

**PROGRESSIVISM AND WAR. FEMINIST DISCOURSES  
ON THE ARMED CONFLICT IN UKRAINE**

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**Abstract**

What we propose in this article is a mapping of the main themes of feminist discourse on the conflict in Ukraine. In the first part of the paper, we will attempt an outline of the main positions on the conflict and its causes. We do not claim to be exhaustive in our examination of them, but it is important to present them in order to see how feminist organizations and personalities position themselves in relation to them. In the second part of the paper, we will sketch a typology of feminist theories in order to better understand what will follow in the third part, namely how certain types of feminist discourses overlap - or not - with the positions of international relations scholars. This discursive excursion in which we will present the main positions will also allow us to advance our own perspectives on how feminism as an anti-patriarchal movement should position itself in this conflict.

***Keywords: feminism, war, discourse, Ukraine, Russia;***

**The war in Ukraine - positions**

As early as 22 February 2022 and even before, we have been hearing from the Western and Romanian mainstream media about Russia's unprovoked offensive against a sovereign and independent state which is Ukraine. Since 22 February 2022 the entire public discourse, with very few exceptions, has been dominated by narratives whose truth value will be established over time and on which we will not comment here, the purpose being a mapping of media discourse on war in general. The dominant narratives have centered around a few key points.

- Russia has attacked Ukraine completely unprovoked and out of the blue in an attempt to destroy the sovereignty of an independent state that has always been peaceful towards Russia. The reason for the war is strictly linked to an alleged mental illness of the Kremlin leader who, seized by the typical crises of this type of illness, has unleashed a terrible war with the neighboring country. The Minsk agreements signed in the presence of European leaders, years

before have nothing to do with the war and are invalid because they were signed under the pressure of arms and not negotiations.

- Russia has no rights over Ukraine and its security interests. If Ukraine wants to join the European Union and NATO, it must be supported with all its might. The security interests of the Russian Federation are totally illegitimate and it is therefore not only prudent, but even advisable, to disregard them.

- Freedom and democracy are the values for which Ukraine must fight Russia to the last man. These are the values cherished in the West, which is why the war is the result of the sincere desire of the brave and fearless Ukrainian people to pursue their ideals of unbreakability through the ultimate sacrifice of their soldiers.

- Russia must be humiliated and defeated, the last Russian must pay for the Kremlin leader's mental illness in such a way that never again in the history of mankind will Russia be able to raise claims to security.

- There is no Nazi element in Ukraine, only sincere and ardent nationalists fighting valiantly to defend the national ideal of the country's integration into NATO, because it is known that President Volodymir Zelensky is of Jewish origin, so there are no Nazis in the Ukrainian armed forces.

- The US, NATO and other democratic states must provide aid to Ukraine, and this aid must be mainly in the form of weapons and intelligence to help the brave Ukrainian soldiers fight the Russian invaders.

- Stepan Bandera was not a Nazi and neither was the movement he led. He was a Ukrainian nationalist who deserves a place of honor in the golden gallery of personalities who were at the basis of the formation of a free and independent Ukraine.

- Western leaders owe a great debt to Ukraine, where the battle is not just for the country's independence, but for saving democracy around the globe. Ukraine is the spearhead against evil, authoritarianism and conservatism.

- Russia is the enemy of the LGBTQ+ community and feminism and must be fought until its entire nuclear arsenal is neutralized.

- Russia's nuclear weapons should not frighten us. They are old and will probably explode in Russia. Besides, it's a long chain of command to the nuclear weapon and Putin may not be listened to.

- The US is offering salutary help in the form of tens of billions of dollars spent on weapons, because weapons are what make the difference between democracy and autocracy, knowing

that a bad man with a gun can only be stopped by a good man with a gun and that we always know who is the bad guy and who is the good guy.

- Ukraine is like a female victim and Russia is her aggressor. Therefore, to seek to analyze the conflict in Ukraine is to make excuses for aggressors in general.
- Russia is to blame for the energy crisis. American liquefied gas, even if it is expensive, is clean, it is moral and the sacrifice of citizens goes in this direction of buying morally pure energy, energy that does not come from authoritarian and evil Russia.
- Anyone who disagrees with the above is pro-Russian and an enemy of freedom and democracy.

These are the main positions that dominate the amplified media narrative on all major channels in the West and in Romania. The profile of the journalists and specialists who advance these themes is that of the war journalist, the war general, the military men and the international relations specialists.

