Countering International Backlash by Discrediting the Messengers: Reputational Chaining and LGBT+ Rights in Bosnia

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Abstract

How can LGBT+ activists counter growing international backlash, especially in conservative contexts where LGBT+ people face discrimination? We consider the consequences of linking domestic opponents of LGBT+ rights to international anti-LGBT+ messengers, arguing that such linkages might work to impede backlash. The case of Bosnia informs our study as a conservative society where LGBT+ people have made both progress but also face staunch opposition. We inquire how linking domestic anti-LGBT+ political leaders (i.e., reputational chaining) to the agenda of Russian President Vladimir Putin, a well-recognized but also polarizing international anti-LGBT+ messenger, influences public opinion. Our experiments are designed to raise questions about the moral authority of Putin and political leaders associated with him. Based on a nationwide survey experiment in July and October 2023, we find that priming on Putin's anti-LGBT+ messaging reduces appraisals of Putin's moral authority and increases support for LGBT+ rights. In a second experiment, we illustrate how linking Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik's anti-LGBT+ messaging to Putin also undercuts Dodik's appeal. We reflect on the implications of our findings for theories of norm entrepreneurship in international relations and for strategies to counter anti-LGBT+ backlash in conservative contexts.

Keywords

LGBT+ messaging, public opinion change, LGBT+ rights, Bosnia

Introduction

The struggle for LGBT+ rights has taken on symbolic weight in world politics, serving as a marker of ideological alignment among states and how they position themselves geopolitically (Thiel, 2021).[1] A growing body of research also argues that conservative actors have increased their global influence in the 21st century by promulgating homo- and transphobia under the auspices of traditional morals (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024; Bob, 2019; Velasco, 2023; Weiss and Bosia, 2013). State leaders—in a variety of countries, ranging from Eastern Europe to Africa to the Middle East—increasingly use such rhetorical strategies to distinguish themselves from "the West" to galvanize political support, usually by presenting queer people as an imagined and foreign threat. When doing so, they typically position themselves as defenders of "traditional values" to draw domestic and international support. However, the conditions under which such messaging is effective internationally remain unclear. In this study, we explore this question while considering strategies that LGBT+ supporters might use to stem the tide of internationally coordinated opposition and protect local LGBT+ people from discrimination. We argue that the moral authority of domestic anti-LGBT+ political leaders is diminished when they are linked—or reputationally chained, as we later define it—to inflammatory[2] international anti-LGBT+ messengers, thereby mitigating the domestic messenger's anti-LGBT+ appeal and the effectiveness of anti-LGBT+ messages on public sentiment.

Our argument draws on theories of norm diffusion and entrepreneurship in international relations (IR).

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Norm entrepreneurs are actors who work to influence beliefs and values by framing issues and creating a sense of moral urgency around their cause in international arenas (Florini, 1996). We focus on the influence of Russian President Vladimir Putin's highly visible anti-LGBT+ discourse internationally, examining a case where the power of Putin's traditional values messaging could generate polarizing responses among domestic audiences. Scholars have pointed to how Russia, under Putin's authority, has signaled its global leadership role by crafting itself as a "protector of traditional values"—actively deploying anti-LGBT+ messaging—to differentiate itself from the West and bolster its standing on the world stage (Edenborg, 2023; Sleptsov, 2017; Stoeckl, 2016; Wilkinson, 2014). In this framing, "the West" is the origin of this "foreign LGBT+ ideology" (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024; Page, Mironova, and Whitt, 2023), which is presented as violating domestic sovereignty and traditions. At present, the Kremlin has a fully-fledged anti-LGBT+ campaign that operates internationally (Buyantueva, 2018; Van Herpen, 2016), in a way that resonates with theories of norm entrepreneurship and soft power politics in international relations.

In our preregistered design, we provide a framework for explaining how international norm entrepreneurs like Putin could increase LGBT+ backlash in contexts where both LGBT+ opposition and the messenger's perceived moral authority are high domestically. We find such a context in Bosnia, which houses variation among three deeply conservative religious-national communities, especially among Bosnian Serbs who show strong attachments to both domestic and international anti-LGBT+ messengers. Chief among these messengers are Bosnian Serb nationalist leader Milorad Dodik and Putin, respectively. Unlike other communities in Bosnia, Bosnian Serbs are also strongly supportive of both Putin and Russia's war effort in Ukraine (Muzaferija and Toal, 2023).

Our study examines whether priming on Putin's anti-LGBT+ messaging, including linkages between Putin and domestic conservative politicians (in this case Dodik) reinforces or undercuts anti-LGBT+ opposition among Bosnians, and Bosnian Serbs in particular. Indeed, if Putin is a credible international anti-LGBT+ messenger, we could expect his influence to be felt in boosting homophobic attitudes among Bosnia's pro-Russia, pro-Putin Serb population. In contrast, Bosnia's non-Serb population (predominantly Bosniaks and Croats), while generally socially conservative on LGBT+ issues, also regard Putin very negatively due to his support for Serb nationalism in Bosnia (see Secrieru, 2019 for a review of Russia's influence in the Western Balkans). As such, Bosnia represents a useful case for examining receptivity

to Putin's anti-LGBT+ messaging within a single case study (see Fisher, Henry, and Peshkopia, 2023 for a similar approach comparing receptivity to Russian influence in Serbia and Albania). Bosnia also helps us to theorize about other cases, like Ukraine, where abhorrence of Putin has rapidly boosted LGBT+ support since the start of the war (Chisholm, 2023).[3] It may also apply to a wide variety of cases globally, where local politicians present LGBT+ rights as a threat to "traditional values" (Velasco, 2023).

Our survey experiments in Bosnia reveal that Putin is an ineffective if not pernicious anti-LGBT+ messenger. Indeed, we find that linking domestic anti-LGBT+ opposition leaders to Putin's agenda (i.e., weaponizing a morally questionable Putin in light of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine) could be an effective strategy *to counter* anti-LGBT+ backlash. Even among Bosnian Serbs, priming on Putin's anti-LGBT+ messaging increases support for LGBT+ rights and reduces Putin's credibility and moral authority. We also find that linking Dodik's anti-LGBT+ messaging to Putin's does nothing to enhance Dodik's approval among Serbs, undermines his anti-LGBT+ messaging efforts, and furthers his alienation among non-Serbs. We refer to the mechanism driving these findings as *reputational chaining*, a concept we later introduce to demonstrate how emergent norm entrepreneurs are strategically linked together in a way that negatively associates their positions and rhetoric, creating a "guilt by association" effect that can deter collaboration and curb the momentum of international backlash.

We conclude that weaponizing Putin (i.e., sowing doubt in his moral authority within his target audience) could be an effective strategy for countering international backlash against LGBT+ rights. While much literature has been devoted to the detrimental impact of Putin's traditional values campaign on LGBT+ rights over the last 15 years, our research suggests his normative sway in this domain could be waning—a potential game-changer for LGBT+ and feminist activists who have been confronted with a formidable "traditional values" norm entrepreneur in Putin. These findings raise important questions about Putin's credibility as an anti-LGBT+ messenger on the international stage. Today, his discriminatory policies and rhetoric appear to backfire in terms of generating international LGBT+ backlash, even in a case where he should enjoy greater resonance than most. By outlining the politics of norm entrepreneurs and methods to undermine their appeal, our research has important implications for strategies LGBT+ activists could pursue to protect communities under threat. In this case, rallying around the specter of Vladimir Putin may be an effective tool for countering homophobic backlash agendas.

Promoting LGBT+ Rights amid the Rise of International Backlash

While LGBT+ rights have experienced a remarkable period of expansion internationally, there is growing concern about an organized, international backlash, which a burgeoning literature has begun to chart (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Velasco, 2023; Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). That said, less scholarly attention has been paid to how LGBT+ activists respond to this organizing and the effective counterstrategies they might pursue. In this section, we survey key arguments in the literature raising alarm about international backlash and highlight the need for more analysis on effective tools to confront rising threats to LGBT+ communities.

