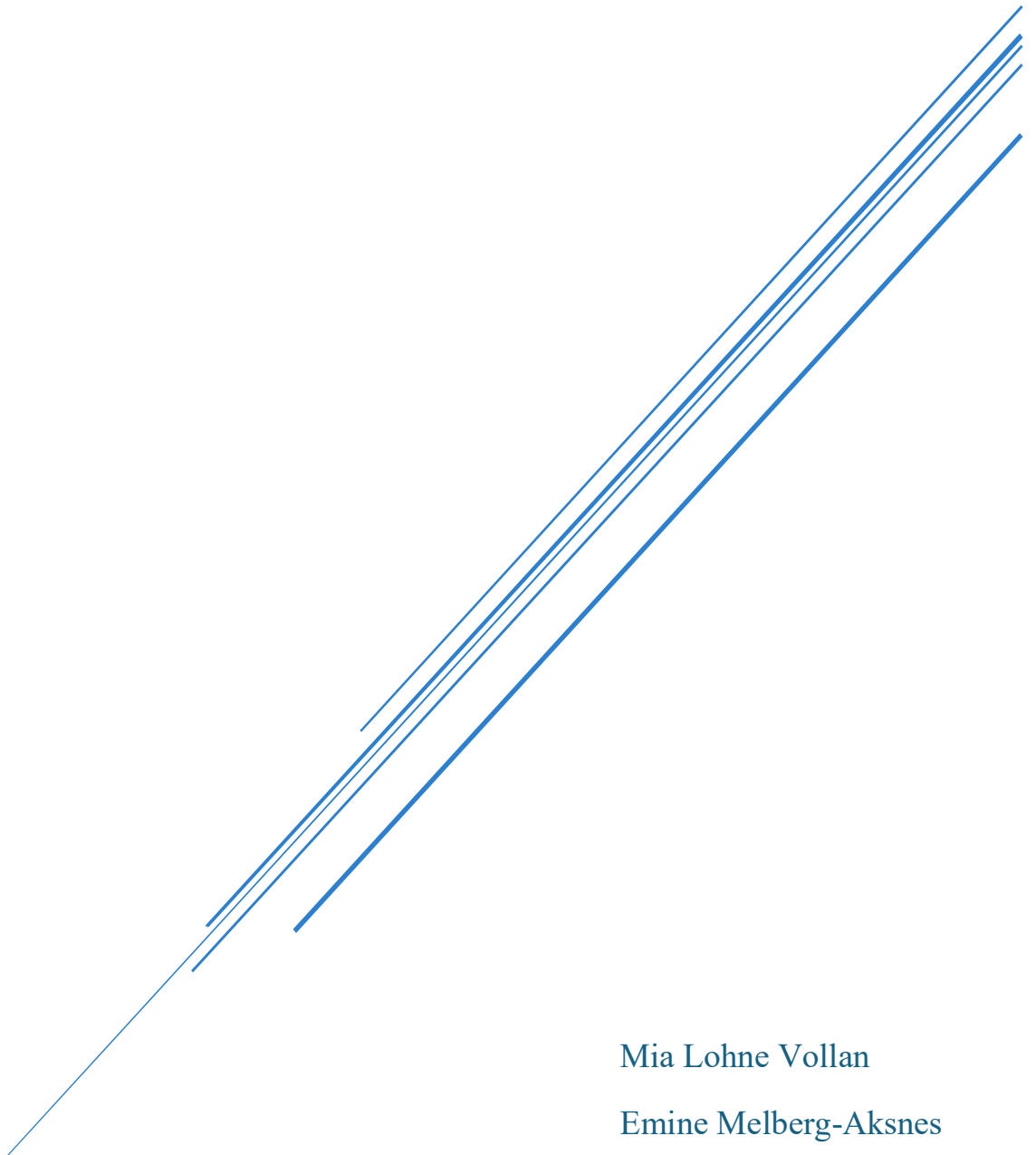


IS THE UKRAINIAN WAR A RESULT OF TOXIC MASCULINITY?

Is Putin toxic, and if so, is this a factor to the Ukrainian war?



