



Post-Soviet Gender Regimes: Militarized Masculinities in the Making of the Russian-Ukrainian War

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Abstract: The close international media coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought to attention the topic of militarized masculinities and the historical role they play in shaping the narrative, discourse, and imagery of the conflagration. Whereas the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is depicted as an example of a sensitive man who learns to become a “real man” through war, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, is positioned as the epitome of authoritative manliness and warmongering. This article assesses the contrasting gendered portrayals of these men as extensions of not only an unfolding geopolitical crisis but also changing militarized masculinities that are rooted in the post-Soviet moment. I argue that the way Zelenskyy’s image is portrayed during the Russo-Ukrainian war depicts him as a man of character with a gender typology and profile of “positive” militarized masculinity, which can be juxtaposed against the toxic negativity of Putin. The article not only scrutinizes this simplistic portrayal but also emphasizes that on a structural level such representation of hegemonic militarized masculinities prevents countries from achieving peace. Framing Zelenskyy as an ultimate hero who fights till the end, as a measure of idealized manhood, only prolongs the war and leaves little room for imagining a post-gender demilitarized world.

Keywords: Militarized Masculinities, Russia, Ukraine, War, Zelenskyy

Introduction

“It is two ways of life. Two images that could not be more different. You have a face of tyranny and evil and you have an ordinary man, an entertainer turned into a hero.” With this statement, Garry Kasparov, Russian chess grandmaster, writer, and political activist, starts his assessment of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in an ABC News documentary *Two Men at War* (2022). Russian-born American journalist, Julia Loffe, follows Kasparov’s statement and argues that the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy,¹ whom Loffe refers to as a “tiny Jewish boy,” presents himself as much more of a man and a hero than his infamous opponent, president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin. Interest in this little-known Ukrainian political figure skyrocketed after Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, causing the largest refugee crisis and military conflict on the European continent since World War II.

¹ Various US media outlets spell Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s name differently. The issue is mainly one of transliteration—from the Cyrillic alphabet used in Ukraine to the Latin alphabet used in the United States. This article will use “Zelenskyy,” because the Ukrainian presidential administration has officially adopted it as the official English-language spelling of the current president’s name (The Presidential Office of Ukraine, n.d.).

This article aims to take a closer look at the ways hegemonic masculinities have changed since the late Soviet period and analyze heteropatriarchal regimes that emerged since then. One of the major challenges with the framework of hegemonic masculinities is the question of whether it is a proper research tool for analyzing the contradictions between male leaders in various positions, such as Zelenskyy, who deploys his form of militarized masculinity to resist the hypermasculine overtures of more powerful authoritarian figures like Putin (Christensen and Jensen 2014). This issue is especially relevant and particular to the Russian–Ukrainian case, because this involves two countries once under the Soviet Union, one as master and the other as subordinate. This article studies how the contrasting gendered portrayals of Zelenskyy and Putin contribute to the ongoing geopolitical crisis in Ukraine and affect the notions of militarized masculinities. The article takes a deeper look at these questions through the prism of gender and investigates how hegemonic militarized masculinities are constructed, used, and analyzed in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

International media continue to cover the conflict in detail, which also brings to attention the topic of maleness and what role it plays in shaping the gendered narrative, discourse, and imagery of the conflagration. The ways Putin’s and Zelenskyy’s modern-day masculinities are depicted in the West, or so called First-World countries, have entered all social media platforms and the entertainment industry as counterexamples of male power. American comedian and political commentator, Bill Maher, opened his late-night show with a controversial statement arguing that, if there is anything to learn from the crises in Ukraine, it is that the world still needs what he calls a “manly man” (2022). He continues to argue that even though toxic male masculinity has contributed to “oceans of brutality,” it is one of the reasons why the human species still exists. Projecting his Anglo-American liberal sensibilities about how modern women are turning men into “pussies,” Maher brings up Zelenskyy as an example of a man who, instead of sharing his feelings and being vulnerable (perceived to be signs of demasculinization/feminization), the embattled Ukrainian leader is busy being a “real man,” which appears to be in short supply these days. In that broadcast, Maher shows the images of Ukrainian women and children who are fleeing the war-torn country and argues that, unlike them, every able-bodied man is staying in Ukraine to defend their country. He concludes with this observation: “If there is one thing, we’ve learned from the crisis in Ukraine is that everyone loves, and the world still needs grown men” (Maher 2022). What Maher fails to reveal in his commentary on preserving masculinity is that after the Russian invasion, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy declared martial law, pronouncing that every able-bodied man aged 18 to 60 was restricted from leaving the country (Harding 2022). I argue that masculinities then are very much about perception, complicated by synergies with cultural hegemony and militarism.

The war only benefited Zelenskyy’s domestic ratings. If in March 2021 only 12 percent of Ukrainians approved Zelenskyy’s actions, in April 2022, his approval rating reached 74 percent (statista.com 2022). Jackson Katz (2016) observed a similar phenomenon in relation to Donald Trump. After the ISIS attack on Paris on November 13, 2015, Trump made comments about

how the US military needed to be rebuilt so that no other country can ever challenge its superiority. After these suggestions, Trump's poll numbers jumped five points. Katz (2016) elegantly summarizes this phenomenon and argues that despite decades of epochal transformations in gender norms, a large number of populations still need a strong (White) man in charge as a symbol of strong leadership. I argue that in the Ukrainian case the need for a strong man is further supported not only by domestic but international media as well.