Existing research on the expansion of LGBT+ rights—often attributed to theories of successful norm diffusion (Kollman, 2013; Paternotte, 2015; Ayoub, 2016)—has been joined by a focus on backlash to it. The world over, such rights are constructed as threatening traditional (potentially dominant) societal values and become cudgels for socially conservative elites, often used to galvanize constituents for political gain (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024b; Bob, 2019). Hence, a dominant finding has emerged in political science where LGBT+ rights have been globalized via norm entrepreneurs (usually a velvet triangle of progressive states, movements, and IOs) and are simultaneously being met with a conservative resistance that also operates in the international sphere. Nonetheless, in many places, the successes of LGBT+ rights (which relied on a universal and cosmopolitan human rights framing) are now framed as "international" values in opposition to conservative "domestic" ones (Page, Mironova, and Whitt, 2023). In that construction, LGBT+ rights commonly become associated with "the West," while LGBT+ opponents present themselves as defenders of "traditional" and "authentic" cultural norms and values.[4] The so-called "Western LGBT+ rights" become threats to sacred and sovereign values of the nation, the family, religion, nature, and common sense in that narrative (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024; Velasco, 2023).

Evidence of a growing international political backlash to LGBT+ advocacy that peddles these narrative constructs—often in very similar ways from country to country—is strong. For example, a bill against so-called "gay propaganda" might emerge in one state, and then subsequently be passed in multiple others. Even hysteria on an issue as conspicuous (and harmless) as "drag-queen-story-hour" has spread from Florida to Bavaria (Chazan, 2023; Empson, 2023). Scholars have identified a growing transnational network of anti-gender advocacy behind such messaging, which primarily targets women's and LGBT+ rights under the guise of defending "traditional values" (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Velasco, 2023;

Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). Furthermore, Velasco (2023) has demonstrated that these messages have political consequences, with pro- and anti-LGBT+ advocacy networks affecting policy in different countries, depending on which network is most entrenched in any given domestic space.

Research conducted outside of Western Europe and North America is particularly illustrative of these trends. Lyon's (2023) survey of Ugandans found no appeal of pro-LGBT+ narratives when framed as "Western," because local leaders cunningly connect it to neocolonialism—even if, in actuality, colonialism spread homophobia (Rao, 2020; Dreier 2018). In the Republic of Georgia, Page, Mironova, and Whitt (2023) find that people react negatively to U.S. embassies flying rainbow flags, especially if they view homosexuality as a Western importation (i.e., foreign to Georgian culture). In Poland, LGBT+ rights have been presented by politicians as a Western ideology or an "Ebola from Brussels" (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). In all cases, these rights are presented as foreign-imposed and as threats.

Progressive activists are naturally concerned by these trends because they reflect the power of anti-LGBT+ political forces working across borders (Bob, 2019; Weiss and Bosia, 2013). This observation has challenged some assumptions in early IR norm diffusion theory that progressive forces hold a monopoly on the diffusion of "good" ideas in the international space, given that anti-LGBT+ forces are also operating internationally, often using the same types of transnational tools for different ends (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). That reality has spurred important conversations within LGBT+ organizing, with advocates thinking carefully about effective strategies to thwart this global opposition's harmful rhetoric.

In their LGBT+ advocacy toolkit, Blackmore and Sanderson (2017) emphasize that the current moment demands profound shifts in thinking.[5] They stress the urgency of addressing the question: "How can the LGBTI movement respond to this reality?" (10). In response to mounting threats, LGBT+ advocacy groups have adopted diverse strategies. For example, ILGA's 2022 World Conference hosted a workshop titled "Building our Collective Strength to Counter the Anti-gender Opposition," aimed at fostering innovative responses. This followed a prior strategic dialogue, co-sponsored by groups like Transgender Europe (TGEU), which convened 120 global experts from various sectors, including states, movements, and donors, to counter anti-gender narratives. Additionally, LGBT+ organizations have begun creating a network of counter-disinformation experts to develop and share strategies for combating homo- and transphobic campaigns.

While advocates are aware and working swiftly to develop counter strategies, political science research has

been slower to study them. Some scholars have begun to theorize potential responses (Grabowska-Moroz and Wójcik, 2021), like the use of "rooted frames" that focus on local and indigenous interpretations of queerness to dispel the idea that LGBT+ rights are foreign (Ayoub and Chetaille, 2020). Moreover, women's movements have strategically used medical and legal expertise to counter anti-gender narratives (Korolczuk, 2020). While new studies are opening the door to these questions, little systematic research has been devoted to testing the effectiveness of these strategies, despite the value of social science tools to human rights advocates. Furthermore, most studies investigate the content of the messages and counter-messages, instead of the moral credibility of the messengers themselves. In this study, we focus on these messengers.

Domestic and International Messengers Driving the Backlash

Central to our observation about this international backlash is that it also involves political norm entrepreneurs (or "antipreneurs" as some scholars have called them, Bloomfield, 2016)[6] who advance homo- and transphobic agendas to counter LGBT+ advocacy. In international relations theory, norm entrepreneurs seek to influence popular and political support across societies of states, collaborating with like-minded actors and organizations internationally (Florini, 1996; Nadelmann, 1990).[7] Groups like the *Political Network for Values* (PNV) connect politicians with conservative NGOs like the *World Congress of Families* (WCF) and CitizenGo to promote policy issues on heterosexual marriage, abortion bans, and new articulations of religious freedom (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). By fostering shared rhetoric and organizing summits to influence legislative agendas, the PNV enables political elites to use morality rhetoric as a tool to rally support against social progressives and distinguish themselves from the West (Sharafutdinova, 2014).

Moral authority is essential for norm entrepreneurs, who rely on it to persuade others to adopt new norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). Yet Weldes (1999) points out that moral authority is also the discursive construction of legitimacy, arguing that it often depends on framing issues in ways that align with dominant moral or ethical narratives—here the perception of what is actually moral or not is key. In our case, such messengers often present themselves as defenders of traditional cultural and moral values in the face of international or Western encroachments, of which LGBT+ rights are the common target of "immorality" (see also Bettiza and Dioniji, 2014). For example, Russian security services have characterized

LGBT+ rights as a threat to Russia's "moral sovereignty," and pro-gay organizations with foreign funding are required to register as "foreign agents" (Nuñez-Mietz, 2019, 553). According to Nuñez-Mietz (2019), countries have gone so far as to *immunize* themselves from what they perceive as existential LGBT+ threats to national identity, thereby legitimizing restrictive measures against these communities.

While anti-LGBT+ norm entrepreneurs are now pervasive, existing research has not directly gauged public reactions to their internationally circulating messaging. Among the growing host of norm entrepreneurs, Putin stands out for his international visibility and resources to project soft (and hard) power around the world, with conservative sexual and gender mores positioned against so-called Western influences (Buyantueva, 2018; Van Herpen, 2016). He has been especially skilled at harnessing homo- and transphobia for political gain at home and in the abroad. For example, in 2012, he exploited demonstrations by the Russian punk band *Pussy Riot* to claim the "moral superiority" of family values over sexual liberalism, claiming that "Russia represents the last bulwark for defending traditional Christian values" (Sharafutdinova, 2014, 616). It was politically expedient during the election for his third term, in which he faced considerable domestic opposition, and needed a "new niche [as defender against 'Western immorality'] to claim authority and respect" (615). That homo- and transphobic image is extended to reinforce his domestic *and* global image and increasingly poses a problem for progressive messaging on LGBT+ rights. As Michelson and Harrison (2020) show, affirming one's morality is important to explaining the effectiveness of pro-LGBT+ messaging. So by reemphasizing the perceived *immorality* of LGBT+ rights, Putin provides a powerful counternarrative to further LGBT+ backlash. His norm entrepreneurship around traditional values has only intensified as he used arguments against LGBT+ people to justify his invasions of Ukraine—which he claimed to defend from Western influence (Grabowska-Moroz and Wojcik, 2021).

The effects of this norm entrepreneurship require more analysis. In our research, we focus on the role that Putin plays as an international anti-LGBT+ messenger, and whether his influence enhances or detracts from the narrative of domestic messengers in shaping public opinion. In what follows, we provide a theoretical framework to explain how such international messengers could potentially encourage LGBT+ opposition and possibly galvanize reactionary LGBT+ support (on backfire, see O'Dwyer, 2012). Our insights provide a theoretical foundation for strategies to counter international messengers driving the backlash against LGBT+ rights.

