

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Geographical value spaces and gender norms in post-Maidan Ukraine: the failed ratification of the Istanbul Convention

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Abstract

With RRW populist actors' discovery of gender norms as a useful foreign policy tool, narratives constructed in terms of geographical value spaces have become central to the struggle for women's rights. Through a detailed examination of international and domestic actors' engagement with the failed ratification process of the Istanbul Convention in Ukraine, this article aims to enhance understanding of the appropriateness of the use of these geographical value spaces when describing the struggle to combat GBV in Ukraine, and how connecting gender justice issues to geographically restricted value spaces impacts this fight. It finds that in practice neither the EU – despite Russia's allegations to the contrary – nor domestic political elites in favour of closer cooperation with Europe have provided meaningful support to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Faced with this situation, some Ukrainian feminists have increasingly sought to present the struggle to combat gender-based violence in a locally acceptable vernacular. This article, however, concludes that framing the struggle for women's rights in any type of geographical terms – be they of an international or domestic nature – increases the risk of either instrumentalisation or selective engagement with the feminist agenda.

Keywords: Istanbul Convention; Radical Right Wing Populism; Russia; Ukraine; European Union

Introduction

As Russia has attempted to regain its position as a global power under Vladimir Putin's second stint as president, it has accompanied its military interventions in neighbouring countries with the use of soft power to expand its sphere of influence in the neighbourhood.¹ Putin has branded Russia as the defender of 'traditional values' in a world that has fallen prey to immoral, liberal ideologies. As such, Russia embodies the emergence of a new type of gender norm entrepreneur on the international stage, which, contrary to the liberal gender norm actors that have traditionally dominated this space, casts its engagement in illiberal, radical right-wing (RRW) populist terms. This development has sparked the interest of mainstream² and feminist International

¹Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, 'Understanding Russia's soft power strategy', *Politics*, 35:3–4 (2015), pp. 347–63.

²Jeanne Wilson, 'Russia and China respond to soft power: Interpretation and readaptation of a Western construct', *Politics*, 35:3–4 (2015), pp. 287–300; Katarzyna Kaczmarek, 'Conservative soft power: Liberal soft power bias and the "hidden" attraction of Russia', *Journal of International Relations and Development* (2017); Alexander Cooley, 'Countering democratic norms', *Journal of Democracy*, 26:3 (2015), pp. 49–63; Robert Horvath, 'The reinvention of "traditional values": Nataliya Narochitskaya and Russia's assault on universal human rights', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:5 (2016), pp. 868–92; Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 233; Melisa Hooper, 'Russia's "Traditional Values" Leadership', The Foreign Policy Centre (24 May 2016), available

Relations scholars and experts alike.³ As a result, over the last five years a small, but growing body of publications concerning or referring to Russia's use of gender norms as a foreign policy tool has emerged. Nevertheless, gaps remain in this body of literature. One of these gaps constitutes the lack of research on the responses of defenders of women's rights and gender equality both in the West and in states at the centre of Russian influence, such as Ukraine.

Focusing on the failed ratification process of the Istanbul Convention in Ukraine, this article expands the focus, taking into account the EU's, and conservative and progressive domestic actors' responses to the promotion of anti-gender ideology in Ukraine. Relying on interviews with relevant actors in Brussels and Kiev,⁴ this offers a more comprehensive assessment of the impact that the idea that gender values are connected to certain geographical areas – a notion this article refers to as geographical value spaces – has on the advancement of gender equality. More specifically, it aims to provide insight into the consequences/desirability of the framing of the fight against violence against women (VAW) as either a European or Ukrainian affair.

Radical right-wing populism, traditional gender norms, and Russia's opposition against the Istanbul Convention

This section discusses how Russia's promotion of traditional gender justice norms in general, and its opposition to the Istanbul Convention in particular, are emblematic of a RRW populist foreign policy, which uses these values to curb the EU's influence in eastern Europe. With the rise of RRW populism across the globe, and the adoption of gender norms as a useful tool for alliance building by some of its proponents, a new type of player has entered the stage of global gender politics: the promoter of 'traditional' gender norms. Depending on national specifics, these actors have opposed: 'LGBT rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education in schools, gender itself (as meant in gender violence, gender studies and gender mainstreaming).'⁵ Efforts aimed at promoting any of these issues have been described by RRW actors as emblematic of 'gender ideology'. RRW populist actors' attempts to curb advances in this regard have therefore been described as 'anti-gender' campaigns.⁶

at: {<https://fpc.org.uk/russias-traditional-values-leadership/>} accessed 10 January 2019; Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga, *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe* (London: Routledge, 2018).

³Elżbieta Korolczuk, 'The war on gender' from a transnational perspective: Lessons for feminist strategising', *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategising for Gender* (2014), p. 43; Conor O'Dwyer, *Coming Out of Communism: The Emergence of LGBT Activism in Eastern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Kristina Stoeckl and Kseniya Medvedeva trace back Russia's norm entrepreneurship through the United Nations Human Rights Council to the agenda set by the Russian Orthodox Church. Kristina Stoeckl and Kseniya Medvedeva, 'Double bind at the UN: Western actors, Russia, and the traditionalist agenda', *Global Constitutionalism*, 7:3 (2018), pp. 383–421; Anne Marie Goetz, 'The New Cold War on Women's Rights?', 'Let's Talk about Women's Rights: 20 Years after the Beijing Platform for Action', UNRISD (2015), available at: {<http://www.unrisd.org/beijing+20-goetz>} accessed 14 January 2019; Elise Ketelaars, 'When "European values" do not count: Anti-gender ideology and the failure to comprehensively address GBV in Ukraine', LSE Engenderings blog (2018), available at: {<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2018/09/26/when-european-values-do-not-count-anti-gender-ideology-and-the-failure-to-comprehensively-address-gbv-in-ukraine/>} accessed 27 January 2019; Alicija Curanović and Lucian N. Leustean, 'The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russian and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Status', *Transatlantic Academy Paper Series*, No. 1 (2015); Kristina Stoeckl, 'Transnational Norm Mobilization: The World Congress of Families in Georgia and Moldova', *The Foreign Policy Centre* (18 July 2018), available at: {<https://fpc.org.uk/transnational-norm-mobilization-the-world-congress-of-families-in-georgia-and-moldova/>} accessed 27 January 2019.

⁴These actors are EU officials, Ukrainian women's rights activists, and representatives of international organisations working on gender issues in Ukraine.

⁵David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, 'Disentangling and locating the "global right": Anti-gender campaigns in Europe', *Politics and Governance*, 6:3 (2018), pp. 6–19.

