violence. Efforts to accomplish both of these changes have failed, but there have been small gender equality victories such as a 2011 maternity leave reform that made it easier for women to be compensated if they were illegally fired while pregnant; a 2013 reform that made it illegal to specify the age, race, faith, marital status, sex, or physical appearance of job applicants, except for ads pertaining to the list of hundreds of professions that were at that time closed to women (Sundstrom, Sperling, and Sayoglu 2019, 229–230); the brief 2016 criminalization of domestic violence; and the reduction in 2021 of Russia’s list of 456 occupations banned to women down to only 100 (Global Legal Monitor 2019). While radical feminist groups might find such liberal gender-equality-endorsing policies and positions insufficient, as they ignore the needs of gender-queer and non-binary citizens, the constituencies for statements promoting gender equality are young and progressively minded people, the internet-enabled urban “creative class” of Russia’s large cities, as well as a small handful of pro-feminist state officials and legislators such as Duma member Oksana Pushkina.²

Neutral

Anti-gender/ultra-conservative, traditionalist, stereotypical/Soviet, and pro-gender-equality are the four overtly gendered categories that we derived from the literature and applied to the Russian case. However, scholars of the region also point to one more category. Sometimes, issues shaped by a gender ideology can be hidden by avoiding reference to gender in order to act as if gender does not matter (Johnson and Robinson 2007, 15; Muravyeva 2014). We label as “neutral” situations in which gender-neutral terms are used to describe policies, responsibilities, or social locations that are typically gendered male or female in the Russian context. This would include referring to “people in the military” (instead of “men”) and “people (or families) with children” (instead of “women with children”) in the context of a state program that provides financial incentives to women for child-bearing, like Russia’s “maternity (family) capital” program. We also categorize as neutral any

statement in which Putin mentioned both sexes outside of an explicitly gendered context. (By contrast, mentioning both sexes in a context related to gender – such as referring to the importance of mothers *and* fathers to child-rearing – would be characterized as a pro-gender equality remark.) The constituencies for this category border those for the statements promoting gender equality, including democracy and human rights advocates and academics who may not be explicitly pro-feminist (see Sundstrom, Sperling, and Sayoglu 2019) but who are oriented toward legal equality.

To illustrate the complexities of this overall coding scheme, we elaborate on the example of the “maternity capital,” which is the most prominent gender-related issue that has arisen in Putin’s speeches during these two decades, pitched as the centerpiece of Putin’s policy to address Russia’s demographic “problem” – a shrinking population. Embedded in the 2006 Federal Law “On Supplemental Measures of State Support for Families with Children,” the policy was officially labeled as “maternity (family) capital” and provided any woman giving birth to a second (or subsequent) child with a lump sum that could be cashed in once the child turned three, for such things as housing, the child’s education, or the mother’s retirement. Many scholars see the maternity capital as traditionalist, because offering financial incentives for child-rearing specifically to women is seen as “reinforcing biologically framed gender roles” (Doğangün 2020, 276) and bolstering the fact that women typically leave work to take care of children; a more egalitarian policy would have promoted a more equal distribution of responsibility between parents of both sexes (Rivkin-Fish 2010; Pecherskaya 2012).

In our coding strategy, we characterize Putin’s mentions of the “maternity capital” as traditionalist only when the policy is explicitly linked to the prescriptive idea that *women* should have more children. When the language is descriptive and linked only to the demographic problem, we characterize his mentions of the “maternity capital” as stereotypical/Soviet. In doing so, we argue that the policy reflects an extension of the Soviet practice of combining essentialist gender stereotypes (i.e. that addressing the problem is about incentivizing women in particular to have more children) with progressive ideas about the appropriateness and expectation of women’s full participation in all spheres of life. For example, Putin sometimes refers to the maternity capital as a means to help women get back into the workplace faster, expressing the stereotypical/Soviet notion that the state’s job is to help women combine their inherent roles as workers and mothers. On the rare occasions when Putin refers to the policy by its formal title, “maternity (family) capital,” or just “family capital,” we characterize it as neutral, as referring to the policy this way bucks the overwhelming trend to consider the decision to have children as being linked mainly to mothers, and instead links that decision to the family as a whole.

Data and methods

As noted above, our universe of cases was composed of Putin’s annual remarks to the Federal Assembly, his New Year’s Eve and International Women’s Day speeches, and his participation in the annual Big Press Conference and Direct Line call-in shows (for more information, see the online Appendix). We began with Putin’s New Year’s Eve address in 1999 and included all of the iterations of these five events, up through his International Women’s Day speech on 8 March 2020. These speeches were given almost every year throughout Putin’s presidencies, but there were notable gaps during the Medvedev presidency (2008–2012) for all except for the Direct Line. The speeches to the Federal Assembly are the most formal, while the New Year’s and Women’s Day speeches are more celebratory and the Direct Line and Big Press Conference are more interactive. We chose to focus on this set of five annual speeches because they are aimed at the broad range of Putin’s domestic constituencies. The Big Press Conference, the Direct Line, and the address to the Federal Assembly have led to measurable increases in Putin’s approval ratings, suggesting that he is likely to take them seriously as platforms for communication to various constituencies (Fedotenkov 2020, 168). We chose not to include Putin’s speeches on specific policies of direct relevance to gender (e.g.

the maternity capital policy; women's entrepreneurship) or to a particular audience (e.g. the Eurasian Women's Forum), because we sought events where Putin addressed a wide and diverse set of constituents simultaneously and repeatedly over time.

