

**Doğangün, Gökten Huriye.** Gender Politics in Turkey and Russia: From State Feminism to Authoritarian Rule. London / New York: I.B. Tauris / Bloomsbury. 2020. 192 pages. ISBN: 9780755646227.

Reviewed by **Gül Şen**  
University of Heidelberg, Germany  
guel.sen@ori.uni-heidelberg.de

In this book, Gökten Huriye Doğangün examines the relationship between the state and gender equality in Russia and Turkey, surveying both countries along parallel historical trajectories that begin in the early twentieth century and continues to the office tenures of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Comprising fewer than 200 pages and keeping the endnotes to a minimum, the book can be considered a succinct monograph. Doğangün begins with an author's preface in which she describes how she became interested in the topic and explains the rationale for her choice of research method, expert interviews. Neither here nor in the acknowledgments, however, does she mention that the book was written as a PhD dissertation; the reader learns this only from her thanking her "supervisor and chair Professor" and from her current affiliation, which confirms that she has already received her PhD.

The authors' main argument is that gender inequality is increasing in Turkey and Russia because of the 'authoritarian tendencies' (p. 8) of their respective leaders, Erdoğan and Putin. Their approaches to gender, she argues, serve as legitimization for 'their authoritarian tendencies with the help of a nationalist narrative' (pp. 8–9). This is a bold statement, reducing as it does the complexity of power elites in both countries to the personalities of their leaders; one would have expected more justification of this fundamental assumption.

In the introduction, the author lucidly explains the concepts of gender order and gender climate (as defined by Connell and Kay) and her methodology, which relies on in-depth interviews in both countries and the evaluation of the empirical data obtained through them. These interviews were conducted in 2011 and 2013 in Russia and in 2013 in Turkey; her interviewees in both countries consisted of employees of national civil society organizations, UN institutions, universities, and selected state institutions (the latter only in the case of Turkey, since, as the author explains, she was unable to secure interviews with representatives of state institutions in Russia). In view of the book's much later publication date (2020), one may wonder to what degree the interviews reflect the political and social situation in the intervening period. However, Doğangün does engage with a variety of relevant literature published up to 2018.

The book is divided into two major sections. The first one, entitled 'Discourses on Gender in Early Modernization, Transition and Authoritarian Eras in USSR / Russia and Turkey' (pp. 19–97), comprises four chapters. Serving as an overview, the first chapter deals with the gender climate during the Soviet and Republican periods, which was dominated by a state-led feminism in both countries (widely acknowledged and well-

studied in the Turkish case). The second chapter discusses the transitional period in Turkey from the end of one-party rule to the 1980s, during which liberal politics and a feminist movement emerged in Turkey. Demonstrating the remarkably similar development of the political regimes in Turkey and Russia, the third chapter explores the “rising authoritarianism” spearheaded by Erdoğan and Putin, both of whom rose to power after a decade of political instability and deep economic crises. Whereas Putin consolidated strong presidential rule as soon as he entered into office in 1999, Erdoğan at first initiated political and legal reforms aimed at a more democratic system in order to meet the conditions of full accession to the EU. Building on this discussion, the fourth chapter analyzes how the “authoritarianism” of Erdoğan and Putin interacted with gender politics within the framework of the conservative and nationalist narratives that both politicians cultivated during their rule.

