

## **Structural Masculinism and Women’s Media Ownership in the Context of Authoritarian Populism: A Feminist Political Economy of Communication Perspective**

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This study explores the structural imbrications between gendered news media ownership and masculinist authoritarian populism from the lens of a feminist political economy of communication. The existing literature offers useful insights into the authoritarian-capitalist restructuring of media but fewer into how these processes are gendered. Drawing on primary data and secondary resources of ownership ties in Austria, Slovenia, and Turkey, we explore the masculinist configuration of news media ownership in countries that saw the rise of authoritarian-populist politics in recent years, albeit in varying degrees. We employ the concept of structural masculinism and the perspective of feminist political economy of communication to reveal the ways in which news media ownership structures are gendered. We argue that female underrepresentation coupled

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with patriarchal family business models, ownership concentration, and clientelist-masculinist ties between politics and the media create a fertile ground for media influence and control by masculinist authoritarian populists.

*Keywords: structural masculinism, authoritarian populism, feminist political economy of communication, media-ownership concentration, clientelism*

Right-wing authoritarian populism has been characterized as masculinist for several reasons including sheer male party membership and parliamentary representatives, male constituencies, and electoral supporters adhering to a masculinist, anti-feminist ideology (Sauer, 2020). Masculinist authoritarian populism relies on media support and complicity to gain public visibility, convince the voter public about the relevance of populist politics, and maintain power once populists garner electoral success (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). While existing literature on populism has established the role of media in the rise and endurance of right-wing authoritarian populism, with a focus on its cultural and discursive aspects (De Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018; Mazzoleni, 2008), it offers fewer clues about media's structural complicity in democratic backsliding, particularly in the field of media ownership. In the rare studies that reveal the imbrications between concentrated media ownership and authoritarian populism, the gendered implications of this entanglement seem to be muted (e.g., Baker, 2007; Freedman, 2018).

However, neither political nor media power is gender neutral; power and power concentration, as critical feminist scholarship has long established, is gendered. Hence, media-ownership concentration not only directly impacts women's representation in media-governing structures and media content but also comes with de-democratizing effects disadvantaging women on a structural level: It concentrates power in the hands of a few wealthy men, reinforces existing barriers, and consequently impedes women from inscribing their voices in the public sphere (Byerly, 2014). The inquiry into women's communicative power in media ownership attains a distinctive significance in authoritarian-populist conjunctures when media-ownership concentration serves not only economic but also political ends. While the media's complicity with authoritarian populism is not specific to the news media, the downfall of the gatekeeping role of the journalistic sphere contributes to the rise and popularity of authoritarian-populist politics. The news media are vital for the visibility of authoritarian-populist figures and their messages, as well as for the reproduction of political idiom and style that contribute to the popularization of authoritarian populism (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; Mazzoleni, 2008).

By focusing on news media, our study aims to explore the structural imbrications between masculinist, concentrated media ownership and masculinist authoritarian populism from the lens of a feminist political economy of communication. Drawing on a comprehensive data set of ultimate beneficial news media-ownership shares, we illustrate and contextualize women's ownership in news media across three different European countries—Austria, Slovenia, and Turkey—that were exposed to masculinist authoritarian-populist politics over the last two decades, albeit in very different sociopolitical contexts and to varying degrees: Austria represents a strong case of populist backlash in Western Europe due to the early "Haiderization" of politics starting in the 1990s (Wodak, 2015), while Slovenia, as a Central and Eastern

European country with a post-socialist history, has experienced intermittent authoritarian-populist governments over the past two decades that have been characterized by fierce control over the media (Pajnik, 2019). We also include Turkey as a non-European Union (EU) trendsetter country in authoritarian populism; since 2002, Turkey has been uninterruptedly ruled by the authoritarian-populist and masculinist party of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Çelik, 2023).

Referring to the political shifts in our sample countries, we deploy the notion of authoritarian populism, originally coined by Stuart Hall (1985), which allows us to grasp a variety of political and economic strategies that “seek to undermine, capture or instrumentalize institutions of democratic governance” (Edelman, 2020, p. 1420). The notion of authoritarian populism shifts the focus away from the level of populist discourse and instead highlights the political-economic and institutional conditions enhancing antidemocratic, authoritarian politics—including those in the media sphere (Kellner, 2017).

In contrast to studies that consider the world’s media systems based on differences such as Western liberal, democratic-corporatist, Mediterranean, or non-Western media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2011), our study aims to reveal the underlying similarities among countries’ media spheres. We focus on common patterns of masculinist and patriarchal structures, concentrated news media ownership, clientelism, and authoritarian restructuring. By including the under-investigated countries of Slovenia and Turkey in our sample, we aim to show how masculinism serves as a common denominator of media systems, regardless of whether they are situated within the categories of Western European democracies, post-socialist contexts, or non-Western settings.