In conceptualizing hegemonic masculinities, this article follows the notions of masculinities developed by sociologist Raewyn Connell. Connell (1995) suggests that masculinities should be defined in relation to femininities because they are located within the gender binary. She also points out that masculinities are always linked to power and are produced at various sites and scales. Connell underlines that there are multiple masculinities and that hegemonic masculinity is defined in relation to other subordinate, marginalized masculinities and femininities concepts (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). It is crucial to underscore the limitations of the concept of hegemonic masculinity because the framing operates with the universal assumption of patriarchal gender relations, which might disregard or overlook significant changes in local or regional gender power relations (Christensen and Rasmussen 2015). For this reason, my critical work intervenes by suggesting a close analysis of post-Soviet Russian and Ukrainian masculinity discourses as they unfold across space and time.

The first part of the article will discuss the late Soviet masculinities that emerged in the wake of the collapse of the USSR and the independence of Ukraine. I argue that it is necessary to analyze what Soviet scholars have called "crises of masculinity" (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2013) in the late Soviet era to understand post-Soviet policies that were implemented to address these social "crises" and how they erupted into large-scale wars. The following two sections discuss the construction of hegemonic militarized masculinities in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine as they developed in accordance with each country's political choices about their futures. The last section analyzes how Western notions of gender and heroism have affected the differing depiction of Ukrainian and Russian masculinities. It argues that the current war between Russia and Ukraine is fueled by the Western promotion of militarized masculinities, pitting a bloody contest of wills among men as the synecdoche of inter-state tension. The data for the first section is collected from existing literature on late Soviet masculinities. The sources for the next three chapters are gathered from scholarly articles on Putin's and Zelenskyy's image, international media articles, and movies such as *Two Men at War* (2022) and a viral video, with 2.3 million views, from Bill Maher (2022) *New Rule: Make America Grind Again*. Methodologically, this article uses content analysis to examine how international media depicts those competing militarized masculinities during the war and how this discourse affects (and emboldens) the ongoing political crises. My approach to thinking of war as a gender event brings together text, subtext, and context in an interdisciplinary manner that speaks to gender and masculinity studies, history and memory, critical military studies, cultural media studies, and global/international studies.

Late Soviet Masculinities and the Male Crisis

To understand current dominant types of masculinities in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine, it is necessary to look into the past and structures of masculinity. This section investigates scholarly literature that discusses this topic and its impact on East Europe and Eurasia. The development and expansion of an independent women's movement in the late Soviet and post-Soviet era gave a push to women's and gender studies in post-Soviet space. Since the early 1990s, academics in Russia and other post-Soviet countries have studied concepts of femininity and how gender systems have been historically and socially constructed. Parallel to this movement emerged questions about unspoken notions of manliness and male gender norms (Randall 2012). One of the crucial questions this field brings up is, how have "hegemonic" constructions of masculine identity been molded by historically and culturally specific conceptions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class? This section of the article narrows down the aforementioned question and explores its development from the Soviet period until the current Ukrainian crisis.

Each new regime in the Soviet Union established its own notions of manhood and masculinity. From 1917 up to the 1940s, Russia and later the Soviet Union urged men to prioritize their public duties such as the defense of the Soviet Union. The private sphere, which included fatherhood, families, and household responsibilities, was seen as less and less important to this mandate of service to the nation. Two world wars and political repressions in the 1930s further separated men from the private sphere, drawing them into the war machine and soldiering (Chernova 2012). Under Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet government became more preoccupied with the "woman question" and even increased social and financial support for motherhood. However, these changes did not affect Soviet perceptions of manliness as a cultural prerogative and national imperative. The Soviet government aimed to create a new Soviet man, an independent political thinker (under state control), family breadwinner, and warrior. However, Soviet gender policies and practices had the opposite effect. Social, political, and economic challenges led to the disenfranchisement of Soviet men and left them feeling undermined (Randall 2012). The "emasculatation" of the Soviet man, which became more visible as the USSR was weakening, led major thinkers of the day to an assumption that the Soviet Union was experiencing a crisis of masculinity.

The late Soviet era, since the 1980s, was "diagnosed" with "crises of masculinity" that came in the wake of the disintegration of the USSR as a once mighty superpower. However, it is important to differentiate between Western and Soviet perceptions of the "crises of masculinity." In the Western context, the problem was linked to pressure from the public sphere, which commended a specific performance of a range of gender roles (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2013). In the late Soviet era, the "crisis of masculinity" served as a concept that veiled the acknowledgment of social discontent by men. Political and economic freedom were implied as the basis for men's inability to perform traditional male roles. The crisis of masculinity thesis was supported by the ruling elites and scholars who depicted post-Soviet

Russian men as victims of their material circumstances, thus requiring ideological buttressing (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2013). The thesis proceeds to argue that men's troubles were intensified by the threat of economic modernization, which affected men disproportionately because they were more involved in the labor force than women (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2013).

The "crisis of masculinity" required radical political solutions. The creators of *perestroika*, with Leonid Brezhnev in charge, believed that the new liberalized economic system would promote a new type of man, who was depicted as an independent property owner, and whose success would eventually send women back to their traditional gender roles. New political and economic programs disregarded women's emancipation goals. Soviet politicians and journalists propagated the idea of returning women to the private sphere and reducing their high labor participation rates (Eichler 2011). The *Perestroika* era reintroduced and promoted fundamental gender differences and traditional gender roles in the face of socioeconomic upheaval.