Our goal was to analyze the content of these speeches systematically, so we conducted our analysis in NVivo, a software program used for qualitative data analysis. Reading through the transcripts of these 80 speech events, the research team of four Russianists (including one native Russian speaker) identified 55 gender-related Russian-language search terms. We then entered the transcripts into NVivo and searched them using this set of terms in order to reveal Putin's possible gender-related remarks (for details, see the online Appendix). Using the gender ideology categories described above, we manually coded the text fragments found by this NVivo search, first as a collective, examining a test sample, and then individually (each of us coding one set of Putin's speeches), but checking our coding in rotating pairs for consistency.

Results

Gender categories: frequency and change over time

Perhaps the most conspicuous finding of our analysis is that, with the exception of the speeches marking International Women's Day, gender-relevant issues do not constitute a particularly popular subject matter for President Putin; a mere 5% of the entire text of Putin's speeches refers to issues or people in any gendered way. In fact, over all the years of speeches examined, Putin used the term "gender" only once, during the 2019 Big Press Conference, in response to a question about whether he could imagine a woman in the position of President of Russia. Putin's answer was positive, combining support for gender equality ("From the perspective of the ability to govern . . . the requirements cannot differ on some kind of gender principles; these requirements are identical – competence, decency, and so on") with a stereotypical view ("But a woman, nevertheless, brings to politics a certain female essence, less aggression, it seems to me. That will certainly be in demand"). The near absence of references to "gender," however, does not suggest that Putin ignored gender issues.

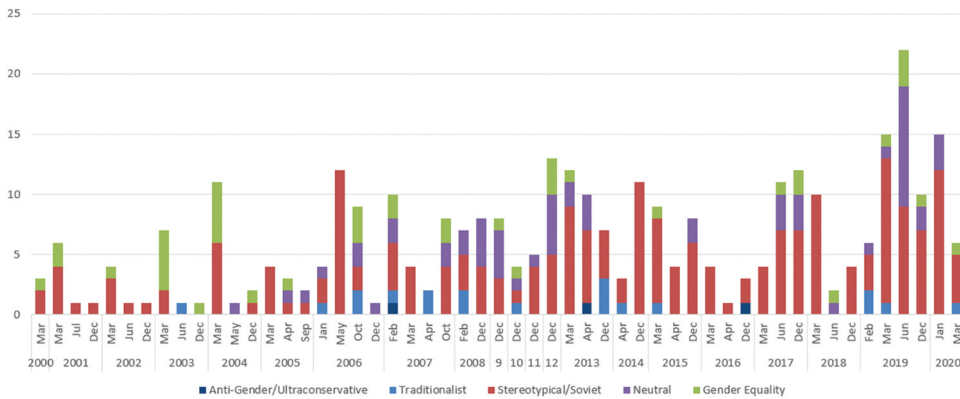
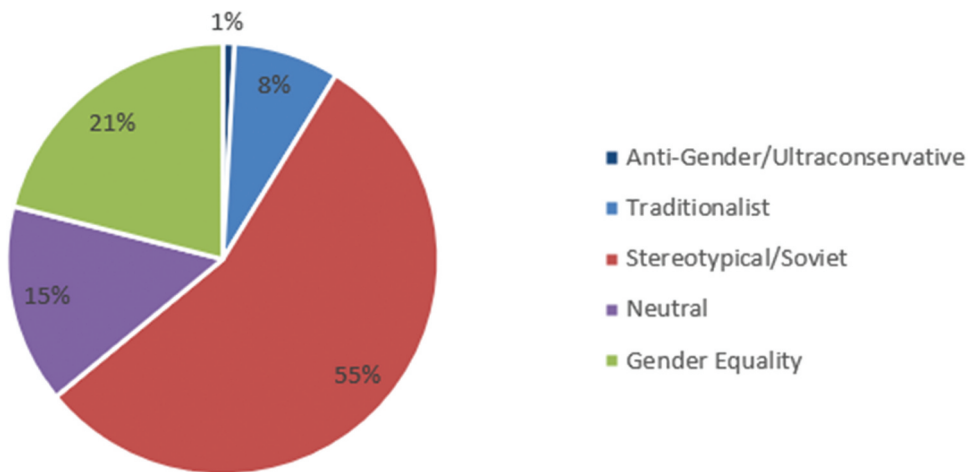
We coded 342 of Putin's statements over the entire time period of all the speeches covered as gender-related, categorizing almost two-thirds of these as stereotypical/Soviet and relatively few – only 6% – as traditionalist or anti-gender/ultra-conservative (see [Table 1](#)).

