

Women, Peace and Security in central Europe: in between the western agenda and Russian imperialism

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<epig>You justify your invasion by talking of ‘liberation’. How were you intending to ‘liberate’ Tatiana from Irpin, killed by a Russian grenade along with her two children? Or Olena from Hostomel, raped by one of you in a car? <epigend>

<source>Zuzana Čaputová, President of Slovakia, April 2022<sourceend>

In this speech, directly addressing the Russian troops in fluent Russian, Čaputová appealed to them to put ‘an end to violence and this terrible war’.¹ This message showed Slovakia’s solidarity with Ukrainians and served as a reminder of the collective trauma of Russian imperialism, now revived in central Europe (CE).² Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there have been similar expressions of anti-imperialist solidarity with Ukrainians across the region. In the Czech Republic, feminist activists organized a powerful performance in front of the Russian Embassy in Prague. Protesting against rapes committed by Russian soldiers on Ukrainian women, men and children, the activists stood in a row in with black plastic bags over their heads and red liquid-stained underwear and legs. Their message to Russia is that Russian war crimes cannot be ‘washed away’.³ Contradicting such declarations, however, is the reality of gender-conservative populist governance in the region. The loss of abortion rights faced by Ukrainian survivors of sexual violence as they cross the Polish border,⁴ or sex trafficker gangs exploiting the humanitarian crisis, are just a

¹ ‘Slovak president calls on Russian troops to “end this terrible war”’, *Slovak Spectator*, 27 April 2022, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22895259/slovak-president-calls-on-russian-troops-to-end-this-terrible-war.html>.

² We use the term ‘central Europe’ to refer to the post-state-socialist countries known as the Visegrad Group: the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Poland and Hungary, although we exclude Hungary from this study.

³ The event on 9 May 2022 was titled ‘To nesmeješ’ [You won’t wash this away] and followed similar earlier performances of regional solidarity in the Baltic capitals of Tallin and Vilnius. See <https://www.facebook.com/events/519604649573049/?ref=newsfeed>.

⁴ Yulia Ioffe, ‘Conflict-induced displacement of Ukrainian women, pregnancy, and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Poland’, *International Studies Review*, forthcoming. .

couple of examples of the acute war-related gendered insecurities and continuum of violence in Europe.⁵

As the Russian aggression continues, a feminist understanding of security is ever more relevant in central and eastern Europe (CEE) and beyond. Yet the dominant hard security mindset appears to have successfully silenced feminist foreign policies and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda,⁶ and the reality of a gendered war in Europe seems to have caught policy-makers unprepared. This highlights the deeper global challenges of the WPS framework, which is criticized by many as having evolved largely driven by the global North through colonial projections towards conflict-related insecurities in the global South.⁷ Scholars note that CEE has long been considered a ‘non-region’ or ‘a void in the global coloniality’,⁸ positioned somewhere ‘in between’ the global North and South.⁹ We show that the region neither has been a site of WPS knowledge nor has actively shaped the WPS norms at the UN and beyond. The agenda thus lacks the living regional memory of Russian

⁵ *Sexual violence and the Ukraine conflict*, Insecurity Insight, 19 April 2022,

<https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/sexual-violence-and-ukraine-conflict-april-2022>.

⁶ See e.g. Aida A. Hozić and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, ‘Reimagining the aftermath of war, now’, LSE blog, 10 May 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2022/05/10/reimagining-the-aftermath-of-war-now/>; Mila O’Sullivan, *Where are the Ukrainian women? Respecting female voices now and in post-war times*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung Prague, 4 April 2022, <https://cz.boell.org/en/node/2573>.

⁷ See Swati Parashar, ‘The WPS agenda: a postcolonial critique’, in Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True, eds, *The Oxford handbook of Women, Peace and Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Toni Haastrup and Jamie J. Hagen, ‘Global racial hierarchies and the limits of localization via National Action Plans’, in Soumita Basu, Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, eds, *New directions in women, peace and security* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), pp. 133–51.

⁸ Madina Tlostanova, ‘Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48: 2, 2012, pp. 130–42.

⁹ See Kateřina Krulišová and Mila O’Sullivan, ‘Feminist security studies in Europe: beyond western academics’ club’, in Maria Stern and Ann Towns, eds, *Feminist IR in Europe: knowledge production in academic institutions* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Teresa Kulawik and Zhanna Kravchenko, eds, *Borderlands in European gender studies: beyond the East-West frontier* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

imperialism. At the same time, apart from Hungary, the CE region appears to have clearly committed itself to this gender norm by publishing WPS National Action Plans (NAPs).¹⁰ This is despite the political polarization and growing influence of anti-gender coalitions in the region. In the Czech Republic, this anti-gender trend has manifested itself in the ongoing opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. The Polish government has succeeded in restricting reproductive rights. Slovakia has seen similar legal attempts on restricting abortion, while Hungary has limited gender studies and LGBTQIA+ content in education.

It is therefore crucial to ask: what does the WPS become in institutional environments characterized by illiberal populist and anti-gender politics and governance? Drawing on postcolonial and decolonial feminist perspectives, combined with feminist institutionalism (FI), we argue that the CE's WPS agendas serve as mere paper tigers. They are currently failing to address the multitude of domestic and regional gendered insecurities, both related and unrelated to the most recent demonstration of Russian imperial aggression. This is due to the following factors: first, uncritical adoption and reproduction of 'western' approaches to WPS; second, conscious and continuous efforts by key femocrats to represent the agenda as a low-profile foreign security policy;¹¹ and, third, shallow domestic institutionalization lacking in local innovations. Despite this failure, we see WPS as having a significant potential to become not only an effective tool for gender security policy but also a powerful counterforce to the ever more influential anti-gender alliances.

Building on FI approaches, we focus on both the formal institutional arrangements and informal norms, cultures and discourses that are more embedded and resistant to change.¹² We highlight the role of CE's femocrats and the limitations both the institutional and wider sociopolitical environments place on them. Based on our observations, these are feminist-minded officials which may have different feminist visions based on their liberal or more radical expectations. The focus is on their agencies which involve strategic, creative, and

¹⁰ The Czech Republic adopted its first NAP in 2017, followed by a second one in 2020. Poland published its NAP in 2018 and Slovakia in 2020.

¹¹ For discussion on femocrats, see Mona Lena Krook and Fiona Mackay, eds, *Gender, politics and institutions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹² Laura Chappell and Georgina Waylen, 'Gender and the hidden life of institutions', *Public Administration* 91: 3, 2013, pp. 604–5.

intuitive action, as well as calculating self-interest.¹³ Exploring the role of femocrats from postcolonial and decolonial perspectives enables us to understand specific local features, such as the absence of strategic partnerships between femocrats and feminist outsiders, as well as femocrats' motivations and strategies for WPS adoption.