The *Perestroika* period, however, was accompanied by the *Glasnost* policy, which opened space for a more critical examination of Soviet policies, including gender norms. As a political scientist and women's studies scholar, Maya Eichler (2011) argues that the Soviet–Afghan war was one of the major turning points in challenging Soviet masculinities. Owing to the *Glasnost* policies, the atrocities of the war and Soviet soldiers' suffering became more visible to the public, eventually contributing to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, this change did not necessarily prompt the demise of militarized masculinities but rather hinted at upcoming modifications to the existing gender regime (Eichler 2011).

The archetype that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union desired follows what Soviet writer and sociologist Aleksander Zinov'ev (1983) called *Homo Sovieticus*. Ideal Soviet men were supposed to move beyond any racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious differences and succeed in all their efforts. However, in reality, the millennial ideas of citizen equality came into conflict with culturally prescribed gender roles, leading to the creation of new kinds of social inequalities (Smirnova 2017). Eventually, the discrepancies between the government's expectations and the socioeconomic challenges that Soviet men experienced led them to develop a nihilistic approach to their lives. *Homo Sovieticus*, who had little interest in his or collective's work and was blindly obedient to his government, drowned his sorrows in alcoholism, a symptom of nations in peril (Hinote and Webber 2012).

The hopes of maintaining dominant Soviet masculine norms quickly vanished in post-Soviet warring realities. The emergence of the fifteen new countries with distinct regimes challenged the prevailing regional power apparatus in which Russia would still retain its role as overseer of its formerly controlled territories. For male leaders like Putin, the collapse of the Soviet Union was seen as another opportunity to reestablish the real masculinity that was once lost (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2013). As Russia under Putin sought to regain status on the international scene, we can spot these efforts, which culminated in the invasion of Ukraine.

Russian Masculinities and the Return of Soviet *Muzhik*

This section focuses on post-Soviet masculinities in the Russian Federation. The collapse of the Soviet Union ended the viable dreams of communist futures, and countries started the transition process from state-run command economies to a global market economy. In Russia, the transition was thought of as an opportunity to foster men's creativities formerly limited by state socialism. All blame for the "emasculatation" and "feminization" of Russian men was cast on the Soviet approach to gender relations, which stifled social change and innovation (Kay 2006).

After the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, images of the desired roles for men and women flooded Russian print media (Yurchak 2002). A successful post-Soviet person was depicted as someone working in or managing something in the business sector. At the same time, magazines prompted women to find their niche in the domain of home and beauty (Asztalos Morell and Tiurikova 2014). Russian men-dominated media and male pundits actively reinforced the resurgence of rigid essentialist notions of gender. The implications of these discourses had an obvious negative impact on women as natural subordinates; however, men were not the "winners" in these scenarios either (Kay 2006). The market fluctuations and financial situation in Russia made it impossible for Russian men to return to their primary roles as the sole breadwinner or create a new role of a successful businessman, one that could lift Russia out of its economic slump. As Boris Kagarlitsky's (2002) analysis of the economic situation during Boris Yeltsin's presidency (1991–1999) demonstrates, Russian agricultural and industrial production fell by half compared with the pre-Yeltsin era. Even the oil industry, which still dominates Russian economic production, was down by 44 percent from the height of the Soviet era. However, the most striking example of post-Soviet Russia's downfall was the sharp fall in population. During the years of Yeltsin's first presidency, the decline was 3.4 million (Kagarlitsky 2002). The first Russian–Chechnyan war (1994–1996) further complicated post-Soviet men's lives as reproductive subjects. The First Chechnyan war had a similar impact as the Russian Afghan war because it questioned the necessity for mandatory military service and emphasized that the post-Soviet regime did not deliver the promise of transition to an all-volunteer military force (Eichler 2011).

The first president of post-Soviet Russia, Boris Yeltsin became the face of a "defeated" and enfeebled Russian man, a man who lost the Cold War and incited an unsuccessful war against Chechnya in 1994. Yeltsin drank heavily during his presidency and was frequently caught on camera stumbling or falling over, even exhibiting improper behavior toward female secretaries. Yeltsin became a worldwide example of a fallen Russian man. His political career was bluntly but fairly described by the German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, which published his obituary in 2007 under the title "The Rise and Fall of the Drunken Czar" (Mettke 2007). It is not surprising that one of the main reasons for dissatisfaction with Yeltsin and other authorities was the general feeling of demasculinization, which was seen as problematic on the domestic and international levels. Yeltsin could not deliver the promises

of restoring collective male (and by proxy national) dignity to Russia. His rating was around 4 percent at the end of 1999.