It should be noted that since the beginning of the war the US has controlled the narrative, with Russian TV stations and publications being banned. Russia Today, Sputnik, You tube channels, even American journalists like Chris Hedges, have been permanently and irrevocably censored. [BBC 2022] [Arbel 2022] [Reed 2022] The public must be protected by the authorities from false information because the public alone cannot decide on such important issues. It is well known that mere exposure to information can create doubt and therefore it is good that information that contradicts the official narrative is completely suppressed.

On the other hand, another rhetoric was designed to keep Russian soldiers in the fight and to gain support for the "special denazification operation". The main themes were as follows:

- Ukraine is going to threaten Russia's security interests because the Americans promised in 1990 that NATO would not expand an inch to the east, and now NATO is reaching the border with the Russian Federation;
- A decadent West that encourages feminism and LGBTQ+ depravity is about to attack beautiful Russia, independent and pure in its orthodox conservatism;
- The empire of lies is about to wipe Russia off the face of the earth and Russia must invade Ukraine to defend itself.
- The invasion of Ukraine is not an invasion, it is a special military operation, which is totally different.
- The purpose of the special operation is nothing but the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine.

- The Minsk Agreements were not signed under pressure and non-compliance with them led to the special military operation.
- There are significant groups of Nazis in Ukraine who dominate the security forces and they must be neutralized.
- Russia has to fight a decadent West that wants to harm it and wants to draw it into its sphere of influence;
- Vladimir Putin and the Russian army are the only guarantees against dangerous and depraved Western invaders.
- Russia is defending itself when it launches its special military operation against this dangerous West.
- Anyone who disagrees with President Putin and the special operation in Ukraine is an agent of the collective West and an enemy of the Russian people.

These are, by and large, the official political positions amplified by the official media. Mirroring Western measures, Russia has banned Facebook, though many Russians still use it [The Guardian 2022].

We are witnessing an unprecedented rupture accompanied by economic sanctions measures coming in a cascade of unprecedented scale. The extent to which sanctions are generally effective in economic warfare is debatable. In a recent paper historian Nicholas Mulder also brings to light the problematic aspects of the boomerang effect, but it will be many years before we have enough time to investigate the effectiveness of these economic sanctions. [Mulder 2022]

The West's break with Russia has also meant a severing of diplomatic ties, a withdrawal of major companies from Russia, a decoupling of Russia from the swift system, the freezing of Russia's money assets stored in Western banks, and the freezing of billions of euros worth of assets belonging to Russian oligarchs.

Beyond that we have the public speeches. What is very problematic in this information age is that these narratives being peddled by leaders - be they Western leaders or Russian leaders - are very little debated.

One theoretical explanation is that in times of crisis, and especially during war, people tend to become dependent on the media and rally behind their leaders, and are very willing to accept things that they would not accept in peacetime. [Ball Rokeach, S. J.; De Fleur, M. L. 1976]

Another, less flattering, explanation is that despite the avalanche of information, despite the public conflicts on various issues, especially those relating to private life, on the military, on

war, on NATO's role in solving the problems it too creates, there are no debates, especially on the left, where they would be expected to occur.

Let's ask ourselves together, how many times have we heard on TV, on important channels pacifists, activists opposing the military? How many times have we seen that in university security studies programmes we have, in addition to studies on armed conflict management, studies on de-militarization, on the systematic pursuit of peace. It is what the prolific and famous Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung describes in his hundreds of articles and dozens of books - while war is systematically pursued, while university programmes of security and defense studies and international relations talk almost exclusively about conflict management, we do not have systematic peace studies. Peace always remains an ideal, often banished to the realm of naive idealism, a wish. It is not transformed into a concrete objective. [Galtung 1996] One possible explanation would be that peace as a concrete objective and a militant strategy clearly assumed institutionally would collide directly with militarism, with deeply rooted ideas about the inevitability of conflict, of human evil, of war as a necessary evil. This collision could lead to the financial interests of military elites, who in all societies enjoy undisputed privileges over the civilian citizens they are supposed to serve, not dominate. What is certain is that until we have peace studies programmes worldwide equal in number, resources and involvement to security programmes (which are essentially war management programmes) peace will not become a clearly stated objective or a concrete strategy. This being the case, it is natural to have military generals, not peace activists, at the forefront of the debate on the conflict in Ukraine.

More problematic politically is that we have them both in Russia, where let's say it would not be a surprise given that country's very fragile democratic history, but we have them in the highest media forums of the US, UK, France, Germany, etc. In other words, wartime narratives and discourses are still decisively dominated by military elites, not peace activists no matter which side of the border we are on.

