

Gender Power Relations in Putin's Speech on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, has revealed the dominance of Russian masculinity in its treatment of Ukraine. The language construction employed by Putin in his speech narratives illustrates unequal gender power relations. The portrayal of Russia as a man who comes to protect Ukraine from Western influence serves to justify the violence and warfare it engages in. The patriarchal and machismo social system in Russia also functions as a source of violence and legitimizes the country's actions. Putin's image as a macho leader is inseparable from the narrative embedded in his speeches. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the question of how feminism interprets Putin's language construction in the context of military operations in Ukraine. To address this question, the author applies a feminist poststructuralist approach. Through this approach, it becomes evident that the discourse in Putin's speech constructs a language that assigns meaning to gender concepts grounded in traditional Russian values. This meaning shapes the perceptions and actions of Russian society in the Ukrainian conflict. The contribution of this paper lies in offering a feminist perspective that critically examines the gendered language employed by political leaders, emphasizing how such constructions help justify military aggression. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of how gendered discourses influence the framing of international conflicts and contribute to political legitimacy.

Keywords: construction; gender; machismo; narrative; patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Russia's attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked the beginning of a special military operation carried out by Vladimir Putin. Although the invasion has continued for nearly three years, there are still no signs that it will end soon. According to the Deputy Head of the Ukrainian Military Intelligence Service, Vadim Skibitskyi, as of June 2024, Putin stated that around 700,000 Russian troops had been deployed to fight in Ukraine (Hodunova, 2024). Initially, the Russian military operation targeted only the Donbass region, specifically Donetsk and Luhansk, before expanding to control much of Ukraine. Although the Russian invasion of Ukraine is often analyzed through classical approaches such as realism, gender studies have provided alternative explanations by focusing on gender aspects that are frequently overlooked in the study of war and conflict.

In several previous gender studies examining Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the perspectives have varied considerably (Antwi-Boateng & Al Nuaimi, 2023; Kuteleva, 2025). Asuinura and Kipo-Sunyezi (2023), in their article entitled "Russia-Ukraine War from a Gender Perspective," provide a gender-based analysis of the war's impact on women, men, and children. Using a post-structuralist framework, their study found that war affects these groups differently. Women and children are typically portrayed as victims; however, women also possess the competence to act as agents who contribute to war, peace, and security. The article highlights the importance of recognizing women not merely as victims but also as active participants in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine can also be understood through discourse analysis and the role of key figures in shaping narratives. Kratochvil and O'Sullivan (2023), in their article "A War Like No Other: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine as a War on Gender Order," argue that the construction of political narratives by elites represents a circular process of growing emancipation in Ukraine and neo-traditionalist reactions in Russia. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), they conclude that gender functions as a central element in every discourse

and justification—ranging from claims of protecting Russian traditional values to defending Ukrainians from so-called genocide.

Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2021), in their study “Mixed Signals: What Putin Says About Gender Equality,” observe that in several annual speeches, Putin avoids overtly anti-gender rhetoric when addressing gender equality. Nevertheless, stereotypes against women persist in his discourse, accompanied by a significant decline in statements supporting gender equality. In another study titled “Women in the War: A Gendered Analysis of Media Coverage of the Russian–Ukraine War,” Oyeleye and Jiang (2023) analyze representations of women in wartime news coverage. Their findings reveal that women’s voices are notably underrepresented; when mentioned, they are often depicted as helpless victims in need of protection.

These prior studies underscore the strong connection between gender and warfare. The Russia–Ukraine war drew international attention, arguably because the invasion occurred suddenly amid a relatively stable global climate. To justify his actions, Putin advanced several arguments. First, he accused the Ukrainian government of committing human rights violations in Crimea, a contested border region between Russia and Ukraine (Asuinura & Kipo-Sunyhzi, 2024). Second, Russia portrayed its actions as a response to the potential expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) toward its borders—stemming from Ukraine’s intention to join an alliance perceived by Russia as a Western adversary (Asuinura & Kipo-Sunyhzi, 2024).

Although Russia’s official justification centered on NATO expansion, many scholars view Putin’s true ambition as seeking to dominate Ukraine and restore the former glory of the Soviet Union. Russia’s 2016 foreign policy concept states that one of its strategic objectives is to consolidate the Russian Federation as a global center of influence. Accordingly, experts argue that Russia’s actions—although not aimed at full annexation—reflect Putin’s aspiration to exert control over other states and restore Russian dominance in global politics, reminiscent of the Soviet era (Wilkinson, 2022).