Our analysis revealed that the number of Putin's stereotypical/Soviet statements increased over time at the expense of statements promoting gender equality (see [Figure 1](#)). The significance of this shift can be seen by dividing the Putin era into two time periods: his first two terms as President (2000–2008) and his second two terms (from 2012 onward). As shown in [Figures 2 and 3](#) below, Putin's stereotypical/Soviet speech increased as a proportion of his gender-relevant statements, filling the gap created by a reduction in his pro-gender equality remarks over time. The volume of Putin's gendered speech increased over time as well, with more gender-relevant statements during 2012–2020 than during 2000–2008. It is important to note that the introduction of the "maternity capital" program accounts for much of the increase in the volume of gender-relevant speech and the skew toward statements in the stereotypical/Soviet category.

Putin's International Women's Day speeches show the most marked evidence of the decline over time in statements promoting gender equality and their replacement with more stereotypical/Soviet remarks. In 2000, Putin noted that despite the fact that women "plow no worse than men," they "sometimes get less for their work, unfortunately," and in 2001, he bemoaned the "rarity of women in high governmental positions." Early on, Putin also painted child-rearing as a joint venture, saying in 2002 that he would not want people to "get the impression that only women should take care of children; that would be wrong in general," and noting in 2004 that men "understand how important men's and women's participation is in all spheres, whether it's work or the family. Only then can harmony in society and the state be attained." Putin also used these earlier speeches as opportunities to talk about concrete policies in a way that seemed engaged with gender equality questions,

Table 1. Total number and percentage of Putin's gender-relevant remarks, 2000–2020.

Coding category	Number of remarks	Percentage of total number of remarks by gender category (N = 342)
Promoting gender equality	51	15%
Neutral	58	17%
Stereotypical/Soviet	211	62%
Traditionalist	19	6%
Anti-gender/ultra-conservative	3	<1% (0.88%)

**Figure 1.** Number of gender-relevant statements in Putin's speeches by gender category over time, 2000–2020.**Figure 2.** Percentage of Putin's gender-relevant statements in each gender category, 2000–2008.

including reform of the foster care system (2002), professional retraining programs for women returning to the workforce after maternity leave (2003), and the “maternity capital” program in his 2007 speech. Over time, however, there was a shift in Putin's tone in his March 8 speeches toward a more stereotypical/Soviet and even traditionalist perspective when extolling mothers. For example, in 2015, as he read his March 8 greetings to a group of mothers of accomplished Russian athletes, artists, and scientists, he openly asserted his focus on the celebration of motherhood: “It is no coincidence that today we invited to the Kremlin women who have given our country children

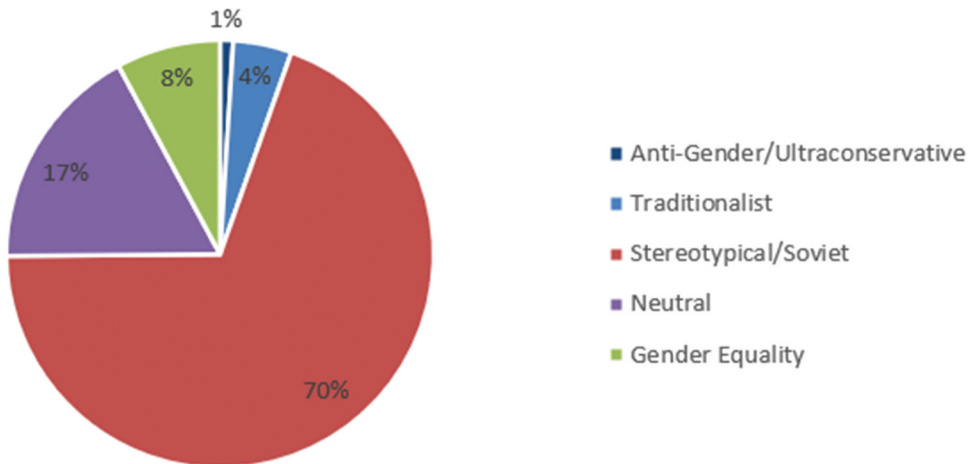


Figure 3. Percentage of Putin's gender-relevant statements in each gender category, 2012–2020.

who, in turn, glorify and strengthen our state, culture, education, science, sports, and the arts," and added that, according to a Russian saying, "The most sacred thing is a mother." Since 2016, his annual International Women's Day speeches have been pre-recorded and became more abstract, a recitation of platitudes, rather than an opportunity to engage with women on specific topics.³

Perhaps most surprisingly, given his reputation as a gender traditionalist, Putin made precious few "ultra-conservative/anti-gender" statements in the speeches we analyzed – only three such comments in two decades – and all came in response to questions at the Direct Line or Big Press Conference. None of the three remarks concerned men's and women's gender roles directly. Two were with reference to homosexuality (at the Direct Line in 2013, and the Big Press Conference in 2007), and one with regard to "juvenile justice" reform – specifically, the so-called "spanking" law that temporarily, in 2016, made violence within the family a criminal act. On the latter, Putin asserted that the state should not intervene in family matters "unceremoniously," which is consistent with the ultra-conservative/anti-gender ideology. While that legal change to Article 116 of Russia's Criminal Code could have been raised as a gender-related issue (since it applied to violence between intimate partners), at the 2016 Big Press Conference the change in the law was mentioned in the context of spanking children, with no reference to violence against women.

