

ESSAY



Patriarchal Populism: The Conservative Political Action Coalition (CPAC) and the Transnational Politics of Authoritarian Anti-Feminism

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, populist movements and regimes have proliferated around the world, pledging to uphold the interests of the ‘pure people’ against corrupt ‘elites.’ Among right-wing populists, ‘globalists’ and feminists are cast in the latter role, framed as dangerous threats to the restoration of national greatness. Meanwhile, alleged ‘gender ideology’ is rebuked, while women’s reproductive and LGBTQ equality rights are legally curtailed. We examine the convergence of populism and anti-feminism within the framework of *patriarchal populism*, analysing how proponents of this worldview coordinate across borders. To illustrate these trends, we focus on meetings of the Conservative Political Action Coalition (CPAC), a large and influential gathering begun in the United States (US) and increasingly dominated by the far-right, which is rapidly internationalising. Observing political discourse at CPAC Hungary and Texas in 2022, we identify common themes including advocacy of transnational right-wing coalitions, fearmongering about threats to the West, calls to control education and knowledge production, and bellicose advocacy of illiberal strongman leadership. Anti-feminism is woven throughout these frames, positioning right-wing populism as a significant challenge to women’s and LGBTQ rights in the US and elsewhere.

KEYWORDS

transnational populism;
women’s rights; LGBTQ
rights; United States;
Hungary

Images of burning cities across the United States (US) attributed to Black Lives Matter rioters, toppled Confederate statues, waving rainbow flags, drag queens, prominent American transgender official Rachel Levine and gay pride parades flash across the screen in quick succession as disorienting music plays in the background. An ominous voice warns that Marxism is targeting children while the words GENDER, FAKE NEWS, SOROS, IMMIGRATION, and ANTIFA are boldly superimposed over the video. A new front has opened in Europe, says the narrator, but “Hungarians say ‘no’ to the Left’s hegemony”. Uplifting music plays as we learn some in Europe are “taking the fight to the globalists” while the faces of far-right leaders Andrzej Duda, Marine Le Pen, Santiago Abascal, Georgia Meloni, Nigel Farage and Matteo Salvini emerge. “We are with God and God is with us”, proclaims the narrator. Viktor Orbán is then shown declaring victory, again and again, as the video concludes with a montage of

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beautiful tourist spots, wholesome families and traditionally dressed Hungarians (CPAC Hungary 2022). This crudely propagandistic introductory video titled “Western Civilisation is in Danger” for the 2022 Conservative Political Action Coalition (CPAC)¹ meeting in Hungary, the first held in Europe, encapsulates the preoccupations of the contemporary far-right: Feminists, LGBTQ people, immigrants and their benefactors are the enemy; white families and nations are their victims.

In recent years, populist movements and regimes have proliferated around the world. Populists pledge to uphold the interests of the “pure people” against corrupt “elites” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Contemporary right-wing populists cast ‘globalists’ and feminists in the latter role, framing them as dangerous threats to the restoration of national greatness. Meanwhile, alleged ‘gender ideology’ is rebuked, while women’s reproductive and LGBTQ equality rights are legally curtailed (AWID 2022; Gwiazda 2021). In this article, we examine the convergence of right-wing populism and anti-feminism within the framework of *patriarchal populism* (Sanders and Jenkins 2022a; 2022b). Patriarchal populism layers the people-versus-elite antagonism that characterises populism with exclusionary sexist and misogynistic rhetoric and policies. While patriarchy exists everywhere and is not new, and thus some patriarchal elements can be found in all populist formations, we conceptualise patriarchal populism as a virulent and increasingly dominant variant of contemporary right-wing populism that uses blatantly sexist and regressive tropes to mobilise mass support and undermine women’s and LGBTQ equality, as well as sexual and reproductive health and rights.

To illustrate these trends, we focus on the promotion of patriarchal populism at CPAC, a large and influential gathering of the US right that is rapidly internationalising. We then explore how attention to anti-feminism highlights important aspects of right-wing populism, including its reactionary desire to undo contemporary human rights commitments, its hostility to democratic pluralism, its nativist and pro-natalist policy agenda, and its embrace of masculinist political violence and strongman leadership. The dynamics of contemporary patriarchal populism reveal that while right-wing populists fetishise the nation, their messaging, personnel and strategies are deliberately spread and coordinated transnationally. In addition, both the ‘people’ and the elite ‘Others’ constructed by patriarchal populists are increasingly transnational. Appeals to white men and calls to fight back against supposed threats to Western civilisation are attempts to mobilise a ‘people’ across borders via racist, masculinist and civilisational identities. Transnational feminists and technocrats are portrayed as the ‘elite’ enemy. Based on a narrative analysis of speeches at CPAC Hungary and CPAC Texas in 2022, we identify transnational themes and argue that patriarchal populism’s role in democratic decline presents a significant challenge to women’s and LGBTQ rights in the US and elsewhere.