Moreover, as leading media scholars point out, even though the US is a democracy, the influence of the security apparatus on media and consumer culture is overwhelming. What's more, it is all the more effective because it is exercised treacherously, in secrecy and while posing as a total non-involvement.

To be sure, there are important exceptions among analysts, but they are quickly neutralized by the dominant voices. There are, however, those who come from opposite ideological directions, but who try to break these dominant discursive patterns. They are often angrily branded as pro-

Russian or pro-Western - depending on which side of the fence you stand. One category of such commentators comes from the academic area of international relations. They belong to the so-called realist school. The spearhead of these international relations specialists is John Mearsheimer, who long before the outbreak of war in Ukraine warned of the dangers that NATO expansion to the east would pose, judging coldly strictly from the point of view of military security consequences [Mearsheimer 2015]. Another dissenting voice is the very famous Jeffrey Sachs who worked as an advisor and expert on economic issues in the 1990s in Russia's socialist bloc countries. Surprisingly, he is of the opinion that what has led to the current conflict is a very bad tactical strategy of the US. [Sachs 2022] A keen connoisseur of Eastern realities, he believes that US non-involvement in the region before the outbreak of hostilities in February 2022 is out of the question. From the US military, Colonel Douglas Abbott Macgregor who argues that the US has been involved in Ukraine since 2014 and that the sources of this conflict must be identified in the hijacking of the Maidan as a legitimate protest in an effort to place a pro-Western political leader in Kiev. Colonel Macgregor was directly involved in the military conflict in the former Yugoslavia. [Macgregor 2022]. A less famous but highly articulate international relations specialist, author of "Covert Regime Change. The Secret Cold War Waged by the US", Cornell University Press, 2018, Lindsay O'Rourke argues that the current war has its roots in the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s and the duel between the major powers over the sphere of influence in the former Soviet bloc countries in the years that followed. She points to the Bucharest summit in 2008 when Georgia and Ukraine were promised NATO membership as a key moment in the deterioration of relations with the Russian Federation. The situation also deteriorated even more visibly after the 2014 protests in Kiev installed a pro-European leader. Lindsay O'Rourke also succeeds in bringing up the fact that, indeed, in 1980s Afghanistan, arming the mujahideen rebels meant a weakening of the USSR that proved fatal. Hilary Clinton pointed out "a highly motivated, then funded and armed insurgency virtually drove the Russians out of Afghanistan" and suggested that this could provide a "model" for the current arming of Ukraine. [O'Rourke 2018]

But, curious or not, Hilary Clinton also said in an incendiary interview, "to be fair, we helped create the problem we're fighting now because when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, we had this brilliant idea that we would come into Pakistan and create a force of mujahideen, equip them with Stinger missiles and everything else to attack the Soviets in Afghanistan, and we were successful. The Soviets left Afghanistan and then we said, "Great, goodbye!" Leaving these trained men who were fanatics in Afghanistan and Pakistan, leaving them well-armed

and creating a serious problem that at the time we didn't really recognize, we were so happy to see the fall of the Soviet Union and we thought okay, well, we're okay now, everything's going to be much better. Now look back. The people we are fighting today were supported in the fight against the Soviets. " [Fox News, 2010]

In the same vein, international relations specialist Lindsay O'Rourke says that although the Afghan rebels succeeded in driving out the Soviets, it came at a huge cost to the Afghan people: more than a million Afghans were killed in the Soviet-Afghan war, and millions more fled the country. This is not a fate you wish on the Ukrainians. [O'Rourke 2022]

These are the dissenting voices that come down the rather conservative track and question the dominant narrative about the war in Ukraine. There are also voices from the area of peace activism that are resisting a simplistic interpretation of the military conflict we are witnessing. Vijay Prashad, professor of history and author of numerous articles and books, argues that the only option is Russia's exit from Ukraine and the dismantling of NATO. Basically, now both sides are in conflict and only through serious renunciations on both sides can peace be achieved.