While Putin has made a very small number of ultra-conservative gendered statements in these speeches, he has offered more frequent nods to traditionalists on gender-related matters. One unusually specific signal in the traditional category was his 2013 remark at the Big Press Conference that Pussy Riot had "dishonored women; in order to stand out and promote themselves in some way, they crossed every line" (Big Press Conference 2013). Such remarks illustrate Putin's "selective responsiveness" to his more right-wing constituencies. Rather than explicitly endorsing their positions, he "signals" his support to gender traditionalists without committing to any specific or concrete policy.

Most of Putin's traditionalist statements – about half – concerned maternity, and most of the others were nonspecific mentions of "traditional values" or "family values." The maternity-related statements mostly entailed fairly subtle applications of the "prescriptive" quality of the category, and arose only at his interactive events. These remarks typically occurred when Putin's female interlocutors at the Direct Line or Big Press Conference identified themselves as being mothers; Putin would then ask how many children they had (or they volunteered the information along with their question) and would congratulate them, reinforcing the traditionalist – prescriptive – idea that women ought to have multiple children. Occasionally, Putin raised the maternity question himself during "informal" banter with a journalist or caller. For example, at the Big Press Conference in 2013,

a journalist volunteered that she had gotten married recently. Putin congratulated her on her marriage and asked whether she had children yet, jokingly inquired whether she had any questions about the maternity capital policy, and told her “Don’t delay” (*opazdyvat’ nelz’ya*), before wishing her good luck. The next journalist to be called upon announced that she already had “a large quantity” of children. Putin interrupted to ask how many, she responded, “Three,” and he praised her, saying, “Well done!” (*Molodets!*). These informal interactions reinforce the traditionalist notion that women ought to have multiple children, but they are neither firm directives nor disquisitions on women’s responsibility to replenish the nation.

Gender issues raised

We can also see that certain topics “trend” in Putin’s speeches. The “demographic” concern, broadly construed, was the gender-related issue most commonly raised at the events we analyzed. After the introduction of the “maternity capital” policy in his speech to the Federal Assembly in 2006 (one of the very few gender-related issues that Putin raised in that set of speeches), Putin regularly referred to it or responded to questions on it in his annual remarks at the Federal Assembly, the Big Press Conference, and the Direct Line (it also came up twice in his March 8 remarks, but never in his New Year’s address). Although fostering population growth was a common theme in Putin’s speeches, the gender-ideological context in which Putin referred to demographic issues varied. In his 2012 Federal Assembly speech, for instance, he spoke about the policy within a framework promoting gender equality: “Our women themselves know when and what they need to do [regarding choosing when/whether to have more children],” and expressed that it was important that having more children not foreclose women’s “path to a career, to a good job, and force them to restrict themselves exclusively to household chores.” In 2013, however, while the policy was not mentioned specifically, the language around demography and the family shifted markedly, with advocacy for “our position on the protection of traditional values . . . [including] the values of a traditional family, a genuine human life, including religious life,” which was repeated in 2014, with a call for “a healthy family and a healthy nation, traditional values passed on to us by our ancestors.”

By contrast to the ever-present maternity (family) capital program, some gender issues were only rarely aired in these speeches, if at all. As noted above, Putin made only one mention of the absence of equal pay – in his 8 March 2000 speech – lamenting that women are “unfortunately” under-compensated for their work relative to men. And there were no mentions of a major, longstanding labor discrimination challenge faced by women in Russia – the long list of occupations banned to women by law. Putin neither raised this issue nor responded to any questions about it, even when that list was greatly reduced by an order from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection in October 2019.

Putin’s expressed degree of commitment to gender equality also varied according to the issues raised. While he seemed regularly inclined toward a progressive, gender-equality stance on work-related issues, he appeared less so on abortion and domestic violence. Still, on these more controversial issues, Putin was careful not to pin himself down to an explicitly ultra-conservative or even traditionalist position. In his one comment on abortion (Big Press Conference 2017) – when asked whether the government would help an organization aiming to prevent abortions by providing funds to pregnant women – he explained that “in the modern world, in the overwhelming majority of countries, that decision is left to the woman herself,” because outlawing abortion results in illegal abortions and “colossal damage to women’s health and ability to have children in the future, mortality rises sharply, and so forth.” In this part of his response, Putin offered a hint of a pro-gender equality approach, but then relied largely on a Soviet/stereotypical framing, linking the issue back to the demographic question, and outlining the state benefits associated with the birth of children, including the “maternity capital.”