⁶Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

Not all RRW populist actors espouse anti-gender ideology, and actors who use anti-gender ideology to achieve political goals are not necessarily RRW populists.⁷ Nevertheless, in certain parts of Europe – and in the US – RRW populist actors have been the core or dominant drivers of anti-gender ideology. Russia is a core example of an actor that has used the promotion of anti-gender ideology for RRW populist purposes. As the EU has embraced the image of a liberal defender of women's rights, Russia has used gender norms to create a normative distinction between itself and the EU, as part of a competition over the shared neighbourhood.⁸ Russia depicts 'traditional values' as inherently Russian, contrary to the liberal gender norms promoted by 'the West', specifically the EU, or what Russian backers of anti-gender ideology like to refer to as 'Gayropa'.⁹

In 2015 Russia went as far as 'securitising' traditional values,¹⁰ by identifying their preservation and development as a long-term national security interest in its National Security Strategy. According to this document one of the main threats to public security is activities

focused on destroying the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, destabilizing the domestic political and social situation – including through inciting 'color revolutions' – and destroying traditional Russian religious and moral values.¹¹

Kristina Stoeckl has found that the Russian Orthodox Church has been a leader of the promotion of 'Russian values' at home and abroad.¹² Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, has also continuously emphasised the EU's 'moral relativism' as the key threat to the EU's and the whole of Europe's security.¹³ Under his supervision the Church has engaged in

⁷Clifford Bob's description of the global anti-gender movement as a 'Baptist-burqa' network aptly captures that anti-gender ideology has equally been espoused by the – Islamic – actors who are themselves the target of RRW populist organisations in Europe and the US. Scholars such as Verloo, who have focused on the link between gender and RRW populism in northern Europe, have found that in the European context not all RRW populist actors have embraced anti-gender ideology. In northern Europe in particular, RRW populist parties have actually come out in favour of LGBT rights and gender equality, in order to distinguish themselves from the populations that they have identified as existential threats to national identity, meaning people with a Muslim background. This means that the movement behind the promotion of anti-gender ideology is both broader than, as well as not inclusive of all actors that are generally understood to constitute the RRW populist movement. Based on these findings, Paternotte and Kunar have argued that scholars should avoid conflating rising RRW populism (in Europe) with the promotion of anti-gender ideology. See Clifford Bob, *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 41; Sarah de Lange and Liza M. Mügge, 'Gender and right-wing populism in the Low Countries: Ideological variations across parties and time', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49:1–2 (2015), pp. 61–80; Mieke Verloo, 'Gender knowledge, and opposition to the feminist project: Extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands', *Politics and Governance*, 6:3 (2018), pp. 20–30; Paternotte and Kunar, 'Disentangling and locating the "global right"', pp. 6–19.

⁸Emil Edenborg, 'Homophobia as geopolitics: "Traditional values" and the negotiation of Russia's place in the world', in Jon Mulholland, Nicola Montagna, and Erin Sanders-McDonagh (eds), *Gendering Nationalism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 67–87.

⁹In Poland RRW populist actors have described proposals to consolidate women's rights and gender equality as 'Ebola from Brussels'. See Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff, 'Gender as "Ebola from Brussels": the anticolonial frame and the rise of illiberal populism', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43:4 (2018), pp. 797–821. Similarly, Melisa Hooper has found that 'Russians refer to Europe as Gayropa to emphasise its acceptance of altered gender roles and LGBT relationships that Russians deem "deviant"'. Hooper, 'Russia's "Traditional Values" Leadership'.

¹⁰Securitisation refers to the process in which issues that were previously not considered to concern a matter of national security, are constructed as 'existential threats'. Ole Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization* (Copenhagen: Centre for Peace and Conflict Research, 1993).

¹¹Russian Federation Presidential Edict 683 approving appended text of 'The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy' (December 2015).

¹²Kristina Stoeckl, 'The Russian Orthodox Church as moral norm entrepreneur', *Religion, State & Society*, 44:2 (2016), pp. 132–51.

¹³The Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Church Relations, 'His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Meets with Members of the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union' (8 October 2017), available at: {<https://mospat.ru/en/2017/10/08/news151113/>} accessed 27 January 2019.

bilateral and multilateral diplomacy targeted at other Church leaders as well as states and international institutions. Since 2010, bodies responsible for the management of external relations of various national branches of the Orthodox Church have rapidly spread across Europe. These bodies have united in the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union (CROCEU). In addition to the diplomatic efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church, Russia has also supported ‘grassroots’ civil society associations that advocate against gender ideology.¹⁴

One concrete issue that has become the target of Russia’s anti-gender ideology crusade is the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (also known as the Istanbul Convention).¹⁵ The Istanbul Convention is the first legally binding international treaty that criminalises violence against women. It puts State Parties under a positive obligation to fully address VAW in all its dimensions, which means that they can be held accountable in case of a failure to adopt measures to prevent violence against women, to protect its victims, and to prosecute its perpetrators.¹⁶ Being A Council of Europe instrument, it is open to ratification to all countries on the European continent including Russia and Ukraine. As noted, Russia is strongly opposed to this document: this opposition is rooted in the document’s use of the term ‘gender’.¹⁷ The Istanbul Convention defines gender as ‘the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men’ (Article 3), and clearly states that it considers violence against women to be gender-based violence, meaning that it understands that women become victim of this type of violence because they are women. Russia’s opposition is born out of the fact that some of the preventive measures the Istanbul Convention propose focus on addressing traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes. In this regard a 2017 CROCEU statement posited that:

Being aware of the fact that the protection of women from domestic violence and other forms of violence needs effective legal tools and measures to be dealt with, CROCEU welcomes the intention of the signing parties of the Convention to provide a legally binding document aimed to create a common comprehensive framework in this area.

CROCEU, however, expresses serious concerns about the introduction into the text of the Convention of a new legal term, namely ‘gender’ and other terms related to it.

¹⁴Tova Højdestrand, ‘Nationalism and civicness in Russia: Grassroots mobilization in defense of “family values”’, in Katalin Fábán and Elżbieta Korolczuk (eds), *Rebellious Parents: Parental Movements in Central-Eastern Europe and Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Olena Strelnyk, ‘Conservative parents’ mobilization in Ukraine’, in Fábán and Korolczuk (eds), *Rebellious Parents*.

Oleg Marushchenko has described in detail the efforts of this movement to oppose the introduction of gender education in Ukraine: ‘One of the prime examples is the All-Ukrainian Parent Movement, a union of the non-governmental organizations and private persons with its educational activities, “Parents’ readings”, forums, brochures and newspapers promoting the so-called “traditional family values” and supporting the related upbringing system.’ What is particularly well known is the book *Unembellished Gender [Gender bez Prikras]* with the following subtitle speaking for itself: *Through Gender Policy to Dictatorship of Homosexuality [Cherez Gendernuyu Poli ku k Diktature Homoseksualisma]*. This movement allegedly produced yet another odious book for teachers and parents, *Gender ‘Education’, or How They Will Make Homosexualists from Your Children [Gendernoye ‘Vospitanie’ ili Kak iz Vashih Detey Budut Delat Homoseksualistov]*, published in Ukrainian with no identification data. Large numbers of both books were sent out to the state departments for education, schools, and preschool institutions in the country. Oleg Marushchenko, ‘In Between Cultural Traditions and Reactionary Threats: Is Gender Education Possible in Ukraine?’, Materials of the Second International Gender Workshop: ‘Overcoming Backlash: Experiences of Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Poland’ (2013).

¹⁵Council of Europe, *The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (November 2014), available at: {<https://www.refworld.org/docid/548165c94.html>} accessed 3 August 2019.

¹⁶Lisa Grans, ‘The Istanbul Convention and the positive obligation to prevent violence’, *Human Rights Law Review*, 18:1 (2018), pp. 133–55.