We draw on research material that includes interviews, WPS documents and personal observations. We have conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with key WPS stakeholders—civil servants, researchers and civil society representatives—from the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia.¹⁴ The interviewees either have worked or currently work on the WPS agenda in their respective countries. They were based in the ministries of foreign affairs, ministries of defence and ministries of interior, governments' gender equality bodies, academia and NGOs. Interviews were held between summer 2020 and early February 2022 and focused on three broad themes: (1) the conditions that led to the adoption of the agenda; (2) the formal and informal local WPS cultures, including the role of femocrats and 'outsiders'; and (3) the tensions between the agenda and illiberal and anti-gender politics. The combination of interviews and our engagement with WPS at the national level helps us to understand the informal everyday practices and discourses affected by the gendered structures and the workings of power in the respective institutions.

The article makes several empirical, conceptual and theoretical contributions to the WPS scholarship. First, we highlight the need to apply feminist institutionalism together with postcolonial and decolonial thought, and to pay close attention to local and regional contexts when studying institutions. Second, our in-depth analysis of the three cases from the chosen and under-studied region empirically enriches the existing WPS scholarship. Third, employing this regional perspective, we identify general trends of adoption and implementation of NAPs in similar national contexts. The study of WPS within CE's gender regimes allows us to unpack how these engagements and manoeuvres speak to the WPS agenda globally as well as in similarly less visible regions.¹⁵ This regional study shows the

¹³ Fiona Mackay, 'Conclusion: towards a feminist institutionalism?', in Krook and Mackay, eds, *Gender, politics and institutions*, p. 191.

¹⁴ Interviews were held in Czech, Slovak and in English in case of Polish respondents; the translations are our own.

¹⁵ See also Paula Drumond and Tamyá Rebelo, 'Global pathways or local spins? National action plans in South America', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22: 4, 2020, pp.

importance of effective localization for more effective and inclusive implementation of WPS globally.

The argument proceeds as follows. We first discuss the conceptualizations of CEE as a ‘non-region’, and then link those to the postcolonial and decolonial feminist critiques of the WPS agenda. Through this postcolonial and decolonial lens, we apply FI for three purposes. First, we analyse the conditions that led to the decision to start drafting the first NAPs, along with the drafting process itself. Second, we uncover the strategic choices femocrats make to keep WPS out of the focus of the anti-gender alliances. Third, we examine the shallow institutionalization of WPS in the region. The final part discusses the regional WPS agenda in the context of the gendered crisis following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. We conclude by discussing how the regional WPS realities speak to the wider WPS agenda and its futures.

The ‘non-region’ of central Europe and the ‘western’ WPS agenda

Interrogating what the western-centric WPS agenda becomes in a ‘non-region’ characterized by illiberalism and anti-gender tendencies, we draw on postcolonial and decolonial feminist approaches. We use the postcolonial critique of the WPS agenda,¹⁶ and foreground the decolonial scholarship that discusses the ‘in-betweenness’ and ‘otherness’ of the CEE region.¹⁷ This is crucial for understanding the local context and rationale for engagements with the WPS agenda.

CEE as a ‘non-region’

The concept of a ‘non-region’ was introduced by CEE feminists after the end of the bipolar East–West division and remains relevant for understanding the current state of the WPS agenda in CE. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the ‘second world’ vanished almost overnight, which led to a western understanding of the post-Soviet world as one of time, not space.¹⁸ As the global axis shifted from eastern and western blocs to that of the global North

462–84; Jennifer Thomson and Sophie Whiting, ‘Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans in anti-gender governments: the cases of Brazil and Poland’, *European Journal of International Security* 7: 4, 2022, pp. 531 – 550.

¹⁶ Haastrup and Hagen, ‘Global racial hierarchies’; Parashar, ‘The WPS agenda’.

¹⁷ Kulawik and Kravchenko, eds, *Borderlands in European gender studies*; Tlostanova, *Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial?*

¹⁸ Tlostanova, *Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial?*, p. 131.

and the global South, the region shifted closer to the global North. Yet the East–West divide has not been overcome.¹⁹

This continuing divide is apparent in the ambiguous position of the former ‘second-world’ feminists, most of whom have remained outside transnational feminist theorizing and practice.²⁰ During the Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, second-world feminists staged an important intervention in the form of a ‘statement from a “non-region”’.²¹ They raised concerns that the specific east European experiences and context disappeared with the shift to the North–South dichotomy, and called attention to the worsening status of women amid the transition to liberal democracies.²²

The region was consigned to a temporal catching up with the West as part of ‘returning to Europe’, where it once belonged.²³ During the 1990s and 2000s, the East–West divide re-emerged especially through the concept of Europeanness. Postcolonial scholars have noted the desire of CEE to become fully western with accession to the EU, yet have referred to its position as ‘liminal Europeanness’ or ‘Europe but not quite’.²⁴ Kalmar conceptualizes this as ‘white but not quite’: being in a quasi-colonial position by not possessing the full extent of the white privilege experienced by west Europeans.²⁵ These East–West distinctions rely on hierarchies and power relations, and represent experiences and mental structures.²⁶ East

¹⁹ Kulawik, ‘Introduction’, in Kulawik and Kravchenko, eds, *Borderlands in European gender studies*, p. 3.

²⁰ Magdalena Grabowska, ‘Bringing the Second World in: conservative revolution(s), socialist legacies, and transnational silences in the trajectories of Polish feminism’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 37: 2, 2012, pp. 385–411.

²¹ See Grabowska, ‘Bringing the Second World in’; Kulawik, ‘Introduction’.

²² Grabowska, ‘Bringing the Second World in’.

²³ Kulawik, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

²⁴ Maria Malksöo, *The politics of becoming European: a study of Polish and Baltic post-Cold War security imaginaries* (London: Routledge, 2010); see also Alexandra Sojka, ‘Liminal Europeanness: whiteness, East–West mobility and European mobility’, in Kulawik and Kravchenko, eds, *Borderlands in European gender studies*, pp. 192 – 212.

²⁵ Ivan Kalmar, *White but not quite: central Europe’s illiberal revolt* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), p. 6.

²⁶ See Kulawik, ‘Introduction’; Grabowska, ‘Bringing the Second World in’.

Europeanness is inferior and racially othered.²⁷ Kalmar shows that east Europeanness is further hierarchically ordered, with each country to the east in Europe imagined as progressively less western; this means that when people in the region say they are ‘central Europeans’, they highlight that they are *not* like the Russians and should be seen as more ‘western’.²⁸

In their critique of unequal East–West relations in feminist knowledge production, CEE feminist scholars highlight the ambiguous position of the region. They introduce the concepts of ‘semi-periphery’ and somewhere ‘in-between’ to show that local knowledge of these countries is not reaching the western ‘core’.²⁹ The debate concentrates on the ‘one-way’ travel of concepts, stressing the emergent hierarchy between western producers and eastern transmitters of gender knowledge.³⁰ This came along with accepting ideas pertinent to the advantages of western identities within global racial hierarchies and thus reproducing an ‘unreconstructed’ idea of whiteness.³¹ As we show here, these hierarchies between producers and transmitters and their consequences continue to exist in WPS knowledge production. While western feminist postcolonial scholars have addressed these hierarchies in relation to the global North,³² CEE has been so far entirely omitted in this critique.