We engage in our analysis with the approach of the feminist political economy of communication that locates gender and, in our case, masculinism at the core of critical research on media ownership and control. Coming from disciplines such as political science and media and communication studies, we center our work on critical feminist scholarship and activism, finding inspiration in the activist social research conducted by organizations such as the International Women’s Media Foundation, European Journalism Observatory, the European Institute for Gender Equality, the Global Media Registry, and the Global Media Monitoring Project.

Following an overview of the state of research on feminist media studies and the political economy of communication, we outline our theoretical framework, which builds on these traditions while incorporating conceptual discussions on structural masculinism. We then present primary data about women’s ownership in the news media sector in Austria, Slovenia, and Turkey, supplemented by key cases of masculinist ownership based on secondary resources. While not claiming a definitive causal relationship, our study suggests that masculinist media-ownership structures create fertile conditions for media influence and control by masculinist authoritarian populists.

### **Feminist Media Studies: Unmasking Gendered Media Spheres**

Since the 1970s, feminist media studies have been pivotal in challenging not only patriarchal media industries but also the scholarly silence surrounding gender disparities. While the majority of feminist media studies has focused on media content, examining how women are portrayed across mediated forms,

formats, genres, and platforms, fewer have delved into labor issues, uncovering the structural inequalities faced by women media workers and the gendered nature of journalism as an institution (e.g., Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 2004; Ruoho & Torkkola, 2018). Scholars have convincingly demonstrated that journalism has been institutionally ingrained as a masculine practice, evident in the division between “serious” journalistic content produced by and for men and “softer” cultural content targeted at women (e.g., De Bruin & Ross, 2004; North, 2016; Steiner, 2012). This gender disparity is further highlighted in newsroom practices, where women face systematic discrimination and harassment from male managers and peers across national contexts—a problem that persists despite the increasing number of female journalists (Gallagher, 2001; Ross, 2001).

Several studies have underscored the persistent gender inequality within the globalized mass media and Internet industry, with managerial and editorial positions predominantly held by men and women gaining acceptance in management only under “crisis conditions” (e.g., Djerf-Pierre, 2007; Gallagher, 2008; McLaughlin, 2008; O’Brien, 2014). A closer look reveals ongoing gender imbalances in the media industry: Lower-ranking positions see a growing number of women, while upper managerial roles remain predominately male-dominated across Europe (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2013). Despite efforts to promote gender equality within media spheres through national and EU laws, male dominance endures particularly in decision-making positions (Ross & Padovani, 2017; Rush, Oukrop, & Creedon, 2011). However, recent research has shown that female leadership in newsrooms can significantly impact editorial decisions, news interpretations, and the allocation of time and resources for news production (Byerly & McGraw, 2020).

While it is widely recognized that gender segregation in the media endures, the prevailing corpus of feminist media literature appears to stagnate in terms of data dissemination and fails to make a shift from *what* to *why* (Lobo, Silveirinha, da Silva, & Subtil, 2017). Hence, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the gendered structuration of media industries by placing it in a broader economic and political context.

### **Exploring the Political Economy of Communication and Media Concentration**

The critical political economy of communication offers a valuable lens for understanding power dynamics in the production of mediated messages, particularly concerning the ownership and control of media institutions. It exposes structural problems within the capitalist organization of the political economy of communication, hindering the development of a media sphere conducive to social justice and democratic public discourse (see Hardy, 2014, for a comprehensive overview). The increasing commodification and marketization of the media, alongside the concentration of communicative power, pose significant obstacles to inclusive public debates and equitable participation in political deliberation (Baker, 2007; Noam, 2016).

The advent of the “Washington consensus” represents a key milestone in media history, marked by neoliberal restructuring (Berry, 2019). This shift brought about global challenges such as financialization, privatization, liberalization, and deregulation of media markets, diminishing state ownership and regulatory power while jeopardizing public service quality, media autonomy, and communication workers’ welfare (Chakravartty & Schiller, 2010).

Research shows that many media owners, especially in liberalized and privatized markets, enter the media landscape to leverage their power over political elites for business and commercial purposes (Çelik, 2023; Stetka, 2012). Media investment often serves as a strategic tool for the capitalist business elite, with governmental permissions tied to potential political instrumentalization. This dynamic fosters clientelist ties among media owners and political actors, parties, or governments, where both sides perceive the media as a means to advance their business and political interests (Pajnik, 2019). Freedman (2014) argued that powerful "media moguls" are regularly intimately related to other powerful (political, business) actors in networks. He refers to "a small group of people who occupy commanding positions across the economy, politics and culture and authority and who impose their world views and everyday regimes on those who lack 'elite' power" (Freedman, 2014, p. 32). Örnebring (2012) specifies that "clientelism is linked to informal networks engaged in exchanges of favors and resources, often nontransparent, where the main goal of the network is to increase/retain the power and resources of its leading actor(s)" (p. 503). Within the media sphere, informal clientelist exchanges are primarily facilitated through links between politicians and media owners, as noted by these scholars.