Theory—Countering the Backlash by Discrediting the Messenger

Our research is motivated by a desire to understand the mechanisms through which international backlash against LGBT+ rights arises so that it can be more effectively countered. We focus on international and domestic linkages with an emphasis on messenger effects. First, we ask whether anti-LGBT+ political messaging by a highly-visible world leader (i.e., moral conservative norm entrepreneur) promotes or undermines tolerance and public support for LGBT+ rights. Second, what happens when domestic leaders bandwagon with international anti-LGBT+ messengers? Does association with the rhetoric of international anti-LGBT+ messengers also help boost domestic leaders' credibility and support among social conservatives?

To answer these questions, we first provide a general theoretical framework for explaining and predicting the influence of anti-LGBT+ messengers in generating LGBT+ opposition/support. Our theory is informed by political psychology where messenger effects are optimal when people accept or trust the authority of the messenger and reject appeals by those whom they oppose or distrust (Cialdini, 2007; Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Turnbull-Dugarte and Ortega, 2024). Indeed, associations between messages and messengers significantly influence their persuasive power. Harrison and Michelson (2017) demonstrate that messengers can sway attitudes even on polarizing issues when perceived as credible within a given social or ideological group. For example, religious individuals showed greater support for same-sex marriage when endorsed by a religious leader. Similarly, Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2006) emphasize that the effectiveness of a message depends not only on its content but also on the credibility of its source. Framing issues around trusted messengers can result in more dramatic shifts in public opinion. Conversely, Pitt (2010) extends this by showing how questioning the credibility of messengers, such as anti-LGBT+ religious leaders, can neutralize negative messages. This is particularly relevant for anti-LGBT+ rhetoric, where messengers often derive legitimacy from perceived moral authority. Turnbull-Dugarte and Ortega (2024) highlight how associating a message with controversial groups can disrupt the direction of its influence, suggesting (for our study) that strategic linkage can erode the persuasiveness of anti-LGBT+ messages. While this literature suggests messengers can assume many roles, we are specifically interested in political elites as messengers, and how they can be linked reputationally. Together, these insights underscore the critical role of messenger identity, and potentially the ability of strategically constructed associations to other messengers, in shaping audience receptivity.

Thus, to explain when people are receptive to anti-LGBT+ messaging by political elites, we focus on key factors: an individual's opposition to LGBT+ rights and the individual's perception of the messenger as a moral authority. For example, people who oppose LGBT+ rights should be more likely to accept homo- and transphobic messaging when it comes from a credible moral authority, such as a conservative representative of the Catholic Church, or from a politician who signals such authority on traditional values. Conversely, people who are strong supporters of LGBT+ rights should react positively to pro-LGBT+ messaging since it aligns with their prior beliefs, but they might be wary of messengers whose authority on LGBT+ issues is ambiguous or doubtful, as, for example, a more liberal representative of the Catholic Church or a moderate politician whose views "evolved" on LGBT+ issues (Ayoub and Page, 2020). In sum, if a leader's perceived strength or ideological consistency is undermined—such as through hypocrisy in areas central to their moral claims—this can damage their standing. For instance, a "strong man" leader being portrayed as weak or compromised, especially in relation to foreign influence, could erode their credibility. We assume that messengers who repeatedly signal homo- and transphobic agendas are perceived as credible representatives of conservative values.

Our main concern, however, is precisely how to counter an effective international anti-LGBT+ messenger. If moral authority is indeed a power resource in international politics (Hall, 1997; Mehta and Winship, 2010), our approach focuses on efforts to sow doubt in the moral authority of the messenger, thereby reducing the receptivity of the message within the key target audience. Linking domestic anti-LGBT+ leaders to issues that their constituencies find objectionable—such as an inconsistency in upholding moral claims or engaging in morally questionable practices—may be effective. The association between a domestic messenger and a foreign influence itself may be damaging to the messenger's credibility, especially for leaders who routinely frame LGBTQ+ rights activists as tools of foreign (i.e., Western) powers. That said, our mechanism is additionally focused on associating a domestic leader with an international figure of morally questionable reputation (e.g., one perceived as corrupt, repressive, or warmongering) and how that might tarnish the domestic leader's moral authority. We assume that a messenger's core supporters are not easily dissuaded, but raising questions about a messenger's claim to moral authority could be effective at moving those with moderate conservative views about LGBT+ rights away from more staunchly homo- and transphobic positions. In that process, raising questions about an international leader's moral authority *subtly* or *sotto voce* can have a

discrediting effect on their influence over core constituencies. Labeling messengers as "homophobes, fascists, dictators, or criminals," for example, might cause reactionary responses among their supporters (e.g., anti-Trump rhetoric in the 2024 U.S. presidential election). Instead, we suggest a subtler approach that chips away at the credibility of the messenger, such as pointing out how they use rhetoric for self-serving political gain. We test the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1 (Discrediting the messenger): Discrediting an anti-LGBT+ messenger reduces public opposition to LGBT+ rights by diminishing the messenger's moral authority.

So far, we have considered strategies to counter anti-LGBT+ messaging broadly construed in ways that could apply to any messengers. Often, however, when one anti-LGBT+ advocate is effectively discredited, another will rise to assume the mantel of moral authority. We argue that one way to curtail emergent norm entrepreneurs is to link them to one who is already well-recognized but whose moral authority is increasingly suspect or outright discredited. We refer to this process as *reputationally chaining the messengers*.[8] Our concept captures a strategy of "guilt by association" in that we are metaphorically "chaining" actors [or political elites] together in a way that links their political positions and rhetoric.[9] One effect of the "chaining the messengers" approach is that it can also curb the momentum of international backlash by reducing incentives for anti-LGBT+ messengers to band together. Activists who are successful at discrediting one link in the chain of international homophobic messengers can then potentially reduce the appeal of others by association. We focus specifically on reducing incentives for emergent norm entrepreneurs, often in conservative contexts, to bandwagon with more visible international anti-LGBT+ messengers. We test the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 (Chaining the messengers): Linking an emergent anti-LGBT+ messenger with another more visible, but morally questionable/discredited, anti-LGBT+ messenger reduces opposition to LGBT+ rights by diminishing the emergent messenger's moral authority.

Rationale for Case Study

Our case study of Bosnia explores ways to counter a highly visible international anti-LGBT+ messenger, Putin, as well as a domestic anti-LGBT+ messenger and political entrepreneur, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik. We expect that public receptivity to both Putin's and Dodik's messages is a function of their subjective moral authority. Putin offers Russia as a model civilization, where rigid gender roles for men and women undergird society. Russian civilization is constrasted with a model of Western civilization that is painted as pro-gay and effeminate (Buyantueva, 2018; Van Herpen, 2016). This rhetoric has intensified with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with the Kremlin conducting a robust anti-LGBT+ campaign, domestically and internationally, to justify its war and depict Kyiv's government as a proxy for Western powers and their liberal values (Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan, 2023). In Bosnia, Dodik is also outspokenly homophobic, regularly condemning homosexuality, LGBT+ activism, and LGBT-inclusive education (Gavranovič, 2023). U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken even compared Dodik to Putin based on their shared positions on homophobia (Gavranovič, 2023). For Dodik, as well as Putin, LGBT+ rights are foreign and not part of the national core (Kajinic, 2010).

What is more, Bosnia is also a socially conservative society where many people are wary of and divided on issues of LGBT+ rights, making it a useful case for testing anti-LGBT+ messenger appeals (Ayoub, Page, and Whitt, 2021). It is also a society with enduring ethnic divisions (Hadžić, 2022; Toal, 2013). Bosnian Serbs are strong supporters of both Vladimir Putin and Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, while Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) and Bosnian Croats view both leaders highly unfavorably. Bosnians are also divided on another salient issue—support for Russia's war against Ukraine, with Bosnian Serbs supporting Russia and non-Serbs supporting Ukraine (Muzaferija and Toal, 2023). These divisions will play a potentially important role in our research design.