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Introduction

The Ukrainian war stands as a current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The war reminds the world about enduring consequences of armed conflict. Since the war started in Ukraine 2022, the conflict has unleashed a wave of devastation, with the killing and displacing of many innocent lives. According to UN, there are not any definite numbers of how many people have been killed from the war. (UN, 2022). However, we do know thousands or maybe millions of humans have suffered from this cruel war.

Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, is widely seen on as the driving force behind the Ukrainian invasion. According to Dr. Rolf Van Dick, professor of social psychology at Goethe University Frankfurt and Dr. Ulrich Wagner, professor of social psychology at Phillips University Marburg, Putin embodies a leadership called toxic leadership. Van Dick and Wagner asks the question, “Is the invasion of Ukraine therefore Putin’s war alone?”. (Dick & Wagner, 2023). We wonder, is this toxic leadership connected to toxic masculinity?

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2024), the term toxic masculinity is described as: “ideas about the way that men should behave that are seen as harmful, for example the idea that men should not cry or admit weakness”. Toxic masculinity is a concept that has gathered increasing attention both academically and publicly. It refers to a set of attitudes and behaviours associated with norms of masculinity, often characterized by aggression, dominance, and the suppression of vulnerability or emotion.

In this research project we want to investigate the causes for Putin’s strict and dictatorial regime, and whether the invasion of Ukraine is a strategic move by Putin to show the world his powers. We believe that Putin’s way of ruling can be compared to the concept of “toxic masculinity” and have therefore come up with the following research question:

“Is the Ukrainian war a result of toxic masculinity?”

Previous research and background

In our research project, we aim to investigate the term "toxic masculinity" to describe Vladimir Putin, particularly in relation to its potential influence on the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Vladimir Putin, a figure on the global stage, has held the leadership of Russia since 1999, gathering widespread attention and media coverage. His actions have been documented in various forms, including news reports, books, and analyses. There are plenty of literature exploring various dimensions of Vladimir Putin's life and leadership. Biographical works such as Philip Short's "Putin" where Short describe in detail his personal history. (Short, 2022). Additionally, analyses of Putin's leadership style and personality, with books such as Steven Lee Myers "The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin," which gives an analysis of Putin's political tactics. (Myers, 2016). Also, Masha Gessen's "The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin," which dives into the psychological side of Putin. (Gessens, 2022). Moreover, there are plenty examples of in the digital world, discussions and posts exploring Putin. With other words, plenty of research has been done on Vladimir Putin.

Although research on our specific research question has not been found, it has been mentioned. In a post from The Guardian, Boris Johnson makes a striking claim: "Putin would not have invaded Ukraine if he were a woman," (Badshah, 2022) (further branding Putin to be described with the term toxic masculinity. This piqued our interest: Did Putin's decision to invade Ukraine stem from a desire to assert his dominance as a man? In today's society, particularly among youths, the term "toxic masculinity" has gained attention. Influential figures like Andrew Tate have spread this way of thinking, particularly targeting young men. As young individuals ourselves, we are curious by the potential connection between toxic masculinity, Putin's behaviour, and the conflict in Ukraine. Questioning whether current issues like toxic masculinity can describe actions of historical leaders like Putin. We want to get a better understanding of who Putin is and if he can be described with the term toxic masculinity. We think that toxic masculinity is a relevant theme for our generation. Hence, why we picked a subject relating to this. Boris Johnson statement made us think, and that is what our project is driven by.

Method

There is a good amount of literature surrounding Vladimir Putin, such as articles and books, each offering unique perspectives, analyses, and insights into the figure who has dominated Russian politics for decades. While none of these sources may directly address our specific research question, the information remains valuable. Delving into these, offers an opportunity to explore Putin's personality and life, and most importantly, answer our research question.

To find out about our research question, we also need a lot of research on what toxic masculinity is defined as. For this, important information for us will be to see how different dictionary describes the term, but most importantly find articles delving into the subject. Our main article will be an article from The Guardian, talking about Andrew Tate and toxic masculinity. Our goal is to find other articles on the same subject and compare them, and in the end find a definite definition for what toxic masculinity is.

Masha Gessens, a Russian American journalist particularly known for exploring Russian politics and history. (Masha Gessen, 2022). She is the author of the book "The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin," which, as mentioned, dives into the psychological side of Putin. We know Gessens sits on a lot of knowledge on both Putin and his leadership. Therefore, using articles related to her name will be severally relevant for our project.