These entanglements are key to the popularization of authoritarian-populist politics. Scholars such as Pickard (2014) and Freedman (2018) highlight the role of policy changes in the production of mediated messages that benefit authoritarian-populist discourses. Others such as Chakravartty and Roy (2015) and Mazzoleni and colleagues (2003) emphasize the impact of commodification and marketization in generating mediated populism. Additionally, Baker (2007) discusses how concentrated media ownership not only erodes pluralistic media content but also undermines the "democratic distribution ownership principle" (p. 10). Ensuring a wide dispersal of media power is essential for maintaining media diversity and upholding the "watchdog" role of journalistic media, which informs the public about the abuses of economic and political power (Birkinbine, Gómez, & Wasko, 2017).

Despite the useful insights into the evolving power relations within neoliberal and populist contexts, the critical political economy strand often overlooks the gendered implications of these processes and neglects to acknowledge the news mediascape as permeated by both, political-economic and gendered interests.

### **The Feminist Political Economy of Communication and Structural Masculinism**

In this article, we adopt a feminist political economy of communication approach, which integrates an examination of capitalism and patriarchy (Riordan, 2004). This approach does not view "gender" as merely an addition to the political economy of communication but places it at its core, redefining it as a gendered theory and method (Lee, 2011; Meehan, Mosco, & Wasko, 1993; Meehan & Riordan, 2002): Gender permeates the entire mediascape, from gendered journalistic practices and content to media structuration at the level of media ownership and control.

Byerly (2011) conceptualizes media ownership "as a site of gendered struggle for control" (p. 28). When considering knowledge production in the communicative realm as primarily a public service, the absence of women in media control roles, such as ownership and management, underscores how the "public interest is heavily tilted towards men's interest" (Byerly, 2011, p. 25). From a feminist political economy lens, it is crucial to differentiate between owning shares in a media company and being an "active media

owner" (Byerly, 2011, p. 40). Unless women hold "active media owner" positions, their ownership shares may contribute to the perpetuation of masculinist power in media markets. Byerly (2011) defines active media owners as those engaged in managing the company to ensure that women's voices, concerns, and struggles receive substantial coverage in the outlet(s) they own and manage. In her study on the U.S. broadcasting sector, she found that female owners with small shares and no management roles often functioned as "absentee owners," merely holding ownership in name (Byerly, 2011, p. 40). In such cases, female media owners are typically associated with male majority shareholders, who assume management positions in the media organizations. Byerly (2011) identifies several gender barriers hindering women's media ownership, including exclusion from decision-making forums, lack of promotional opportunities, insufficient mentorship, or hostile regulatory environments.

Among the multiple impediments to women's news media ownership, Byerly (2014) also highlights media-ownership concentration and conglomeration. These processes of power consolidation tend to reinforce existing structural barriers to entry into the media market, limiting access points for various actors to partake in public discourse. Byerly (2014) suggests that women are disadvantaged by the unchecked processes of mergers and ownership concentration occurring in today's media industries. She argues that media-ownership concentration typically leads to fewer employment opportunities for women and a narrowing of viewpoints presented in the news (Byerly, 2014). Consequently, she argues that "media conglomeration signals the consolidation of men's economic and political power, and the further marginalization of women's" (Byerly, 2014, p. 323).

Our study builds on these critical perspectives to illuminate gendered inequalities in the field of media ownership. However, we aim to enrich this approach by incorporating a perspective on structural masculinism to underscore the prevailing masculinist norms in this field.

Feminist studies on representation have distinguished between descriptive masculinism, which mainly focuses on the numbers of (biological) men or on the individual characteristics of representatives, and structural masculinism, which characterizes organizations and institutions. Research aiming to unravel the gendered structure of institutions typically draws on Raewyn Connell's (1990) notion of gender and masculinity, which describes an ordering structure of social practices within societies encompassing power relations, inequality, and hierarchies. In capitalist societies, these gendered ordering principles are intertwined with labor, ownership, relations of production, laws, and the architecture of the state's institutional power. These relations both shape and are shaped by specific gender regimes, or, rather, institutionalized gender relations (Connell, 1990). The concepts of gender regimes and structural masculinism hence highlight that all social organizations, state and political institutions, as well as the media are characterized by a patriarchal gender structure or structural masculinism within capitalist societies. Patriarchal gender regimes are, for instance, institutionalized in a gendered division of labor as well as in the heterosexual family, both instrumental for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production.

Political science research shows that structural masculinism is a dominant characteristic of Western capitalist states and liberal democracies (Brown, 1992). Not only are state institutions and political organizations like parties staffed by men but they also perpetuate structural masculinism. Accordingly, right-

wing authoritarian parties are “men’s parties” not only due to their male personnel but also because they promote masculinist ideals or “masculinist identity politics” (Sauer, 2020, p. 23).