Despite the ‘one-way’ flow of knowledge, the need to adopt gender equality laws and policies to comply with EU standards represents a positive development for the region. At the same time, in this ‘catch-up with the West . . . gender equality principles have been implemented without engaging a wider audience’ and were ‘left in the hands of bureaucrats’.³³ This led to two unintended consequences. First, with EU accession, much of

²⁷ Sojka, ‘Liminal Europeanness’, p. 196.

²⁸ Ivan Kalmar, *White but not quite: race and illiberalism in Central Europe*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.transformingsociety.co.uk/2022/04/20/white-but-not-quite-race-and-illiberalism-in-central-europe/>.

²⁹ Marina Blagojević, ‘Creators, transmitters, and users: women’s scientific excellence at the semiperiphery of Europe’, *European Education* 36: 4, 2004, pp. 70–90.

³⁰ See Kulawik, ‘Introduction’, p. 22.

³¹ Sojka, ‘Liminal Europeanness’, p. 196.

³² See e.g. Haastrup and Hagen, ‘Racial hierarchies’.

³³ Marta Rawłuszko, ‘And if the opponents of gender ideology are right? Gender politics, Europeanization, and the democratic deficit’, *Politics and Gender* 17: 2, 2021, pp. 301–23 at p. 303.

the financing for gender NGOs focused on the labour market and employment, directing their focus solely on ‘domestic’ issues. Second, this was one of the factors that led to a backlash against the EU. Rawłuszko links the Polish anti-gender movement directly to Europeanization, arguing that the decade-long EU accession process led to the de-democratization of Poland.³⁴ Korolczuk and Graff show how illiberal and populist movements equate gender egalitarianism with colonization, and often compare it with twentieth-century totalitarianisms.³⁵ As we demonstrate in this article, the WPS agenda has been adopted by bureaucrats in this anti-gender context without reaching a wider audience, although it has so far largely escaped the attention of the anti-gender coalitions. Recent research encourages overcoming the difference implied in East–West binaries.³⁶ We are aware of this critique, but agree with Koobak, Tlostanova and Thapar-Björkert that the post-socialist frame reveals much more than experiences of ‘people living in former state socialist spaces’; it is ‘a characteristic of the world in its globality after the end of the Cold War’ that reflects ‘the larger geopolitical shifts that mobilise people to react to the ontological designs imposed by modernity and coloniality’.³⁷ For the purpose of studying WPS, the category of a ‘non-region’ or somewhere ‘in-between’ is a useful analytical tool for two reasons. First, the discourse of ‘belongingness’ to the West or being seen as a reliable international partner resonates through all three countries’ approaches to WPS. Second, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights the pervasiveness of the geopolitical framing of security, by both policy-makers and researchers. While we use the post-socialist ‘non-region’ in this research, we conclude that challenging the East–West geopolitical framing is

³⁴ Rawłuszko, ‘And if the opponents of gender ideology are right?’, p. 303.

³⁵ 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, p. 797.

³⁶ e.g. Blanka Nyklová, ‘Research on the semi-periphery? Beyond geopolitics’, in M. Vohlídalová and M. Linková, eds, *Gender and neoliberalism in Czech academia* (Prague: Sociologické nakladatelství SLON, 2017), pp. 26–68.

³⁷ Redi Koobak, Madina Tlostanova and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, ‘Introduction: uneasy affinities between the postcolonial and the postsocialist’, in R. Koobak, M. Tlostanova and S. Thapar-Björkert, *Postcolonial and postsocialist dialogues: intersections, opacities, challenges in feminist theorizing and practice* (New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 1.

important, for both situated knowledge production and more confident and localized WPS policy-making.

The WPS agenda: western-centrism, imperialism and localization

In the minds of most CE's policy-makers, there are western producers and 'eastern' transmitters of WPS. This can be dated back to the absence of CEE feminists at the genesis of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. Most scholarly accounts attribute a key role to the transnational feminist networks that formed the NGO Working Group on WPS in 2000,³⁸ as well other actors such as UNIFEM,³⁹ and individual Security Council members such as Namibia, Jamaica and Canada.⁴⁰ None of these networks represented CEE perspectives.⁴¹

Feminist postcolonial scholars have consistently criticized the imperialist nature of the WPS agenda.⁴² Pratt points out that '1325 reproduces the racialized–sexualized and gendered hierarchies of colonialism'.⁴³ Parashar argues that the WPS has served the global North's neo-liberal governments in projecting their colonial idea of peace and security to the 'conflict-affected' global South.⁴⁴ This is apparent from Shepherd's study of global North NAPs, which are mostly outward-oriented and 'reproduce' a world in which problems occur

³⁸ Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF); Amnesty International; International Alert; Hague Appeal for Peace; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children; and Women's Caucus for Gender Justice.

³⁹ The United Nations Development Fund for Women, which was later reformed as UN Women.

⁴⁰ Carol Cohn, 'Mainstreaming gender in UN security policy: a path to political transformation?', in Shirin M. Rai and Georgina G. Waylen, eds, *Global governance: feminist perspectives* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 185–206.

⁴¹ The most striking example is WILPF, which has no national sections in CEE, unlike in western Europe. Such East–West division is almost reminiscent of the Iron Curtain.

⁴² C. Achilleos-Sarll, "'Seeing" the Women, Peace and Security agenda: visual (re)productions of WPS in UK government national action plans', *International Affairs* 96: 6, 2020, pp. 1643–63 at p. 1645.

⁴³ Nicola Pratt, 'Reconceptualizing gender, reinscribing racial–sexual boundaries in international security: the case of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security"', *International Studies Quarterly* 57: 4, 2013, pp. 772–83 at p. 776.

⁴⁴ Parashar, 'The WPS agenda', p. 837.

‘elsewhere’ but solutions can be found ‘here’.⁴⁵ Martin de Almagro notes that WPS policy is ‘part of a liberal peacebuilding framework that is racialised, patriarchal, classist, heteronormative and western-centric at its core’.⁴⁶ These approaches make the global North appear to be a safe place, while making local insecurities invisible.⁴⁷

The lack of localization is at the centre of postcolonial critique of WPS and NAPs. Myrntinen argues that localization is ‘often seen as a key pathway towards addressing the gap between WPS policy and lived reality, and . . . a way of delivering tangible results based on locally articulated needs’.⁴⁸ Yet a number of studies show that localization of WPS and NAPs is at best slow.⁴⁹ The gendered impacts of Russia’s war on Ukraine make ever more relevant Holvikivi’s and Reeves’ critique of the view of Europe as peaceful and secure for women refugees,⁵⁰ with only a minority of European states recognizing their agency in WPS policies. This does not mean that the western-centrism of the WPS agenda is not challenged and localized. Basu argues that while the passage of UNSCR 1325, the following resolutions, and their implementation appear to be driven by governments and institutions based in the global North, WPS is also owned, interpreted, resisted and subverted by the global South.⁵¹ Myrntinen notes that although some localization exists in post-Soviet space, WPS is still very much centralized and state-led; and that ‘technical and thematic knowledge . . . both in terms of how to develop an action plan and in terms of the WPS Agenda’ is often missing at the

⁴⁵ Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Making war safe for women? National Action Plans and the militarisation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda’, *International Political Science Review* 37: 3, 2016, pp. 324–35.