The inebriated visage of Yeltsin was followed by the cold calculating demeanor of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, who came to power in 2000. From the very beginning, Putin was presented as a long-awaited savior to the country. Even Yeltsin described him as one:

I was waiting for a new general to appear, unlike any other. Or rather, a general who was like the generals I read about in books when I was young. I was waiting...Time passed, and such a general appeared. And soon after his arrival, it became obvious to our whole society how really courageous and highly professional our military people were. This “general” was named Colonel Vladimir Putin. (Yeltsin and Fitzpatrick 2000, 70)

Putin embodied several types of militarized masculinity, the Soviet military style and new post-millennial authoritarian form that often plays with the mass media and social media, twisting and weaponizing them to his own ends. Putin’s image as a strongman was created in parallel with a dominant Russian masculinity model of the 2000s, which was commonly referred to as “Russian *muzhik*” (Russian man) (Riabov and Riabova 2014). Contemporary Russian *muzhik* was always depicted in relation to the Soviet and Western images of masculinity. Unlike the Soviet man, the Russian *muzhik* was an independent, self-reliant businessman, who enjoyed his relative independence from the state. Unlike his imagined Western counterpart, Russian *muzhik* was strong and rough, spoke little but meant business. *Muzhik* did not care about political correctness, and sexism and homophobia did not seem to bother him at all (Riabov and Riabova 2014). Putin’s personal character and beliefs easily fitted criteria that defined the Russian *muzhik*.

Compared with Boris Yeltsin, whom the West saw as a weak, out-of-control, self-indulgent character, President Putin presented himself as a cold, pragmatic, and rational manager (Randall 2012; Riabov and Riabova 2014). The toxic masculinity and gender stereotypes that Putin embodied and promoted (shirtless and riding on horses) enabled him to become Russia’s longest running leader since Stalin. Putin himself came from a military background; as a former KGB agent, he was surrounded by security service personnel, whom he later hired as members of his administrative team. One of the primary goals of Putin’s first presidency (2000–2008) was to restore the Russian people’s belief in military forces. Putin saw the second war with Chechnya (1999–2000) as a chance to rehabilitate Russia’s image and the Russian *muzhik*. So successful were his attempts that Putin was reelected as president in 2012 and 2018.

Putin’s war campaign against Russia’s neighbors presented itself as an anti-terrorist operation and encouraged patriotism and brutal heroism as well as cultural imperialism. Creating an omnipotent image of a Russian soldier/hero and Chechen “terrorist” was crucial in the revitalization of militarized masculinities. Putin’s image of Russia kept adapting to political changes in the West, which included more post-Soviet countries wanting to join the European

Union (EU). With time, this cultural ideological project detached more from the Western version of manhood and drew closer to the Russian *muzhik*, following Putin's personal example to legitimate their regional power, which Dmitry Medvedev (Russia's third president) did as soon as he came to power. Despite high hopes for modernization and the promises to end the conflict in the Caucasus, Medvedev engaged in war with the neighboring Republic of Georgia after three months of being in office. Despite ending the major counterinsurgency operation in Chechnya, Russian militants stayed active in the Caucasus region as permanent occupiers (Ray, n.d.). Demonstration of patriarchal and nationalist attitudes became highly regarded by Russian conservatives, necessary to establish power over foreign and domestic threats. The somewhat liberal Medvedev was soon replaced by Putin after one term as president, even if his views hewed closer to Putin's more iron-fisted views over time.

Saying that Putin came to power in 2012 seems ironic because, in fact, he never left his position of power. Russian mayor, Sergei Sobianin, announced Putin's comeback accordingly: "We have a candidate for president who does not chatter, who works really hard...I know how he takes responsibility for everything; he is a real *muzhik*, a real leader, a man of his word and deeds" (Riabov and Riabova 2014, 27). From that point on, Putin fully embraced the Russian *muzhik* identity, a big part of which was the promotion of militarized masculinity as the only possible form of maleness. Not surprisingly, soon after his reelection, Putin signed Russian federal law "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating a Denial of Traditional Family Values," which in Western media is commonly known as the anti-gay law or gay propaganda law (Hodges 2015). This was met with protests by gay activists and the international community. The situation only got worse from that point on as the specter of war shored up the "straight state" (Canada 2009). Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and in 2022 started a full-scale war against Ukraine.

Re-masculinization and Heroism in Ukraine

Not only was Russian re-masculinization an internal process, but it also required the creation of a demasculinized external enemy, Other. As social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1982) argues, human beings share a need to create a positive self-identity. The desire is accomplished not only by bettering oneself but also by worsening and denigrating an out-group. Thus, re-masculinization processes are always accompanied by demasculinization of the enemy. Both Eastern Europe and Caucasian states were the primary objects of Russia's re-masculinization politics. Particularly important for Putin were the former Soviet states that went through Color Revolutions: The Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005) (Tudoroiu 2007; Wilson 2010; Toal 2017; Petrov 2020). Color Revolutions openly demonstrated that these countries were no longer interested in aligning themselves with their former colonizer and wanted to get closer to Europe. Political opposition by these states to outside influence was perceived by Putin as Western intervention and meddling, which included importing its feminized Western liberal culture. Russia refused to consider these countries independent or

autonomous, ascribing their desires to join the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) only to the United States' growing influence in the post-Soviet space. Depicting these countries as non-self-governing weak entities that needed to be securitized and protected allowed Russia to argue that they lacked rationality and strength and hence the need for Russian paternalism. For this section, I focus on the case of Ukraine and how Russian masculinization policies affected Ukraine's perception of itself and its invader.