How does this structural masculinism work within media organizations? Following Joan Acker’s (1992) concept of “gendered organizations,” we distinguish four sets of gendered processes within institutions like the media: The first one is the “production of gender divisions” (Acker, 1992, p. 252) and a gendered hierarchy, which positions men at the top of the hierarchy and women subordinated to them within a system of a gendered division of labor. In capitalist societies, the latter is most important for (re-)producing patriarchal and masculinist structures. The second dimension refers to practices and “interactions between individuals” (Acker, 1992, p. 253), which reproduce these divisions, binaries, and borderings and at the same time recreate masculinist hierarchies. Male networks and informal male bonding are typical processes within institutions to secure the masculinist structure and control. The third process refers to the “creation of symbols, images and forms of consciousness” (Acker, 1992, p. 253) that justify the divisions, hierarchical line drawings, and practices of privileging male experiences. The structural masculinism of media organizations thus refers to the dominance of male values and norms, masculinist ways of thinking and organizing, as well as masculinist rules of proceedings and practices that again favor male experiences and life plans. Furthermore, structural masculinism refers to the “internal mental work of individuals” (Acker, 1992, p. 253), which makes up the fourth process. Hence, it is also relevant for feminist research to highlight the emotional work necessary for justifying the masculinist structuring of practices, norms, and attitudes. Overall, these processes produce and reproduce a gender binary and gendered power structures through the sedimentation of masculinist patterns and norms in institutions and organizations. While these structures go beyond biological sex and individual behavior, they nevertheless must be acquired by individuals who performatively reproduce these structures as well as their own identity as masculinist (or feminized) individuals.

### Data

Our analysis of masculinist ownership structures unfolds along two dimensions: First, we draw on a primary data set from the Populist Backlash, Democratic Backsliding, and the Crisis of the Rule of Law in the European Union (POPBACK) research project, providing a comprehensive examination of ultimate beneficial news media ownership in Austria, Slovenia, and Turkey. While previous work using these data revealed media-ownership concentration dynamics in these countries over the past two decades (Schnyder et al., 2024), our article introduces a gender perspective on these findings. We scrutinize the characteristics of individual media owners including sex, family relationships, and management positions. The data set encompasses 167 news outlets from the print, online, and TV sectors, each with a national audience reach or average annual audience market share of at least 3% in 2020, and traces the ownership structures across multiple layers until the ultimate beneficial owners (legal entities, such as foundations, and individuals) are identified. It thus reveals individuals who directly held capital stakes in companies involved in the ownership of these news media outlets by 2020, including those with marginal shares in the companies involved.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For details on data collection and sources please see appendix here: [https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/z5kbhonaxq1vi01hk127y/appendix\\_-21688.pdf?rlkey=6ui3mphant75duruv0y68uevi7&e=1&st=6nx2ue4v&dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/z5kbhonaxq1vi01hk127y/appendix_-21688.pdf?rlkey=6ui3mphant75duruv0y68uevi7&e=1&st=6nx2ue4v&dl=0)

Second, beyond nominal masculinity, we present key cases illustrating how structural masculinity influences authoritarian-populist dynamics in our sample countries. While they are not exhaustive, we select recent media-political trends, events, or scandals and draw on secondary sources to demonstrate how masculinist media-ownership structures manifest differently in Austria, Slovenia, and Turkey. Our cases include the biggest media conglomerate in Turkey based on market share (Media Ownership Monitor, 2021), print media companies in Austria that are the biggest beneficiaries of government advertisements (Kaltenbrunner, 2021), and private media companies in Slovenia that operate with the support of media conglomerates on a local level in Slovenia (Kučić, 2019). By choosing cases that consider specific country contexts, we aim to explore the relevant authoritarian-populist dynamics within each context.

### **Masculinism of Media Ownership in Austria, Slovenia, and Turkey**

#### ***Women News Media "Absentee" Owners***

Of a total of 167 high-reach news media outlets in our sample, we identified 139 individual ultimate beneficial owners: There were 29 owners of Austrian news outlets, 27 owners of Slovenian outlets, and 83 owners of Turkish outlets. Among these 139 individuals, 114 (82%) were identified as male and 25 (18%) as female. Broken down by country, this equates to eight women news media owners in the Austrian sample (27%), 10 women news media owners in Slovenia (37%), and seven women news media owners in Turkey (8%).<sup>3</sup> Table 1 provides a summary of the frequencies of selected characteristics of these female media owners.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1. Sample of Female Media Owners.**

Frequency Table	Austria ( <i>n</i> )	Slovenia ( <i>n</i> )	Turkey ( <i>n</i> )	Full Sample ( <i>n</i> )
<b>No. of Female Owners</b>	8	10	7	25
holding > 10% of outlet	5	3	5	13
family-related	7	8	6	21
management position	4	2	1	7

Given the relatively low number of female owners, it is crucial to delve deeper to understand who those women are and how they became involved in media ownership. Therefore, we analyzed the family relations of the 25 female owners, categorizing them as "family-related" if they had at least one close male relative, commonly (ex-)husband, son, brother, father, or father-in-law, who served as the majority shareholder, chief executive officer, or founder of the same media company in which the female owner held her shares.