¹⁷Russia is one of only two Council of Europe states that has not even signed the Istanbul Convention. The other one is Azerbaijan. See Council of Europe, Chart of Signatures and Ratifications of Treaty 210, available at: {<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210/signatures>} accessed 19 January 2019.

There is a strong reason to believe that the Convention could be used as the first step towards future attempts to legalise the notions of ‘gender’ and ‘gender identity’ in the context, which would contradict the biblical teaching about men and women and relations between them (‘slippery slope argument’).¹⁸

As discussed below, for Russia it is not enough to prevent the slope from slipping at home. Convincing other eastern European countries from ratifying the Istanbul Convention has become an integral component of the religious diplomacy and other types of foreign policy interventions discussed above.

The EU geographical value space and the Istanbul Convention in Ukraine in theory

The notion that the EU promotes immoral gender norms is central to Russia’s gender norm entrepreneurship. This section finds that when it comes to the Istanbul Convention the EU has indeed become an increasingly vocal proponent of this document, describing it as integral to its value system. As Ukraine, in the wake of Maidan, has embarked on a path towards closer EU integration, ratification of the Istanbul would have been a strong signal of its commitment to this goal.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine gained independence and embarked on a path to democracy. Nevertheless, for much of this period, the country’s economy and politics remained strongly intertwined with Russia.¹⁹ This interdependence ended in 2014 when President Yanukovich’s last minute refusal to sign an agreement to facilitate the creation of closer ties with the EU sparked the Euromaidan protests.²⁰ While Russian pressure had been at the root of Yanukovich’s abrupt rejection of the EU Association agreement, the Euromaidan protests eventually resulted in his ousting. Ukraine cloaked the political transition that followed Russophobia, Europe-centred rhetoric, such as President Poroshenko’s allusions that ‘nothing can stand between Ukraine and its European ambitions’.²¹

Ukraine’s European ambitions include a desire to embrace what is commonly referred to in the Ukrainian context as ‘European values’.²² While feminist scholars have contested the use of the term ‘European values’ for its colonial connotations,²³ since the Euromaidan the EU has been conceived of as a ‘value space’ by Ukrainian citizens.²⁴ This claim is supported by surveys that show that Ukrainians who are in favour of closer integration with the EU strongly support the founding principles of the EU being respect for human dignity, freedom,

¹⁸Russian Orthodox Church Representation to the European Institutions, ‘Statement of the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union on the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)’ (2018), available at: {<http://www.orthodox.ru/index.php?content=article&category=news&id=2018-07-13-1&lang=en>} accessed 27 January 2019.

¹⁹Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I. B. Tauris 2014).

²⁰Erik Kuhn von Burgsdorff, ‘The Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine: Stages of the Maidan movement and why they constitute a revolution’, *Inquiries Journal*, 7:2 (2015).

²¹‘Nothing can stand between Ukraine and its European Ambitions’, *UNIAN* (10 July 2018), available at: {<https://www.unian.info/politics/10182074-nothing-can-stand-between-ukraine-and-its-european-ambitions-poroshenko.html>} accessed 27 January 2019.

²²Kostiantyn Yelisieiev, ‘Ukraine to EU: Tell us what we’re fighting for’, *EUobserver* (15 November 2017), available at: {<https://euobserver.com/opinion/139873>} accessed 27 January 2019. See also EU Neighbours East, ‘Perceptions of the European Union in Eastern Partnership Countries’, available at: {https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2017-08/EU%20Neighbours%20East_Factsheets_2016_REGIONAL%20OVERVIEW.pdf} accessed 27 January 2019.

²³Rahel Kunz and Julia Maisenbacher, ‘Women in the neighbourhood: Reinstating the European Union’s civilising mission on the back of gender equality promotion?’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:1 (2017), pp. 122–44; Maria Stern, ‘Gender and race in the European security strategy: Europe as a “force for good”?’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 14:1 (2011), pp. 28–59.

²⁴Matthes Buhbe, ‘How Ukrainians Perceive European Values Main Results of an Empirical Survey’, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2017), available at: {<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/13731.pdf>} accessed 27 January 2019.

democracy, the rule of law, and – a particularly important one in the context of this article – equality.²⁵

Ukraine signed the Istanbul Convention in 2011, and ratification would have been a strong signal of its commitment to European values. Whereas Russia has presented itself as the main detractor of the Istanbul Convention and the values it represents on the European continent, the EU's leadership has increasingly turned out as a principal defender of this document. In 2017, the year that the Commission dedicated to fighting violence against women, the Council decided in favour of the EU signing the Istanbul Convention. On this occasion first Vice-President Frans Timmermans and Commissioner Věra Jourová emphasised the importance of the Istanbul Convention for the EU, stating that:

The Council's decision today is a significant step towards the EU becoming – along with its Member States – a full party to the Convention preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention). This is the first binding and comprehensive international instrument in Europe that addresses violence against women.

The signing of the Istanbul Convention sends out an important political signal during the year the Commission dedicated 2017 to fighting violence against women: the EU is committed to putting an end to violence against women.²⁶

Ratification would also have been urgent from a purely feminist perspective, as at that point Ukraine's legislative framework did not recognise domestic violence as a crime. Moreover, as the conflict in eastern Ukraine resulted in increased levels of VAW across the country,²⁷ and the occurrence of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence in Donbas,²⁸ ratification would contribute to addressing a persistent, pervasive, and intensifying problem.²⁹

Ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, was foreseen to go hand in hand with signing into law a set of bills that would amend existing Ukrainian legislation in order to bring it in accordance with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention. However, in 2016 the parliament voted against ratification: instead, it settled the matter by adopting legislation that criminalised domestic violence and recognised sex without consent as rape in 2017.³⁰ However, this legislation did not put in place many of the other guarantees of the Istanbul Convention particularly those aimed at 'tackling the prevention of violence against women strategically and in longer-term and by creating the necessary institutional

²⁵Roberta Guerrina and Katharine A. M. Wright, 'Gendering normative power Europe: Lessons of the Women, Peace and Security agenda', *International Affairs*, 92:2 (2016), pp. 293–312.

²⁶European Commission, 'Joint Statement by First Vice-President Timmermans and Commissioner Jourová Following the Council Decision on Signing of the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women' (11 May 2017), available at: {http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-17-1268_en.htm} accessed 27 January 2019.

²⁷UNFPA data, for instance, show that while in 2016 174 women died as a direct result of the conflict, 601 were killed as a result of non-conflict related GBV. 'Economic Costs of Violence against Women in Ukraine', UNFPA (2017), available at: {https://ukraine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Economic%20Costs%20of%20Violence_2017_3.pdf} accessed 27 January 2019.

²⁸OHCHR, 'Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Ukraine – 14 March 2014 to 31 January 2017' (2017).

²⁹'Masculinity Today: Men's Attitudes To Gender Stereotypes And Violence Against Women', UNFPA (2018), available at: {<https://ukraine.unfpa.org/en/publications/masculinity-today-mens-attitudes-gender-stereotypes-and-violence-against-women>} accessed 3 August 2019; 'Gender-Based Violence in the Conflict-Affected Regions of Ukraine', UNFPA and Ukrainian Centre for Social Reforms (2015), available at: {https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/gbv_stu-dy_2015_final_eng.pdf} accessed 15 August 2018.