As a major global event, the invasion has naturally attracted various analytical perspectives. From a realist lens, Russia’s use of expansionism, militarization, and violence exemplifies power politics. Realist interpretations, such as those in Vasquez’s “The War Puzzle,” focus on territorial disputes but often overlook gender dynamics. In contrast, feminist theory fills this gap by examining how gender influences international relations. Feminist scholars argue that the assumptions underpinning realism—such as anarchy and sovereignty—reflect masculine worldviews and behaviors (Pevehouse & Goldstein, 2017). This perspective reinforces the idea that militarism and warfare are traditionally associated with masculinity (Wlodkowska, 2023).

This assumption arises from culturally ascribed gender roles, in which men are portrayed as fighters and protectors, while women, children, and non-combatant men are seen as passive and in need of protection (Wlodkowska, 2023). According to Sjoberg (2013, as cited in Oyeleye & Jiang, 2023), gender is a social expectation that assigns characteristics to specific groups of people, creating power imbalances between men and women. Consequently, traits associated with masculinity are valued more highly than those linked with femininity (Braun, Stegmann, Hernandez Bark, Junker, & Van Dick, 2017; Donnelly & Twenge, 2017; Gupta, Wieland, & Turban, 2019; Kachel, Steffens, & Niedlich, 2016; Kray, Howland, Russell, & Jackman, 2017).

Beyond gender itself, leadership and social structures also shape gender narratives. Traditional Russian values emphasize the image of the patriarchal family, where gender roles are complementary rather than equal (Johnson et al., 2021). Since 2012, Putin has glorified these values, extending them into discourses surrounding military operations in Ukraine. His projection of hypermasculinity greatly influences public perceptions and reflects his belief in

gendered hierarchies of power. Therefore, employing a gender-based approach offers a critical alternative framework for understanding conflict.

This paper examines the gendered narratives constructed by Putin in his speeches on military operations in Ukraine. While Johnson et al. (2021) highlight Putin's general reluctance to advocate gender equality and Oyeleye and Jiang (2023) analyze gender representation in media coverage, this paper specifically analyzes Putin's language referring to military operations. It applies a feminist post-structuralist and discourse analysis framework, following the approaches of Asuinura and Kipo-Sunyezi (2023) and Kratochvil and O'Sullivan (2023). However, unlike these prior works, this study focuses on how feminism interprets Putin's linguistic construction of gender power in wartime rhetoric.

This inquiry is crucial given the frequent neglect of gender considerations in studies of war and conflict. The analysis reveals that Putin's speeches employ gendered language grounded in stereotypes. His discourse epitomizes a projection of masculine identity, reflecting his perception of power and authority in military contexts. Therefore, this article aims to uncover the gendered meanings embedded in Putin's rhetoric, challenge prevailing gender perceptions within Russia's social system, and promote a broader understanding that encourages gender equality. Ultimately, this research contributes to understanding how gendered narratives in political discourse shape societal perceptions, influencing both the justification of violence and the global pursuit of gender justice.

METHOD

This paper employed a feminist poststructuralist approach derived from poststructuralism. Within this framework, social structures were understood to shape human behavior, yet this relationship remained dynamic—human actions could also transform social structures (Asuinura & Kipo-Sunyezi, 2024). Poststructuralist thought emphasized that discourse was influenced by power relations, which in turn reshaped social interactions and ways of thinking. It also challenged the notion of objective truth, arguing that knowledge was shaped by those in positions of power, particularly political or social elites (McMorrow, 2017). Consequently, poststructuralists sought to deconstruct accepted truths to reveal their instability and reconstruct them through new interpretations (Devetak, 2013).

Building on this foundation, feminist poststructuralism adopted similar principles while focusing on the interrelation of language, gender, and power. It dismantled traditional views by understanding gender and sexuality as socially and linguistically constructed phenomena rather than fixed categories (Davies & Gannon, 2005;). Feminist poststructuralist analyses often examined linguistic dichotomies such as strong/weak, rational/emotional, and public/private, which historically privileged masculinity over femininity (Tickner & Sjoberg, 2013). In addition, this approach acknowledged the influence of patriarchal systems in perpetuating gender subordination. Such systems not only assigned distinct gender roles but also reinforced the idea that men were protectors and women needed protection, normalizing gendered hierarchies within warfare and society (Asuinura & Kipo-Sunyezi, 2024). Patriarchal dominance thus served as a primary source of systemic violence embedded in cultural and institutional practices.

Power relations, central to poststructuralist and feminist analyses alike, were viewed as embedded in every social and cultural practice (Steans et al., 2010). These relations produced dominant and subordinate groups, legitimizing gender inequality through the valorization of masculinity over femininity. Feminist poststructuralism therefore revealed how patriarchal discourse sustained male dominance both ideologically and institutionally.