Russian re/demasculinization policies became most visible during the gas supply dispute between Russia and Ukraine in 2006. Russian protesters gathered at the US embassy in Moscow to show their dissatisfaction with Ukrainian debt for Russian imported natural gas. One of the activists had a banner saying, "A Gentleman Always Pays for His Girlfriend" (Riabov and Riabova 2015, 28), implying that the US should be responsible for paying Ukrainian sovereign debt. Another clear attempt to question Ukrainian masculinity as a matter of international concern was Vladimir Putin's direct comparison, in 2009, of Ukraine to an overly picky girl: "They should have no illusions; the girls should have no illusions: the groom has other choices; they have to understand" (Riabov and Riabova 2014, 28). With this comparison, Putin attempted to remind Ukrainian politicians that Russia, as an older and mature "groom," had options to export its natural gas through other countries and once again usurp Ukrainian masculinity by referring to the country as a fickle young girl who needed proper tutelage and domestication.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine took a similar path to Russia in refining its gender norms with traditionalist and nationalist undertones. Unlike Soviet emphasis on women's dual role (public workers and private spouses), post-Soviet Ukraine concentrated on women's private role (domesticity and motherhood) with a profound impact on women's relations with the state. In a new market economy, women no longer had access to state welfare benefits that once supported them under the Soviets. Market orientations affected Ukrainian men as well because their success became dependent on their performance in the markets. This pressure evokes a range of responses from impotent men who are unable to "perform" their duties. For example, alcoholism among Ukrainian men is six to seven times higher than among Ukrainian women (Bureychak 2013). Not surprisingly, male life expectancy is eleven years lower than that of females. Forty percent of men usually work more than forty hours per week, which, of course, impacts their physical and mental health (Bureychek 2013).

In search of new forms of masculinities, Ukrainians rediscovered their Cossack roots. The importance of Cossack identity became more visible after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. The mural, pictured in Figure 1, is one of the depictions of renewed Ukrainian military masculinity. The mural is called "Ukrainian Saint George." The authors, *Interesni Kazki* (Aleksei Bordusov and Vladimir Manzhos), argue that their work intends to emphasize historical moments of the struggle of the Ukrainian people for freedom and independence. They describe the image accordingly:

In the center of the piece—the Ukrainian Cossack warrior with a falcon head, hacking the snake. I deliberately used two images—first one is the ancient, pre-Christian Slavic symbol—the falcon, a symbol of the sun and the victory of light over darkness, and the second one is a Christian—St. George or Ukr. Saints Yuriy, to create a universal image of the people, fighting against evil, that is serpent, which represents a trouble that came to Ukraine. (Wakim 2015)



Figure 1: “Ukrainian Saint George”
 Source: Gasviani 2016

The mural combines the elements of religious, nationalist, and Western masculinities. I use this mural and its meanings as an entry point for discussing a newly imagined version of an ideal Ukrainian man. I argue that the mural of Ukrainian St. George shows how integral Orthodox Christianity is to traditional warrior gender ideology. Whereas the Russian state-sanctioned use of religious propaganda to promote Russian unique “state-civilization” and state-sanctioned homophobia has been openly discussed (Romanets 2017), similar tendencies have been selectively ignored in Ukraine. Queer soldiers in Ukrainian armies are the best depiction of the controversy. Whereas militarized masculinities are praised by both the state and the church, queer militarized masculinities are considered as an abnormality that needs to be hidden or eliminated (Berdnyk 2021). The only type of acceptable masculinity became Ukrainian Cossack.

The virile portraits of Cossacks became a crucial part of the Ukrainian national identity and ideal masculinity model, one that President Zelenskyy epitomizes with his commonly worn fatigue attire. Cossacks were a military community that played a significant role in European and Ukrainian geopolitics from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries (Bureychak 2009; Bureychak and Petrenko 2015). The importance of Cossacks to Ukrainian history was downplayed during the Soviet Union because the Soviet government was afraid of revitalizing ethnonationalistic feelings among Ukrainians. After the destruction of the Soviet Union, Cossack identity was reignited to fuel Ukrainian nationalism and to establish

more connections between Ukraine and Western culture. Cossacks are portrayed as the archetype of real Ukrainian men and women, which means the promotion of patriotic and militaristic masculinities for men and glorified motherhood for women. Ukrainian militarized masculinities were supported by the images of fighters for the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) fighters. OUN was created in Vienna in 1929 with the goal of regaining Ukrainian independence (Bureychak and Petrenko 2015). OUN and UPA fighters were using methods of disruption, expropriation, and assassination. As expected, Soviet authorities saw them as terrorists; however, their picture was completely changed and evolved in post-Soviet Ukraine. OUN and UPA fighters became national heroes and sources of inspiration for all Ukrainians, serving as mobilization for political causes and common action.

The social and political insecurities that started with the Orange Revolution (2004) and intensified during Euromaidan in 2013 have significantly enhanced the importance of militarized masculinities. Male activists of the Euromaidan and the war in the Donbas brought a sense of historical continuity and “brought new meaning to the notions of victimhood, bravery, independence, and power” (Bureychak and Petrenko 2015, 22). Ukrainian masculinities have been adapting to rapidly occurring geopolitical changes. In 2004, Ukraine declared its pro-Western foreign policy, since then, it has only had one pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014), who had to flee to Russia when Euromaidan started with a serious pursuit of the “European Dream.” Arduous work by the Ukrainian people and their desire to become a member of the EU finally resulted in the establishment of a visa-free regime, with the EU and the signing of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement. However, Ukrainian success did not last long: Ukrainians and the rest of the world were still shocked when they woke up on February 24, 2022, to Russian rockets falling from the Ukrainian sky. The next section will discuss how hegemonic Ukrainian masculinities defined the (dis)course of this war and how the militarized image of Ukraine’s current president informs and shapes possible peace negotiations.