³⁰'Domestic violence now criminal offense in Ukraine', *UNIAN* (7 December 2017), available at: {<https://www.unian.info/society/2285764-domestic-violence-now-criminal-offense-in-ukraine.html>} accessed 27 January 2019; Verkhovna Rada, 'Law of Ukraine No 2227-VIII on Amending the Criminal and Criminal Procedure Codes of Ukraine with a View to Implementing the Provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence [in Ukrainian]' (6 December 2017), available at: {<https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2227-viii>} accessed 15 August 2018.

mechanisms and supporting multi-agency coordination (Articles 7 and 10 of the Istanbul Convention).³¹ This course of affairs constitutes a significant blow to the feminist cause; moreover it also raises questions about Ukraine's commitment to the notion of 'European values'.

The European geographical value space and the failed ratification of the Istanbul Convention in practice: a value paradox?

In Ukraine some of the strongest opponents of the Istanbul Convention have simultaneously strongly condemned Russian influence in and expressed favour towards European values. This provides the impression that Ukraine is experiencing a value paradox on its path towards closer integration with Europe. Resistance against the Istanbul Convention's ratification in Ukraine has been driven by powerful domestic actors, most notably the Ukrainian Council of Churches.³² This opposition is rooted in the belief that recognising and addressing the negative implications of traditional gender roles would threaten social stability by undermining the natural order between men and women and the sacrosanctity of heterosexual marriage. This is reflected in public statements that posit that:

Such a twisted approach ... can make the Istanbul Convention an instrument for popularizing new 'gender roles' and same-sex relations in Ukrainian schools and universities, which would be a disastrous way for Ukraine.³³

As such, the Ukrainian Council of Churches' rhetoric on the Istanbul Convention is reminiscent of Russia's traditionalist vision on gender. Before the eruption of Euromaidan, Russian Orthodox leader Patriarch Kirill was reported to engage in outreach activities targeted at conservative Ukrainian women focusing on the negative influence of feminism:

Speaking to a meeting of the Union of Orthodox Ukrainian Women in Moscow, Kirill slammed feminism for leading women to look beyond the traditional family for fulfilment. According to Kirill, women are first and foremost 'the guardians of the family fire, the centre of family life'. He accused feminism of being opposed to 'family values'.³⁴

In addition, Ukrainian women's rights defenders indicated in interviews that in recent years they had noticed a surge of conservative groups that called themselves 'parents' committees', which had disseminated propaganda against the Istanbul Convention.³⁵ When it comes to these organisations' ties to Russia, Strelnyk notes that the All Ukrainians' Parents Committee, Ukraine's leading conservative parents' group, 'is officially registered as a charitable organization that sustains itself from donations and voluntary contributions, but [that] it is difficult to discern to what extent people support the organization financially'.³⁶ However, a recent in-depth investigation by the Southern Poverty Law Centre demonstrated strong ties between Russian oligarchs close to

³¹Council of Europe, 'The Istanbul Convention: A Tool to Advance in Fighting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in Ukraine (2018–2020)', available at: {<https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/the-istanbul-convention-a-tool-to-advance-in-fighting-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence-in-ukraine>} accessed 3 August 2019.

³²The Council of Churches is the representative organ of all Ukraine's Christian institutions.

³³'No to Gender: Council of Churches Speaks Out against Ratification of Istanbul Convention', Union of Orthodox Journalists (7 March 2017), available at: {<http://spzh.news/en/news/40019-no-to-gender-council-of-churches-speaks-out-against-ratification-of-istanbul-convention>} accessed 27 January 2019.

³⁴Miriam Elder, 'Feminism could destroy Russia, Russian Orthodox patriarch claims', *The Guardian* (9 April 2013), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/09/feminism-destroy-russia-patriarch-kirill>} accessed 27 January 2019.

³⁵Höjdestrand, 'Nationalism and civicness in Russia'; Strelnyk, 'Conservative parents' mobilization in Ukraine'; Marushchenko, 'In Between Cultural Traditions and Reactionary Threats'.

³⁶Strelnyk, 'Conservative parents' mobilization in Ukraine', p. 78.

Putin and the All Ukrainians' Parents Committee, a finding supported by an interviewee who was convinced that Russia had financed these organisations.^{37,38}

In October 2013, just before President Yanukovich was presumed to sign the EU-Association agreement, the World Congress of Families, a US organisation that promotes 'Christian values', published a press release, stating:

The Ukrainian leaders expressed concern about the pressure brought to bear on their nation to accede to the homosexual agenda (including 'gay marriage') as a condition for membership in the European Union.³⁹

This statement followed in the wake of a WCF trip to Ukraine to lobby the All Ukrainians' Parents Committee and a selection of Ukrainian parliamentarians. Soon afterwards, the All Ukrainians' Parents Committee repeated this language in a statement of its own, which read:

We oppose the signing of the association agreement with the EU, because it will lead to the inevitable homosexualizing of Ukraine.⁴⁰

What is remarkable is that the rejection of the Istanbul Convention coincided with a period in which Ukraine-Russia relations, including those at the religious level, were at an all-time low. Some of the strongest Ukrainian detractors of the Istanbul Convention also happen to be those most strongly opposed against Russian interference in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church for instance has completely cut off ties with the Moscow Patriarchate after having been part of one Church for centuries.⁴¹ The then Ukrainian President Poroshenko identified this development as part of Ukraine's 'pro-European and pro-Ukrainian state strategy',⁴² and he described Moscow's loss of control as 'the fall of the "third Rome" as the most ancient conceptual claim of Moscow for global domination'.⁴³

Ukraine thus seems to be embroiled in a rather paradoxical situation where a desire to move in the direction of the EU goes hand in hand with the rejection of values that are – supposedly – central to the EU's identity. Moreover, while one could argue that these patriarchal worldviews are inherent to most religious institutions, one would expect political elites committed to closer EU integration to distance themselves from these values. Not in Ukraine, however. President Poroshenko's 2019 campaign slogan 'Army, language, faith', signified the importance that religion and religious rhetoric played in his (failed) re-election bid.⁴⁴ This raises the question of

³⁷Interview with a Ukrainian feminist activist, Kiev, 29 November 2017.

³⁸Hatewatch Staff, 'How the World Congress of Families Serves Russian Orthodox Political Interests', Southern Poverty Law Center (16 May 2018), available at: {<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/05/16/how-world-congress-families-serves-russian-orthodox-political-interests>} accessed 27 January 2019.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ukrainian Orthodoxy had been under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church for centuries, but this move granted it independence from Russian interference. "After autocephaly, there will be no Moscow spirit in Ukraine" – Patriarch Filaret', *UNIAN* (23 November 2018), available at: {<https://www.unian.info/society/10350051-after-autocephaly-there-will-be-no-moscow-spirit-in-ukraine-patriarch-filaret.html>} accessed 27 January 2019.