The second section, entitled ‘Gender Climate under Authoritarian Politics in Russia and Turkey’ (pp. 99–142), is divided into three chapters that address three key issues of gender equality in both countries. The fifth chapter examines the situation of women in the employment world. In spite of the fact that statistically more women participate in the labor market in Russia than they do in Turkey, both states have adopted similar measures under a policy of “family strengthening,” as both have experienced demographic decline since the 1970s and in Turkey the birth rate declined between 1965 and 2015 due to anti-natalist policies. In Turkey, women’s employment rate has always tended to be low; even during the early Republican period, education was seen as more important than employment, and since then, as Doğangün puts it, the ‘housewifization of women is internalized as the prevailing cultural norm’ (p. 120). The interviews show that despite its legal existence, maternity leave remains still a challenge to women’s employment and a cause of discrimination for female employees and job applicants in the private sectors of both countries. The sixth chapter is dedicated to pro-natalist policies and the instrumentalization of motherhood against the backdrop of demographic decline, aging populations, increasing divorce rates, and the falling fertility rate in both Russia and Turkey (the fertility rate in Turkey is higher than that in Russia, but it, too, is in long-term decline). Whereas Erdoğan struggles against an aging population with the pro-natalist policy embedded in his religious discourse, Putin, with his policy, attempts to secure Russian sovereignty through patriotic discourse.

The seventh chapter examines the struggle against domestic violence in both states, the most crucial issue of gender equality. In Turkey, laws protecting women from violence have been enacted, and several civil society organizations are active on this issue. However, the growing number of victims of domestic violence demonstrates that these efforts have not fundamentally improved the situation. The author suggests that one reason could be the pro-family policy of the state, which defines women’s rights not individually but within the framework of family, with the result that policies ostensibly meant to protecting them in fact serve to protect the institution of the family. In addition, the measures taken by the government, especially the counseling offices for families offered by the Directory of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), have provided religious pressure groups with an instrument to influence social debates for their own purposes. Consequently, Doğangün’s interviewees criticized the return to family values as a

priority issue in legislation and legal consultancy, because it meant that protecting the rights of women was not prioritized even when women were in fact victims of domestic violence and sought refuge in women's shelters. The author concludes that both states, despite their different legal regulations, have attempted to solve the issue of domestic violence through protectionist pro-family policies that are, in the end, intended to serve not the cause of civic rights but the interests of the state and the nation. Furthermore, in Turkey, the origin of the problem is traced to mental defects or drug addiction among men, who are requested to seek appropriate therapy. By contrast, in Russia domestic violence is regarded not as a felony but merely as an administrative offense, which leads to prosecution only in cases of serious physical harm. Attempts to make domestic violence a crime have been blocked by pro-family groups and above all by the Orthodox church. In short, in both states pro-family and religious discourses dominate the struggle against domestic violence.

In her conclusion, Doğangün reiterates her motivations for choosing the concepts of gender order and gender climate as the basis of her study, explaining that these enable her to analyze the threefold relationship between state, gender, and legitimacy. She then summarizes the findings of the two sections. She argues that in both Russia and Turkey, hegemonic rule has been reflected in gender policies unfolding within an ideological modernization that constituted a clear-cut break with the past and from which a sort of state feminism emerged. The similarity of the two states ended only in the way in which these policies were enacted: whereas women's equality in Turkey was pursued through education, in the Soviet case it was promoted through work. However, '[i]n both cases, the role of cultural reproduction was emphasized for women, who had to raise children loyal to the communist and secular-national premises of the Soviet and Republican regimes' (p. 144). It is interesting to observe that although both states' reforms created a new social order and gender climate, the traditional patriarchal gender order was preserved in a broader sense – a continuity that the author correctly points out. Another finding of the study is the author's identification of a 'neo-traditional / conservative gender climate' in both countries during the period of her research. Here, however, her conclusions are not really convincing, even though she has discussed this issue extensively in the main text. Instead, she allows herself to get mired in either details or oversimplification with the conclusion that in Turkey 'moral control over women's sexuality' is the overarching issue, whereas 'women's sexuality is much more liberated and moral toleration of premarital sex, cohabitation and a revealing dress code is higher in Russia' (p. 147).

In general, the study draws a picture of a patriarchy that is alive and well in both states and that powerfully dominates the discourses on gender policies. Doğangün cogently delineates the situation of women by addressing a variety of factors in and peculiarities of Russian and Turkish gender equality policies. Comparing the recent history and contemporary political contexts of the two countries in the context of the research question of gender equality is an original and very welcome approach for political studies of Turkey and Russia and above all for feminist history and gender studies.