Western Masculinities and the Hero Worship of Zelenskyy

Russian and Ukrainian perceptions of Western masculinities started to shift with their different foreign policy approaches. For Russia, the West always served as the paramount archrival. With Putin’s ascendance to power and popularization of the Russian *muzhik* identity, Russian propaganda started the process of Western “demasculinization.” Russian disinformation sources created an image of the West that they refer to as “Gayropa,” a derogatory term that presumes that homosexuality is the essence of the European lifestyle. This discourse argues that homosexuality is key to losing one’s manhood and strength (Foxall 2019). The hegemonic discourse of Russian nationalism depicts Europe and the United States as degenerate civilizations best manifested in “the collapse of the traditional gender order: the triumph of homosexuals and feminists, the legalization of same-sex marriages, and the destruction of the family” (Riabov and Riabova 2014, 29). Russia also uses this homophobic

discourse to represent itself as the last bastion of White Christian normalcy and family morality. In addition, Russian propaganda associates European demasculinization with liberal values such as social tolerance, secularism, and democracy. This image of Western decline is crucial for the Russian authoritarian regime to justify its oppressive measures against Ukraine.

Ukrainian perception of the West and the Western masculinities is heavily influenced by a desire to become a member of the EU. Ukraine made a number of structural adjustments to present itself as a nation worthy of being a member of the EU (and an ally of the United States). Ukrainians' ability to now travel to Europe freely and have open access to the European market fostered a more desirable pro-Western inter/national identity. Some gender studies scholars (Wojnicka, Mellström, and Boise 2022) argue that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy presents these changes in Ukrainian masculinities. One of the examples that is often brought up to define Zelenskyy's non-traditional display of masculinity is a viral music video of him dancing in high heels while wearing a midriff-baring top under Beyonce's famous song, "Single Ladies." At the beginning of the original video, "Cossacks Made in Ukraine," Zelenskyy and three other performers show up in traditional Cossack outfits that they later rip off to flaunt their latex crop tops, leather pants, and high heels. Katarzyna Wojnicka, Ulf Mellström, and Sam de Boise (2022) argue that "this performance can be interpreted as an attempt to queering the most traditional and still desired form of Ukrainian masculinity" (85). Yet I contend that this performance and its popularity portray a deeper, more complex picture. Seeing this video as an effort at queering traditional Ukrainian masculinity can obscure the fact that the video was initially made as a parody of the song "Love" made by the Ukrainian queer boys' band, "Kazaky." "Kazaky" are known for performing in black crop tops, high heels, and latex-like outfits. The Zelenskyy parody of "Kazaky" can also be seen as a mockery or spoof of the band and invisibilizing the original queer artists. Furthermore, his action of putting on heels does not necessarily mean that he aims to disavow mainstream modes of masculinity. In a famous TV show, "Servants of the People," where the former comedian and actor, Zelenskyy, played the role of the Ukrainian president, Zelenskyy's character becomes president after his video goes viral. In the video, his character is talking about corrupted Ukrainian officials who are limiting the country's progress, he uses the derogatory term "pidaras" to describe them. "Pidaras" is a common Russian swear word used to describe a gay person; however, it is used as an insult even when the targets are not homosexual. It is another expression of national pride by way of distancing from gay people. "Servants of the People" finally aired on Netflix, one of the biggest streaming companies in the world, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as Americans came to favor the handsome straight-presenting actor-turned-warrior politician.²

² In English subtitles "pidaras" was translated as "bastard," which did not convey the gender-charged meaning of the original word.

Zelenskyy's "sensitive" governing style is often compared favorably to Putin's one-man governance approach. Zelenskyy's leadership style, which is perceived as less hierarchical and more open to the people, is seen as less toxic and more acceptable (Wojnicka, Mellström, and de Boise 2022). However, social media in the West continues to describe Zelenskyy as a "man with iron balls," or a "real man." Scholars who believe that Zelenskyy does not represent a new image of toxic masculinity argue that "such attempts aimed at portraying Zelenskyy as the newest ideal of hegemonic masculinity seem to be made against his ways of understanding masculinity, are counterproductive and (unconsciously?) reproduce and praise [the] type of masculinity embodied by Putin, the perpetrator of the violence, that Zelenskyy acts against" (Wojnicka, Mellström, and de Boise 2022, 85). This assessment brings up further queries about portrayals of him as a "man's man."

As previously mentioned, Zelenskyy's non-hegemonic masculine image is questionable and open to critique. Avid supporters of Ukraine's leader and his government have failed to mention the fate of transgender Ukrainian women who were turned away from the third country borders and sent back to Ukraine owing to their identity. Since the war started, international news has barely covered any stories of transgender women and non-binary people who were inappropriately searched at the border and asked to "go back and fight" as "men" (Greenberg 2022; Heinrichs 2022). Even transgender women, who had legally changed their gender on their birth certificates, were not allowed to leave the war-torn country (Tondo 2022). The misgendering and challenges that Ukrainian transgender women are facing in trying to leave the country put these laws to a test, and, clearly, the Ukrainian government is failing to uphold the new liberal LGBTQ+ laws they adopted in 2015.³ The question of transgender women during the Russo-Ukrainian war brings up further questions about gender and notions of masculinity and femininity during violent conflicts. The fact that transgender women at the Polish border are sent back to Ukraine to fight as "men" is one of the examples that shows that even if Zelenskyy personally supports queer communities, there are few real actions taken to protect transgender and non-binary people from harm. Ukrainian anti-discrimination law had been overruled by martial law imposed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Despite these examples, Western media are trying to crystallize and cement a heroic idolization of Zelenskyy so it can fit in with current Western liberal notions of masculinity, particularly the image of a progressive man who can be soft and masculine at the same time, a fighter, and a lover. I argue that this ambivalent gendered imaging creates the illusion that militarized masculinities can be compatible with less threatening "soft and caring" forms of masculinity. Western political forces, such as NATO, have been actively using social media to