We also want to use an article that delves into psychological analysis of toxic leadership. Professor Van Dick and Professor Wagner dive into the psychological state of Putin. We found this article severally relevant to our research project, and as mentioned, we want to see if the toxic leadership presented in this article is connected to toxic masculinity. The article written by professor Van Dick and Professor Wagner will therefore be relevant for our project.

By gathering information from diverse sources, including Gessen's work, articles on toxic masculinity, and scholarly analyses of leadership, we aim to find out about the complex relationship between Putin's personality, his leadership style, and the concept of toxic masculinity, contributing to a deeper understanding of our research question.

Theory

Before we get into the analysis on our research question, we think it's important to create a better understanding of who Putin is, how the war started and what the term toxic masculinity actually indicates. We will explain shortly about who Putin is and how the war started, as we feel like this is not the main subject of our project. The most important for us, is to gain a deep understanding of the term toxic masculinity. This is going to be done by looking at masculinity, toxic masculinity and comparing them, to see through the different definitions of the term. We also want to share our own opinions and viewpoints on how we think of toxic masculinity, to officially gain a better understanding of the term.

Who is Putin and how did the Ukrainian war start?

Putin is, as many know, the leader of Russia. Some would call him a dictator, leading one of the most powerful countries in the world. As mentioned, Putin is seen as the face of the invasion of the Ukrainian war. According to UN the war already started in 2014 and is a conflict of geopolitical interests. (UN, 2024). It's an ongoing conflict, resulting in misery for millions of lives.

What is masculinity?

Cambridge Dictionary defines Masculinity as "the characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of/or suitable for men.". However, we think this definition is quite general and doesn't give a great understanding of the term. Masculinity can be categorized as a gender role, where different social and cultural expectations such as behaviours, attitudes and characteristics is connected to the gender. Words as strength, courage, independence, leadership and tough are often associated with the term. One might argue that the definition to masculinity is quite like the definition of toxic masculinity. It certainly has some similarities; however, the definition of masculinity is less complex than toxic masculinity, and more general.

What is toxic masculinity?

According to the article “What Is Toxic Masculinity” written by Maya Salam editor and reporter at The New York Times, toxic masculinity indicates this “ideology” where men is expected to be tough all the time, and to show little to no emotions because it resembles femininity and weakness. Salam claims toxic masculinity can be defined into three main parts: Suppressing emotions, maintaining an appearance of hardness, and violence as an indicator of power. (Salam, 2019). The article also states that the “ideology” of toxic masculinity can hinder men from exploring what it means to be a male and leaves them with very fragile egos. (Salam, 2019).

A more recent article “What Is Toxic Masculinity?” written by Amy Morin psychotherapist and author at Verywell Mind states that: “Toxic masculinity refers to the notion that some people’s idea of “manliness” perpetuates domination, homophobia, and aggression. The term involves cultural pressures for men to behave in a certain way.” (Morin, 2022). Morin also states that the term toxic masculinity doesn’t just include behaving like a man, it also includes extreme pressure towards men to act in a way that is harmful. Like the New York Times Article written by Maya Salam, this article also claims that toxic masculinity can be divided into three parts: Toughness, Anti-femininity, and Power. Morins article articulates that toxic masculinity glorifies unhealthy habits. According to Morins the “ideology” gives the notion that men should treat their bodies like machines by skimping on sleep, working out even when they’re injured, and pushing themselves to their physical limits. It also discourages men from getting mental health treatment, because, well you might have guessed it, it resembles weakness. (Morin, 2022).

Our definition

We think it is suitable to define toxic masculinity as a mindset or a type of “ideology”. This ideology indicates a certain mindset where men is expected to show little to no emotion. The importance of being able to show emotions has slightly been oppressed by the importance to “act like a man”. This creates the foundation of mocking women for being “too emotional”, even though there is a possibility that these men deep down have the same number of emotions as women. This certain group of dominant men bares on an unrealistic image of how to be a man. The goal is to be unemotional, aggressive, dependent and to push themselves to

look like the “ideal man”. In addition to this, other people’s opinions are always wrong. Achieving this mindset is simple, but to act it is selfish. “Toxic masculinity” ruins the importance of compassion and respect. Respect for themselves, for not letting themselves act like humans showing emotions. More importantly, lack of respect for women and other people disagreeing with them. We can say that toxic masculinity is to show little emotion, maintaining an appearance of hardness, using violence as a display of power and to strive for domination.