Patriarchal populism: populism + anti-feminism + misogyny

Populism pits the besieged ‘people’ against the corrupt ‘elites’ and uses this basic story to explain social problems. The populist framework is notably thin, lacking explicitly

¹The acronym CPAC refers in media and literature to both the Conservative Political Action Conference and the Conservative Political Action Coalition (which runs said conference). The latter is used on the organisation’s website, so we also employ that nomenclature, even though the primary focus of our analysis is the conference.

substantive content beyond this dichotomy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Yet in practice, populism is always deployed in the service of ideological projects and interests that give meaning to its amorphous and empty signifiers. Populism's political ambiguity extends to gender dynamics, with comparative research highlighting a range of gendered policies and performances that vary with local political and ideological contexts (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015; Abi-Hassan 2017). Some left-wing populism, such as Evo Morales' Bolivarianism, has been "compatible with feminist projects" but has a mixed record in achieving substantive policies for women (Castaño 2022). Indeed, the so-called 'pink tide' of contemporary progressive populism in Latin America emerged alongside a growing anti-feminist movement which foreclosed or even reversed women's reproductive rights in some cases (Kampwirth 2008). Analysis of Spain's Podemos party suggests that left-wing populism may be more compatible with feminist ideas than its right-wing variants, but populists often homogenise the 'people' and elevate majoritarian charismatic leaders and masculinist political cultures, which undermine their feminist and democratic potential (Caravantes 2021). In this sense, "populism's emphasis on a bellicose political style is especially problematic for feminist politics" (Kantola and Lombardo 2019, 25).

While left- and right-wing populists can mobilise sexism, we focus here on right-wing populists and their global networks. Among these ascendant formations, the people are characterised in exclusionary nationalist, civilisational and identitarian terms, while elites are accused of being unmoored from tradition, religion and the national or civilisational interest, working instead in the service of 'globalism.' There are a range of gender ideologies on the right as well, with some right-wing populists, particularly in Western and Northern Europe, instrumentally claiming to defend women's and LGBTQ rights against the perils of Islamic immigration and its associated regressive norms and practices (Akkerman 2015; de Lange and Mügge 2015; Spierings *et al.* 2015; Norocel and Giorgi 2022). Proponents of this 'femonationalist' (Farris 2017) approach emphasise Muslim perpetrators of the 2015/16 New Year's Eve sexual assaults in Cologne or 'grooming gang' networks in the UK (Cockbain and Tufail 2020; Hajek and Dombrowski 2022). Other, arguably increasingly predominant strains of right-wing populism also engage in civilisational discourse and fearmongering, but place feminists and sexual and gender minorities outside of the boundaries of the protected people. Rather, advocates of gender equality are cast as dangerous enemies. In the US context, emancipatory priorities are currently vilified as 'wokeness', a term appropriated from African American activists and warped into a caricature of progressivism. For instance, the term was used incessantly in Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders' Republican response following President Biden's 2023 State of the Union address, to belittle and mock his attention to women's, LGBTQ and racial minority rights (Huckabee Sanders 2023).

In their quest to restore national greatness, right-wing populists frequently target feminists and feminism (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Kaul 2021; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018; Sanders and Jenkins 2021). They allege that advances in and advocacy for women's rights, in particular women's sexual and reproductive rights, undermine social cohesion, reduce national birth rates and erode the centrality of the 'natural' (that is, heterosexual, nuclear) family. According to this worldview, saving the people from the nefarious designs of the elites necessitates restrictions on reproductive freedom (for example, abortion and even contraception bans), the promotion of childbearing among the dominant

in-group and social and educational reinforcement of traditional gender roles and identities. This linkage between national restoration and restrictions on women's rights and freedoms is characteristic of patriarchal populism. Patriarchal politics is hardly new, and anti-feminism and homophobia have long been central to conservative politics, particularly advocacy associated with the Catholic Church, Evangelical and Orthodox Christianity, and Islamism. But its contemporary convergence with populism has created a distinctive assemblage of rhetorical tropes, political frames and policy initiatives that are being reproduced transnationally. This contagion is not accidental, but the product of concerted efforts by reactionary activists and politicians to harness the opportunity structure presented by broader populist trends to their advantage and borrow effective tactics from likeminded movements and regimes (Sanders and Jenkins 2022b).

In addition to the European leaders depicted in the aforementioned CPAC Hungary 2022 introductory video, notable patriarchal populist politicians, some currently in and some recently out of power, include Donald Trump of the US, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, among many others. Such leaders exploit the social status anxieties fuelled by rising economic inequality, globalisation, and shifting demographics and cultural norms (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Even where patriarchal populists do not hold office, their political progeny populate political bodies, ready to continue their agenda at local or state levels and work to retake power at the national level. Undeterred by periodic electoral defeats, such setbacks fuel their sense of grievance at an allegedly 'rigged' system. Increasingly patriarchal populists and their allies are also active at the international level through engagement with international media, organisations and conferences, including those featured in this article.

Patriarchal populism manufactures and mobilises political nostalgia for a supposedly golden past. This "retrotopian" (Bauman 2017) vision postulates the existence of a lost era of marital bliss, family harmony and social contentment—when 'men were men' and 'women were women', mothers and fathers knew their distinct roles, and children were acculturated to perpetuate traditional social norms. Such sentiments are often layered with populist "welfare nostalgia" aimed at "securing or reinforcing the social position of the modernisation losers based on traditional economic and family patterns" (Fenger 2018, 191). This idealised portrayal of history obscures the reality of diverse family formations, parental roles and social norms in the past, while eliding the consistent reality across time of family violence, parental absence and economic instability. Women have always sought abortions when necessary. Societies throughout history have had LGBTQ people. Nonetheless, this retrotopian fantasy remains a powerful mobilising framework and provides a rationale for rolling back inclusive social norms and legal protections. For patriarchal populist reactionaries, progressivism, and particularly feminism, must be reversed to recapture a lost world.