³ In 2015, Ukraine adopted an anti-discrimination law that bans discrimination in the workplace, including that based on gender or sexual orientation. In 2016, Ukrainian officials simplified the legal transition process for transgender people and granted gay and bisexual men the right to donate blood (Shevtsova 2020). Even though these changes were imperfect and did not fully guarantee the safety and security of queer people, it is still seen as a progressive move on the part of the Ukrainian government.

promote the aforementioned type of Western masculinity. The case of Lasse Matberg, a Norwegian naval officer and Instagram influencer who has become the face of NATO's largest military exercise since the Cold War, demonstrates NATO's effort to create a new type of Western masculinity that attempts to combine characteristics of the Western imperial, military masculinity with more democratic and progressive forms of maleness (McLaughlin 2018). Matberg's outstanding physique and Viking looks make him very appealing to the general public, thereby simplifying NATO's campaign effort to promote their ideas through his image. Matberg is regularly seen on NATO's social media accounts promoting military training alongside NATO's secretary. His actions further normalize war preparations and even make them more desirable (Hedling, Edenborg, and Strand 2022). I argue that a similar logic works behind Zelenskyy's image-making to make him more acceptable to the liberal West.

Zelenskyy has become extremely popular on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok). One of the most viral tweets that appeared during the early days of the Russian attack on Ukraine said: "BREAKING: every woman in your life now has at least a small crush on Volodymyr Zelenskyy and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it" (Mahdawi 2022). Sexualization and adoration of political leaders is not a new phenomenon and can be found in almost every contemporary society in which image-making plays a major role in identity formation. However, Zelenskyy's case demonstrated how quickly this phenomenon can overshadow or distract from the actual war. Even though Zelenskyy himself argued against idolization of political leaders during his inauguration speech (The Presidential Office of Ukraine 2019), the media continues to depict him as a symbol of courage and heroism. The *Vogue Magazine* cover titled "Portrait of Bravery: Ukraine's First Lady, Olena Zelenska" further demonstrates how not only Zelenskyy but also his wife became a subject of admiration (Donadio 2022). Even though the *Vogue* cover provoked a controversy over the morality of their actions (Kaylan 2022), the Ukrainian president's supporters justified it by arguing that this type of exposure brings more attention to the situation in Ukraine (Smith 2022). However, they fail to point out how the glamorized pictures of the Zelenskyy family further romanticize war and detract attention from the Ukrainian people whose war-torn daily realities are not captioned by famous photographers.⁴

The Western media's attempt to further promote Zelenskyy's macho image not only propagates a fantasy of overwhelming virile maleness but also exposes the hypocrisy around the Western double standards. Whereas the Western media and political leaders actively praise Zelenskyy for being a men's man, they openly mock Putin's display of militarized masculinity. At the latest G7 Summit (2022), world leaders found time to discuss and ridicule Putin's bare-chested horseback-riding image (even though the cowboy image is prevalent in the West). The British prime minister, Boris Johnson, even jokingly suggested showing Putin G7 leaders' "pecs" (Propper 2022). Whereas Putin's masculine image has been ridiculed by

⁴ The *Vogue* photoshoot of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Olena Zelenska was conducted by famous celebrity photographer Annie Leibovitz.

the West, it has definitely been praised at home by many. One of the clear examples of Putin's admiration as a sex idol and men's man is modern Russian music. The Russian singer, Mashani, wrote the song "My Putin" to show her admiration for and dedication to the Russian president and thank him for taking over the Crimean Peninsula (Barishnikov 2015). The mega famous Russian rapper and businessman, Timati, in collaboration with another rapper Guf, wrote a song called "Moscow." The song was written during the repression of candidates for the election of the Moscow State Duma (parliament) and aimed to disparage Russian opposition while praising Putin and his political apparatus. The song proudly states, "[M]y best friend is President Putin" and claims that the "Russian capital does not hold gay parades" (Sauer 2022). Besides domestic praise, Putin is also supported by many Third World leaders. The question of why many of the Third World countries support Russia is beyond the scope of this article; however, it is important to point out that the image of a strong authoritarian leader who stands against the Imperial United States and Europe is very appealing to many former European colonies (Kammer et al. 2022).