⁴⁶ Maria Martin de Almagro, ‘Producing participants: gender, race, class, and Women, Peace and Security’, *Global Society* 32: 4, 2018, pp. 395–414 at p. 412.

⁴⁷ See Haastrup and Hagen, ‘Global racial hierarchies’.

⁴⁸ Henri Myrntinen, ‘Localising WPS in the post-Soviet space reconfigurations, copy-pasting and conceptual gaps’, *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 8: 1, 2022, pp. 105–20 at p. 108.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Drummond and Rebelo, ‘Global pathways or local spins?’; Yeliena Dudko and Yvette Langenhuizen, ‘Localisation of the UNSCR 1325 agenda: lessons from post-Maidan Ukraine (2014–2020)’, *Journal of Regional Security* 17: 1, 2022, pp. 25–48.

⁵⁰ Aiko Holvikivi and Audrey Reeves, ‘Women, peace and security after Europe’s “refugee crisis”’, *European Journal of International Security* 5: 2, 2020, pp. 135–54.

⁵¹ Soumita Basu, ‘The global South writes 1325 (too)’, *International Political Science Review* 37: 3, 2016, pp. 362–74.

local level.⁵² Similarly, Dudko and Langenhuizen conclude that Ukraine's first NAP triggered localization initiatives, but that the potential to facilitate bottom-up WPS activities remains untapped.⁵³

Recent feminist literature focuses on the contestations of WPS.⁵⁴ True and Wiener propose a methodological framework 'that maps and evaluates diverse practices of contestation to identify expanding spaces and choices for a variety of local, national and regional perceptions of what constitutes gender-equal peace and security'.⁵⁵ They acknowledge that intersectional identity markers are key to access to such contestation. While CE appears to 'write NAPs too',⁵⁶ our analysis shows that the space for contestation and localization remains minimal.

Central European NAPs: 'it was just embarrassing'⁵⁷ not to have one

The region started engaging with the agenda under rather unfavourable conditions. The varying degrees of popular and institutional resistance against progressive politics and policies,⁵⁸ and the lack of academic and NGO interest in applying a gender lens to understanding security,⁵⁹ significantly shrank the space for WPS localization and contestation. At the same time, the agency of local femocrats suffered from the political desire to 'belong' to the West and be considered a reliable international partner.

⁵² Myrntinen, 'Localising WPS', p. 116.

⁵³ Dudko and Langenhuizen, 'Localisation of the UNSCR 1325 agenda'.

⁵⁴ Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, 'Women, peace, and security: mapping the (re)production of a policy ecosystem', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6: 3, 2021, pp. 1-25.

⁵⁵ Jacqui True and Antje Wiener, 'Everyone wants (a) peace: the dynamics of rhetoric and practice on "Women, Peace and Security"', *International Affairs* 95: 3, 2019, pp. 553-74.

⁵⁶ Basu's article is entitled 'The global South writes 1325 (too)'; the '(too)' representing a call for recognition of actors in the global South who are shaping WPS amid their marginalization at the international level. See Basu, 'The global South writes 1325 (too)', p. 363.

⁵⁷ Interview 9.{?}

⁵⁸ Zora Hesová, 'Three types of culture wars and the populist strategies in Central Europe', *Politologický časopi—Czech Journal of Political Science* 28: 2, 2021, pp. 130-50.

⁵⁹ Blanka Nyklová, Kateřina Cidlinská and Nina Fárová, 'International relations in the Czech Republic: where have all the women gone?', *Mezinárodní vztahy* 54: 2, 2019, pp. 5-23.

In the Czech case, the first NAP adoption coincided with the country's application for membership of the UN Human Rights Council for 2019–21.⁶⁰ Similarly, Poland felt mounting international pressure before its presidency of the UN Security Council in 2018–2019.⁶¹ A Polish civil society representative sees this as a pure political calculation by the Law and Justice (PiS) government; they 'wanted to make a good impression at the international stage', otherwise such a 'progressive' gender agenda would not have been adopted.⁶² The Slovak government could also no longer avoid the agenda after it introduced gender mainstreaming as one of its priorities while chairing the OSCE in 2019. The governments were also under sustained pressure to adopt a NAP during regular meetings at the EU, NATO and the UN.⁶³ One Polish femocrat noted: 'It has been too long for Poland not to have a NAP, we knew it was a problem actually because the first European countries had their first NAPs in 2004/5 and it was just embarrassing.'⁶⁴ Advocacy for WPS thus came about largely through interactions with international organizations rather than from the local knowledge represented by feminist researchers and civil society.

These international links can be considered as the few exchanges with outsiders available to CE femocrats that have affected the institutional location and focus of the agenda. In all three countries, WPS was set as a foreign security agenda via the NAP drafting process and its coordination. The agenda is coordinated by ministries of foreign affairs, and the role of defence ministries is strongly accentuated. In Poland, the MFA 'owns' WPS because it 'represents Poland in regular meetings with the EU and NATO', but the 'Ministry of Defence is doing a lot of work with NATO'.⁶⁵ The drafting process took place within gender-resistant domestic environments which constrained femocrats' agency. The first Czech NAP was adopted relatively smoothly, as the MFA was at the time led by a member of the Social Democratic Party, which supported pro-gender equality policies. This is despite the fact that the Social Democrats had a somewhat weak position in the coalition government led by a

⁶⁰ Míla O'Sullivan and Kateřina Krulišová. "“This agenda will never be politically popular”": Central Europe's anti-gender mobilization and the Czech Women, Peace and Security agenda.' *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22: 4, 202, pp. 526-549.p. 537.

⁶¹ Interview 9.

⁶² Interview 11.

⁶³ Interviews 8, 9, 10.

⁶⁴ Interview 9.

⁶⁵ Interview 10.

populist ANO.⁶⁶ While not openly anti-gender, then Prime Minister Babis' government repeatedly postponed ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Poland adopted its NAP, somewhat surprisingly, under the conservative PiS government, which continues to curb reproductive rights and is openly anti-gender. As noted by our interviewees, international pressure was the key motivating factor.⁶⁷ The production of the Slovak NAP has been interrupted by the new government's conservative forces, which led to the resignation of almost the whole gender equality department and the postponement of the NAP's adoption.⁶⁸ Strategically avoiding gender-conservative and populist forces was decisive for the successful adoption of NAPs in all three cases. Here, the role of femocrats and their creative strategies becomes most visible.⁶⁹ The unfavourable political circumstances combined with instrumental motivations for NAPs required femocrats to navigate the WPS agenda carefully by aiming for the 'least worst outcome'.⁷⁰ On the basis of our observations, most CEE femocrats effectively learned to manoeuvre their role in gender-conservative environments by packaging WPS as an 'add gender and stir' initiative that does not challenge local gender conservatism.