⁴²President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, Official Website, 'Head of State: Church Autocephaly is the Most Important Event Similar to the Ukrainian Aspiration to Join the European Union and NATO' (14 October 2018), available at: {<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-avtokefaliya-cerkvi-ce-najvagogomisha-podiya-po-50450>} accessed 27 January 2019.

⁴³Harriet Sherwood, 'Ukraine-Russia tensions spark historic religious rift', *The Guardian* (30 November 2018), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/30/ukraine-russia-tensions-religious-rift-orthodox-church>} accessed 27 January 2019.

⁴⁴Volodymyr Yermolenko, 'Does Poroshenko have a chance at a second term?', *Atlantic Council* (1 October 2018), available at: {<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/does-poroshenko-have-a-shot-at-a-second-term>} accessed 27 January 2019.

how Ukraine's religious and political elites reconcile their pro-Europe and pro-EU language with their – apparent – adherence to traditionalist societal views. The subsequent section will reflect in more depth on the factors that allowed for this paradox to exist looking both into the justifications of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the role of Ukrainian Presidency and EU elites as enablers of this vision.

The value paradox as a signifier of the fragility of the notion of 'European values'

In order to mitigate this value paradox, Ukrainian detractors of the Istanbul Convention had to engage in creative interpretation in order to reconcile their desire for closer EU integration with preservation of values reminiscent of those Russia has been promoting in eastern Europe. However, for this fiction to continue to exist, the EU had to turn a blind eye on Ukraine's failure to live up to its European ambitions when it comes to gender equality. Interviews with EU officials provide the impression the EU did so in view of the need to advance other foreign policy interests. Such impression not only suggests the fragile character of 'European values' as such, but also the danger of casting the fight for gender equality in eastern Europe in terms of Russian vs European values.

Emily Channell-Justice's research on female activists who participated in Euromaidan suggests that Ukraine's embrace of 'Europe' during the Maidan served more to signify what Ukrainians did not want Ukraine to be – that is, closely intertwined with Russia – than what Ukraine should be.

Discourses about Europe that gained traction during the Euromaidan mobilizations were used to establish a specific vision of Ukraine as not Russian (and therefore not Soviet) rather than being a realistic interpretation of European reality.⁴⁵

This suggests that for some Ukrainian actors the adoption of Europe-centred rhetoric by (patriarchal) Ukrainian actors only serves the pursuance of other interests. The amenability of European values has allowed opponents of liberal gender values to justify this paradox, while the lack of real commitment to their promotion on behalf of those who present themselves as their defenders, has allowed this reality to persist.

The Ukrainian Council of Churches has argued that there is no paradox, as in their understanding, traditionalist values are European values. In this regard Ukrainian Patriarch Filaret has, for example, stated that: 'It is precisely because Ukraine is a part of Europe that we believe our people have no fewer rights than other peoples to maintain their own identity within the European family and to adhere to traditional spiritual and cultural values.'⁴⁶ A joint statement by the Council of Churches, issued before the eruption of Euromaidan, even suggested that Ukraine should join hands with like-minded actors to promote these ideas in Europe:

It is clear that modern united Europe has achieved much, but there is still much that needs to be changed or corrected as in our own Ukrainian home. Traditional religious, cultural, family and moral values, which for centuries have served as the basis for life of the peoples of Europe, are a precious treasure which we should work together to value, protect, defend and multiply.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Emily Channell-Justice, "'We're not just sandwiches": Europe, nation, and feminist (im)possibilities on Ukraine's Maidan', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 42:3 (2017), pp. 717–41.

⁴⁶Mykhailo Cherenkov, 'Without Ukraine, there is no Europe', *New Eastern Europe* (14 March 2016), available at: {http://neweasterneuropa.eu/old_site/articles-and-commentary/1921-without-ukraine-there-is-no-europe} accessed 27 January 2019.

⁴⁷IPC, 'Звернення Церков і релігійних організацій до українського народу' (30 September 2013), available at: {https://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1281%253A1&catid=50%253Azv&Itemid=78&lang=uk} accessed 27 January 2019.

This mindset has been at the root of the previously discussed advocacy efforts directed towards the Council of Europe, aimed at removing ‘gender ideology’ from the Istanbul Convention.⁴⁸ This demonstrates that the concept of European values, while traditionally associated by both proponents as well as detractors with a liberal worldview, is sufficiently amenable to be appropriated for illiberal purposes as well.

Former President Poroshenko opted for the selective interpretation and invocation of ‘European values’ depending on the audience he is addressing. Even though patriarchal institutions dominated his recent electoral campaign rhetoric, he also emphasised the importance of ratification of the Istanbul Convention at the Second Ukrainian Women’s Congress that took place in December 2018. The Council of Europe reports that during the plenary session President Poroshenko called on the Verkhovna Rada to ratify the Istanbul Convention, stating that:

I would like to absolutely clearly insist and call to make everything possible to complete inter-state procedures and ratify the convention. Why not bringing it [on the agenda] of the nearest session of the Verkhovna Rada? ... We signed it as early as 2011. As of today, some 33 nations have ratified it, and I regret to say it that there are still some certain manipulations about this topic in our society, including the understanding of the term gender.⁴⁹

Ukrainian actors have thus managed the value paradox through a mixture of denying the validity of commonly held perceptions of European values or by employment of double speak adjusted to the audience that is listening. While this might be effective in the national context, one would expect the EU – presumably the arbiter of these values – to come in between.

The creative interpretation of what ‘European values’ stand for and/or their arbitrary invocation, however, has been facilitated by the EU’s own ambivalence towards the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality in Ukraine. On paper, the EU’s commitment to the promotion of women’s rights in Ukraine has been robust. As mentioned, over the recent years the EU and its representatives have continuously emphasised the importance of gender equality in general and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in particular. Gender equality also is a central principle underpinning the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.⁵⁰ Interviews with EU officials in Brussels and Ukraine confirm that ratification of the Istanbul Convention has been the EU’s priority issue in Ukraine in the area of women’s rights promotion.⁵¹ This raises the expectation that both before as well as in the wake of the failed attempt to ratify the Istanbul Convention, the EU must have been engaged in significant efforts to change the visions of both those in power, as well as the Ukrainian population at large, on the Istanbul Convention. This could include financial support for advocacy in favour of the Istanbul Convention, diplomatic efforts, and the rendering of other types of support conditional upon ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Since the EU has provided Ukraine with ‘unprecedented assistance’ since Euromaidan, it seems to have both the means as well as the political leverage to turn the tide for the Istanbul Convention.

Publicly, the EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender, Ambassador Mara Marinaki, called upon Ukraine to ratify the Istanbul Convention during her visit to the country in April

⁴⁸IRF, ‘333 NGOs From 9 States of Europe Initiate Amendments to the Istanbul Convention’ (22 March 2018), available at: {https://www.irf.in.ua/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=455:1&catid=35:worldwide&Itemid=62} accessed 27 January 2019.

⁴⁹Council of Europe, ‘II Ukrainian Women Congress – An Important Milestone for Promoting Gender Equality and Women’s Rights in Ukraine’ (21 December 2018), available at: {<https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/-/ii-ukrainian-women-congress-an-important-milestone-for-promoting-gender-equality-and-women-s-rights-in-ukraine>} accessed 27 January 2019.