Following the logic of our general Hypothesis 1, we ask whether discrediting Putin as a moral authority reduces the appeal of his anti-LGBT+ rhetoric. We focus on priming around his claim to be a protector of traditional moral values and note that such claims have been used to justify his war in Ukraine. While such claims may not curb his appeal to the most homophobic and pro-Russia war proponents, they may dampen his influence on those of moderate LGBT+ opposition. Contextualizing Hypothesis 1 to the Bosnian case, we hypothesize that *raising questions about Vladimir Putin's credibility as an anti-LGBT+ messenger reduces public opposition to LGBT+ rights by diminishing his moral authority.*

Similarly, we examine the "chaining the messengers" strategy in Hypothesis 2, asking whether linking Milorad Dodik, a local messenger of anti-LGBT+ rhetoric, hurts his appeal among his local Serb constituents when linkages are made between his words and those of Vladimir Putin. Despite both Dodik and Putin's general popularity among conservative Serbs, we anticipate that chaining Dodik to Putin could hurt his appeal among moderate Serbs, who might be wary either of anti-LGBT+

messaging or Putin's brutality in Ukraine or both.[10] We anticipate that *linking Milorad Dodik's anti-LGBT+ messaging with Vladimir Putin reduces opposition to LGBT+ rights by diminishing Dodik's moral authority.*

In summary, we evaluate whether discrediting an anti-LGBT+ messenger like Putin undercuts his effectiveness as an international anti-LGBT+ messenger by reducing his moral authority, especially when linking his homophobia to his war efforts in Ukraine. We also examine whether linking local homophobic messengers like Dodik to Putin has a similar reductive effect on the domestic messenger's moral authority, dampening the appeal of their backlash agenda. We now turn to our research design.

Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we focus on two experiments from our preregistered design (see online appendix for further details). The first considers whether raising questions about the intent of Vladimir Putin's anti-LGBT+ messaging undercuts his moral authority as well as opposition to LGBT+ rights in general. Table 1 provides a summary of the key experimental treatments and outcome variables in the order that they were received. In the experiment, respondents are randomly assigned to one of three groups—a control group with no anti-LGBT+ messaging prime, a Putin messenger treatment that identifies

Vladimir Putin as an international norm entrepreneur against LGBT+ rights, and a second treatment group that links Putin's anti-LGBT+ messaging to his efforts in the Ukraine war. The treatments signal a subtle discrediting effort because they are worded as "claims" rather than matters of fact. As such, the treatments raise questions about Putin's moral authority. For example, in the first treatment, we note that Putin "claims" to be a "protector of traditional moral values" as a way of "rallying his supporters." In the second treatment, we state that he "justified" his war against Ukraine for similar reasons. These treatments do not reflect clear endorsements of Putin's agenda and undercut his moral authority in part by linking anti-LGBT+ rhetoric to violence in the Ukraine war. We anticipate that those who associate Putin with political repression at home [Russia] and violence abroad [Ukraine] will react negatively to our treatments. If our treatments have a discrediting effect on Putin's moral authority, as anticipated, associations between anti-LGBT+ messaging and Putin could have a reductive effect on overall LGBT+ opposition.

We then measure support for LGBT+ rights using three items—two focusing on voting for parties that support legalizing equal rights for LGBT+ people in general and one for marriage equality specifically. If priming on Putin's claims to be a "protector of traditional moral values" has discrediting effects, Hypothesis 1 predicts that the International Messenger and International Messenger

Table 1. Putin Anti-LGBT+ Messenger Experiment: Treatment and Outcome Variables (Experiment 1).

Control	International Messenger Treatment	International Messenger + Ukraine War Treatment
No prime	As you may know, **Russian President Vladimir Putin** often rallies supporters against LGBT+ rights by claiming to be a protector of traditional moral values	As you may know, **Russian President Vladimir Putin** often rallies supporters against LGBT+ rights by claiming to be a protector of traditional moral values. *He has also justified his war against Ukraine as standing up for traditional moral values, including stopping the spread of LGBT+ rights*
Support for LGBT+ Rights		
1 How likely are you to vote for a political party that supports legalizing equal rights for LGBT people? 0 (definitely not) to 10 (definitely yes)		
2 How likely are you to vote for a political party that supports legalizing marriage equality for LGBT+ people? 0 (definitely not) to 10 (definitely yes)		
Appraisal of Putin's Moral Authority		
To what extent do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Vladimir Putin as a moral authority? 0 = highly unfavorable to 10 = highly favorable		
Anti-Western Contestation		
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following? Homosexuality is being promoted by Western powers in Bosnia. 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)		

+ Ukraine War treatments should reduce support for LGBT+ rights relative to the control group. We also ask respondents to evaluate Putin's moral authority alongside beliefs about homosexuality's Western origins (agreement that homosexuality is being "promoted by Western powers in Bosnia").

We anticipate potential moderating effects of ethnicity where outcomes vary between Serbs and non-Serbs. If our treatments have discrediting effects, then associations between anti-LGBT+ messaging (International Messenger Treatment) and Putin and the Ukraine war (International Messenger + Ukraine War Treatment) could reduce Putin's credibility as a moral authority and undercut LGBT+ opposition among especially moderate Serbs (relative to the control group). Among non-Serbs—who already dislike Putin—we anticipate priming on Putin's rhetoric (International Messenger Treatment) or linkages between anti-LGBT+ rhetoric and Ukraine (International Messenger + Ukraine War Treatment) would be either ineffective at mobilizing anti-LGBT+ sentiment or might even galvanize LGBT+ support (relative to control). But the key point is that Putin's credibility should be reduced among all Bosnians.

Next, we utilize a second experiment to evaluate Dodik's anti-LGBT+ messenger appeal and Putin's reputational chaining effects on opposition to LGBT+ rights as well as appraisals of Dodik's moral authority and political support. Table 2 below provides an overview of the experiment and outcome variables. In the second experiment, respondents are randomized to either a control group or one of three treatment groups. The first is a simple domestic anti-LGBT+ treatment that assesses Dodik's appeal similar to the first experiment with Putin but with the same mildly discrediting language about Dodik "claiming to be a protector of traditional moral values" to rally his supporters against LGBT+ rights. The second treatment chains Dodik to Vladimir Putin and is framed in a way that is critical of the linkage, while acknowledging that both claim to be protectors of traditional moral values. This captures the reputational chaining effect of linking Dodik to Putin, which would come as no surprise to anyone in Bosnia as the two leaders are often quite close politically (Muzaferija and Toal, 2023). The last treatment ties Dodik's anti-LGBT+ messaging to both Putin and the Ukraine war.[11] We measure Dodik's moral authority using the same item as for Putin previously, and we also keep the same "support for marriage equality" variable as in the previous experiment but alter the other two LGBT+ rights support variables to focus on LGBT+ rights protections. Finally, we include an outcome variable that examines the credibility of the anti-Western contestation narrative. We consider whether our treatments reduce receptivity to the argument that "homosexuality is not part of Bosnia's culture."

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, we anticipate that the reputational chaining treatments linking Dodik to Putin and his war against Ukraine will undercut Dodik's moral

authority and messaging appeal relative to the Domestic Messenger treatment (a placebo control with no mention of Putin) or control (with no mention of either Dodik or Putin), especially if the chaining treatments serve to discredit Putin as an international messenger. Given both Putin's popularity and Serb support for Russia's war in Ukraine, we expect that reputational chaining could be more effective in reducing Dodik's appeal among non-Serbs, but could also sway moderate Serbs against his anti-LGBT+ agenda.

As with Experiment 1, we also anticipate moderated treatment effects when comparing Serb and non-Serb participants. If the treatments have discrediting effects on Dodik's moral authority, then linking Dodik to Putin's anti-LGBT+ messaging (Domestic Messenger + Putin Treatment) and/or the Ukraine war (Domestic + Putin + Ukraine War Treatment), could diminish Dodik's moral authority and reduce LGBT+ opposition among Serbs. Among non-Serbs, the (Domestic Messenger + Putin) and (Domestic + Putin + Ukraine War) Treatments should be either ineffective at reducing LGBT+ support or potentially galvanize LGBT+ support and further erode Dodik's moral authority (relative to control). Again, though, the key point is that Dodik's association with Putin has a discrediting effect among all Bosnians.