In his one comment on domestic violence (Big Press Conference 2019), Putin called on a journalist with a “Domestic Violence” sign, asking whether she wanted to ask about the draft legislation then under consideration to comprehensively address domestic violence. The journalist pointed out that the law was opposed by the Russian Orthodox Church and by multi-child families, whereas those in favor of the project included “LGBT organizations, feminist organizations, and even a union of sex workers,” and suggested to Putin that this law could destroy efforts to increase the population by enabling “total control [by the state] over the family.” Putin responded that he had not read the law, but that he had been briefed on it, that his response to it was “mixed,” and that he was “absolutely opposed to any violence, including in the family, and, of course, first off against children and women.” He added that using “brute physical force” to get one’s way was a sign of “low culture,” and that there was “nothing good” about that. Further, he wondered aloud whether the law was necessary, and concluded by saying he thought it should be discussed “calmly in society,” noting: “We have to understand what’s written in each of its articles, try to discern the results that could come from adopting the law . . . and then make a final decision.” Although the questioner adopted a clearly anti-gender/ultra-conservative stance, objecting to state intervention in the family, and implying that any law with support of LGBT people and feminists must be bad, Putin did not “bite” by responding in kind; his response was instead decidedly moderate.

A final pattern worth noting is that the extent to which Putin spoke about gender-relevant issues varied markedly across the types of speeches. Gender came up least often in the most formal type of speech – Putin’s annual address to the Federal Assembly (1% gendered) – and most often in the International Women’s Day speeches (22%). His New Year’s Eve speeches regularly mentioned families and children, but typically in anodyne and non-gendered ways. A more diverse set of gender issues arose in Putin’s Direct Line events and the annual Big Press Conference, where the public was more directly engaged. In these interactive contexts, Putin’s remarks were driven, to some extent, by the questions asked. Although some of the journalists’ queries and citizens’ phone calls are curated, their questions can take an unexpected turn (Walker 2017). For instance, at the 2019 Big Press Conference, Putin called on “The young woman standing with the ‘Family’ poster”; this turned out to be Farida Rustamova, a BBC Russia correspondent, whose question was not about “the family” (a beloved topic), but about Putin’s *own* family – specifically, about Putin’s grown daughters – a subject around which Putin maintains a fairly strict silence (Big Press Conference 2019).

Discussion

In sum, while gender *policy* under Putin shows a shift over time toward more gender conservatism, with marked changes from the first two terms of Putin’s presidency to his second two terms in office, in examining Putin’s gendered *rhetoric*, we observed neither a traditionalist nor ultra-conservative turn. In support of the regime dynamics literature on Putin’s balancing of various elites, we found evidence across the span of his rule that Putin’s statements on gender constitute complex signaling to a range of elite and mass public constituencies without over-committing to any of them. Concretely, we saw little evidence that Putin has offered direct or sustained concessions to the Orthodox Church and transnational anti-gender movement – at least not in his annual public speeches to a broad domestic audience. The frequency of his pro-gender equality remarks did notably decrease from 21% during Putin’s first two terms to 8% during his third and fourth terms, which coincides with his move away from generally more pro-liberal rhetoric. But there was no corresponding increase in ultra-conservative or traditionalist statements. Thus, over time, we see that Putin signals less to liberal/pro-gender equality constituents, but rather than signaling a stronger commitment to the ultra-conservative constituency, he instead embraces a Soviet/stereotypical gender ideology that reflects the training and socialization of his generation of public officials and *siloviki*, as well as of a broad swath of the population. In the rare cases when he makes traditionalist or anti-gender/ultra-conservative statements, they tend to be in response to questions, not as

material he volunteers as a means to set a rhetorical or political agenda. Nor, it must be said, does he venture in these venues to declare himself proactively against sexism (or homophobia), or to endorse family formats beyond the nuclear, heterosexual variety.

Given the gender-conservative policies of the regime over the past decade, Putin could use any or all of these speeches as a “bully pulpit” from which to proclaim the virtues of a strictly gendered division of labor in the family, the evils of abortion and divorce, the dangers of feminism and the merits of patriarchy, and so on – yet he has repeatedly chosen not to do so. By contrast, even with regard to the policy issue most central to the regime’s “traditional values” agenda – raising the birthrate – which Putin mentions regularly in these speeches, he refrains from reinforcing an anti-gender/ultra-conservative perspective, and offers a range of remarks about childrearing and parenting that sometimes take a traditionalist tone, but largely reflect a stereotypical/Soviet view, or even an egalitarian one.