In addition to attacking feminism and reproductive rights, 'anti-gender' campaigns are central to patriarchal populism (Corredor 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Gwiazda 2021). This framework encompasses rejection of non-normative and non-binary gender roles and expression, and is especially hostile to the recognition and rights of LGBTQ people. At present, transgender people are prime targets, subject to increasingly violent and eliminationist rhetoric from both right-wing politicians and neo-Nazi thugs. Insofar as transgenderism challenges biological essentialism, it is

deeply threatening to efforts to maintain rigid distinctions between men and women. Moreover, as a culturally ostracised and vulnerable minority, transgender people are easy targets. A few vocal self-declared ‘gender-critical’ feminists have worked with right-wing populists to challenge transgender rights (Burns 2019), often scapegoating transgender people for violence against women. Patriarchal populists seek to weaken feminism by exploiting anti-trans moral panic as a wedge issue, while anti-trans feminists have in turn lent political cover to reactionaries, despite their attacks on feminism and cis women’s rights.

In Europe and North America, patriarchal populism’s fear of changing gender roles dovetails with anxieties over non-white and non-Christian migration, growing secularism, and cultural globalisation and homogenisation. The nationalist project of in-group regeneration in the face of alleged ‘great replacement’ by foreigners demands white Christian women have more white Christian babies (Wilson 2022). Discourses about ‘globalism’ and ‘wokeness’ in patriarchal populist agitation fuel great replacement conspiracy theories. ‘Globalism’ denotes political commitments to universalism, liberalism and cosmopolitanism, hospitality to immigrants, refugees and minorities, social pluralism and tolerance, free trade and international law, which purportedly weaken nations. Relatedly, the charge of ‘wokeness’ derides demands for racial and gender equality while reinforcing support for the unequal *status quo*. Ubiquitous anti-globalist and anti-woke campaigns against progressive philanthropist George Soros accuse him of being a ‘puppet master’ and ‘fifth columnist’ who seeks to destroy Western civilisation through immigration and birth control, strongly echoing longstanding antisemitic tropes (Antisemitism Policy Trust 2020; Jenne *et al.* 2022). Anti-Soros propaganda is particularly prevalent in, and spreading from, Hungary (Enyedi and Krekó 2018). These narratives point to the racist and identitarian undercurrents of patriarchal populism’s preoccupation with national reproduction.

In addition to its anti-feminism, and structural attacks on women’s and LGBTQ rights at the international and national levels (combined with racist, antisemitic, anti-immigrant and anti-‘globalist’ stances), patriarchal populism is also notable for its misogyny, or hatred of women. Specifically, patriarchal populists have extreme contempt for those who do not fit the patriarchal model of cisgender heterosexual wives and mothers in domestic gender roles. Demonisation of noncompliant women and all LGBTQ people is increasingly central to patriarchal populist mobilisation. Targets include feminists and women leaders, who are subject to verbal and sometimes physical violence (Krook 2020). This is accompanied by an exponential increase in the dehumanisation of LGBTQ persons in recent months and years, especially transgender persons (Reid 2021).

While political homophobia has been actively exploited for years in Russia, where Putin introduced authoritarian restrictions on LGBTQ ‘propaganda’ over a decade ago (Reid 2023), and in many parts of Africa where Christian evangelicals have promoted draconian and even lethal punishments for homosexuality (Human Rights Watch 2023c), the successful revivification of anti-LGBTQ scapegoating in North America and Europe comes after years of LGBTQ rights advancement (for example, the widespread legalisation of same-sex marriage). Patriarchal populists claim that LGBTQ persons ‘groom’ innocent children for recruitment and sexual exploitation. These allegations intersect with the pro-Trump Q-Anon mass political cult, which claims Democrats and other progressives are Satanic sexual sadists (Romano 2022). These ludicrously

bizarre and irrational internet rumours have enjoyed stunning levels of acceptance among patriarchal populists' political base in both the US and Europe (Collucini 2022).

Ironically, many patriarchal populists at the forefront of the 'groomer' discourse are themselves notorious for their unconventional and sometimes illegal sexual exploits, including allegations of sexual assault, sex trafficking and sexual abuse (Reinhard and Arnsdorf 2023). But of course, patriarchy has never applied consistent standards to sexual behaviour. Accordingly, patriarchal strongmen such as Trump mobilise their histories of extra-marital affairs and 'pussy' grabbing to signal virility and prowess (Ben-Ghiat 2020). Indeed, Trump has barely bothered to deny his propensity for such behaviour, likely contributing to a significant civil liability judgement against him for sexual assault (Queen and Cohen 2023).

Despite their crude misogynist messaging, patriarchal populists deftly navigate complex political and legal terrain, using the institutions of liberal democracy to erode rights and enhance authoritarian forms of power. This phenomenon has been called "autocratic legalism" (Scheppelle 2018). Procedurally, the playbook includes entrenching partisan power through gerrymandering, voter suppression and court stacking, undermining the independent judiciary and free press, and disseminating misinformation. Public policies initially focus on protecting children from allegedly dangerous ideas such as comprehensive sexuality education and then shift to widespread book bans and censorship, broad prohibitions on academic freedom in universities and attacks on basic individual rights in society. This evolution, effectively deployed in Hungary and Russia, is now being copied in the US (Friedman *et al.* 2023). When it comes to women's and LGBTQ rights, the autocratic policy package includes banning abortion, weakening laws to protect women from sexual and domestic violence, permitting discrimination against LGBTQ people, and prohibiting transgender healthcare. This legal mimicry is just one form of patriarchal populism's transnationalism.