In summary, we evaluate treatment effects in both experiments using the following ordinary least squares regression models, where the outcome variables consist of LGBT+ support, appraisal of the messenger's moral authority, and beliefs about Western influence on LGBT+ rights in Bosnia. Coefficients β_{0-3} estimate messenger treatment effects on outcome variables and compare Serbs to non-Serbs in treatment and control groups using interaction terms, while β_n estimates the influence of other extended control variables on key outcomes of interest.

$$Y_i(Outcome) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Messenger\ Treatments)_i \\ + \beta_2(Serb)_i + \beta_3(Messenger\ x\ Serb)_i \\ + \beta_n X_i + e_i$$

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out by Ipsos in Bosnia in two rounds, the first in July and the second in October 2023. The first wave consisted of 1001 respondents and the second of 1026 for a total of 2027 across both waves. Our survey sample is derived from a sampling frame based on a list of all Polling Station Territories in Bosnia (averaging 200 households per Territory). The sample is stratified by region and urban/rural settlements. Once a Polling Station Territory is selected (proportional to size—more populated territories have a greater chance of selection), households were chosen via a random

Table 2. Dodik + Putin Anti-LGBT+ Messenger Experiment: Treatment and Outcome Variables (Experiment 2).

Control	Domestic Messenger Treatment	Domestic Messenger Treatment + Putin Treatment	Domestic Messenger + Putin + Ukraine War Treatment
No prime	As you may know, **Milorad Dodik** often rallies supporters against LGBT+ rights claiming to be a protector of traditional moral values	As you may know, **Milorad Dodik** often rallies supporters against LGBT+ rights claiming to be a protector of traditional moral values. *On this issue, his critics say his views are very similar to those of Russian President Vladimir Putin*	As you may know, **Milorad Dodik** often rallies supporters against LGBT+ rights claiming to be a protector of traditional moral values. On this issue, his critics say his views are very similar to those of Russian President Vladimir Putin, *who has also justified his war against Ukraine based on traditional moral values*

Appraisal of Dodik's Moral Authority
To what extent do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of **Milorad Dodik** as a moral authority? 0 = highly unfavorable to 10 = highly favorable

Support for LGBT+ Rights
To what extent do you support or oppose the protection of LGBT+ rights in your country? 0 = strongly oppose to 10 = strongly support
How likely are you to vote for a political party that supports legalizing marriage equality for LGBT+ people? 0 (definitely not) to 10 (definitely yes)

Anti-Western Contestation
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?
Homosexuality is not part of Bosnia's culture. 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)

route technique drawn from addresses based on dwelling registries. Once the interviewer reached the household, the selection procedure followed the Kish scheme (randomly selecting those dwelling in the household), and surveys were carried out face-to-face. Ipsos uses random iterative weighting (RIM) to offset sampling biases with regard to sex, age, ethnicity, and rural/urban settlements. We pool the data from both waves in our analysis and provide a time-fixed effect in our models which was not significant. We also provide balance tests in the online appendix which shows that respondents are well-balanced on observable demographics across treatment and control groups. No adverse events were reported during data collection and our research received IRB approval. We provide descriptive statistics in Table 3, which indicates how the sample is representative of the demographics of Bosnia.

Results

We begin with an overview of key outcome variables of interest. First, we show that Serbs, compared to non-Serbs in our sample, are equally socially conservative on LGBT+ issues but much more approving of Vladimir Putin, Milorad Dodik, and support Russia's war effort in Ukraine. Figure 1 provides a sampling of outcome variables related to LGBT+ support on a 0 to 10 scale. This includes measures of pro-LGBT+ party support (Q. *How likely are you to vote for a political party that supports legalizing equal rights for LGBT+ people?* Q. *How likely are you to vote for a political party that supports legalizing marriage equality for LGBT+ people?*) with response options ranging from 0 = definitely not to 10 = definitely yes as well as support for greater LGBT+ rights protections (Q. *To what extent do you support or oppose the protection of LGBT+ rights in your country?*) with response options ranging from 0 = strongly oppose to 10 = strongly support. First, as illustrated in Figure 1, mean responses are far closer to the 0 option indicating limited LGBT+ rights or party support in Bosnia. Second, mean responses are not significantly different between Serbs and non-Serbs in the sample. Both are very socially conservative on LGBT+ issues.

Next, Figure 1 provides responses to outcomes related to Vladimir Putin and Milorad Dodik's moral authority. Both items are also scaled from 0 = highly unfavorable to 10 = highly favorable for the question *To what extent do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of [Vladimir Putin, Milorad Dodik] as a moral authority?* Figure 1 shows that Serbs have much more favorable attitudes toward co-ethnic Bosnian Serb Milorad Dodik than non-Serbs as expected. Serbs express even stronger approval for Vladimir Putin

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample.

| Variable	Survey Responses	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Bosnia July 2023 sample	2027	0.49	0.50	0	1
Ethnicity					
Bosniak	2015	0.52	0.50	0	1
Croat	2015	0.12	0.33	0	1
Serb	2015	0.33	0.47	0	1
Others	2015	0.005	0.07	0	1
Bosnian	2015	0.03	0.17	0	1
Women	2027	0.55	0.50	0	1
Age	2027	47.76	17.52	18	91
Education	2021	5.67	1.78	1	10
Unemployed	2011	0.14	0.35	0	1
Rural	2027	1.52	0.50	1	2

Data source: July 2023 Survey of Bosnia.
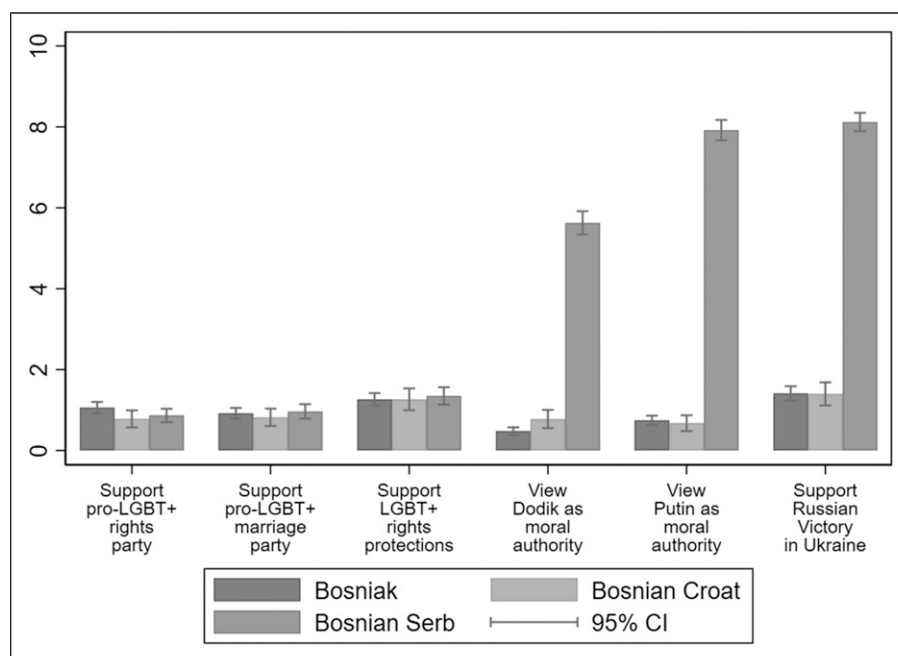
Figure 1. LGBT+ support and messenger approval by ethnicity (means, 95% confidence intervals in brackets).

while non-Serbs view Putin as unfavorably as Dodik. Finally, on support for Russia's war effort, Serbs are much more supportive of Russian victory than non-Serbs (Q. *Regarding the Ukraine war, where do you stand in terms of Russia's victory or defeat?* 0 = support absolute Russian military victory to 10 = support absolute Russian military defeat).

Overall, our survey data reveal broad similarities between Serbs and non-Serbs on LGBT+ support but wide gaps between them on attitudes toward Dodik and Putin and his war in Ukraine, which sets up a useful comparison. In the context of Bosnia, we anticipate that experimental treatment effects in relation to Hypotheses 1 and 2 are likely moderated by ethnicity due to differences in the perceived moral authority of the messengers. The key question is whether efforts to discredit such anti-LGBT+ messengers are more effective against the norm entrepreneur's moral supporters (Serbs) or moral detractors (non-Serbs). We argue that while both socially conservative audiences are important to shifting public opinion, it is especially useful to curb the appeal of messengers within their key target audience, in this case, the appeal of Putin and Dodik's messaging abilities to Bosnian Serbs.

Table 4. Average Treatment Effects From Experiment 1 (OLS Regression).