Our findings support the argument that Putin is a “weak strongman” (Frye 2021), choosing his words deliberately to enlist a variety of constituencies among Russia’s elites and masses. Putin’s range of statements across the spectrum of gender ideology categories – albeit heavily gravitating towards stereotypical/Soviet statements – speaks to the tactical nature of his public pronouncements. They reflect a combination of imperatives to signal support to various elite constituencies he depends upon to maintain his power (including the Russian Orthodox Church and its powerful political activists on one side, and more liberal economic and cultural elites on the other), and the fact that, as argued above, most Russian voting citizens themselves likely fall closest to the Soviet model in their gender views. As a result, official statements on gender in Russia are “rather contradictory,” as Skorniakova et al. (2020, 8) suggest, offering a conflicting set of gender-ideological positions.

Our analysis suggests that Putin mostly takes commonly accepted stereotypical/Soviet positions on gender issues, but then releases “trial balloons” with his pro-equality and more traditionalist positions, waiting to come down on one side or another until it seems clear whether any particular position would be to his benefit. This accords with existing scholarship on Russia’s electoral authoritarian hybrid regime, which lacks full political competition and a free media, and in which it is difficult to know with certainty the preferences of key societal groups (Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014, 21–22). Viewing Putin’s remarks through a constituency-signaling lens helps explain his move away from (but not exclusion of) statements promoting gender equality over time in these speeches, as the constituency for conservatism has become more powerful. It also explains his apparent reluctance to take ultra-conservative or even traditionalist positions on gender issues, as he chooses not to use these opportunities to further boost the power of this vocal minority of conservative constituents, preferring instead an expansion of the less controversial stereotypical/Soviet middle ground that more elites and regular citizens find palatable. We also note that it is in his expressions of humor – especially during the interactive events – that Putin sometimes pushes the “gender-traditionalist” envelope, enabling him, in the event that anyone interpreted an off-the-cuff remark as sexist, to maintain plausible deniability and assert that his comments were only intended in jest.

Conclusion

We find that Putin’s pronouncements on gender-related issues in his regular annual speeches to the nation lean toward a stereotypical, essentialist perspective, while he assiduously avoids making or even endorsing far-right positions on women’s issues and, in the early years, sometimes even sounded a little like a pro-feminist ally. In asserting these findings, we are not suggesting that there is little or no state-sponsored sexism or discrimination in Russia. Women in Russia currently face discrimination – including widespread sexual harassment – in the workplace, underrepresentation in politics at all levels, extremely limited options for support from law enforcement and the legal system in the event of domestic violence or sexual assault, limited reproductive rights, and an ongoing overload of family responsibilities. Feminist activists have faced direct repression since Pussy Riot members were imprisoned, including prominent anti-domestic violence organizations

being placed on the “foreign agents” list and the arrest of individual feminists for their online activism. “Anti-gender” interest groups have far more policy influence than organizations and individuals concerned about women’s rights, and although feminism is better known than it was a generation ago, the backlash against it has permeated academic institutions, punditry, and social media.

We also find that although the percentage of Putin’s pro-gender equality statements significantly decreased over time, he did not replace them with explicitly ultra-conservative or traditionalist rhetoric. Although Putin is careful not to lend too much open support to ultra-conservative/anti-gender and traditionalist constituencies, the decrease in his pro-gender equality remarks might still signal his tacit endorsement of the ultra-conservative and traditionalist gender ideology. It is possible that he has chosen to signal this change of position or “conservative turn” not by expressing more anti-gender or traditionalist beliefs but by saying fewer things that could “trigger” the conservative/traditionalist camp. By increasingly resorting to the “middle ground” of Soviet/stereotypical comments, he relies on the essentialist language that traditionalists and ultra-conservatives also embrace, without endorsing their far-right ideological positions on gender.

It is clear that Putin’s discourse on gender-related issues does not consistently match the regime’s policies which, arguably, have a greater impact on Russians’ lives than his speeches do. Yet Putin’s rhetoric – on gender issues and otherwise – remains an essential aspect of his rule for several reasons. First, Putin’s pronouncements have an impact on policy innovation. His remarks on a regime priority such as the “demographic problem” can spur the creation of policies designed to address it – like the maternity capital program. Second, his repeated references to such social policies at his annual public events serve to reinforce paternalist expectations that the Russian state will care for the population in exchange for quiescence and endorsement of the political status quo. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the public display of presidential rhetoric constitutes a central aspect of maintaining any government’s legitimacy. Putin’s diverse rhetorical approach to gender issues enables him to potentially satisfy a wide range of constituents on issues of real and symbolic importance without alienating those who would prefer more maximalist policies (on abortion, for instance). The fact that the regime consistently places Putin in front of the public at a series of annual speaking events – particularly the Direct Line and Big Press Conference – attests to the importance of campaigning for constituents’ support, even in an authoritarian setting. Sponsoring these occasions for public interaction creates the appearance of a president who engages with the public and takes concerns and complaints seriously, while also providing an opportunity for participants to voice their enthusiastic support and admiration for Putin as a confident, capable, and well-informed leader. Perhaps especially in the era of “informational autocrats” (Guriev and Treisman 2019), Putin’s rhetoric plays a critical role in his government’s legitimization strategy.