Patriarchal populism's transnationalism

Patriarchal populists coordinate transnationally to build international social movements, promote transnational messages and frames, share political, legal, media and lobbying strategies and tactics, and form diplomatic coalitions at international organisations to advance their goals or stymie their opponents (Sanders 2018; Sanders and Jenkins 2022b). For example, right-wing NGOs have repeatedly coordinated patriarchal populist messaging at the World Congress of Families, a transnational gathering sponsored by American and Russian Christian extremists that has convened in multiple locales around the world (SPLC 2018), most recently Mexico City. American advocacy organisations have developed international offshoots such as Alliance Defending Freedom International and the European Center for Law and Justice, which have spearheaded legislative challenges to women's and LGBTQ rights across many countries, while millions of dollars have flowed between US and European activists (Martuscelli 2022). These linkages also extend between the Global North and South, as wealthy Americans and Europeans use developing countries as laboratories for repression, as evidenced by their persistent sponsorship of lethal homophobia in Uganda (Wepukhulu 2023).

At the United Nations (UN) and other international fora, patriarchal populists join with a variety of reactionary religious fundamentalist and authoritarian regimes to roll

back the protection of women's and LGBTQ rights (Sanders 2018; Goetz 2020; Sanders and Jenkins 2021; 2022a; 2022b; Cupać and Ebetürk 2022). Initiatives include campaigns to strip words such as 'gender' and 'sexual and reproductive health and rights' from international legal documents. In 2015, anti-feminist fellow travellers formed the Group of Friends of the Family at the UN, while in 2020 the Trump administration partnered with dozens of states to advance the 'Geneva Consensus Declaration' opposing the recognition of abortion rights in international law (Sanders and Jenkins 2022b). While not all regimes are populist, shared misogynistic commitments unite a range of military and theocratic dictatorships with patriarchal populists. As Agnieszka Graff *et al.* (2019) notes:

Gender conservatism has [...] become the lingua franca [...] It is what brings together right-wing activists from otherwise distant walks of life [...] So, while the new global Right is by no means a unified political movement, there does exist a global antifeminism—a counter-movement to transnational feminism, an internally diverse global coalition to roll back gender equality (541-2).

These transnational dimensions of patriarchal populism demand additional scrutiny and case analysis. Whereas populists typically mobilise people at the national level – indeed exclusivist nationalisms are central to right-wing populism – patriarchal populist leaders and likeminded organisations are increasingly engaging in transnational advocacy, mobilisation and messaging. The focus of our analysis, CPAC, exemplifies many of the aforementioned features of patriarchal populism. While we argue that CPAC serves as an exemplary site of emerging transnational patriarchal populist coordination, it represents just one of many instances of sustained cooperation among such actors.

CPAC as exemplary site of transnational patriarchal populism

CPAC bills itself as “the largest and most influential gathering of conservatives in the world” (CPAC 2023). Initially US oriented, CPAC has been a popular venue for the dissemination of right-wing political ideas for decades. Currently run by conservative Catholic activist, lobbyist and Fox News contributor Matt Schlapp, annual CPAC conferences are an important stage for aspiring and established politicians to showboat their political credentials. The CPAC US presidential nominee 'straw poll' provides a periodic barometer of right-wing activist political sentiment.

While once home to mainstream Republican conservatism with its emphasis on free markets, fiscal restraint, national security and Christian moralism, CPAC, like the Republican Party writ large, has been thoroughly Trumpified, with allegiance to the former president and his heterodox MAGA (Make America Great Again) agenda now a litmus test for invitations and a warm reception. Indeed, being shunned or disinvited from CPAC, as experienced by moderate Republican politicians such as John McCain or Mitt Romney, marks an informal excommunication from the American political right. In this sense, the ideas and policies platformed at CPAC offer a window into predominant strains of right-wing politics.

In recent years, CPAC has added new venues in addition to its annual Washington DC conferences, such as CPAC Texas and CPAC Florida. This extension of the brand is also transnational, with CPAC conferences held in Mexico, Brazil, Australia, Japan, Korea, Israel and Hungary. The latter was particularly significant, marking CPAC's first conference in Europe, held in 2022. The synergy between the originally US-based CPAC and

Hungarian politics has been so successful that a second CPAC Hungary conference occurred in May 2023. This intentional transnationalisation of CPAC represents the convergence of global strains of far-right politics, a synthesis exemplified by a growing, shared hostility to women's and LGBTQ rights.

Here we analyse two CPAC conferences – CPAC Hungary (May 2022) and CPAC Texas (August 2022). We chose these two conferences because of the extensive cross-pollination between the Hungarian and US right. Freedom House currently classifies the US as democratic or 'free' and Hungary as only 'partly free' in terms of access to political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2023). Yet the policy goals, rhetoric and many of the featured speakers in the CPAC space were consistent across both cases. Human Rights Watch documents growing challenges to human rights in both countries (Human Rights Watch 2023a; 2023b). These cases illustrate the rising tide of 'democratic authoritarianism' or 'authoritarian populism', both of which Thomas Blom Hansen and Srirupa Roy (2022) characterise as "a politics that simultaneously advances and violates ideas and practices of popular and constitutional democracy" (1-2).