Variables	(1) Support LGBT+ Equal Rights	(2) Support LGBT+ Marriage Equality	(3) Moral Authority Putin	(4) View Homosexuality As Western Promoted
Treatment effects for Serbs				
Control group	−0.470**	−0.280	7.804***	0.528***
	(0.234)	(0.241)	(0.304)	(0.089)
Putin Messenger Txt	0.728**	0.665**	−1.137***	−0.369***
	(0.293)	(0.296)	(0.370)	(0.119)
Putin + Ukraine Txt	0.246	0.288	−0.836**	−0.254**
	(0.276)	(0.286)	(0.364)	(0.116)
Treatment effects for non-Serbs				
Putin Messenger Txt	−0.216	−0.153	0.078	−0.067
	(0.175)	(0.160)	(0.153)	(0.077)
Putin + Ukraine Txt	−0.152	−0.089	−0.087	−0.0569
	(0.176)	(0.161)	(0.148)	(0.077)
Constant (control group)	1.184***	1.038***	0.766***	3.211***
	(0.150)	(0.135)	(0.130)	(0.063)
Observations	1953	1972	1929	1892
R-squared	0.004	0.004	0.672	0.022
Adj. r^2	0.002	0.001	0.671	0.020

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
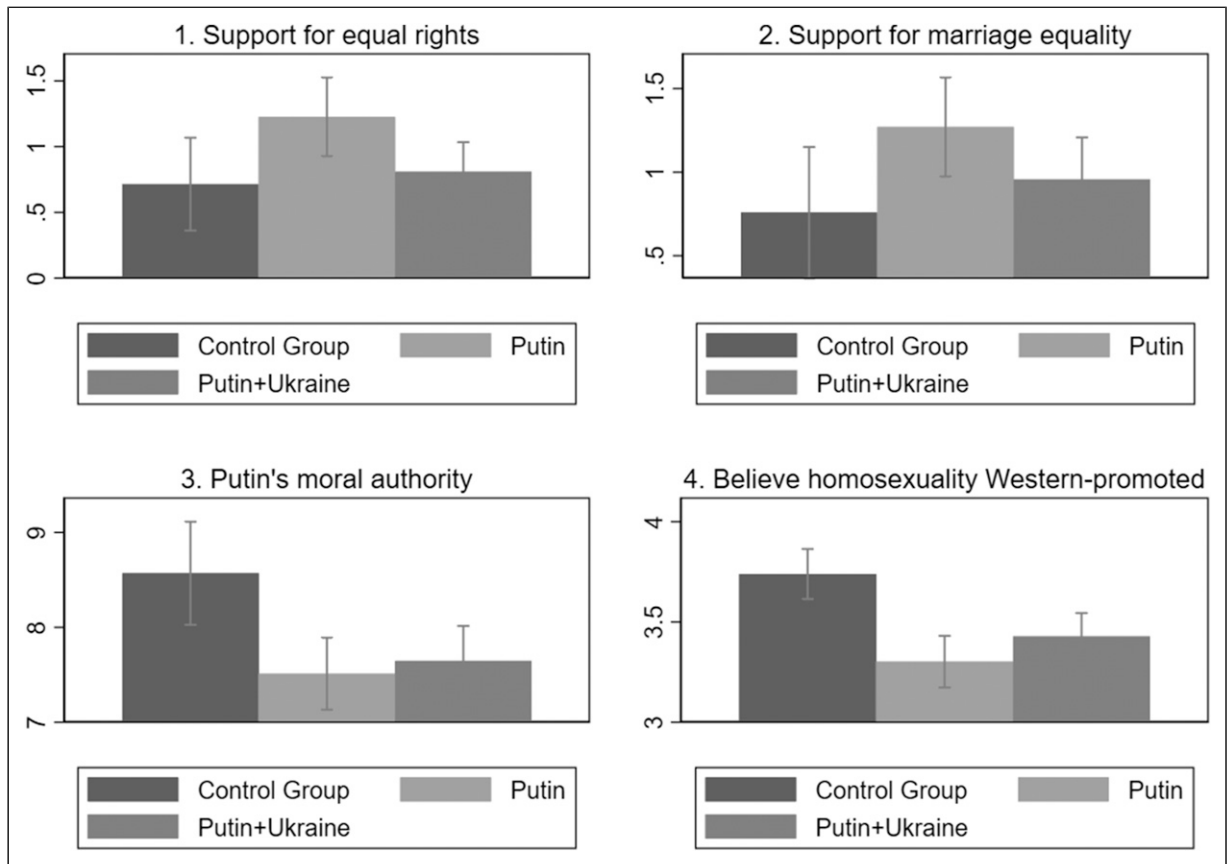***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

Figure 2. Average treatment effects on key outcome variables from Experiment 1 (Serbs only) (Means with 95% confidence intervals in brackets).

We now turn to estimating treatment effects from Experiments 1 and 2 using OLS regression models. We begin with Experiment 1, which we use to test Hypothesis 1 on discrediting the appeal of Vladimir Putin as an anti-LGBT+ messenger. Table 4 utilizes OLS regression to estimate treatment effects moderated by ethnicity (Serbs vs. non-Serbs) using interaction terms as specified in the Research Design. We find stronger support for Hypothesis 1 among Serbs than non-Serbs. Serbs who receive the Putin anti-LGBT+ messaging treatment are more likely to support a political party favoring equal rights for LGBT+ people (model 1, Cohen's D = 0.22) and marriage equality (model 2, Cohen's D = 0.22). They are also less likely to view Putin as a moral authority (model 3), which is consistent with a mechanism where discrediting Putin's anti-LGBT+ messaging reduced his moral authority among Serbs.[12] For example, Serbs are less likely to believe that "homosexuality is being promoted in Bosnia by Western powers" in treatment groups that prime on Putin's rhetoric (model 4), undercutting a core component of Putin's anti-LGBT+ narrative. This is important given that Serbs are more likely than non-Serbs to agree with this statement. Among Serbs, 80% strongly agree with the statement in the control group compared to 65–69% in the treatment groups (only 48% of non-Serbs strongly agree

on average). These results are visualized in Figure 2. In contrast, the messenger treatments failed to move non-Serb opinions in any direction, most likely due to Putin's ex-ante low moral appeal among non-Serbs. He is already discredited in their view as a moral authority so priming has no further reductive effects. The critical point to underscore here is that in either case (Serbs or non-Serbs), Putin is now ineffective at furthering international backlash to LGBT+ rights, and he can be discredited as a moral messenger even among people in his key constituencies (Serbs).

Next, we evaluate Hypothesis 2 on reputational chaining effects with Experiment 2. Table 5 reports the average treatment effects of efforts to discredit Dodik as an anti-LGBT+ messenger by linking (i.e., chaining) him to Vladimir Putin and his war in Ukraine on key outcome variables. We focus on three main outcome variables. The first, discussed in Figure 1, involves support for general LGBT+ rights protections. We ask respondents *To what extent do you support or oppose the protection of LGBT+ rights in your country?* with response options ranging from 0 = strongly oppose to 10 = strongly support. The second focuses specifically on marriage equality, asking respondents *How likely are you to vote for a political party that supports legalizing marriage equality for*

Table 5. Average Treatment Effects From Experiment 2 (OLS Regression).

Variables	(1) Support LGBT+ Rights Protections	(2) Support LGBT+ Marriage Equality	(3) Moral Authority Dodik	(4) Believe Homosexuality Not Part of Bosnian Culture
Treatment effects for Serbs				
Control group	−0.449	−0.501**	4.974***	0.286***
	(0.308)	(0.240)	(0.437)	(0.089)
Dodik Messenger Txt	0.452	0.569*	−0.511	−0.250*
	(0.377)	(0.299)	(0.516)	(0.128)
Dodik + Putin Txt	0.573	0.701**	−0.00293	−0.314**
	(0.380)	(0.306)	(0.507)	(0.124)
Dodik + Putin + Ukraine Txt	0.878**	0.884***	−0.211	−0.316**
	(0.395)	(0.320)	(0.519)	(0.126)
Treatment effects for non-Serbs				
Dodik Messenger Txt	−0.295	−0.292	−0.365**	−0.165**
	(0.215)	(0.189)	(0.162)	(0.078)
Dodik + Putin Txt	−0.175	−0.215	−0.410**	−0.144*
	(0.215)	(0.189)	(0.163)	(0.076)
Dodik + Putin + Ukraine Txt	−0.269	−0.274	−0.498***	−0.099
	(0.214)	(0.187)	(0.156)	(0.076)
Constant (control group)	1.549***	1.159***	0.869***	3.575***
	(0.177)	(0.157)	(0.145)	(0.059)
Observations	1972	1971	1921	1946
R-squared	0.004	0.005	0.485	0.010
Adj. r²	0.000	0.002	0.483	0.006

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

LGBT+ people? with responses ranging from 0 = definitely not to 10 = definitely yes.

