



Rapporteur: Brooke Lennox

On March 9, 2023, CNA held its first Inclusive National Security event of the year (@InclusiveNatSec on Twitter), under the theme “intersectionality.” This month’s event ([recording here](#)), “Masculinity and Authoritarianism: Political Leadership and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” examined how masculinity and political leadership intersect in the international and domestic politics of Russia and Ukraine. The event featured Dr. Valerie Sperling, professor of political science at Clark University, and Dr. Marlene Laruelle, director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies and director of the Illiberalism Studies Program at George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs.

Reflections from Dr. Sperling and Dr. Laruelle

- Male leaders can tie masculinity to political legitimacy by linking their own strength to dominant characteristics of leadership. This tactic can be seen in times of crisis. For example, a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a weakened Russia launched a propaganda campaign to re-masculinize Russia by associating the power of Vladimir Putin’s “masculine” personality with the power of Russia.
- Putin justified Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 by saying it was necessary to push back against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion and the “collective West.” This narrative was an extension of Russian messaging during its invasion of Crimea in 2014, when themes of domination and foreign policy were reflected in—among other things—Russian bumper stickers portraying Russia sexually assaulting and dominating the United States. In 2014, this narrative was welcomed, and pro-Kremlin activists constructed public artworks lauding Putin’s strength.
- Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s narrative is also closely tied to his “masculine” public persona, and he is often praised for his toughness and willingness to stay and “fight” for Ukraine. Many have compared the masculinity of Zelenskyy and Putin, stating that Putin’s bravado is staged, but Zelenskyy has genuine strength and heroism. However, both identities—like those of almost any other male political leader—contain masculinity tropes.
- Narratives regarding femininity are seen in the current Russia-Ukraine war in images of Ukrainian women carrying rifles while walking with their children or wearing makeup and jewelry while in uniform. Despite women appearing as fighters, femininity is still associated with submission; for example, just before the invasion, Putin implied at a press conference that Zelensky must “put up with” the Minsk Agreements just as women must “put up with” sexual assault.
- In addition to masculinity, characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, class, religion, and LGBTQ+ identity also influence narratives around the conflict. For example, Putin has used transphobic language to justify the invasion of Ukraine, furthering the bias that honoring LGBTQ+ rights means being weak, and negatively linking these characteristics with the West.
- Masculinity and political leadership are deeply linked in society. Women in politics must therefore walk a fine line. Although women hold positions as political leaders and even dictators, women can face accusations of being too angry (e.g., “nasty”) or masculine—accusations rarely aimed at men in politics, even when they are explicitly aggressive.

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