We accessed a range of videos of speeches in English or voiceover English translation by CPAC translators, posted on CPAC's official conference websites. While a small country, Hungary under Orbán has styled itself as the vanguard of a new European traditionalism. Orbán has masterfully pursued "autocratic legalism", undertaking aggressive reforms to entrench his authoritarian rule (Scheppelle 2018), while passing anti-LGBTQ laws and attacking rights and academic programs related to gender. So, while CPAC Hungary epitomises the transnational influence of the US right, the flow of ideas is multi-directional. Rather than CPAC teaching Hungarians to be great conservatives, the tone of admiration for Orbán throughout this conference and his subsequent appearance at CPAC Texas made clear that the Hungarian model is also an inspiration for Americans.

A notable transnational development with deep roots in Hungary is the growth of pseudo intellectual justifications and dubious research institutes and colleges supporting anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ and anti-democratic policies and programmes. The Central European University and the entire academic field of Gender Studies were expelled from Hungary in 2017 and 2018, respectively (Redden 2018a; 2018b). In this institutional vacuum, the Orbán government financially supports the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), a private college which has opened an outpost in Brussels as well, where it hosts anti-feminists such as British author Joanna Williams (2023) on the topic of history teaching ("Is the Past being Cancelled?") (MCC Brussels 2023; Preussen 2022). This resonates with current right-wing talking points in the US and state-level laws to curtail discussion or books on gender or race in education, such as recent efforts by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (and other mimicking states) to ban Gender Studies and Critical Race Theory in public education, including colleges and universities (Blest 2023). Other patriarchal populist anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ themes feature in the MCC blog, such as warning against "trans totalitarianism" (Ballester 2022). Even articles on other issue areas contain gendered and demeaning rhetoric, as in the dismissive and inflammatory entry on the "antics" and "mindless radicalism" of climate activist Greta Thunberg, characterised as a "communist" and "walking exclamation mark" (Ferenc 2022). Along with the de-institutionalisation of Central European University and Gender Studies within Hungary, MCC's institutionalised ideological groundwork and networking set the stage for Hungary as a hub of transnational patriarchal populism.

US-based former Fox News host Tucker Carlson broadcast his show from Hungary in the summer of 2021 while making a hagiographic film about Orbán entitled “Hungary vs. Soros: Fight for Civilization”. Ironically, the Soros Foundation had funded Orbán’s own education at Oxford University (Enyedi and Krekó 2018). The film depicts Hungary as a “conservative paradise with strong pro-family policies” (Serdült 2022). Thus, choosing Hungary for CPAC’s European debut in May 2022 was a natural development. In August 2022, when Orbán travelled stateside to headline CPAC Texas, he closed the circle of mutual admiration by plugging Carlson in his speech. Referring to “my friend Tucker Carlson”, Orbán stated “programs like his should run day and night” (CNN 2022).

This trajectory illustrates how the transnationalisation of patriarchal populism – and of CPAC itself – relies on a trifecta: politicians, like-minded organisations and sympathetic media personalities. Our illustrative case analysis of two CPAC conferences thus illuminates in microcosm how patriarchal populism is advanced by political, organisational and media power. When choosing which videos of speeches and Q&A to analyse from the two CPAC conferences, we included all three of these types of figures: politicians, organisational leaders and media personalities. We also paid attention to diversity in terms of sex and nationality. The pool of conference speakers lacked much diversity in other dimensions, such as race or sexuality. An “illustrative case” such as this is particularly useful in “qualitative single case designs that intend to generate new theory from intensive study” (Ackerly and True 2020). This allows us to expand on and refine our prior research on patriarchal populism (Sanders and Jenkins 2022b) by further examining how it is propagated and by whom, as well as its transnational dimensions.

After listening to a range of the speeches, we identified common themes and compared, sorted and combined them in an iterative process (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2014). We chose four major themes that featured in both conferences and incorporated particularly gendered language or addressed gender or sexuality policy issues. We coded our notes and transcriptions related to each of these themes for closer scrutiny, organising our analysis thematically rather than by speaker. We use the quotations and paraphrases below not as sources of descriptive truth about the world we live in. Rather, we feature them as exemplary of dominant narratives used by contemporary patriarchal populists. These dominant interpretations are important to document and scrutinise because they are propounded by powerful people and shape “what kinds of actions leaders and their publics are supposed to take” (Lynch 2014, 301). Indeed, the speakers often tell the audience exactly what should be done.

Patriarchal populist themes at both CPAC Hungary and CPAC Texas 2022

The attempt to forge a transnational far-right populism that pits ‘Western civilisation’ against ‘global elites’ was evident at CPAC’s 2022 conferences in Hungary and Texas. Several refrains were both populist and patriarchal in that they played on fears related to gender and/or sexuality to attack feminist conceptions of women’s and LGBTQ rights. In addition to anti-feminist attacks, hypermasculinity took centre stage, including grandstanding and misogyny by male speakers and messaging about boys at risk (from, for instance, trans-inclusive sexuality education or from vague allusions to ‘groomers’) and/or militant calls to arms by both male and female speakers. Below, we disaggregate

this messaging into four patriarchal populist themes which pervaded speeches: ‘anti-globalisation but pro-coalition’; ‘white noise’; ‘education wars’; and ‘strongman masculinity.’