We report the results of OLS regression analysis in Table 5. As before, we find that our hypothesized effects are moderated by ethnicity. First, among non-Serbs, we find no significant treatment effects on support for LGBT+ rights protections (model 1) or support for LGBT+ marriage equality (model 2). Overall, Dodik is a poor anti-LGBT+ messenger among non-Serbs due to his low moral authority. Furthermore, his appeal appears to significantly erode among non-Serbs in any treatment involving anti-LGBT+ messaging compared to the control group (model 3).

Among Serbs, priming on Dodik's anti-LGBT+ messaging efforts also fails to move Serb opinion on LGBT+ rights protections in general (model 1) and enhances support for marriage equality, especially when linked to Putin and the Ukraine war (models 1 and 2). Messing on anti-LGBT+ rhetoric also fails to boost Dodik's moral authority among Serbs (model 3). More importantly, linking Dodik to Putin undermines support for the anti-Western contestation that "homosexuality is not part of Bosnian culture" (model 4)—a statement that

94 percent of Serbs strongly agree with in the control group but is reduced to 75–70% in the treatment groups.[13] We visualize key findings from Table 5 in Figure 3 below.

Overall, we find support for Hypothesis 2 that linking Dodik to Putin and his justifications for the war in Ukraine appears to be an effective strategy for countering his anti-LGBT+ messaging. When Dodik is "chained" to Putin, Serb support for LGBT+ rights protections (model 1) and LGBT+ marriage equality (model 2) increases relative to the control group or priming on Dodik's messaging efforts alone (without linkages to Putin or Ukraine). We see no advantages to Dodik as an anti-LGBT+ messenger from any association with Vladimir Putin or the Ukraine war in boosting his support among Serbs. His anti-LGBT+ messaging also only weakens his appeal among non-Serbs with no net gains for the anti-LGBT+ movement. Like Putin, Dodik appears to be a poor anti-LGBT+ messenger and derives no benefit from bandwagoning with Putin on this issue. In contrast, activists seeking to counter Dodik's anti-LGBT+ rhetoric could find purchase in linking Dodik more visibly to Putin.

Finally, we call attention to other observational correlates of LGBT+ support and opposition in Bosnia.
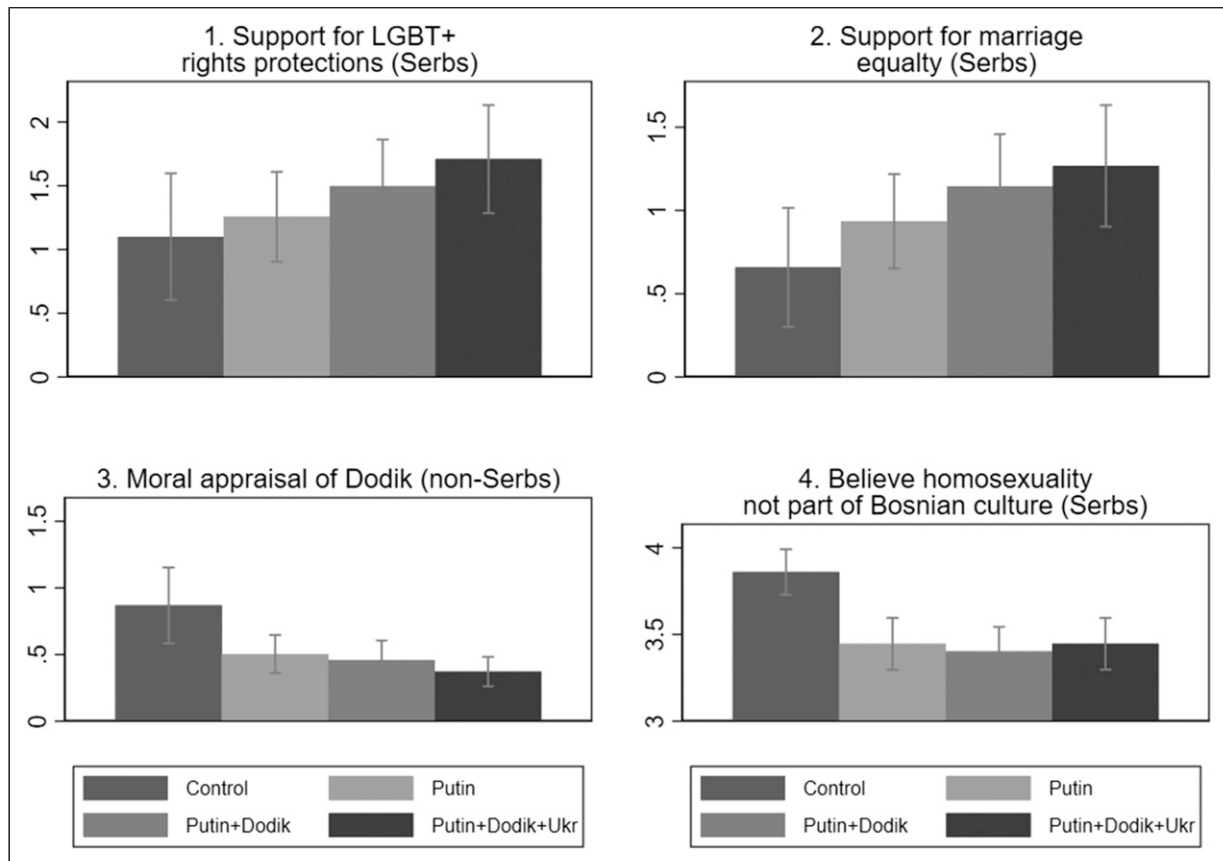

Figure 3. Average treatment effects on key outcome variables from Experiment 2 (Means with 95% confidence intervals in brackets).

While not experimentally manipulated, these correlates enrich our understanding of the variability of LGBT+ support across other demographics beyond ethnicity. Table 6 below reports the results of OLS regression on the general measure of support for LGBT+ rights protections as an outcome variable. First, we again confirm that Serbs are no more homophobic than other ethnic groups in Bosnia (Bosnian Croats being the comparison group). All are generally socially conservative. Within a conservative context, however, men, older respondents, rural, and of lower socioeconomic status (proxied by unemployment) are generally less supportive of LGBT+ rights protections in Bosnia. Among attitudinal correlates, respondents who

are more ethnocentric (attaching greater importance to their ethnic identity) are less supportive of LGBT+ rights. Also, consistent with our argument about linkages between homophobia and Putin's war narrative in Ukraine, we find that respondents who support Russian victory in Ukraine are strongly opposed to LGBT+ rights protections. Also, those who agree that "Homosexuality is being promoted by Western powers in Bosnia" and that "Homosexuality is not part of Bosnia's culture" are opposed to LGBT+ rights protections.

We consider whether correlates of LGBT+ support and opposition could serve as potential moderators of treatment effects. However, interaction terms between

Table 6. Correlates of LGBT+ Support and Opposition (OLS Regression).

Variables	(1) Support for LGBT+ Rights Protections
Serb	0.645*
	(0.359)
Bosniak	−0.159
	(0.187)
Women	0.250**
	(0.117)
Age	−0.012***
	(0.004)
Education	0.057
	(0.039)
Unemployed	−0.361**
	(0.153)
Rural	−0.606***
	(0.118)
Religiosity	−0.161
	(0.126)
Ethnocentrism	−0.487***
	(0.125)
View Russia favorably	−0.001
	(0.129)
View Ukraine unfavorably	−0.211***
	(0.070)
View Putin favorably	0.035
	(0.029)
Support Russian war victory in Ukraine	−0.120***
	(0.023)
View homosexuality as Western promoted	−0.276***
	(0.080)
Do not consider homosexuality as part of culture	−0.110
	(0.083)
Constant	6.652***
	(0.632)
Observations	1548
R-squared	0.136
Adj. r^2	0.128

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

experimental treatments and gender, age, education, unemployment, rural location, ethnocentrism, religiosity, favorable views of Russia, unfavorable views of Ukraine, support for Russian victory in the Ukraine war, and cultural acceptance/rejection of homosexuality revealed no clear, consistent moderating effects on this or other outcome variables in our analysis. Instead, these observational correlates serve primarily as independent predictors of LGBT+ rights support. We also considered possible mediation relationships between treatments, outcomes, and intervening variables, but ultimately, we will require a more complex research design with treatment and mediator randomization to identify causal processes, which we can explore in future designs.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of global norm entrepreneurship, particularly the counterintuitive effects of anti-LGBT+ rhetoric promoted by inflammatory international conservative actors like Vladimir Putin. While existing literature has extensively explored the promotion of LGBT+ rights and subsequent backlash, we contribute a novel perspective by unpacking how the international promotion of conservative values may be neutralized or abated—especially when messengers such as Putin can be discredited as moral authorities.