⁵⁰Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part, OJ L 161 (29 May 2014).

⁵¹According to EU officials in Brussels and Ukraine interviewed for this research: Interview with a SGUA representative, Brussels, 12 June 2017; Interview with a EUAM official, Kiev, 30 October 2017.

2017.⁵² During fieldwork in Brussels in June 2017, and in Kiev between October and December 2017 EU representatives indicated that they had consistently raised the issue in political dialogues with the Ukrainian authorities before and in the aftermath of the Verkhovna Rada's failure to ratify the document. However, the EU did not allocate funding to local projects that address this goal until 2018.⁵³ This means that in the period running up to the actual vote for ratification, and for two years after it, the EU did not provide any tangible financial support to awareness raising and/or advocacy efforts that could have influenced public opinion on the Convention.⁵⁴ Moreover, no high-level EU functionaries, for whom gender is not their daily preoccupation, denounced Ukraine's failure to ratify the Convention, strengthening the impression that women's rights did not figure among the core values, or at the very least priorities, the EU is trying to promote in Ukraine.

This impression was confirmed during interviews by representatives of both other international, as well as local, organisations working on women's rights in general, and the Istanbul Convention specifically in Ukraine. Asked about the EU's contribution to the fight for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the gender advisor of another international actor active in Ukraine exasperatedly replied: 'The EU – what do they do? I don't know, to be honest'.⁵⁵ Ukrainian civil society representatives also complained about both the EU's failure to commit funding to advocacy and awareness raising, as well as its near total invisibility. Comparing the public outreach on the Istanbul Convention conducted by the EU and the Council of Europe, one interviewee remarked in this regard:

Mårten [Representative of the Secretary General in charge of the co-ordination of the co-operation programmes in Ukraine], he is everywhere: in the parliament; he has small meetings, he was in Budapest, elsewhere, and he is always speaking in a very inspiring and simple fashion. He meets with different people. One day he can meet with the parliament or the president, and the other day with grassroots organisations. And this shows that international organisations do work, and compared to that the EU looks really bad. The EU looks like 'we are closed, we are very closed, we don't do anything, maybe sometimes we give money'.⁵⁶

Others criticised the diplomatic efforts the EU did undertake as too insignificant. For instance, when questioned about the impact of Mara Marinaki's visit to Ukraine, one representative of a Ukrainian women's rights NGO mentioned that the radio station where she appeared for an interview was a very niche station not listened to by many Ukrainians.⁵⁷ Another prominent

⁵² Available at: {<https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news-feeds/foreign-offices-news/48420-zastupnik-ministra-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrajini-sergij-kislicya-zustrivsyia-z-golovnim-radnikom-jevropejskoj-sluzhbi-zovnishnih-dij-z-gendernih-pitany-ta-vikonannya-rezolyuciji-rb-oon-1325-maraju-marinaki>}.

⁵³ The EU has started to support the Kharkiv Regional Gender Resource Centre to provide 'informal gender education [to] young people and women, with the aim of helping them to grow into "gender sensitive leaders" and become active in decision-making process at both the local and regional levels'. In view of the rejection of the Istanbul Convention being driven by hostility against the use of the term 'gender', support for this project seems to be important, but also rather late.

More information available at: {https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine_me/49255/Centre%20of%20Gender%20Culture%20as%20a%20Platform%20for%20empowerment%20of%20women%20and%20youth} accessed 3 December 2018.

⁵⁴ See European Commission, 'Programming of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) – 2017–2020 – Single Support Framework for EU Support to Ukraine' (2018–2020). This document contains the term 'gender' 47 times, and the term 'women' 13 times on a total of 29 pages, compared to virtually no mention of this term in relevant policy documents on Ukraine published before 2017.

⁵⁵ Interview with the gender advisor for an international organisation active in Ukraine, Kiev, 6 November 2017.

⁵⁶ Interview with the executive director of a Ukraine office of an international human rights NGO, Kiev, 24 November 2017.

⁵⁷ Interview with a representative of a Ukrainian women's organisation, Kiev, 8 November 2017. Ambassador Marinaki made an appearance on a show of the Ukrainian radio station *Hromadske Radio* to talk about UNSCR 1325, and to emphasise the need for the Ukrainian parliament to ratify the Istanbul Convention.^[57]

Ukrainian women's rights defender indicated she was not aware that Ambassador Marinaki had visited Ukraine:

E: And do you think that the visit of the Principal Advisor on Gender, Ms Marinaki, that was this year, right?

I: I don't know, I don't remember. So many events, I ...

E: Ah, okay, but that didn't make a big impact?

I: No, no, no. You know, a visit of any kind of important person makes sense and impact only if during the visit of this person something happens, what confirms this importance, like signing of some documents. If not, it is just process, not result.⁵⁸

Thus, whereas Russia has significantly invested in the consolidation of its normative influence in Ukraine through both (religious) diplomacy as well as funding for conservative civil society groups, the EU has largely failed to take similar action to promote its own values at both the diplomatic and programmatic level. This raises questions about the EU's commitment to the promotion of gender equality in Ukraine.

EU interviewees suggested that while ratification of the Istanbul Convention is the EU's number one priority in the field of women's rights in Ukraine, it is not one of the EU's many priorities in Ukraine.⁵⁹ One EU official, for instance, stated:

And then, very quickly, when we would like to raise an issue or push, for example, for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, our leadership says: 'Well what is the legal basis for that, we already have a lot of contentious issues, do we really need to add this too?'. That is one side, and on the Ukrainian side they are getting hammered with loads of stuff they need to do and are not doing. So they are also a bit allergic to yet another issue.⁶⁰

Asked about the reasons behind the EU's exclusive reliance on gender mainstreaming rather than a combination of gender mainstreaming and the allocation of targeted resources to support for women's rights, the gender focal point in the EU Delegation in Kiev replied that it is 'better, really to mainstream, to make sure that the gender component is ensured in all our policies, in all our assistance that is coming up, the new assistance let's say from 2018 to 2022, because it is going to touch upon the education, upon the governance, judiciary etc., etc.' However, she also indicated that:

It is rather ... Again, it is a question of where you want to put the money on. For the time being, we are thinking that we have to really invest in the reforms. We have to invest in the Association Agreement to make this country more prosperous, more stable and so on, again the fight against corruption and all those issues, but without leaving gender you know completely aside. I mean, we understand that we also have to integrate this perspective in. So I think for the benefit of the country it is better to have it incorporated than having it as a separate priority.⁶¹

This might be the case if gender mainstreaming was systematically implemented, but the wording 'but without leaving gender you know completely aside', implies that within the EU Delegation in Kiev supporting gender equality and women's rights – through gender mainstreaming – is not a priority issue. Moreover, during political dialogues the Istanbul Convention has not been singled

⁵⁸Interview with a Ukrainian feminist activist, Kiev, 29 November 2017.

⁵⁹Interview with EEAS officials working on Ukraine, Brussels, 19 June 2017.

⁶⁰Interview with a Commission official working on Ukraine, Brussels, 12 June 2017.