Intriguingly, the total number of women owners in our sample was close to the number of women owners we identified as "family-related." A striking 84% of all female owners in our sample could be linked to a specific family or family business within the respective mediascape. Furthermore, we discovered that

<sup>3</sup> For Austria, these figures include four German owners who held shares in a German media group (Funke Mediengruppe) in 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Table 1 suggests that Esra Teymur held at least 10% of the Turkish online outlet haberler.com.



17 women owners in our sample (68%) entered the media market through inheritance or the transfer of ownership shares from a family member, rather than by direct investment or acquisition. This pattern was consistent across all three countries, underscoring the significant role of family relations in facilitating women's involvement in news media ownership.

We further observed a consistent pattern in the structuring of family businesses, which remains dominant in the mediascapes of the three countries: Typically, these companies are organized as networks of legal entities directly or indirectly owned by a single family. These companies are predominantly run by male founders, followed by male heirs of the founders. While female heirs often inherit shares of the media company, they are typically not involved in its management, particularly in top leadership positions. This trend is evident in examples such as the Dogus Media Group or the Ihlas Medya Grup in Turkey, the Dichand or the Dasch family in Austria, or the female relatives of Martin Odlazek in the Slovenian case. Overall, among the 25 women owners in our sample, only seven were also involved in the top management of the owned company in 2020.

Their involvement in hierarchically structured family media businesses often places women media owners in "absentee" ownership positions (Byerly, 2011). Patriarchal and heteronormative family dynamics serve as a key dimension of the masculinist gender order in capitalism. This structure not only upholds male dominance over women in the public-private divide but also reproduces capitalist ownership structures and domination secured by inheritance laws. Within the media sector, family businesses tend to reinforce masculinist supremacy claims and hierarchical or authoritarian decision-making processes, thereby perpetuating masculinist corporate cultures. The prominence of individual families and family businesses is thus related to the dominance of assertive male media owners, commonly referred to as "media moguls" or "newspaper patriarchs," who lead media companies.

We thus argue that masculinist news media-ownership structures prevail in all three countries. These structures are characterized by the significant underrepresentation of women in news media-ownership roles and the predominant reliance on family relations and inheritance as the decisive factor to get women involved in media ownership, suggesting dependence on male relatives and limited agency within patriarchal family systems and the broader context of masculinist media industries. The following key cases illustrate how these structures are maintained further by clientelist practices with actors from the political terrain, showcasing their nuanced manifestations in the countries under study.

### ***Selected Cases of Masculinist Media-Ownership Structures***

#### *Austria*

The Austrian news media market has historically been characterized by high levels of concentration with regard to media ownership and market shares as well as by an exceptionally high reach of dailies, with a conspicuous position of tabloids (Thiele, 2009). Since the turn of the century, commercialization of the Austrian media market has been escorted by the expansion of the tabloid sector through the launching of two national freesheets. Increased public ad spending, from which the tabloid sector has benefitted

disproportionately (Kaltenbrunner, 2021), has been commented on by scholars as “strategic placement of advertisements [that] leads to a symbiosis of government and tabloids” in Austria (Wodak, 2022, p. 796).

In 2021, the then chancellor Kurz and his followers of the Austrian Peoples’s Party that is, the ÖVP, were charged with using taxpayers’ money to publish manipulated opinion polls in their favor in a tabloid paper that belongs to the *Mediengruppe Österreich*. Wolfgang Fellner, the head of this family-owned media group, is under suspicion of publishing manipulated polls in exchange for receiving public ads. Fellner, who has been notorious for his authoritarian style of leadership, the intimidation of employees, and the massive political power attributed to him (Fidler, 2009), has been convicted twice for defamation following media reports and multiple court cases in which former female employees accused him of sexual harassment. As a consequence of the revelations on the sexist work environment in Fellner’s media group, Austrian journalists’ associations called for stricter standards for the allocation of press subsidies and the establishment of a *Vertrauensstelle* (confidential office) to combat the abuse of power in the media, claiming that precarious working conditions, steep hierarchies in the sector, as well as the small size of the Austrian media market would establish settings that favored sexist abuses of power (Opis, 2023).