This local gender conservatism is undoubtedly influenced by the experience of what some call 'state' or 'statist' feminism,⁷¹ which emphasized 'women's equality that supposedly treats women like men: entry into the labour market is equated with equal rights'.⁷² Discussions on equality still appear to be 'tainted by the ghost of socialism',⁷³ resulting in

⁶⁶ ANO stands for Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (in Czech 'Akce nespokojených občanů').

⁶⁷ Interviews 9, 14.

⁶⁸ Interview 15.

⁶⁹ Mackay, 'Conclusion', p. 191.

⁷⁰ Louise Chappell and Fiona Mackay, 'Feminist critical friends: dilemmas of feminist engagement with governance and gender reform agendas', *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 4: 3, 2021, pp. 321–40.

⁷¹ See Nannette Funk and Magda Mueller, eds, *Gender politics and post-communism: reflections from eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

⁷² Zillah Eisenstein, 'Eastern European male democracies: a problem of unequal equality', in Funk and Mueller, eds. *Gender politics and post-communism*, p. 303.

⁷³ Alexandra Gerber, 'The letter versus the spirit: barriers to meaningful implementation of gender equality policy in Poland', *Women's Studies International Forum* 33: 1, pp. 30–7 at p. 33.

CEE governments ignoring or rejecting gender equality after 1989. The anti-gender coalitions are now firmly established in the mainstream politics of all three countries. They oppose marriage equality, reproductive justice, gender mainstreaming and quotas, LGBTQIA+ rights and sex education. Their objective is eradication of LGBTQIA+ and other equality policies and reaffirmation of heteropatriarchal structures.⁷⁴ As such, the only way to keep the WPS agenda out of the gaze of anti-gender alliances is to focus on participation of women in foreign security.

The ‘add women and stir’ logic also fits into the regional hard security mindset.⁷⁵ As noted by one of our respondents, ‘WPS does not seem to be a problem for people because it is framed as a security issue.’⁷⁶ CE’s politicians continue to understand security as the ‘hard’ military security of the state,⁷⁷ guaranteed through membership of western security structures. One Polish civil society representative noted: ‘Security as an issue is very militarized, when you speak about security you have the picture of the Polish army, some tanks and aircraft, now also cybersecurity, but that’s it.’⁷⁸ For Polish decision-makers, the key idea behind WPS was to support more women in the military.⁷⁹ New research shows that the number of women in the Polish army has doubled under the PiS government, as a result of increased defence preparations after 2014.⁸⁰ Slovakia also associates WPS with external defence and security, and wants to be seen as a reliable partner to the UN’s efforts in tackling conflicts.⁸¹ With the

⁷⁴ Veronika Valkovičová and Petra Meier, “‘Everyone has the right to their opinion’: gender ideology rhetoric and epistemic struggles in Slovak policy-making”, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 29, 3, 2021, pp.1080-1099, p. 1083

⁷⁵ See e.g. Malksöo, *The politics of becoming European*.

⁷⁶ Interview 11.

⁷⁷ Interviews 2, 12, 18.

⁷⁸ Interview 11.

⁷⁹ Interview 11.

⁸⁰ Weronika Grzebalska, ‘Gender politics of “illiberal pragmatics” in the Polish defense sector’, *Politics and Governance* 10: 4, 2022, pp. 61-71.

⁸¹ Interview 16.

recent focus on the so-called migration crisis,⁸² as well as remilitarization in the face of Russian aggression,⁸³ very few critical voices challenge these narratives.⁸⁴

Framing CE's NAPs around defence and foreign security is also linked to the western NAPs which inspired them. The liberal 'add women and stir' mindset remains a strong feature of WPS.⁸⁵ The Polish NAP was inspired by Irish, British, German, Swedish, Canadian, Finnish, Norwegian and Australian plans.⁸⁶ They used these to see 'what could and could not work for them'.⁸⁷ Poland's consultation with the EU further significantly shaped the NAP's content and its prioritization of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) as accentuated in EU policy.⁸⁸ The Slovakian NAP was drafted with the assistance of the Canadian and Finnish embassies,⁸⁹ while the first Czech NAP drew heavily on the outcome of one seminar with Sweden and Austria.⁹⁰

Looking up to the western states has to be seen as part of the 'belonging' issue this 'non-region' experiences. A Czech femocrat notes: 'In term of values, we want to be close to the Scandinavians. At our WPS meetings, I always want to first greet the Slovaks, I'm always interested in what the Swedes or Norwegians say *as leaders in this field*.'⁹¹ Discussing the topic of gendering diplomacy, a Slovak femocrat says: 'We know what to take as an inspiration. If I bring something from Switzerland, Norway, it has more value because it comes from the outside.'⁹² Both quotes suggest that the grass is greener in the West and CE's

⁸² Interview 12.

⁸³ Interview 7.

⁸⁴ See Ondřej Bělíček, 'For Czechs, war in Ukraine feels near their doorstep' *Jacobin* 4 June 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/04/czech-republic-ukraine-putin-soviet-history-nato-refugees-war>.

⁸⁵ Maria-Adriana Deiana and Kenneth McDonagh, "'It is important, but . . .': translating the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda into the planning of EU peacekeeping missions', *Peacebuilding* 6: 1, 2018, pp. 34–48.

⁸⁶ Interviews 9, 10.

⁸⁷ Interviews 9, 10.

⁸⁸ Interviews 9, 10.

⁸⁹ Interview 15.

⁹⁰ Personal observations.

⁹¹ Interview 8.

⁹² Interview 17.[done to here]

femocrats are looking up to the ‘good citizen states’.⁹³ This supports the abovementioned arguments about liminal Europeanness and whiteness, where East in Europe is imagined as less western/white/civilized.⁹⁴ This further problematizes the illiberal politics for which especially Poland and Hungary have become notorious. This is why the Polish femocrats are careful to steer the agenda away from domestic debates. One Polish interviewee clearly states that ‘there is a problem with the word “gender”’.⁹⁵ The same interviewee noted that WPS ‘should be about gender equality, not understanding of gender expression’.⁹⁶

The CE NAPs are therefore products of femocrats’ careful political manoeuvring between the pressure from international organizations, desire to ‘belong’ to the West, and the local gender-conservative and hard security mindset. Focusing on increased participation of women in the military and foreign missions offers itself as the least controversial topic and steers femocrats’ limited agency in the ‘add women and hope’ direction.⁹⁷ This has led to a perhaps unintentional reproduction of what some feminists call the ‘imperialist nature of the WPS agenda’.⁹⁸ In other words, the CE NAPs also see insecurities elsewhere, and ignore domestic gendered issues.