Anti-globalisation but pro-coalition

‘Anti-globalisation but pro-coalition’ messaging consistently appeared at CPAC Hungary and Texas. Speakers rejected globalisation (or ‘globalism’) and liberal transnational ‘elites’ but transcended nationalism themselves by calling for transnational unity among conservatives. Speakers also emphasised the need to combat globalisation in the form of international organisations, NGOs and donors, blamed for promoting an international right to abortion, gender ideology and sex education, while at the same time leveraging international mechanisms for their own ends.

Andrea Földi-Kovács (2022), a Hungarian news anchor who works with the Megafon Center, a pro-government organisation for social media influencers, spoke at CPAC Hungary. In her speech, she raised the alarm about international governmental organisations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and international nongovernmental organisations, specifically the Soros Foundation: “There is a sexual revolution without an age limit. This is what UNESCO and WHO is talking about. This is the overall sexual education and this is what NGOs are also doing, which they call ‘sensitization.’” She discussed the way Hungarians are counter-organising transnationally. Efforts to combat Soros, the “enemy”, included starting the “Safe Society Foundation”. Földi-Kovács was clear, however, that transnationalism is good for conservatives: “Our objective is to make the world better for our children and next generations. This is a national or supranational, a pan-national value [...] We have to sound our voices together.” Moreover, “We need to pray to God for assistance in the joint action. Dear friends, ‘God, nation, family’ [...] this is the slogan of our two days conference and this is also the foundation of our linkages.”

Valerie Huber (2022), former special representative for Global Women’s Health in the US Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Global Affairs during the Trump administration, who currently runs the Institute for Women’s Health, also emphasised transnational cooperation at CPAC Hungary. In particular, she applauded the 2020 Geneva Consensus Declaration, a diplomatic statement opposing the recognition of abortion rights in international law that was championed by the US and Hungary along with “a coalition of likeminded nations” such as Belarus, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Uganda, among other repressive regimes. Progressive governments, she claimed, put abortion and “deconstruction of the family” in UN resolutions, unfairly pressuring, coercing and intimidating Global South countries by using foreign aid as a carrot and a stick. In response, she implored states to “support the sovereign right of countries” to stand up to “bullying” and to “stand together so they don’t need to stand alone” while also calling for continued efforts to “improve and strengthen the family as a unit” in international resolutions. “Individually we are strong but together we are stronger”, she concluded.

The international environmental movement faced repeated attacks and speakers connected environmentalism to erosion of the traditional family. For example, American

conservative media personality Candace Owens (2022) decried a range of “Machiavelian” Marxists at CPAC Hungary, arguing that radical climate activists are destroying the family by claiming it is irresponsible to have children. Meanwhile, she asserted, feminists “are after the abolition of men” and want to abort full-term babies, linking feminists and environmentalist concerns. She concluded with a call to “lock arms overseas” against the left. While CPAC speakers portrayed feminism, sexual and reproductive health education and rights, and environmentalism as anti-family and anti-national forms of globalism, they championed far-right conservative coalition building across national lines.

Civilisational discourse often accompanied calls for cooperation and unity, framing those inside and outside of the conservative coalition in sweeping terms. As Orbán (2022) stated at CPAC Texas in his call to retake Washington and Brussels, “We must find friends and allies in one another” and “coordinate the movement of our troops because we face the same challenge [...] two fronts in the battle being fought for Western civilisation.”

White noise

We term the emphasis on saving Western civilisation and its implicit and explicit narrative of majoritarian racial grievance ‘white noise’. Victimology was prevalent among CPAC speakers, with migrants and feminists portrayed as major threats to Western nations, families and children. Natalist policies were promoted as an antidote to changing national demographics. Retrotopian tropes helped speakers advocate for returning to a past version of society, imagined and idealised by people in power.

At CPAC Texas, Orbán (2022) invoked the spectres of “migration, gender, and the clash of civilisations”. The “future of the West is in grave doubt” because “now the West is at war with itself”. The left is separating Western civilisation from its Judeo-Christian heritage, he alleged, while claiming that “a Christian politician cannot be racist”. “Stopping illegal migration is necessary to protect our nation” and the “decisive and final battle of the future”, declared Orbán, while comparing migration to Genghis Khan’s invasion of Europe. He then layered this call with the imperative to protect European families: “Family policy [...] is the heart of our politics. [...] if traditional families are gone there is nothing that can save the West from going under.” In practical terms, he touted tax breaks for Hungarian mothers with multiple children to encourage the ‘right’ kind of population growth.

Former United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) leader and Brexit champion, Nigel Farage (2022), also emphasised Western civilisation at his CPAC Texas speech. “The English-speaking countries [...] have got this terrible virus [...] this is a Marxist attempt to break Western civilisation”, he warned, referring to progressives. “Our conservative movements have allowed all of this to be done [...] to save Western civilisation, this is the battleground”, he declared, imploring the audience to serve as “foot soldiers in this battle on behalf [...] of the free world”.