Liberal Western fetishization of Zelenskyy also fails to take into consideration the Ukrainian people's dissatisfaction with the current president's connections with capitalist oligarchs. During his acting career, Zelenskyy worked at "1+1 Media Group," which was owned by a famous Israeli-Cypriot billionaire Ihor Kolomoisky. The same TV channel is responsible for producing "Servant of the People," the TV show that later prompted Zelenskyy's political career. The State Department banned Kolomoisky and his immediate family from entering the United States owing to allegations against him and his partner, Hennadiy Boholyubov, that the businessmen had stolen billions of dollars from PrivatBank in Ukraine and laundered the money by buying real estate and companies in the United States. Kolomoisky has hinted that Zelenskyy came to power with his support and that he was thus very disappointed when the new president of Ukraine did not help him to regain control over PrivatBank. This tension between Zelenskyy and Kolomoisky has delayed Ukraine's parliament's decision to pass the law prohibiting restitution of nationalized banks, which was one of the conditions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for granting Ukraine support during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Warsaw Institute Foundation 2019).

Whereas Western media and scholars selectively choose to ignore Zelenskyy's association with corrupted businessmen, they actively discuss Putin's corrupted regime (Denisova-Schmidt 2012; Adomeit 2016; Buckley 2018). Western media outlets often publish articles asking a variation of the question "Is Putin secretly the world's richest man?" (Holodny 2015; Harding 2021; Koffler 2022). Because Putin is very secretive about his fortune, most of the articles circulate assumptions about his wealth. In addition, Western media never shies away from talking about his dictatorial style of leadership that even scares oligarchs into handing him a portion of their wealth. *New York Post* journalist Rebekah Koffler (2022) describes Putin accordingly: "a cold-blooded, egotistic dictator, who has led a clandestine life filled with mysterious affairs, czar-worthy palace intrigue, and incalculable wealth handed to him by

oligarchs who stole from the Russian common man” (3). Even though Putin undoubtedly earned his wealth through extortion and theft and it is important to openly discuss his actions, it is also critical to shed light on all political leaders despite their favorable image.

These examples do not argue that there are exact similarities between Zelenskyy and Putin as individuals or suggest that their political motivations and actions are the same. However, I argue that the portrayal of Zelenskyy’s image during the Russo-Ukrainian war depicts him as a character with a dominant gender typology, which was often attributed to Putin. Whereas the Russian president’s corrupted regime is frequently discussed in the Western media, corruption allegations are not pinned onto Zelenskyy because he is represented as a leader under siege and not one based on conquest and expropriation.

Here, I emphasize that hegemonic militarized masculinities prevent countries from achieving peace by reinforcing gender regimes and values. Framing Zelenskyy as a hero who fights till the end for all people and Putin as an overcompensating bully, as a measure of idealized military manhood, only prolongs the war and leaves little room for a post-gender demilitarized world.

Conclusion

This article examined the contrasting gendered depictions of Russian and Ukrainian presidents to analyze ongoing geopolitical crises in Russia and Ukraine and the ways it influences dominant types of masculinities. By closely examining the ways hegemonic masculinities have changed since the late Soviet period, I argue that post-Soviet gender regimes have been formed in response to what Soviet scholars called “crises of masculinity” that have erupted into full-blown political crises. Since the last Soviet attempt to reinvent an ideal Soviet man failed with the collapse of the Soviet Union, newly emerged nationalistic republics revitalized binary gender norms. The ideal Soviet man who was supposed to move beyond any racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious differences in the service of buttressing the Soviet empire was officially forgotten. Instead, post-Soviet realities depicted a late Soviet man as a weak person who drowned his sorrows in alcohol and needed to be revitalized through war.

I contend that each Soviet space had its unique ways of recreating gender norms; however, some of them were heavily impacted by the EU and NATO enlargement policies. Russia resurrected the figure of the Russian muzhik who, unlike his Soviet predecessor, was not economically and politically tied to the state and who, unlike his European counterpart, did not care about political correctness. Ukraine tried to revitalize military masculinity through the image of Ukrainian Cossacks. The new Ukrainian masculinity was also influenced by Western imperial masculinity that combined military masculinity with more democratic and progressive forms of maleness. However, as my discourse analysis has shown, both types of masculinities and their examples, Putin and Zelenskyy, embody differential forms of militarized masculinity.

Despite having similar Soviet roots and the structures that support hegemonic militarized masculinities, most of the Western media and leaders prefer the Ukrainian gender model

epitomized by Zelenskyy because it approximates the Western type of soft-but-strong masculinity. The NATO model of power that combines Western imperialism with military masculinity with more democratic, progressive forms of maleness is presented as most desired. Not surprisingly, the Western media is trying to ascribe these characteristics to Zelenskyy to make him and his campaign more appealing to the Western population but depicting Putin's type of masculinity as unacceptable and toxic. I argue that Zelenskyy's image hides the real picture of a corrupted leader who promotes the idea of only one acceptable type of manliness. I emphasize the need to critically compare Zelenskyy and Putin to show the ways masculine characterizations bring more death and violence. However, it is vital to spotlight how their political and gender style choices rely on the same concept of toxic militarized masculinities that has enveloped the planet. Thus, idolizing and sexualizing political leaders, especially in the midst of the conflict, romanticize war and perpetuate alarmingly simplistic narratives of good versus evil that do not offer lasting solutions to problems.

After the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Ukrainians and Russians left their countries in droves (Baranova et al. 2022). These movements opened up questions of how notions of masculinities change when asylum seekers encounter gendered narratives of host countries. Further research is needed to see if and how clashes between different types of masculinities cause conflicts and are used to maintain heteropatriarchal norms. In addition, further investigation is required to analyze the ways the notions of militarized masculinities impact the lives of queer communities and their choice to either participate in or avoid mandatory military services or armed conflict.

Informed Consent

The author has obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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