The study applied an interpretive qualitative method. According to Wiesner (2022), this method relied on content analysis to interpret meaning in texts, speeches, and arguments. Accordingly, this research analyzed Vladimir Putin's narratives within two key speeches: the

"Address by the President of the Russian Federation" on February 24, 2022, which launched the military operation in Ukraine, and the "Address on the Day of Reunification of the Donetsk People's Republic, Lugansk People's Republic, and the Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions with Russia" on September 30, 2023. The analysis focused on how these narratives were constructed and how their meanings influenced the course of the Russia–Ukraine war.

The sources used in this study were divided into primary and secondary materials. Primary sources consisted of transcripts of Putin's official speeches from 2022 to 2024, while secondary sources included scholarly articles, books, journals, news media, and other relevant documents. This research also applied discourse analysis techniques focusing on linguistic interpretation of communication (Lamont, 2015). Both written and spoken forms of political communication were analyzed to interpret the power relations and gender constructions underlying Putin's discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategic narrative is generally accepted by many as a form of soft power, especially in the world of global politics, conflict, and terrorism. Leaders or political elites often use strategic narratives as a way to construct shared meanings of international politics, as a tool to articulate positions on certain issues, and shape domestic and international perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors (Winterbotham, 2023). According to Winterbotham (2023), political elites also often use gender metaphors as a tool to legitimize their foreign policies based on understandings of women in national culture, myths, and stereotypes. This ultimately contributes to gender framing that places masculinity as superior to femininity. The implications of this framing affect military institutions that present women as victims who need protection and are involved in conflict because of their inferior physical appearance and maternal or peace-loving nature (Winterbotham, 2023).

In his "Address by the President of the Russian Federation" or the declaration of Russian military operations on February 24, 2022, Putin clearly brought a gender narrative that portrayed Ukraine as a female figure, a party in need of protection and Russia as a male figure who came to protect Ukraine from 'danger'. In his speech he said:

(1) *"We had to stop that atrocity, that genocide of the millions of people who live there and who pinned their hopes on Russia, on all of us."*

(2) *"The purpose of this operation to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime."*

(3) *"In 2014, Russia was obliged to protect the people of Crimea and Sevastopol from those who yourself call 'nats'."*

(4) *"We understood and deeply felt the most important thing: by defending our compatriots in Donbass and Novorossiia, we are defending Russia itself."*

- Vladimir Putin (Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia 2022; 2023)

From the three narratives above, it is very clear that the underlined sentence was used by Russia to justify their invasion of Ukraine because Putin treated Ukraine as an inferior party or as a woman. The reflection of Putin's narrative is also reflected in the argument of Kratochvil and O'Sullivan (2023) who said that Ukraine was positioned by Russia as a woman and was between masculine Russia which upholds traditional values and Gayropa referring to European countries. In this narrative, the need to protect women further motivates men to go to war (Wlodkowska, 2023).

The use of language such as we had to stop, pinned their hopes, protect and defending shows that Putin is leading the narrative of Russia as a hero who must protect Ukraine. What Putin did can be said to be a hero complex or even a savior complex. Hero complex according to Urban Dictionary means someone who sees himself as a hero. Meanwhile, a savior complex is a feeling of someone who is driven to save others. This is in line with male masculinity which

is often described as a war fighter with leadership, heroism, physical dominance, and aggression (Winterbotham, 2023). Even in the context of a country, when an attack occurs by an external party it can be said to be a rape of a country's territory, and the takeover of the territory is considered its penetration (Wlodkowska, 2023). The use of the language protect which Putin repeatedly conveys in his speech narrative can be seen as a form of avoiding accusations of violence carried out by Russia in Ukraine.

Furthermore, the narrative that Putin often brings in his speeches about military operations in Ukraine is to protect their homeland using the word *motherland*. In fact, the use of the words *motherland* and *fatherland* is often used by Putin to describe two different situations. Russian political elites including Putin use the word *motherland* when describing something that must be protected, and use the word *fatherland* when referring to aggression (Winterbotham, 2023). This narrative is reflected in Putin's speech addressed to men:

(1) *"This means the decision that I made will be executed, that we will achieve the goals we have set, and reliably guarantee the security of our Motherland...I believe in your support and the invincible force rooted in the love for our Fatherland."*

(2) *"Together, we are fighting for the Motherland, for our sovereignty, spiritual values, unity, and victory."*

(3) *"Our people believe in you, the defenders of Russia, in your reliability, resolve and devotion to the Fatherland and the oath."*

- Vladimir Putin (Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia 2022; 2023)

The emergence of these narratives is actually a reflection of *machismo* that has become part of the culture in the social system in Russia. *Machismo* is a term that describes a great and excessive sense of masculinity (Sotelo, 2023). The character of *machismo* is associated with the nature of a man who is strong, arrogant, and aggressive (Wlodkowska, 2023). Therefore, it has become 'common' for men to be forced to be strong and brave and because of that nature men must protect women. *Machismo* and patriarchy in the social system in Russia are an inseparable unity. *Machismo* can be seen as a driving force for male masculinity in Russia to go to war. In relation to this, men or soldiers must protect their *motherland* or mother, just like a husband protects his wife.