Analysis

Can Putin be described with the term toxic masculinity?

As we've established a clear understanding of the concept toxic masculinity, we're interested in examining its connection to Vladimir Putin. Our exploration involved delving into various articles discussing masculinity, toxic masculinity, as well as crafting our own definition of the term based on the insights gained. Throughout this process, we identified several key characteristics that are typically associated with toxic masculinity. To delve into a meaningful discussion on whether Putin can be described as the term toxic masculinity, we need to see if his behaviour hits the key characteristics we have gained. By looking into Putin's actions and attitudes considering these points, we can gain valuable insights into whether his behaviour connects with toxic masculinity. To do this we will go through some typical characterizations that fits toxic masculinity, such as suppressing emotions, maintaining an appearance of hardness, use violence as a display of power, desire domination, homophobia, and engage in manipulation. This evaluation will enable us to inform us regarding if Putin really is toxic.

Putin often appears cold and to not show off emotion in public appearances, suggesting a tendency to suppress emotions, which is a sign of toxic masculinity. This is highly connected to maintaining an appearance of hardness, another sign of toxic masculinity. Putin actively seeks to project an image of strength and power, indicating a desire to maintain a facade of hardness to dominance on the global stage. However, these are just our perspectives on how Putin appears. We don't know Putin personally; hence we don't know he is like this normally. Very few people know how he is with his family for instance. He could be just putting on a façade to seem strong and mighty to remain his power in the world.

Putin's involvement in military conflicts, such as the Ukrainian war, might mean Putin uses violence to display power and spread fear. The Ukrainian war is a perfect example of Putin using violence as an indicator of power. The attacking of Ukraine is something done by Putin to spread fear and show his dominance and power in the world. This connects to another toxic masculinity trait, desire for domination. Putin has a strong inclination toward dominance and control. This shows in his leadership, where he for example attacked Ukraine in 2022 to gain more power, hence therefore be more dominant as a leader.

Putin is not openly rooting for LGBTQ+ rights, as his policies reflect a lack of acceptance or normalization of the LGBTQ+ community. According to Wikipedia: “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) people in the Russian Federation face significant challenges not experienced by non-LGBT residents. Although sexual activity between consenting adults of the same sex is legal, homosexuality is disapproved of by most of the population and pro-LGBTQ+ advocacy groups are deemed extremist and banned.” (LGBT right in Russia, 2022). As a leader of a country who disapproves LGBT advocacy, Putin does not seem like the biggest fan of the LGBTQ+ community. Although homosexuality in Russia is legal, the country is still far behind other countries in the world when it comes to acceptance. This gives us reason to believe, that Putin might not be open for the LGBTQ+ community. And, you might have guessed it, homophobia is a trait often associated with toxic masculinity.

While Putin may not display aggressive behaviour in the news or papers, his contributing of conflicts and use of military force suggest aggression to achieve power. In an article from Nikkei Asia, they say “U.S. company uses AI-driven tech to monitor Russian leader's emotions”. Further they found out: “An emotional evaluation of the speeches reveals a high degree of anger and disgust but surprisingly, almost no fear, clinical psychologist Nirit Pisano told Nikkei Asia in an interview.” (Moriyasu, 2023). Although AI not being the most reliable “source” it’s interesting that they say Putin seems rather angry than scared of the Ukrainian war. Aggression is also a trait of toxic masculinity.

Putin's regime has been criticized for employing propaganda tactics to shape public opinion and maintain power. From the article “Putin’s Propaganda: The Effect of Russian Propaganda on Masculinity” written by A. Dragunoff (2020), he claims the following: “In order to spur nationalism, it was crucial for the Russian government to portray President Putin in a strong

and manly way. This goal was accomplished through a vast propaganda campaign that focused on showing pictures of Putin doing athletic and masculine activities". Putin's propaganda illustrates a form for manipulation, to present very manly to gain votes. This is another characteristic commonly associated with toxic masculinity.