⁶¹Interview with an EU official, EU Delegation Ukraine, Kiev, 8 November 2017.

out as a priority issue and the obtaining of further EU macro-financial assistance or other types of benefits has not made conditional upon ratification of the Istanbul Convention. When it comes to the EU's fight against corruption in Ukraine, the establishment of a visa free regime between the EU and Ukraine was made conditional upon the adoption of a number of measures to combat corruption.⁶²

When asked about critiques on the EU's ineffective use of its leverage EU officials in Brussels insisted that as the ball was in the Verkhovna Rada's court, there was not much that the EU could do. However, they also mentioned that the EU is a political body, which needs to look at the bigger picture:

There are a lot of forces at play, and the EU is involved in loads of reform processes in Ukraine. The EU cannot just be tough on Ukraine in order to safeguard future cooperation. Moreover, we also need to acknowledge that Ukraine cannot do everything at once. The EU does use conditionality, but in a smart way.⁶³

This type of statement suggests that for the EU, promotion of European values, and gender equality in particular has been subjugated to advancing other – more important? reforms.

In the battle surrounding ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Ukraine Russia has most effectively invoked the notion of geographical value spaces. Not only has it most consistently acted upon its own values, but it has also benefited from the EU's inconsistent approach in this regard. More specifically, by continuing to provide the impression that European values and the Istanbul Convention is a priority, the EU provided fuel to Russia's RRW populist narrative that everything the EU is in favour of is bad. This could have been justified if the EU would subsequently have acted upon this rhetoric. However, as it did not do so, it seems that pledging commitment to 'European values' was counterproductive.

Ukrainising the fight for women's rights?

The notion that casting the fight for gender equality in Ukraine in terms of 'European values' is not reflective of reality and likely counterproductive has been confirmed by the response of domestic women's rights defenders. Many have denounced the idea of describing Ukraine's fight for gender equality in terms of a move towards Europe either out of disappointment with the EU's actual support for this cause, or concerns about alienating more Eurosceptic Ukrainians. Feminist activists have tried to 'Ukrainise' the struggle for gender equality in different ways. In relation to the Istanbul Convention, some have suggested to drop gender terminology when advocating for legislation to combat VAW to make adoption of such measures more palatable to Ukrainian citizens.

When it comes to Ukraine's struggle for gender equality in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, Hrycak has argued that the openness of Ukrainian women's groups to Western influence and pro-Western political advocates has allowed them to operate effectively in the patriarchal, conservative environment of Ukraine. This notion that a move to the West presents an opportunity for a feminist awakening was reflected in the way feminist activists framed their struggle for equality during Maidan. Academic observers – and participators – of the Maidan have described feminist activists holding signs stating 'Europe = equal wages for women', 'If you're afraid of gender, you can't be part of Europe' and 'Do you want to be part of Europe? Say no to sexism and homophobia'.⁶⁴ However, they have also reported disillusionment on behalf of Ukrainian

⁶²Schengen Visa Info, 'Over Half Million Ukrainians Visit EU since Visa Free Travel Launch' (12 June 2018), available at: <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/news/over-half-million-ukrainians-visit-eu-since-visa-free-travel-launch/> accessed 27 January 2019.

⁶³Interview with EEAS officials working on Ukraine, Brussels, 19 June 2017.

⁶⁴Channell-Justice, "We're not just sandwiches".

feminists with the response of ‘Western’ actors to their issues, and surprise about the limited extent to which supposed allies understand the struggle of the Ukrainian feminist movement for equality post-Maidan.⁶⁵

Channell-Justice convincingly argues that this disillusionment was accompanied by a more pragmatic observation by Ukrainian feminist activists that if they wanted their message to resonate more with society at large they would have to frame it in a more nationalist vernacular and focus on women’s contribution to the struggle for an independent Ukraine.⁶⁶ One way to forge this connection has been through a feminist focus on a woman’s right to fight on an equal par with male combatants in the conflict in Donbass. Khromeychuk illustrates this by invoking Mariya Berlinska, a prominent feminist Maidan activist who joined the army to fight in Donbass, and who conveyed that she ‘is hopeful that the participation of women in the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine is likely to improve rather than aggravate the plight of Ukrainian women’. She thinks that ‘women’s voices in society are becoming louder as a result of their engagement in the conflict’.⁶⁷

This vision is reflected in a surge of feminist research on women’s role in and contribution to Ukraine’s struggle for independence from Russia as a vehicle for emancipation.⁶⁸ Ukrainian feminist scholars and activists have directed significant energy towards examining women’s participation in brigades during the Maidan and subsequently women’s rights to participate on equal terms in the conflict in Donbass.⁶⁹ While this type of research was initially driven by the observation that women did not receive equal treatment in these endeavours,⁷⁰ significant advances have been made when it comes to the recognition of female soldiers in the conflict in the Donbass, signifying the effectiveness of a strategy that aligns women’s rights with broader societal battles.⁷¹

These types of more pragmatic approaches towards women’s rights promotion in Ukraine have also been the topic of feminist critique. The tendency of some feminist activists and academics to focus on women’s integration in the military has been questioned. In line with Cynthia Enloe’s visions on militarisation,⁷² commenters such as Mayerchyk have argued that focusing on women’s role as combatants contributes to the normalisation of war:

Women participating in this initiative weren’t able to come up with consistent war criticism, or to denounce the destructive role that military hierarchies play in peaceful resistance. In fact, they did quite the opposite: they attempted to ‘meet’ the male standards – power and barricades – and became themselves the mechanisms of reinforcing this androcentrism.⁷³

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Olesya Khromeychuk, ‘Negotiating protest spaces on the Maidan: a gender perspective’, *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics*, 2:1 (2016), final page.

⁶⁸Tamara Martsenyuk, Ganna Grytsenko, and Anna Kvit, ‘The “Invisible Battalion”: Women in ATO Military Operations in Ukraine’ (2016).

⁶⁹Tamara Martsenyuk, ‘Gender issues in Ukraine: Were the EuroMaidan protests patriarchal or egalitarian?’, in *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategising for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe* (Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2015).

⁷⁰Martsenyuk, Grytsenko, and Kvit, ‘The “Invisible Battalion”’.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁷³Mariya Mayerchyk, ‘Do vos’ moho bereznia/Pro pereplavku smysliv [On the occasion of March 8/recasting of meanings], *Krytyka* (8 March 2014), available at: {<http://krytyka.com/ua/community/blogs/do-8-bereznia-pro-pereplavku-smysliv>} cited by Channell-Justice, ‘“We’re not just sandwiches”’, p. 731. See also Maria Mayerchyk and O. Plahotnik, ‘Ukrainian feminism at the crossroad of national, postcolonial, and (post) Soviet: Theorizing the Maidan events 2013–2014’, *Krytyka* (2015).

In line with this, O'Sullivan has questioned the practical dividends this approach has yielded for women, highlighting the imbalance between the high amount of energy that has been devoted by international and national actors to integrating women in the security sector – be it police or military – and the low level of commitment to targeted action aimed at promoting gender equality in society at large.⁷⁴ The investment of significant levels of feminist energy in examining women's role in the military, and the embrace of militaristic language by Ukrainian feminist activists might make these actors feel legitimate in their choice of prioritising female participation in these endeavours. In these cases, the 'Ukrainisation' of the feminist agenda therefore might have consequences that refute the ideals that are at the core of feminist thought.