However, the recent exposition of numerous text messages between media and political actors exceeds the “Fellner case”: As became public in April 2023, the *WKSTA* (Public Prosecutor’s Office for Economic Affairs and Corruption) is conducting investigations against Eva and Christoph Dichand, publishers and co-owners of Austria’s two largest tabloid newspapers (*Heute* and *Kronen Zeitung*), on charges of bribery and collusion with the Kurz-ÖVP (Graber & Schmid, 2023).<sup>5</sup> Intriguingly, Eva Dichand is the only female media owner in the Austrian sample who is not considered as “family-related.” Despite being the wife of Christoph Dichand and daughter-in-law of the former influential owner and publisher of the *Kronen Zeitung*, Hans Dichand, she is not connected to a male relative within the media company she runs.

While Austria might be labeled as a moderately authoritarian-populist context due to the resilience of legal and democratic institutions, the country’s masculinist media-ownership structure appears to be politically capitalized. On the one hand, the tabloidization of the concentrated press sector has ensured favorable media attention for the (rise of the) right-wing populist Freedom Party since the 1990s. On the other hand, informal media-political networks opened a window of opportunity for the manipulation of media coverage and the fierce “message control” implemented by the Kurz government (Wodak, 2022). Overall, the exceptional position of tabloids, the oligopolistic structure of the press and TV market, as well as the firmly established entanglements between media and political actors in the informal and masculinist structured networks have been beneficial to authoritarian and populist forces in Austria over the past two decades.

### *Slovenia*

Slovenia adopted a media system that equated press freedom with private ownership in the 1990s (Splichal, 2001). The constitutive role of the state in shaping the media markets was replaced by capitalist transnational or national companies, which instituted new structures of political parallelism, resulting in a kind of “paternal-commercial media system” (Splichal, 2001, p. 45) that strengthened media privatization

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of publication, all mentioned investigations are still ongoing.

and concentration on the one hand and maximized political power over media on the other. In the absence of regulation, the trends of media concentration and vulnerability to political instrumentalization resulted in the rise of private media conglomerates, where a small number of owners ensure the horizontal and vertical concentration via numerous interlinked and cross-owned companies (Bašić Hrvatin & Milosavljević, 2001). A consolidated male-oriented domestic ownership, which included a few female owners but maintained male dominance, has been strengthened in the last two decades and developed in parallel to the periods of Janez Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) government (2004–2008, 2012–2013, and 2020–2022).

These periods have witnessed the polarization and destabilization of the party system (Fink-Hafner, 2019) and the media (Splichal, 2020). Janša's governing strategies have been recognized as falling under "Orbán's laboratory of illiberalism" (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018, p. 39). In 2018, Orbán and his state-run media gave Janša a huge boost in the snap elections, making his party the largest and putting him in a position to form a coalition government (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018).

In 2020 Janša (2020a) published the essay titled "War With the Media," which was followed by attempts to change several media-related laws, aiming to obstruct media autonomy, pushing for an expansionist, corporatist media policy that has been marginalizing civil society, and awarding political loyalty (Splichal, 2020). The SDS party has been increasing private media ownership, with the support of regional oligarch owners from Hungary and the Czech Republic, namely the corporation PPF, which became the majority owner of the country's largest private TV station, POP TV.<sup>6</sup>

These developments also augmented direct pressure on journalists: Janša published insulting tweets, denouncing the media for "lying" (Janša, 2021) and "producing fake news" (Janša, 2020b). Previously convicted for corruption, Janša received a suspended sentence for defaming two female journalists, calling them "washed up prostitutes" (Janša, 2016) in a 2016 tweet.

Janša is among the founders and co-owners of the right-wing media house Nova24, which includes a TV station and a Web portal operating as supporters of the SDS party and reporting favorably on Hungarian prime minister Orbán and previous U.S. president Trump. While its reach has not been significant and its impact on the public remains dubious, Nova24 illustrates well the authoritarian imaginary of the media as serving the party and its leader by establishing a local oligarchy that awards party loyalty. Since 2017 at least 16 regional Web portals have been established that provide regional news for the Nova24TV Web outlet. While their publishers claim that they are independent news portals, according to Kučić (2019), the documentation for registration in the media register was in several cases identical, and almost all of these portals were registered by the same company. Publishers and editors of these media are dominated by members of the SDS party. These portals exchange content with each other, eventually reproducing the same or similar news, contributing two-thirds of regional news to Nova24TV.si (Kučić, 2019).

The general policy of these media is to echo the interests of right-wing, authoritarian politics, the SDS party in particular. Since its establishment in 2016, enabled by the financial woes of Hungarian media

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<sup>6</sup> See the appeal of the Slovene Association of Journalists to respect editorial independence addressed to the new owner of POP TV (Društvo novinarjev Slovenije, 2020).

companies and businessmen, the majority of ownership shares of Nova24 has belonged to party-affiliated businessmen, directors of firms, and members and supporters of the SDS party. Female owners are largely absent, with a few exceptions: The largest individual ownership share of Nova24 belongs to Klavdija Snežič, the wife of Rok Snežič, a former copriisoner of Janša and SDS party supporter accused of tax evasion. Hence, ownership structures in the media market in Slovenia largely serve to reproduce oligarchic masculinist power where a few female owners are recruited as supporters of right-wing parties or are wives of party members.