Speeches sidestepped people of colour except in instrumental discussions of how gender culture war arguments could mobilise them through the appeal of social conservatism. For instance, former Trump political strategist and right-wing media star Steve Bannon (2022) had little to say at CPAC Texas about people of colour except in

stereotypical and instrumental terms. In addition to sweeping overgeneralisations about the conservative ideologies of the two largest racial and ethnic minority communities in the US, he made clear that the talk of gender ideology has strategic ends—to mobilise people to vote. For instance, in his discussion of how Trump could concoct an electoral victory in 2024, Bannon explained: “The Hispanic and African American community are two of the most conservative communities socially out there, and they detest what’s going on. And they’re not prepared to back a party that’s going to be nothing but groomers [and] destroy your young men and destroy your young women.”

At CPAC Hungary, Andrea Földi-Kovács (2022) stressed victimisation. If there is a crack in the “shield” of the family, “we are going to be victims. Have you ever thought why gender ideology spread so fast?” There were “several decades of planning” and “several decades of internal dismantling” that “made us weaker”. Gender, she argued, is a “charade to distract our attention because they are targeting our children”. We must know the enemy’s plan, she said: “the plan is to dismantle each and every linkage and relationship: mother and child, men and women, but also friends.” Evoking an apocalyptic trope, she stated, “We are in the final hour.”

These doomsday prognostications paint the threat of feminism, gender diversity and migration in dire terms, characterising rights advocates as dangerous and Western nations and families as victims. Since the alleged threat is extreme, so must be the response.

Education wars

For CPAC speakers, ‘education wars’ are essential to saving Western civilisation. In this battle, “We Are All Domestic Terrorists”, flippantly declared a banner at CPAC Texas (2022), mocking concerns about far-right threats to teachers and education officials. CPAC speakers repeatedly rebuked schools and universities as dangers to children, who risk being indoctrinated or even “groomed” via gender ideology or sex education. Often, speakers referenced pseudo-academic arguments from right-wing think tanks or simply made vague allusions to science being on their side.

At CPAC Texas, Nigel Farage (2022) stated the matter clearly: “We are under attack. [...] It’s not Putin [...] the biggest threat we face is the fifth column inside all of our countries that is attempting to destroy the family unit, attempting to destroy our Judeo-Christian culture.” This internal enemy is cultivated by educational institutions and universities, which are “madrasahs of Marxism”. For Orbán (2022) at CPAC Texas, we need a “legal wall around our children to protect them from gender ideology”. He touted Hungary’s referendum restricting education about LGBTQ people in schools. The “culture war” must operate across all fronts, targeting churches, families, universities and community institutions, he advised. For her part, Owens (2022) declared at CPAC Hungary that “it’s ridiculous” that we have to acknowledge that a father is a man and a mother is a woman and asserted that “young children are being taught that men can give birth [...] Within four years we’ve arrived at men can be women and women can be men” and are “trying to convince children to go on hormone blockers”, she warned.

Andrea Földi-Kovács (2022) similarly put children at the centre of her speech at CPAC Hungary. “Children in our schools [...] are also subject to that threat. Where is the enemy? They are in the safe spaces of universities, they are in the dark web, they

are in peaceful family homes. And how do they attack? With influencers[...] with streaming service providers, they are just whipping up our passions and they are giving us phrases [...] ‘family is a family’: now these half truths make us half witted.” On the issue of trans rights, she argued: “From kindergarten to adulthood, there is an experiment on humans with hormone therapies and at the end with transgender operations. This is a sin. This is a crime against those [...] who are defenceless.” Her speech lumped together “pedophilia, porn [...] and the trans movement”. Földi-Kovács also praised unnamed intellectuals who supported her position. “We have excellent conservative thinkers and scientists [...] they are the ones who have done away with gender.” Some say we are not scientific, she observed, but “science is on our side. Truth is on our side.” And “let’s create centres where those experts and those scientists who are pushed to the verge of science [...] would have a safe space.”

Primary and secondary education in the US is run by local school boards, which Bannon (2022) at CPAC Texas identified as key to destroying enemies. The 2024 elections will “shatter the Democratic Party”, he predicted. “Did you see Moms for America? We are going to do it at school boards [...] at election boards [...] at medical boards.” Bannon also praised conservative think tanks as a counterforce in the battle over the judiciary in the US, where divided governments often result in a large backlog of empty judicial posts because opposing parties fail to approve a President’s judicial nominations. Bannon made a militant reference to judicial appointments under an imagined Trump administration in 2024, evoking a Normandy invasion scenario. If we train enough conservative judges, “3000 can hit the beach on day one. [...] This is why we have all these great think tanks coming up.”

These speeches highlight the centrality of education wars to patriarchal populism, from elementary schools to universities, and from academic to pseudo-scientific knowledge production.

Strongman masculinity

‘Strongman masculinity’ loomed large at both CPAC Hungary and Texas, underlining the need to pay more attention to how masculinity is politically mobilised (Carver 2014; Cohn 1987; Eksi and Wood 2019; Hakola *et al.* 2021). Speech after speech dripped with militant, vitriolic, warlike rhetoric, replete with sexual innuendo and misogynistic messaging. One constant refrain across both conferences was the need to defeat the ‘enemy’ on the political battlefield. This growing bellicosity is a distinctive element of contemporary patriarchal populism.

Victory by any means necessary was a central theme of Orbán’s (2022) CPAC Texas speech. “Hungary is the lone star state of Europe”, he quipped, and since 2010 we keep “winning, winning, and winning”. Communists rose from the ashes and came together with the liberals, so “we have to defeat them again”. In this battle, “don’t be afraid to call your enemies by their name” he explained, calling out George Soros to raucous boos. “He uses his army to force his will on his opponents.” You must know how to fight, must “play by your own rules”, “play to win”, and “cannot fight successfully by liberal means”. Invocations of strongman masculinity repeated themselves in Orbán’s call for greater law and order since there “is no freedom without order”: “we don’t need more genders, we need more rangers, less drag queens and more Chuck Norris.”