CE’s WPS agendas: separate islands without local innovations

After discussing the strategic adoption of NAPs as a foreign security agenda separate from domestic politics, we further argue that this has been possible because the local civil society does not engage with WPS. CE’s NAPs are primarily navigated by a few femocrats. This risks depoliticizing the agenda and turning it into a technocratic pledge without meaningful substance and local innovation that would reflect regional embodied insecurities.

Femocrats highlighted that the human resources dedicated to the production of NAPs have been very modest across the region. The NAPs production was in all three contexts coordinated by one person with limited capacities who faced top-down political pressure to have a NAP to improve their country’s reputation. One femocrat noted that this is a region-

⁹³ Kirby and Shepherd, ‘Women, peace, and security’, p. 23.

⁹⁴ See Kalmar, *White but not quite*; Sojka, ‘Liminal Europeanness’.

⁹⁵ Interview 10.

⁹⁶ Interview 10.

⁹⁷ Elina Penttinen, ‘Nordic women and international crisis management: a politics of hope?’, in Annica Kronsell and Erika Svedberg eds, *Making gender, making war* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 167–79.

⁹⁸ See Achilleos-Sarll, ‘“Seeing” the Women, Peace and Security agenda’, p. 1645.

wide problem compared to the resources available in the UK, France or Germany: ‘I think it is something typical for our region in CE that our resources assigned to this topic are unfortunately limited because there are so many different topics we also we have to cover.’⁹⁹ Another femocrat noted that they act as a WPS focal point ‘additionally to [their] *normal* job’;¹⁰⁰ while another noted that ‘the NAP was written very fast, I did a lot of overtime and sat in the office until late at night’.¹⁰¹

These quotes show that it is necessary to understand both the constraining institutional structures that shape the agenda but also the agency of individual femocrats who take on the role of lone agenda drivers. It is also important to consider who these femocrats are and what their professional backgrounds are. Our conversations showed that these are all committed femocrats who understand WPS as a liberal feminist agenda. None of the femocrats we interviewed saw themselves as gender equality specialists, but most reflected on their experience as women in a variety of diplomatic roles. Henshaw’s argumentation around devaluation of the agenda,¹⁰² combined with the perpetual impossibility of ‘catching up’ with the ‘West’, clearly demonstrates the difficult position in which CE femocrats find themselves. This has been reflected in the largely external focus on women’s participation in the public sphere. The first Czech NAP includes a lot of work–life balance measures in the relevant ministries because of the key femocrat’s perception of WPS as a broader agenda that spans domestic politics and not just external conflict.¹⁰³ Even here, however, domestication does not reach local gendered insecurities beyond civil servants.

This is probably caused by very limited strategic partnerships with outsiders.¹⁰⁴ The first Czech NAP, like the Slovak and Polish NAPs, was drafted ‘quickly and quietly’ without much consultation with local feminist NGOs or academics. While the FI framework emphasizes that femocrats pursue change through strategic partnerships with outsiders, these

⁹⁹ Interview 9.

¹⁰⁰ Interview 10 (emphasis added).

¹⁰¹ Interview 9.

¹⁰² Alexis Henshaw, ‘Gendered labor in the making of United States policy on Women, Peace and Security: an interagency perspective’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 24: 5{?}, 2021, pp. 767-789.

¹⁰³ Personal observations and discussions.

¹⁰⁴ O’Sullivan and Krulišová, ‘This agenda will never be politically popular’.

CE examples show that policy change can also happen from the ‘top down’.¹⁰⁵ In all cases, external comments were provided only at the last minute and by chance as a result of pre-existing personal connections.¹⁰⁶ As the public consultation was in all cases limited to just over a week, it could not significantly shape the final text. Poland published a document justifying the selection of comments to be considered for inclusion in the final NAP text,¹⁰⁷ but neither the Czech Republic nor Slovakia provided any feedback. In Slovakia, femocrats deliberately avoided public consultations owing to concerns that conservative religious NGOs would ‘get involved’ and undermine the process.¹⁰⁸ All NAPs were produced through a top-down process which goes against some of the western experience with NAPs and UN practice, but is typical of illiberal environments.¹⁰⁹

This regional experience thus enriches FI, for it uncovers how the strategic choices of CE femocrats are shaped by locally specific contexts. Given their isolation in navigating the WPS, these femocrats uncritically reproduced the western models. This is attributable to the lack of local WPS contestation by feminist civil society. Indeed, a shared characteristic across the region is the absence of local civil society and academia engagement with WPS and foreign policy issues in general. Local feminists who have previously criticized the ‘patronizing tendencies and the false universalism of western feminism’ are not part of the WPS discussion, focusing solely on domestic issues.¹¹⁰

In Slovakia, not many feminists have had a foreign policy background and the WPS topic still waits to be ‘owned’ by a particular person.¹¹¹ In the case of Poland, ‘feminist energy now all goes to anti-gender and sexual and reproductive rights’ and the focus in the past has been

¹⁰⁵ O’Sullivan and Krulišová, ‘This agenda will never be politically popular’.

¹⁰⁶ Interviews 6, 12; personal observations.

¹⁰⁷ Interview 9.

¹⁰⁸ Interview 15.

¹⁰⁹ The participatory practice is apparent in the workings of the CEDAW Committee, the creation of UN Women and the very genesis of UNSCR 1325. See Elisabeth Olivius, Jenny Hedström and Zin Mar Phyo, ‘Feminist peace or state co-optation? The Women, Peace and Security agenda in Myanmar’, *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 5: 1, 2022, pp. 25–43.

¹¹⁰ Kulawik, ‘Introduction’, p. 27.

¹¹¹ Interview 12.

‘similarly reactionary rather than rooted in an independent agenda’.¹¹² Furthermore, many feminists in Poland distanced themselves from the agenda because it is a product of the PiS government.¹¹³ A Polish femocrat recalls the experience of consultation with outsiders from academia and civil society as a challenge, because at that time ‘this topic simply did not exist’; there were no scientific articles, and no experts on WPS.¹¹⁴ Owing to the lack of ownership by feminist civil society and the identification of WPS as a foreign policy issue, domestic insecurities that occur ‘here’ and are at the centre of local feminists’ attention are not considered by the NAPs. NAPs are instrumentally silent on such issues as reproductive justice, violent and military responses to women’s strikes, LGBTQIA+ issues, or treatment of migrants or minorities.¹¹⁵

The absence of bottom-up pressure for the WPS agenda in the CE region has resulted in low-profile NAPs lacking local innovation. Owing to the limited exchanges among femocrats and feminist outsiders, WPS NAPs become isolated islands navigated by individuals and separated from domestic insecurities and anti-gender resistance. The question remains whether such low-profile technocratic policy change can result in institutionalization of the agenda and further progress towards gender-positive change, or if the policy is a paper tiger—ineffectual and empty.

Incremental institutionalization: too little, but not too late

Despite the instrumental rationale behind the CE NAPs and their watered-down content narrowed to foreign policy, these encounters have successfully created WPS institutional cultures. These are characterized by many significant ‘small wins’ or incremental changes. Gradual or incremental changes tend to involve institutions which have been in place for a long time,¹¹⁶ and concern the attachment of new gender elements to existing policies or practices by institutional enforcers without threatening the status quo.¹¹⁷ Indeed, the regional

¹¹² Interview 7.