### *Turkey*

The restructuring of the news mediascape in Turkey began in the 1990s through financialization, privatization, and liberalization of the media sector. The 2000s saw a remarkable deepening of the markets and clientelist organizations of capitalist media under the governance of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Yesil, 2016). When Erdoğan came to power in 2002, the news media sector was highly commercialized, subjected to tabloidization, and controlled by a handful of competing male media moguls. They were generally organized in media conglomerates to form an economy of scale in the market owning multiple outlets across the broadcasting, print, online, and digital sectors while also being involved in other businesses from banking to insurance and manufacturing (Adaklı, 2006). Erdoğan garnered his first electoral success in 2002 when the majority of the media moguls and their outlets gave negative coverage of his political persona and his party. In the next 20 years in office, he used his power to change the media market to form an almost universally controlled news mediascape. While not changing the commercial-capitalist structure of the media market, his administration employed an increasingly politicized judicial system and the state's institutional power to replace the old media moguls who were politically not affiliated with Erdoğanism with those who were. Ninety percent of the television market, which is the leading medium for news and entertainment in Turkey, came to be owned by the pro-Erdoğan firms that had direct clientelist ties with Erdoğan's political party by 2018 (White, 2018). None of the owners or executive board members of these firms had female representation, while only 15% of the middle-range managerial roles were held by women in 2020 (Sarışın, 2020).

To trace how structural masculinism took a renewed turn during Turkey's Erdoğanism, we examine the shift from Doğan to Demirören conglomerates, both of which are family-owned businesses headed by male media moguls. Aydın Doğan, the founder of the Doğan media conglomerate, entered the media sector in the 1970s by purchasing a popular daily and expanded his media business into a media empire. Reaching a 20% audience share through its prime-time television news and 30% of readership through its dailies by 2008, Doğan Holding was a market leader in the national media sector whose relationship with Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian government turned sour (Çelik, 2023). In 2018, months ahead of the presidential election, the Doğan family sold all their media assets to Demirören Holding, which had entered the media sector in support of Erdoğan's administration.

Before the handover, Doğan Media Holding was a market leader not only in terms of audience share but also in terms of women's representation in ownership and management structures. Doğan's four daughters were shareholders and had active roles in the management of media assets, while Vuslat Doğan Sabancı was the chairwoman of *Hürriyet*, the leading Turkish newspaper. By 2018, 33% of the managerial positions were held by women in Doğan Holdings (Doğan Holding, 2018). When Demirören Holding purchased Doğan's media assets in 2018, it lost its market leadership role in terms of women's participation

in ownership and management despite Meltem Oktay Demirören, daughter of the founder, obtaining a share and a deputy chair position in her family's media conglomerate. By 2020, the women's share in media ownership decreased from 10 of 25 firms to four of 28 firms (Çetinkaya, 2022).

These developments can further be linked to the heightened "anti-feminist and anti-gender claims and demands" in mediatised public debates during Erdoğan's governance (Unal, 2021, p. 68). Such debates marginalize feminism as an anti-family standpoint while discrediting gender-based identity politics through a wide range of discriminatory sexist rhetoric from immorality to abnormality in reference to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer politics or in reference to enemies of Turkish-Islamic culture and traditions (Özcan, 2020). While one may hardly argue that women's active ownership in Doğan Holding brought about feminist management of mainstream media in the country, a sporadic presence of feminist topics was visible, such as campaigns addressing the low schooling of girls and sexist language in ads, led by the female shareholders and leaders of the Doğan media group (Unal, 2021). Such an environment was eroded in the context of 2020 where the mainstream legacy media was almost totally controlled by pro-Erdoğanist media establishments, including the Demirören's.

From informal networks prone to media corruption and the reproduction of oligarchic masculinist power to the articulation of an anti-feminist mediated discourse, these cases illustrate how masculinist media-ownership configurations may serve authoritarian-populist interests in various ways. They further reveal the structural dimension of masculinism in the media, which can also be reproduced by women perpetuating hierarchical, informal, and clientelist practices that potentially fuel authoritarian politics.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article, we analyzed the structural imbrications of masculinist news media ownership and masculinist authoritarian populism by focusing on three countries of Europe with distinct histories, cultures, and experiences of right-wing authoritarian populism. We showed that behind the small number of women news media owners lies a robust masculinist structured mediascape in Austria, Slovenia, and Turkey. Based on critical communication scholarship, we identified two distinct dynamics shaping media-ownership structures within authoritarian-populist contexts: The concentration of media ownership and informalization of ownership structures, for example, increased clientelism. Both these dynamics are profoundly gendered and refer to masculinist principles as they privilege not necessarily "biological men" but also masculinist norms, practices, and decision-making patterns within media organizations.