Our survey experiments in Bosnia demonstrate that Putin's homophobic messaging not only fails to rally the expected conservative support but paradoxically increases support for LGBT+ rights in some cases. Even among Bosnian Serbs, a demographic that is both socially conservative and traditionally pro-Putin, the messaging appears largely ineffective. Instead, it erodes Putin's moral authority, further discrediting him as a international champion of conservative values. Notably, this extends to his war effort in Ukraine, where our data suggest that his use of anti-LGBT+ rhetoric to justify the conflict undermines both his own moral authority and his homo- and transphobic agenda, even among sympathetic audiences.

We have a simple but persuasive argument for these findings—one that dovetails with activists' strategies already being deployed on the ground. A key mechanism we propose in this process is the concept of *reputational chaining*, where local anti-LGBT+ messengers are strategically linked to inflammatory and morally questionable international figures, thereby eroding the domestic messenger's credibility. Chaining Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik to Putin reputationally—a tactic used in our survey experiments—further undermines Dodik's moral authority among his key constituents. This linkage exacerbates the negative perception of both leaders' homophobic rhetoric, making it less persuasive. At the same time, we recognize that attitudes among Serbs remain

intolerant, even with our treatment effects. Nonetheless, by associating Dodik's anti-LGBT+ messaging with Putin's tarnished reputation, we show how activists might be able to help diffuse local backlash efforts. Chaining the messenger offers activists a powerful tool: it leverages the growing disenchantment with international conservative actors to erode the legitimacy of domestic leaders who emulate their rhetoric. This strategy disrupts the transnational diffusion of anti-LGBT+ norms, possibly generating a "guilt by association" effect that weakens both the international and local messengers. Of course, the inverse may also be true[14]: For example, Israeli leaders posting images of tanks with rainbow flags during an invasion of Gaza—a political strategy criticized by activists and scholars as *pinkwashing*—surely does nothing positive for the LGBT+ cause among the suffering population (Graham-Harrison, 2024).

Our findings resonate with emerging activist strategies in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond, where LGBT+ rights supporters have begun to turn conservative messengers like Putin into symbols of outdated, out-of-touch moralizing. As activists in Poland, Ukraine, and Hungary suggest, Putin's rhetoric is increasingly perceived as hollow, marking a shift in how such international norm entrepreneurs are received. We argue that adopting strategies like reputational chaining could provide a pathway for activists in these contexts as well. To be sure, there are national specificities to Putin's perception across states. This dynamic may differ in regions where foreign influence is less stigmatized, the Russo-Ukrainian war feels more distant, or where the framing of LGBT+ rights is less securitized. For example, in parts of Latin America, the backlash against LGBT+ rights might be more tied to religious or cultural narratives than to anti-Global North sentiment, suggesting that strategies need to be tailored to the specific political and cultural landscape. However, in general, where reputation is damaged, openings also may emerge. Many illiberal leaders in countries with less cultural capital have emulated rhetoric like Putin's and employed related strategies to galvanize political support. This "enemy-of-my-enemy" dynamic (Turnbull-Dugarte and Ortega, 2024) provides an important framework for theorizing how LGBT+ rights may gain traction even in highly conservative societies.

While much research on international backlash focuses on how conservative elites weaponize liberal values as foreign impositions, our findings suggest that the reverse can also occur. Activists and liberal leaders may successfully weaponize the discredited rhetoric of authoritarian figures like Putin to undermine regressive domestic agendas. Future research could test this dynamic in a variety of states. President Duda of Poland has a history of fomenting fears against "LGBT-ideology," while Prime Minister Orban of Hungary supported the passage of a

so-called anti-LGBT+ propaganda law in 2021. Similarly, this year, the Republic of Georgia's parliament has granted initial approval to bills that impose extensive limitations on LGBT+ rights. In the United States, newly re-elected President Trump has used aggressively trans-phobic rhetoric and policy platforms to campaign. Leaders in many places, whether in sub-national states like Florida or countries like Brazil, have tried the same anti-LGBT+ rhetoric. By chaining local anti-LGBT+ leaders to internationally discredited figures, pro-LGBT+ forces may foster greater public support for LGBT+ rights by associating these leaders with moral disrepute.

We hope this study sheds light on the complex interplay between international conservative norm entrepreneurship and domestic political dynamics. While norm entrepreneurial work to advance conservative values is well charted, morally discredited figures like Putin may unintentionally bolster LGBT+ rights movements by alienating potential conservative audiences abroad. Understanding when the moment is ripe for the dynamic we have articulated here can be useful for LGBT+ rights advocacy. The findings may offer practical insights for activists combating international anti-LGBT+ backlash, illustrating how discrediting powerful conservative messengers can neutralize their influence and even contribute to progressive gains.

Ethical Statement

Ethical Approval

We have IRB approval for this research and discuss our adherance to ethical conduct of research in the online supplementary appendix.

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Notes

1. We use the LGBT+ acronym as an umbrella for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people, recognizing that these are Western identity constructs that do not resonate everywhere. At the same time, the acronym works well given the purposes of this paper, since the anti-LGBT+ politicians we focus on commonly do the rhetorical work to link LGBT and queer people to perceived threats around Western imposition or decadence.
2. And otherwise morally undermined.
3. We should note that there had been very limited support for LGBT+ rights in Ukraine before Russian aggression, but recently years have seen an increase in attitudinal and policy support for LGBT+ rights (Ayoub, 2018; Shevtsova, 2020).
4. The irony being that much of the moral conservative agenda is organized and funded out of Western countries (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024).
5. Data in this paragraph from Chapter 7 in Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024).
6. The anti-LGBT+ rights messengers we study may qualify as antipreneurs, depending on the analyst. For us, their distinct model of so-called traditional values championed by these actors, which spreads new laws and ideas (e.g., "homo-propaganda laws") likely qualifies as more than antipreneur "actors who defend the normative status quo" (Bloomfield, 2016, 310).
7. The concept extends the idea of policy/issue entrepreneurs in interest group research (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009) to the transnational arena.
8. We use chaining because of its metaphorical advantage in capturing the strategic associations and linkages activists make to discredit their opponents. If the association sticks, it can have a "ball and chain"-like dynamic, where an actor is inconveniently stuck to another. While chaining could also signal several links (as in one leader linked to another through multiple other people) or a shackling that would be unbreakable, neither of these dynamics need to be present for the chaining concept we spell out here.
9. See Ratliff (2022) for a review of the psychology of guilt and Charteris-Black (2018) on the use of guilt in political rhetoric.
10. In contrast, Dodik's appeal is likely to remain low among non-Serbs due to the ethnic polarization in Bosnia's political landscape (see Hadžić, 2022; Toal, 2013), but also to low approval of both Putin and his Ukraine war among non-Serbs.
11. This links domestic and international spheres in a way that taps into nascent ideas about norm entrepreneurship, and its varied effects in different domestic contexts.

12. While priming on specific linkages between Putin's anti-LGBT+ messaging and his justifications for the war in Ukraine failed to move Serb opinions on LGBT+ rights (models 1 and 2), priming on the war did reduce Putin's moral authority among Serbs (model 3) and the underlying message of LGBT+ identity being promoted by the West (model 4).

13. We find similar effects using the other anti-Western contestation measure "Homosexuality is being promoted by Western powers in Bosnia."

14. More optimistically, if a leader needed reputational help to be perceived pro-LGBT+, they could potentially be chained to someone endowed with that authority.

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