¹¹³ Interviews 11, 13.

¹¹⁴ Interview 9.

¹¹⁵ O’Sullivan and Krulišová, ‘This agenda will never be politically popular’.

¹¹⁶ Krook and Mackay, ‘Introduction: Gender, Politics and Institutions’ in Krook and Mackay, eds, *Gender, politics and institutions*, pp. 1-19, p. 13.

¹¹⁷ Georgina Holmes, ‘Feminist institutionalism’, in Kseniya Oksamytna and John Karlsrud, eds, *United Nations peace operations and International Relations theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 225.

experience shows that however imperfect the CE NAPs may be, including in their reproduction of imperialism, they are a part of this gradual process that may eventually lead to broader institutionalization and better localization of the agenda.

Although the impact of the externally oriented NAPs may be minimal, their effects on the shaping of local CE WPS institutional cultures are still significant. Femocrats regard the adoption of the first NAPs as a starting-point and a trigger for further engagements. The first Czech NAP served as a symbolic and formal breakthrough, creating new openings for feminist partnerships between insiders and outsiders.¹¹⁸ The Slovak stakeholders understand their NAP as a work in progress which will develop further.¹¹⁹ In Poland, there is an awareness of the need for domesticating the WPS agenda and including more ministries:

<ext>Our approach was to make sure that we are implementing the core activities and core causes of WPS, we also knew that we are only starting the topic, and we really wanted for it to exist and then over the time it will include more and more ministries, it is like a snowball effect.¹²⁰ <extend>

Importantly, our discussions with femocrats revealed that WPS is now firmly rooted in all three countries and that it would now be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse the progress made so far.¹²¹ The perceived irreversibility of WPS in the region can be understood as an important ‘small win’ against the anti-gender background. According to femocrats, even political bodies now understand that this is an international norm that is important for NATO and the EU.¹²²

Creating a more deeply embedded WPS institutional culture is, however, more difficult. In all three countries, the WPS agenda continues to be government-owned and state-centric, and civil society ownership is still marginal if not absent. It is solely the local femocrats who drive the agenda. NAP drafting and evaluation appear to be mostly closed-off or ad hoc processes. The Polish interministerial WPS group is not open to civil society or academia, and its evaluation reports are not public.¹²³ With the current NAP process being prolonged by

¹¹⁸ O’Sullivan and Krulišová, ‘This agenda will never be politically popular’.

¹¹⁹ Interview 16.

¹²⁰ Interview 9.

¹²¹ Interviews 9, 10; personal observation and informal discussions.

¹²² Interviews.

¹²³ Interview 6.

two years owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, this is unlikely to change in the near future.¹²⁴ The summary evaluation report of the Slovak NAP will be submitted by 31 March 2026 as part of the NAP for 2026–30 to the Committee for Gender Equality.¹²⁵ One interviewee noted that the fact that the NAP evaluation is going only to the committee and not to the government with executive powers shows the NAP is ‘not a high priority’.¹²⁶ In the Slovakian foreign ministry, experts working on the topic are engaged in an ad hoc consultative process,¹²⁷ but no further consultations or working groups have been set up. These seem rather weak accountability mechanisms compared to the implementation of the Czech NAP, which has been monitored through annual reports and regularly discussed during meetings of the WPS Working Group.¹²⁸

Overall, the Czech Republic is ahead of its neighbours owing to slightly longer engagement with the WPS agenda, which has led to the adoption of a second NAP for 2021–5. Although the second NAP still does not reflect many local issues, its drafting was much more inclusive, as more civil society representatives participated in the initial consultations. Members of the Czech WPS Working Group from academia and civil society, including ourselves, were invited to comment on several rounds of drafts. Some recommendations from our own research were thus considered in the production of the NAP. While there is willingness and ownership of the NAP among the ministries owing to the top-down process, the question is whether the NAP could have been more ambitious.¹²⁹ Recommendations put forward by academia and civil society that concern domestic issues related to migration or topics such as men and masculinities or LGBTQIA+ rights have not been included. Nonetheless, the second Czech NAP is significantly stronger than the first one. Yet its success still rests on the willingness of the key coordinator and the variety of actors to ‘push’ the agenda.

At the same time, these first ‘small steps’ towards institutionalization are not enough to prepare the region for such major gendered crises as evolved in the CEE region with Russia’s

¹²⁴ Interview 10.

¹²⁵ Interview 16.

¹²⁶ Interview 15.

¹²⁷ Interview 16.

¹²⁸ See WPS agenda at the MFA website (in Czech),

https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/agenda_zeny_mir_a_bezpecnost/index.html.

¹²⁹ Interview 1.

war in Ukraine. The simple reproduction of a western-centric WPS agenda without localization consequently becomes a failure, both domestically and internationally.

(Central European) WPS as a failure amid Russian aggression

The full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine has caused a serious gendered crisis in Ukraine and beyond with devastating consequences which are yet to be fully understood.¹³⁰

What seems to be very clear already is the failure of western actors, including the EU, NATO and WPS champions, and, unsurprisingly, also the CE states, to use WPS approaches in aiding Ukraine and Ukrainians. This is despite the fact that the war exemplifies exactly the external insecurity ‘out there’ strongly accentuated in these western WPS agendas.

Paradoxically, it appears as if the WPS agenda is not suitable for a full-scale war waged on Ukraine by imperialist Russia.

International responses to the new security situation have been first and foremost directed at military support to Ukraine’s legitimate self-defence against the imperial aggressor. The prevailing hard security mindset that characterizes the CE region has fully come to the surface, as the CE countries swiftly took the lead in responding to Ukraine’s calls for arms supplies.¹³¹ In the region, the war revived collective memories of past Russian aggression, and the understanding of the nature of the war as imperialistic has been clear. Still, these responses have lacked a WPS perspective. This failure to apply WPS when urgently needed relates to the deeper challenges surrounding the global WPS policy and practices. The full-scale Russian war on Ukraine demonstrates how shallow and toothless CE’s WPS is, being blind and unprepared for both local and regional gendered insecurities. This is despite the incremental ‘small wins’ and gradual institutionalization of the WPS norms in the CE countries.

Russia’s brutal war on Ukraine, with deliberate shelling of civilian targets and genocidal violence, has caused millions of Ukrainians to flee the country. As of November 2022, the UN records 7,867,219 million Ukrainian refugees across Europe, while over 6.5 million

¹³⁰ At the time of writing of this article, early assessments of the gendered impacts of the war are available: see e.g. UN Women and Care International, *Rapid gender analysis of Ukraine*, 2022, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/05/rapid-gender-analysis-of-ukraine>.