Nevertheless, in relation to the struggle against VAW some interviewees argued that it might be desirable to present these efforts in a vernacular that resonates with Ukrainians.⁷⁵ Practically, this entails staying clear of the gender language used in the Istanbul Convention and adopting a vocabulary that resonates with the Ukrainian population at large in broader advocacy efforts as well as (future) legislative texts put forward to enhance Ukraine's response to VAW. In the words of one Ukrainian feminist activist interviewed for this research:

Everyone tries to push ratification of the Istanbul Convention, but there are many factors that are not favourable this time to do it. The primary factor is the text of the Istanbul Convention itself. I have a lot of criticism in relation to it since its first day. It relates to language in draft laws that were prepared in in the framework of the ratification process. As I said, there was a gender equality law approved in Ukraine in 2005. It contains a description of gender equality, and we have this synonym that we use: the principle of equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men. I think it is good enough, but people who wrote the text of the draft law, they got rid of this term and added the term gender, but it is the same.⁷⁶

Certain activists and practitioners working on the fight against VAW also emphasised the importance of focusing on efforts aimed at sensitising medical professionals, police forces, and the judiciary to the issue of VAW that could be implemented without the Istanbul Convention having been ratified.⁷⁷ Here, the Ukrainian authorities have displayed a certain level of willingness to respond to the issue of violence against women in a fashion that does not touch upon the sensitivities of more conservative factions of society. As mentioned, instead of ratifying the Istanbul Convention, the parliament, for instance, criminalised domestic violence in the end of 2017, through a law that does not evoke the term 'gender'. With the support of international agencies, the Ukrainian police have started to implement reforms aimed at improving its responsiveness to the issue of domestic violence.⁷⁸

⁷⁴A critique voiced by two representatives of an international women's rights NGO active in Ukraine. Interview with an international women's rights NGO, 30 May 2017, via Skype; Mila O'Sullivan, "'Being strong enough to defend yourself': Untangling the Women, Peace and Security agenda amidst the Ukrainian conflict', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (2019).

⁷⁵Interview with a Ukrainian feminist activist, Kiev, 29 November 2017; Interview with a Ukrainian representative of an international organisation working on GBV, Kiev, 16 November 2017.

⁷⁶Interview with a Ukrainian feminist activist, Kiev, 29 November 2017.

⁷⁷Interview with a Ukrainian representative of an international organisation working on GBV, Kiev, 16 November 2017; Interview with a Ukrainian representative of an international organisation working on GBV, Kiev, 11 November 2017. This interviewee, for instance, stated: 'Our main idea is even if Istanbul Convention is not ratified by the end of the year, and probably it won't be ratified, still we have other components of our projects which can somehow add value to the potential opportunity to the ratification of this Convention.'

⁷⁸Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, 'National Police: Pilot Mobile Groups to Counter Domestic Violence Start Their Work' (12 June 2017), available at: { <http://uacrisis.org/57363-anti-domestic-violence-mobile-groups>} accessed 20 June 2019.

However, other interviewees opposed this more pragmatic attitude towards the fight against VAW and questioned the feminist credentials of feminist actors who are in favour of skipping gender language for pragmatic purposes. In this regard, one interviewee stated:

You probably already know that there has been a failed attempt to adopt national legislation on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and that it is very much connected to the use of the concept of gender in the legislation. So I would say that for some activists and organisations the gender term is not so important, and they would agree removing it, provided that the substantial provisions of the law are implemented, but for others if we eliminate gender, if you cross it out of the legislation, it is a very principled thing, because it shows a structural step back in terms of the promotion of women's rights.⁷⁹

Most interviewees shared this position, highlighting the important role that stereotypes about women and the traditional division of labour between men and women in Ukraine play in perpetuating violence against women. The inclusion of the term 'gender' in the Istanbul Convention serves to acknowledge these obstacles. Removing it is equal to acknowledging that there is a problem without looking into the root causes of this problem.

I think we need to care about the political economy question; it is people facing multiple types of discriminations, and women facing multiple kinds of discrimination with a low level of income who are working all day or in illegal employment. They don't know what is a feminist, but they are very emancipated, and they are very active and progressive in practice, but they don't know what is feminism, what is the history of feminism, and they are just doing feminism, feminist practice, but know nothing about this. And in our meetings we try to explain where we are, how to call their work, and how their work connects with feminism.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Russia has constructed its promotion of traditional values, including traditional gender norms, around the existence of a European attack on its spiritual and cultural foundations. In this vein it has positioned its own traditional 'Russian values' as being in conflict with the EU's liberal 'European values'. Gender equality is perceivably central to the latter, which explains why liberal gender norms have become central to Russia's anti-European narrative. Russian efforts aimed at prohibiting ratification of the Istanbul Convention, is a tangible example of this anti-gender attitude. As such, the discovery of gender values as a foreign policy tool by RRW populist actors has resulted in these values being discussed increasingly in geographical terms.

One would expect both the EU and Ukraine to engage in a counter-offensive by fully embracing the Istanbul Convention. However, based on interviews with relevant actors in Brussels and Kiev, this article has found that in Ukraine, powerful domestic adherents to the notion of 'European values' as well as the EU itself have not acted as to defend these values despite rhetoric that implies otherwise. Both the amenability of the term European values as well as a lack of serious insistence on these values on the EU's behalf has allowed Ukrainian actors to mitigate this apparent paradox.

What does this imply about the desirability of the invocation of geographical value spaces in the struggle for progressive gender norms? It should be noted that the EU's inaction on its own values in this context starkly contrasts with the approach taken by Russia, for which the promotion of traditionalist values has become a foreign policy interest in itself. Apparently it is easier to

⁷⁹Interview with a representative of a Ukrainian women's organisation, Kiev, 8 November 2019.

⁸⁰Interview with a Ukrainian feminist activist, Kiev, 14 November 2017.

reconcile values with interests in a RRW populist foreign policy philosophy. Russia's opposition against the Istanbul Convention, however, is heavily dependent on the existence of an – imaginary – European value space. Therefore, the EU's invocation of European values without acting upon them has not only been empty, but also potentially harmful. In absence of tangible EU action to advance European values, it seems that the thing that the notion of 'European values' has done most successfully is fuelling Russia's case for the need for traditional gender norms.

Ukrainian feminist activists have therefore increasingly tried to present their fight for women's rights on Ukrainian terms, depicting them as integral to Ukraine's struggle for independence. This includes casting the fight against VAW in a vernacular that is palpable to local audiences, by not invoking the term 'gender'. Such an approach can contribute to reducing the risk that gender justice agendas are sidelined because they are – mistakenly – understood to further foreign worldviews. However, in the Ukrainian context this article finds that it can also contribute to a failure to address the root causes of the prevalence of high levels of VAW. Therefore, this article concludes that while in some cases connecting the fight for gender justice to geographical value spaces and narratives might contribute to quick gender justice gains, casting the fight against VAW in terms of Ukrainian values does not contribute much to advancing sustainable women's rights outcomes. As long as geographical value spaces are associated with and conditioned by patriarchal interests, their contribution to the feminist cause will either be limited or negative.

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