Our argument is that Putin’s messaging on questions of gender is strategic and complicated, and that Putin himself is not the primary public promoter of anti-feminist policy initiatives. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that while Putin may be a proponent of “traditional values” in many respects, including a heterosexual model of households and relationships, his traditional values appear not to extend strongly to a belief that women should be subjugated to men. Future research could develop comparative analysis with Putin’s statements on LGBTQ+ issues, which we contend are likely to have different politics than those regarding the status and roles of women and men, especially in the context of the Soviet legacy of silencing and criminalizing homosexuality, which is very different from the somewhat progressive Soviet take on gender equality. As we noted, Putin often employs vague language to reference “traditional Russian values” without stating specifically what those values are, and arguably he is thereby able to satisfy numerous constituencies who may have a variety of conceptions of traditional values in mind. This use of coded language with malleable hidden meanings could be a fruitful area for research, particularly regarding how that language is interpreted by different groups.

In short, our findings support the regime dynamics literature’s argument that Putin is beholden to multiple constituencies. We show that this is true even with regard to gender (in)equality, an issue on which Putin has been thought to be of a singular and conservative bent. In these discoveries, we delineate the ongoing importance of gender to Russian politics

and reveal that in this environment of sensitivity to different constituencies' demands, opportunities may emerge for policy advocacy by feminist political leaders and movements to promote gender equality in the future.

Notes

1. These include his "rape joke" to the Israeli prime minister in 2006 (Parfitt 2006) and his injunction to a young female entrepreneur not to forget her "duty" to help solve Russia's "demographic problem," just a few days short of International Women's Day in 2011 (Vesti 2011).
2. Pro-gender equality legislators, surprisingly, once included Elena Mizulina and Ekaterina Lakhova (see Johnson 2016).
3. This may be a consequence not only of Putin's increased seclusion from open public events over time, but also of the documented decline in the importance that Russian citizens attribute to March 8 as a holiday, decreasing steadily in its selection as one of the most important holidays by survey respondents from 27% in 2002 to 16% by 2017 (Levada-Center 2017).

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APPENDIX to Mixed Signals: What Putin Says about Gender Equality

Notes on the Dataset

Our dataset covers slightly more than two decades, starting with Putin's New Year's Eve speech in 1999 and ending with his Federal Assembly (15 January 2020) and International Women's Day speeches (8 March 2020). After that point—as the COVID pandemic hit Russia—the nature and format of the annual speeches under study shifted considerably. For example, the Direct Line and Big Press Conference were combined in December 2020, in a new videoconference format. During the Medvedev presidency (7 May 2008–7 May 2012), Putin did not host a Big Press Conference or give his usual Federal Assembly, New Year's Eve, and International Women's Day speeches, although the Direct Line continued under the title, "A Conversation with Vladimir Putin." While Putin was president, he skipped only a handful of these annual events: the Direct Line in 2004 and 2012; the Big Press Conference in 2005; the International Women's Day speech in 2006 and 2008; and his speech to the Federal Assembly in 2017. The full dataset, including the full text (coded) and URLs for each of the speeches, will be made available as stipulated by the journal.

Overview of the Speeches

Putin's New Year's Eve addresses – regularly the least exciting of the remarks we considered from a gender perspective – descend from a long lineage of Soviet New Year's addresses. Putin's New Year speech is traditionally broadcast on Russian television from the Kremlin, and like its Soviet predecessors, generally sums up the main events of the year and the prospects for the year to come. Putin delivered his first New Year's Eve speech as acting president on 31 December 1999, just before midnight, directly following a recording of President Boris Yeltsin's resignation in his own New Year's speech that had been delivered at noon that day. (There was nothing coded as gendered in that speech, which is why the dates on figures start with the year 2000.) The New Year's Eve speech reaches a wide audience being broadcast on December 31 across the country in time for midnight celebrations starting with Russia's Far East time zone.

Putin's annual speech, the "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," is a joint presentation to both houses of the Russian parliament mandated by Russia's 1993 constitution. It has been delivered at various times of the year, from January to December. It is designed to be a general review of the situation of the country and a forum for introducing major foreign and domestic policy initiatives, but has also been where shifts in ideology or national imagination are

revealed. This is where the maternity capital policy was introduced (in 2006) and where its various modifications have been announced. The Federal Assembly address also showcased the transition from a more liberal ideology to the use of more nationalist language about family and traditional values.

Putin's speeches to mark International Women's Day, also a long-standing Soviet convention, were given to particular groups of high-achieving, professional women in person until 2015. In 2005, for example, he met with women veterans; in 2013, he spoke to women at a Vologda textile factory; and in 2014, he delivered his remarks to a gathering of women on Russia's Paralympic Team in Sochi. In 2015, however, Putin decided to meet with a group of *mothers* of particularly laudatory Russians – recipients of the Presidential Prize in science and technology, well-known performers and athletes, and military servicemen – honoring them for their motherhood, rather than for their own professional achievements. Starting in 2016, Putin ceased to present his March 8th remarks to a live audience, recording them alone instead. Unsurprisingly, these speeches showcase Putin's gender ideology, but often only in a laudatory way.