### **What about feminist speeches?**

Well, there are generally two broad categories of feminist theories. There is liberal feminism with its emphasis on human rights and equal opportunities and there is radical feminism with its emphasis on the economic and class factor. While liberal feminism fights for the integration of women into the current system, radical feminism is about radical change in society based on investigating and changing the mechanisms that produce gender violence, inequality and oppression. Liberal feminism is often accused, if we were to thicken the tick-box for the sake of simplicity, of having as its ultimate goal the integration of women into current power structures. Thus, personalities such as Kamala Harris or Elisabeth Warren serve as models of feminism's success. Critics of the perspective say, ironically, that when women are at the head of mafia organizations, we will have real progress. Why? Because as Albena Azmanova and Nancy Fraser point out, we are fighting for equal portions of inequality, to be integrated into an unjust and unequal system [Azmanova 2016] [Arruza, Bhattacharya, Fraser 2019]. This is precisely why radical feminism, closer to the Marxian tradition, proposes a change in the way goods and services are produced, an extension of democracy in the workplace by encouraging cooperative modes of collaboration, and a focus on economic inequality, without erasing the specifics of the kind of oppression women experience in wage labor and domestic work. Discussions within the feminist movement are not always harmonious. On the contrary. There are issues around which liberal feminism and radical feminism collide directly. While liberal

feminists strongly advocate the integration of prostitution into productive activities and the transformation of the very name of prostitution into sex work, radical feminists argue that, on the contrary, what is an ideal of the feminist movement is the removal of human productive capacities from the imperative of profit. The aim, from this perspective, is not to introduce capitalism into all spheres of our lives and end up paying our own mother for baking us a cake. On the contrary, the goal is to have a guaranteed minimum income that allows us to invest our productive capacities in activities that will bring us more than financial satisfaction [Bindel 2017].

In relation to the war in Ukraine, there have been polarizing positions on Ukrainian feminism as well. Oksana Dutchak, a Ukrainian feminist, has from the beginning advocated reconsidering feminism's relationship to militarism and has even shown herself willing to abandon pacifist principles that she advocated before February 2022 [Dutchak 2022]. For her, defending the country in which her own partner is engaged is more important than anything else. Olena Lyubchenko, on the opposite end of the spectrum, harshly denounces the hypocrisy of the West. Originally living in the areas now incorporated into the Russian Federation, but a Ukrainian herself, Olena writes a scathing critique of how slogans about defending democracy in Ukraine work against women and wage earners against whom a war was started long ago. Not only does she not advocate militarization, she insists that militarization began in Ukraine in 2014 and this has meant a huge increase in military spending at the expense of spending on health and education, sectors that predominantly employ women. In addition, domestic violence has also seen a marked increase amid measures whereby liability for domestic violence by a member of the military was to be examined in a special framework, different from the civilian one. Olena also speaks reproachfully of the way in which the militarization of Ukraine has been carried out and deprived Ukrainian citizens, especially elderly women, of pensions that they could hardly collect [Lyubchenko 2022]. Because she lived in a separatist area, her grandmother had to travel almost two days every two months to collect her pension. For elderly women in particular this proved a major impediment. A tragic event - the death of Olena's grandmother's good friend on the way to her pension - led her and her mother to persuade her grandmother not to make the dangerous journey that was a condition of her pension. Then she tells us about the hypocrisy of the West in its treatment of Ukrainian migrants who are suddenly the guarantors of "whiteness" - a concept in critical theory concerning the social category of being white and how it is codified. It also talks about how fertility clinics in Ukraine use whiteness to promote poor and desperate women to make money who are perfect

surrogate mothers for Westerners who can purchase a milk-white baby in Ukraine. Let's not forget the story of the hundreds of babies left abandoned in Ukrainian maternity wards once the pandemic began because travel restrictions prevented buyers from picking up their 'goods'. In addition, Olena denounces the sudden warmth shown by Westerners, recalling with bitter sadness that before the war no one waited for cheap Ukrainian migrants with open arms. After all, she knows what she's talking about because her own mother was such a migrant, which paved the way for Olena's successful academic career in Canada [Lyubchenko 2022].

Unfortunately, speeches like Olena's are not at the forefront of the debate. Judith Butler is feminism's prestigious international star, and she unfortunately supports the official view. In a recent interview, Judith Butler insists that Russia is the enemy of the LGBTQ+ community and the feminist movement, which is why what inspires her is a velvet revolution in Russia to oust Putin [Butler 2022]. There are also local voices who argue that the key issue is the media myth that men are more valuable because they stay fighting in Ukraine and women less valuable for fleeing conflict with women and children. Surprisingly, the reaction itself does not attack this reductionist dichotomy and inverted scale of values according to which those who bring life into the world are inferior to those who go to end it. No, the way in which the pedal of liberal feminism is pressed to the point of ridicule is the way in which we are reminded that there are many women fighting in the Ukrainian army! I mean hierarchy is not the problem. The hierarchy can stay there. What matters is that women kill side by side with men in the Ukrainian army!