Putin's use of the language *motherland* and *fatherland* can be seen as evidence of the value of Russian tradition which is based on patriarchy. As women will grow into mothers, and men grow into fathers. In addition, the connotation of both languages is also inseparable from gender roles and relations. Mother or women in a patriarchal system are associated with domestic functions that care for and raise children, more than that mothers are at home. Conversely, fathers or men in a patriarchal system are associated with public functions such as working, a provider, and protecting their families. Therefore, when the call to commit aggression is identified with the use of the language *fatherland*, while *motherland* is likened to women who stay at home.

Basically, the use of gendered language by Putin in his narrative has enormous power as the languages used contain driving meanings that can move someone to act according to their understanding of gender. This is in line with the feminist poststructuralist argument explained earlier that discourse can change the way a person thinks and acts. This argument is proven by the existence of quite large mass mobilization in the militarization of Russia with 1000 to 1,500 volunteers signing contracts to join the Russian military in the war in Ukraine every day (Euronews, 2023). This incident may indicate that the main driving factor of the massive military mobilization was influenced by Putin's narrative that glorifies male masculinity or *machismo* itself. These volunteers seemed to be called to fulfill their obligations as men with bravery and violence even though they knew that there was a possibility that they would die in the war.

Violence as in the feminist poststructuralist argument occurs because of gender power relations which, if taken further, are caused by gender inequality itself. The various narratives conveyed by Putin in his speeches also strongly reflect the existence of gender power relations, namely the imbalance of power between masculinity and femininity. In the study by Johnson, et al. (2021) they found that there was a significant decline in Putin's speeches that were pro-gender equality. This is actually not surprising considering that Putin himself believes in the values of Russian tradition. In a traditional value that divides gender roles patriarchally, it will certainly conflict with the values of gender equality. Moreover, with the current invasion, pro-gender equality speeches will certainly be increasingly unheard of.

This value of Russian tradition is important to highlight in seeing the meaning of Putin's narrative because the language construction conveyed by Putin is actually a form of actualization of his *macho* figure. In fact, as a leader, Putin's image is an ideal representation of *machismo*. Pictures of Putin riding a horse, putting a wild tigress to sleep, and his background as a former Soviet intelligence agency (KGB) further strengthen the image of Putin's *machismo*. Therefore, according to Menkiszak from the Center for Eastern Studies, Putin is a man who believes in strength and hates the weak because he believes that it is better to be feared than to be loved and have warmth (Wlodkowska, 2023).

In contrast to Putin, the Ukrainian leader, Volodymyr Zelenskyy displays modern masculinity that is not based on power and aggression (Wlodkowska, 2023). Zelenskyy also has a comedian background that is very different from Putin. In addition, Zelenskyy's way of communicating is simple, concise, and includes emotion in every word and expression. He is also not ashamed to ask for help from a strong country, cry, and show traits associated with femininity (Wlodkowska, 2023). The difference in masculinity is what makes Putin's language construction in his speech narratives so dominated by gender concepts.

Departing from this, the policies implemented by Russia are also merciless, cruel, and aggressive. Russia, which sees itself as a strong country, invades weak countries using its economy and military, wanting to dominate, make them subordinate, and to keep them under its control. Therefore, the narrative that Putin conveys also emphasizes the dominance and hierarchy over peers, society and the state, both to Western countries and to Ukraine (Wlodkowska, 2023). In the end, Putin invaded Ukraine many times because in his perception Ukraine is a woman who belongs only to him.

CONCLUSION

Putin's speeches during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine projected a deeply gendered narrative that framed Russia as a strong, masculine protector against a weaker, feminized Ukraine influenced by the West. This discourse reflected the patriarchal and militarized ideology of Russian society, where war was portrayed as both a duty and a test of masculine strength. By invoking traditional symbols such as the *motherland* and *fatherland*, Putin's language reinforced the idea of national defense as a moral obligation, thereby legitimizing aggression through appeals to protection and honor. The feminist poststructuralist analysis revealed how such discourse sustained unequal gender power relations, using masculinity to justify violence and consolidate national unity. Future research could expand on this by comparing similar gendered constructions in the rhetoric of other authoritarian leaders, exploring how masculinity and nationalism intersect to normalize militarism and suppress dissent in global political contexts.

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