¹³¹ See e.g. Bělíček, ‘For Czechs, war in Ukraine feels near their doorstep’.

people were internally displaced by the war within Ukraine as of 27 October.¹³² Poland reports registering over 1.5 million Ukrainians, the highest number of refugees in the EU, the Czech Republic 462,413 and Slovakia 101,236.¹³³ Ninety per cent of people fleeing the war are women and children,¹³⁴ with acute gendered needs and at risk of continued violence in the destination countries. Reports note a high and imminent threat of trafficking outside Ukraine for the purposes of sexual exploitation, forced labour or illegal surrogacy.¹³⁵ Cases of human traffickers operating on the borders in Poland or Slovakia show that these insecurities need urgent attention.¹³⁶

As noted at the opening of this article, feminist tradition and solidarity are well rooted in the region. Yet CE's feminist civil society keeps engaging with the invasion and its effects largely outside the WPS framework. With the absence of bottom-up engagement, the CE governments have effectively excluded these domestic insecurities from the WPS agenda. This blindness to domestic insecurities eventually turns into a failure of WPS. The most striking example is the Polish NAP, which prioritizes CRSV in conflict zones, like most western NAPs, but in reality remarginalizes Ukrainian survivors of CRSV in Poland due to the strict law on abortion. Ukrainian survivors of sexualized violence have to seek medical help in other countries.¹³⁷ Violence perpetrated against them thus continues and they continue to be revictimized. This remarginalization is, however, not limited to Poland and its gender-conservative order. There has been a continuum of violence further across Europe towards refugees before,¹³⁸ and this has now multiplied with Russia's war on Ukraine.

¹³² UNHCR, *Ukraine situation flash update #35 (18 November 2022)*,

<https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-situation-flash-update-35-18-november-2022>.

¹³³ UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

¹³⁴ UN Women and Care International, *Rapid gender analysis of Ukraine*.

¹³⁵ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Conflict in Ukraine: key evidence on risks of trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants*, Aug. 2022, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/Conflict_Ukraine_TIP_2022.pdf.

¹³⁶ *Sexual violence and the Ukraine conflict*, Insecurity Insight, 19 April 2022.

¹³⁷ Hanna Kozłowska, 'Pregnant Ukrainian refugees struggle to get abortion care', *The Cut*, 3 May 2022, <https://www.thecut.com/2022/05/ukrainian-refugees-struggle-to-get-abortions-in-poland.html>.

¹³⁸ See Holvikivi and Reeves, 'Women, Peace and Security after Europe's "refugee crisis"'.

Supporting Ukraine remains one of the key priorities of CE countries. This is also apparent from the focus of the ongoing Czech presidency of the Council of the EU, whose number one priority is ‘Managing the refugee crisis and Ukraine’s post-war recovery’.¹³⁹ This priority further recognizes that women and children are the majority of the refugees and ‘for women’s participation in the labour market, sufficient pre-school and extracurricular capacity will need to be guaranteed’.¹⁴⁰ War-related gender-based and sexual violence is also gaining the Council’s attention and has led to calls for gender-sensitive humanitarian responses.¹⁴¹ However, further gender-responsive governmental approaches, or approaches based on or WPS, are largely absent. With the exception of Čaputová’s message quoted at the very start of this article, the CE governments’ responses to the invasion and emerging neo-liberal debates of postwar recovery display a very masculine character and blindness to gendered insecurities. It is now urgent to support the ‘strong agency’ of Ukrainian women,¹⁴² and go beyond the gendered neo-liberal recovery model that characterized post-Maidan Ukraine.¹⁴³

Conclusions: towards localized WPS

The central European region, yet again finding itself at the centre of international crisis, represents a curious case-study for WPS scholars. The region is notorious for its illiberal governance, ever-stronger anti-gender forces and restrictions of women’s rights. Yet perhaps surprisingly, it actively engages with WPS.

As we demonstrate in this article, there is currently limited space for optimism about this engagement. The Czech, Polish and Slovak motivations for adopting a NAP were instrumental. Driven by mounting pressure from international organizations and the desire to show that they are at the same time reliable international partners and belong to the ‘West’, CE’s WPS replicates most of the ‘western’ WPS shortcomings. It is defined by wilful blindness to domestic gendered insecurities, and instead focuses on problems elsewhere. It is

¹³⁹ *Priorities of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2022*, https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/media/fk3pihaw/eng_priorities.pdf.

¹⁴⁰ *Priorities of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2022*.

¹⁴¹ Council of the EU, *COHAFAs common messages on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine* (Brussels, 17 Oct. 2022)

¹⁴² See e.g. *Ukrainian feminists’ responses to the Russian invasion*, IIR Prague and HBS, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpZjtUW0phY>.

¹⁴³ Míla O’Sullivan, ‘The forgotten lives: connecting gender, security and everyday livelihoods in Ukraine’s conflict’, *Politics and Gender* 16: 3, 2020, pp. 6-10.

largely militaristic and rooted in the neo-liberal imperialist interventionist logic. Key femocrats, manoeuvring the agenda away from the gaze of anti-gender alliances, represent WPS as a low-profile foreign policy agenda focused mainly on women's participation in the uniformed services. This, for now, successfully disengages the anti-gender forces, but also leads to a lack of interest by local feminist NGOs, both of which focus on domestic issues. While we welcome the institutionalization and 'small wins' of CE's WPS, it is simply not enough. The most recent act of Russian aggression, the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, lays bare the failure of CE's WPS. Not only do local insecurities keep worsening, but the watered-down WPS is unable to meet the needs of Ukrainian refugees, most of whom are women and children. While CE's conservative politicians focus on 'hard' security measures when addressing the invasion, Ukrainian refugees face continuing violence in Europe. Be it the danger that human trafficking gangs pose or the loss of abortion rights in Poland even for survivors of rape, CE's WPS appears to be unprepared for and blind to the lived gendered realities experienced by many in the region. This failure should serve as a mirror to the western WPS, which has similarly failed to provide an adequate response to Russia's genocidal war on Ukraine.¹⁴⁴ Its faults are not merely the result of the local institutional environments and key individuals shaping the agenda, but also of the embedded liberal interventionist and imperialist nature of WPS. This also explains the lack of CE's self-reflection and localization.

With the West's attention now turned on CEE, there is an opportunity to challenge the East–West divide reproduced in the current engagements with WPS. In this sense, the CE region provides important and timely feedback about the future direction of the 'global' WPS agenda. If WPS is not to become obsolete, we need localized, post-western WPS. Such WPS should include the previously overlooked 'non-regions'. It would shift its focus onto local gendered insecurities and learn from collective traumas of the past. It would centre on locally situated knowledge and experience, and as a result would provide an efficient tool to alleviate some of the most pressing gendered insecurities that are not only out there, but right here and right now.

¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the most striking example are the colonial responses of some western feminists who deny voices and the right to resistance to Ukrainians. See reactions by Ukrainian feminists at Feminist Initiative Group, *'The right to resist': a feminist manifesto*, 7 July 2022, <https://commons.com.ua/en/right-resist-feminist-manifesto/>.