The imperative for strength extended into remarks on Ukraine: “Only strong leaders are able to make peace.” Never short on bravado, Orbán concluded by boasting some more: “the globalists can all go to hell, I have come to Texas.”

In Texas, Bannon (2022) maintained the strongman swagger. “We are at war”, he declared, framing a zero-sum battle: “God worked through Trump” and today’s Democrats are “radical cultural Marxists that want to destroy this republic. It’s either their way or our way.” His sexual innuendo included a crude threat: “We’re going to give them a democracy suppository on November eighth.” Bannon’s aggressive, gendered remarks included a startling double message about Gretchen Whitmer, the Michigan Governor who was the intended target of a foiled kidnapping plot by right-wing extremists yet was reelected in 2022. In his Q&A with CPAC co-organiser Matt Schlapp, Bannon said: “Look at Michigan. She’s an existential threat to the system because of Gretchen Whitmer, right?” In this comment, Bannon gendered the entire state while painting Whitmer as a threat to our very existence. Then he continued: “Gretchen Whitmer and [California Governor Gavin] Newsom are getting ready to measure the drapes in the White House.” In this sentence he warned that she has ambitions to become president or vice president but used a metaphor that put Whitmer into a gendered domestic role of interior decorator.

Men are not the only speakers inspiring strongman mentalities. Women of the right are often powerful messengers, making speeches that emphasise their own roles as women and exhort men to defend women and their own masculinity (Basu 1993). “Alleged feminists [...] are trying to destroy masculinity, they are after the abolition of man and manhood and what it means to be a man” warned Owens (2022) at CPAC Hungary. At the same conference, Földi-Kovács (2022) focused on threats to children and families: Today there is a “war waged on humanity [...] using human shields”: “Humans they have misguided and misled, they are using them as shields.” She went on to say, “People are now confused” and it is “important for us conservatives to stand up for families, for biological genders, and our children”. This picture of vulnerability culminated in a call for protection. In closing, she explained that she was not sounding an alarm to warn us but rather sounding a trumpet to attack.

Patriarchal populists clearly consider themselves at war with an existential enemy. In their view, such a fight requires a strong leader, a virile man willing to break the rules to win.

Conclusion

Our analysis of recent CPAC conferences shows that populism is not just about charismatic political leaders mobilising voters within their own nation states. Powerful organisations, conferences and sympathetic media figures are increasingly amplifying and spreading patriarchal populist messages and agendas transnationally. Transnational patriarchal populism is significant because it energises international fundraising, encourages legal mimicry of anti-rights legislation, increases the geographic zones in which the rights and safety of women, girls and LGBTQ people are threatened, and provides ideological tools and examples to normalise dangerous anti-democratic developments.

Is this case study of CPAC emblematic of transnational populism or, rather, international populism? Benjamin De Cleen *et al.* (2020) argue that a confederacy of

nationalist populists is merely international and not transnational populism. A transnational populism, to them, necessitates efforts to develop “a people” that transcends nation-states, such as the Democracy in Europe Movement 25 (DiEM25). Yet transnational populism could occur through a variety of dimensions, including advocating for a transnational ‘people’ of some kind but alternatively or additionally creating a transnational elite ‘Other’, transnational discourses and transnational strategies.

Although both Hungarian and American CPAC speakers were staunch nationalists, we see evidence of several of these transnational dimensions. The ‘West-under-duress’ messaging conglomerated a ‘people’ as white and/or members of ‘Western civilisation’. Strongman discourses united men across borders via masculinity narratives. ‘Globalist’ elite Others (such as feminists and WHO technocrats) were the predominant—and transnational—antagonists in CPAC’s populist dyad. Transnational strategies included not only collaborating with likeminded partners (which, on its own, De Cleen *et al.* [2020] would label international) but also spreading messaging via transnational media relationships, sharing the CPAC organisational playbook by recreating rally-like conferences globally, sending speakers on a transnational populist talking circuit, mimicking talking points, modelling proposed legislation and funnelling funding, all transnationally. Thus, we conclude that our case study is an example of both patriarchal and transnational populism and that transnational populism is not limited to cases wherein leaders are using populist means to try to create transnational entities such as DiEM25. Indeed, because there are patriarchal dynamics at work everywhere, albeit in a variety of forms, this facilitates the creation of transnational political platforms building upon these dynamics, such as patriarchal populism. In other words, patriarchal populism may be particularly prone to transnationalism.

Patriarchal populist messaging is increasingly vitriolic and sensational, framing feminists, LGBTQ people and migrants as existential threats to families, communities and nations. The growing bellicosity and extremism of CPAC speakers stands out, portending deepening social conflict and democratic erosion. This rhetoric leaves no doubt about the stakes involved. Right-wing populism’s embrace of sexism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia now constitutes a central plank of their worldview. Meanwhile strongman populists willing to break the rules to contest and roll back rights have displaced more cautious religious conservatives. Whether the patriarchal populist wave succeeds in further seizing power remains to be seen. But there is little reason to assume its proponents will back down anytime soon.


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