Considering these observations, it appears that Putin shows several traits of toxic masculinity, including a tendency to suppress emotions, maintain an appearance of hardness, utilize violence as a display of power, desire domination, exhibit homophobia, and engage in manipulation tactics. While some traits may manifest more subtly or indirectly, they suggest a pattern consistent with toxic masculinity ideologies.

Has Putin's toxic masculinity resulted in a war?

Through deep analysis, we have delved into the question of whether Vladimir Putin's actions align with the concept of toxic masculinity and if this has contributed to the Ukrainian war. Our examination has figured out some arguments and examples from both parts of the debate.

One perspective suggests that yes, toxic masculinity plays a role in the Ukrainian conflict, as Putin's desire for dominance and power is central to his actions. His assertive and aggressive approach may contribute to engage in military actions to strengthen Russia as a country. On the other hand, another viewpoint is that while Putin's leadership style may have personality traits associated with toxic masculinity, the Ukrainian war cannot be completely driven by this factor. Reading UN articles, we found several different reasons for the war. One factor is for example Russia response to Yanukovych's going off as leader in Ukraine in 2014. Russia responded by taking control of the Crimean Peninsula with the use of armed forces. This led to tension between the countries. Also, the authorities in Russia believe that Russia has a responsibility towards ethnic Russians in Ukraine, where most live in the east. This even though they are Ukrainian citizens. This could be another factor, as Russian feels like the east part of Ukraine is kind of theirs. Also, Ukraine taking part in NATO is not so popular by Russians authorities. According to UN, Russia particularly disliked the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) becoming NATO members, since these had also been part of the Soviet Union itself. The same applies to Ukraine. (UN, 2022)

It's essential to recognize that while Putin's actions may reflect aspects of toxic masculinity, they are not the sole determinant of the Ukrainian war. The war is motivated not only by notions of strength and dominance but also by strategic concerns and a perceived responsibility to protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Factors such as economic interests, geopolitical rivalries, and historical dynamics all play significant roles in shaping the conflict. Therefore, while Putin's leadership style undoubtedly influences the war, it is just one component of a complex conflict.

Conclusion

For this research project different articles, books and definitions has been research with the desire to discover if the Ukrainian war is a result of toxic masculinity. Whether Putin's traits of toxic masculinity are a result of the war or not is hard to answer with yes or no. Our research project aimed to investigate the question of whether the Ukrainian war can be attributed to toxic masculinity, particularly as it pictures to the actions and leadership of Vladimir Putin. Through an in-depth analysis, we examined various perspectives on toxic masculinity, delved into Putin's leadership style and actions, and explored some complex factors underlying the conflict in Ukraine.

We started by establishing a clear understanding of toxic masculinity, drawing from multiple sources and crafting our own definition that made us come up with its key characteristics. Toxic masculinity, we determined, involves the suppression of emotions, the maintenance of an appearance of hardness, the use of violence as a display of power, a desire for domination, and often manifests in homophobia and manipulative acts.

When evaluating Putin's behavior and leadership style through the lens of toxic masculinity, we found several similarities with what toxic masculinity is described as. Putin's as public person often portrays him as cold and unemotional, suggesting a tendency to suppress emotions and maintain a facade of hardness. His involvement in military conflicts, such as the Ukrainian war, can be interpreted as a means of asserting dominance and displaying power through violence. Additionally, his regime's use of propaganda to shape public opinion reflects manipulation tactics associated with toxic masculinity.

However, it's important to acknowledge that while Putin has traits of toxic masculinity, the Ukrainian war is not completely driven by this factor. The conflict has several different factors including tensions between Russia and Ukraine, Russia's perception of its responsibility to protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine, and the disapproval Russia has for Ukraine's willingness to NATO membership.

Therefore, while toxic masculinity may play a role in shaping Putin's actions and leadership style, it is just one component of a multifaceted conflict. Our analysis suggests that while Putin's behaviour reflects aspects of toxic masculinity, the Ukrainian war is not at all only controlled by this factor. It is important to consider the broader context and underlying dynamics when examining the causes of complex conflicts such as the one in Ukraine.

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