First, ownership concentration restricts women's opportunities to partake in media control by limiting the very number of power positions, thus stabilizing the status quo of male descriptive overrepresentation. Horwitz (2005) argued that with a smaller number of media owners, the access points to media power and thus to the potential of shaping news content diminish. This particularly disadvantages groups that have historically been excluded from positions of power due to structural discrimination along the axes of class, race, and/or gender. In this respect, Horwitz (2005) clarifies that in commercialized media systems, "concentrated mass media are understood to shape content in ways that reproduce the prevailing structures of power and dominant cultural norms" (p. 182).

Thus, media-ownership concentration not only de-democratizes access to media power positions by prioritizing prevailing privileges but also risks reproducing a structural bias in terms of media content. Since it has been shown that ownership pressures on news media largely manifest indirectly and a variety of forces determine news content (e.g., Sjøvaag & Ohlsson, 2019), it is not possible to claim a direct linkage between media ownership and content across the national contexts. However, we argue that the concentration of male ownership still produces an opportunity structure and favorable grounds for the marginalization of women and women's interests in the public sphere (Byerly, 2014).

Second, the informalization of media ownership and control further restricts women's opportunities to participate in media ownership as clientelist media-political networks are historically structured in a masculinist way. Decision making in informal settings excludes women or lets them face difficult entry barriers due to the establishment of masculinist interactions (Acker, 1992) and the absence of democratic safeguards and regulations. Informal power networks therefore tend to be aligned with capitalist and masculinist interests as they enable nontransparent exchanges of favors and resources to retain the power of leading actors (Örnebring, 2012). They are thus permeated by entrenched masculinist attitudes and sedimented institutionalized practices that are oriented toward male lifestyles, for example, full-time gainful employment, no care work, and the ideal of an autonomous sovereign male subject. Within media spheres, informal networks further serve to squeeze women out, for instance, by sharing information in circumstances where male bonding occurs. The expansion of such informal power settings accompanies the authoritarian restructuring of mediascapes and thus further impedes women from participating actively in media ownership.

The masculinist structure of media ownership that we illustrated in this article is related to hierarchical and patriarchal gender relations and, hence, cannot be dissociated from the broader patriarchal and capitalist power relations, in which women gain access to economic and communicative power mainly through family relations and inheritance. Furthermore, sexual and gender violence within media organizations creates structures that dominate or exclude women. Practices of dominating women as well as the patriarchal norms of the heterosexual family where women's identities are largely defined through their role as dependents resonate well with masculinist authoritarian populism and their anti-feminist strategies. Such politics take the heterosexual family as the basis of the nation in terms of biological reproduction and a hierarchical gender and social order. While right-wing authoritarian populists frame neoliberal transformations as a crisis of masculinity, their discourse of fixing this crisis is connected to a restructuring of masculinity embedded in precisely these patriarchal family relations (Sauer, 2020).

Analytically, we suggest a resemblance of the concentration of masculinist media ownership and a masculinist promise of right-wing authoritarian social restructuring and de-democratization. Both serve to secure and maintain masculinist and capitalist power relations by hindering the development of a participatory, inclusive, and democratic public sphere and preserving traditional, patriarchal family models and gender roles. Authoritarian politics that aims at undermining the democratic and inclusive negotiation of interests within the state can build not only on the patriarchal concentration of power in civil society, for instance in the media, but also on the informalization of media-political relations, allowing them to circumvent democratic safeguards and regulations. In this respect, the masculinist concentration of power in the media may feed into the reproduction of masculinist political power. Thus, while not claiming any

direct causality between the dynamics of media ownership and political trends in the countries studied, we suggest that there are favorable conditions to be found in the masculinist and capitalist configuration of media ownership for the popularization of authoritarian politics.

With respect to our sample countries, we observe that in Austria the masculinist and informal media-ownership structure has proven to be conducive to attempted media influence by populist actors, while in Slovenia it contributed to the “the media war” and the establishment of a parallel masculinist media system that operates in support of the SDS party. The case of the long-term consolidated authoritarian regime in Turkey reveals the consequences of a firmly established masculinist media-ownership structure, implicating excessive media-ownership concentration, expansion of media-policy clientelism, a decrease of women’s involvement in media ownership and control, and ultimately the dissemination of anti-feminist mediated discourse.

The gender perspective of this article stressed so far overlooked facet of media ownership within the political economy of communication research: Its masculinist and patriarchal family structure. This calls for further feminist research examining how concentrated, masculinist media ownership affects a pluralistic and democratic public sphere on the discursive, representational, and structural levels.

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