The "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin" is an annual call-in show, initiated in 2001 and broadcast live by Russia's major television and radio stations. Putin receives questions via a variety of means, from text messages and email, to telephone and live video, and responds aloud during the event. Here Putin encounters some of his various constituencies with varying approaches to gender (in)equality in less curated ways than in the formal speeches.

Putin's annual "Big Press Conference," also beginning in 2001, brings the president together with domestic (and some foreign) journalists, who descend on Moscow from across the country, and try to attract Putin's attention (or the attention of his press secretary) with handmade cardboard signs stating where they are from, or some indication of the question they hope to ask. The Big Press Conference typically lasts several hours – and consists of Putin answering questions as well as bantering with the journalists, who raise personal as well as policy issues. Although foreign journalists are invited to – and participate in – the event, it is aimed at the Russian domestic audience. Like the Direct Line, the relative informality of this event creates more opportunities for Putin to reveal, perhaps spontaneously, his approach to gender (in)equality.

Notes on Coding

To find the all the instances within the five sets of remarks under consideration in which Putin said anything having to do with women and gender-related issues, we settled on 55 search terms and their variants in Russian (e.g. woman/women, man, mother, father, child, family, demography, parent, violence, abortion, equality, values, traditional, gender, feminism), and employed a native Russian-speaking graduate student to import the transcripts of the speeches into the analytical coding software, NVivo, and code them according to our list of terms. Because of the linguistic peculiarities of Russian, the search was conducted using "root" search terms that would capture the desired words in any declension or gender, as well as in plural and singular forms. This resulted in many "false positives" which were then left uncoded (e.g. searching for "mat*" (мат*) to capture the various forms of "mother" and "maternal" (e.g. мать, матери, материнский, материнского) also captured verbs ending in mat* (e.g. подумать).

We derived the search terms both inductively and deductively, doing a preliminary review of this set of Putin's speeches to identify what terms appeared there, and then also culling what are seen as common gender-related policy issues from feminist political science sources (e.g. Htun and Laurel Weldon 2010), so as to bring into view any gender (in) equality issues we had not considered, or that Putin did not discuss during these events. The topics we covered included violence against women (which we captured with search terms like "violence" and "harassment"), family law (e.g. "alimony," "guardian"), in/equality in the workplace (e.g. "equal" pay, "pregnant"), reproductive rights (e.g. "abortion," "birth," "fertility"), provisions for family leave and child care (e.g. "children's," "daycare," welfare "support" or "benefits" for mothers and children, "maternity leave"), and women's participation in politics (captured by our varied search terms for "women"). While this may not be an exhaustive list, we frequently found that "hits" on search terms that turned out to be relevant in context occurred in close proximity to other search terms, such that mentions of "maternity" often arose in the same sentence as "family" or "children," for example, so our level of confidence in having caught all of Putin's relevant speech acts is high.

These search terms were used to locate and then code any speech that might indicate a "signal" to a constituency for any of the five categories on the gender (in)equality spectrum: anti-gender/ultra-conservative, traditional, Soviet-stereotypical, neutral, and promoting gender equality. Often, the search terms found in Putin's speeches arose in a context unrelated to gender equality (e.g. a mention of "men and women in national costume"), and we excluded these from our coding. We also left uncoded the "hits" for search terms such as "father" or "woman" when Putin used them only to refer to or identify a person (e.g. "Kadyrov's father" or "the woman who just spoke"). In the International Women's Day speeches, for instance, we did not apply our gender-ideological coding categories to Putin's references to the "women" in the room unless he was also making a comment that communicated something about gender to his constituents. Nor did we gender-categorize demographic expressions like "births per woman" if they were isolated from any gendered commentary. Remarks made by journalists, callers, Putin's press secretary (or other people involved in the Direct Line and Big Press Conferences in particular) within these texts were not coded under our five gender ideology categories.

We coded all portions of the text that were gendered in some explicit way (see Coding Table). The sole exception we made to coding only terms that were explicitly gendered was the phrase "family values." The denotation of this term is not gendered, but its connotation is gendered in the Russian context. In other words, saying "family values" is *implicitly*

gendered, connoting at the very least a heteronormative family structure, marriage, and the presence of children, and possibly also a traditionally gendered division of labor, with the woman being primarily responsible for childrearing and domestic tasks.

We coded by phrases and sentences (fragments of speech) rather than by single word “hits” on our search terms (e.g. child, family) in order to capture a thought. If a paragraph contained multiple hits on our search terms, and fit into a single gender-category (e.g. “stereotypical/Soviet”) we would code it only once, but if Putin expressed more than one position vis à vis gender equality in the paragraph (or sentence), we coded those sentences (or fragments within a single sentence) separately.