The fact that Russia is integrating progressive movements into security risks should give us a lot to think about. If 90% of Russians were truly progressive this would be impossible. It's the reason for not going strongly against Orthodoxy, for example. The problem in societies that have had a different path than Western societies, progressivism in terms of sexual life or gender equality did not start from the bottom up. In the US, for example, Mary Dore's documentary shows how millions of women and their allies marched through the streets of New York to win their civil rights. In our societies such events have been rarer and they have focused primarily on economic rights [Dore 2014] That's why, for the most part, feminism and pro LGBTQ+ movements have come from the top down, from the elites to the masses. Moreover, and this is a very serious problem, they are concentrated in the area of civil society and dependent on funding methods involving structures in the area of Western financial and political elites. They represent in our societies a class of activists who are largely precarious but privileged by nature of education in relation to the impoverished masses. They are dependent on funding that comes

almost exclusively from the West, which for an authoritarian regime can pose serious problems. Often LGBTQ+ feminism and progressivism become a yardstick for any democracy deficit, shifting the whole issue of human rights into non-economic areas and proposing solutions that are a matter of legislation rather than economics. For the Kremlin authorities, there is always the suspicion that beneath the intention to protect women's rights lurks Western interests in undermining power. Judith Butler does not question these suspicions in the context of the US secret service offensive, which has been proven by the unsealing of archives. Nor does she allow for an examination of the idea that when Western and Russian interests come into direct conflict, financially Western-backed NGOs will struggle to find a voice to criticize their funders. But CIA funding of feminist organizations is not unusual. As Helen Laville points out, the CIA has been involved in funding women's rights groups. There was a policy of shifting the focus from economic issues within the movement to legislative issues. Gloria Steinem, the feminist idol of the 1970s, worked for the secret service to identify potential movements and leaders of the feminist movement who would lead it into an economic uprising. The aim was to create a feminism in line with elite interests. [Redstockings Statement 1975] However, these interests were not about workers' rights, shortening the working day, increasing the period of leave, securing seats on company boards. They were about promoting the idea that the accomplished woman is the woman who fights side by side with men - in the company, in the army, in politics. The echoes of this perspective on feminism can still be felt today, when liberal feminism promotes the idea of the Ukrainian fighting woman, not pacifism and negotiation. Of course, the CIA's past funding of feminist organizations in no way implies that this is the case in Russia with feminist organizations today. But the suspicion of authoritarian regimes should not be underestimated. Moreover, Putin's regime can afford to scapegoat feminism because it has emerged in Russia and the former Soviet bloc countries as a movement of the elite with which the common people have unfortunately had little empathy.

In this tense context, it is hard to find feminists who advocate peace. Medeea Benjamin, author of numerous books and articles and founder of the pacifist organization Code Pink, is a prominent opponent of resolving the conflict in Ukraine through militarization and refuses to distribute weapons as the only solution to the conflict. Moreover, she recently co-authored the book "Ukraine. Making Sense of a Senseless War" in which she explains in detail why believing the dominant media mythology that the conflict in Ukraine started completely out of the blue, without any consideration of the involvement of other states and entities in its outbreak, is likely to block future negotiations on peace in Ukraine, which can only prolong a

bloody conflict. [Benjamin 2022] In a personal conversation he confided in me that he would protest against Putin at the risk of imprisonment. Her problem is not taking a pro-Kremlin stance, but, along with Russians who are militating against armed conflict, against war.

### **Conclusion**

Feminist discourse follows the liberal feminist, radical feminist divide and positions itself either on the side of arming Ukraine as the only chance of resolving the conflict, or on the side of those who want negotiations to cease fire as soon as possible. Naturally, a feminist discourse supporting the Russian Federation's perspective is completely absent. This is probably also the reason why any deviation from the official discourse is treated as pro-Russian. Often such reasoning is based on the logical fallacy of affirming the consistent. If you are pro-Russian, you want peace in Ukraine. You want peace in Ukraine, so you are pro-Russian. Naturally this ignores the case where you want peace for reasons other than joining the pro-Russian camp. It's worth noting that as the conflict evolves the punitive emotion diminishes in intensity and the real economic costs of sanctions make the appetite for revenge, and solidarity with the Ukrainian government, more difficult. Pacifist feminism is the only one that manages to position itself across the geopolitical divide and critique the militarism, barbarism and violence exercised by both West and East, arguing that Ukraine is caught in a game that goes far beyond its borders. To what extent this stance will gain adherents depends only on time and a genuine willingness to cease fire and come to the negotiating table.

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