

## Motives for Women's Participation in Military Conflicts: The Ukrainian Case

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# Motives for Women's Participation in Military Conflicts: The Ukrainian Case

Moterų dalyvavimo kariniuose konfliktuose motyvai:  
Ukrainos atvejis

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the motives for direct (in military actions) and non-direct (in administrative or military support actions) participation of Ukrainian women in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian military conflict that began in 2014. It aims to reveal the motives that have led pro-Ukrainian women to take part in defending their country by allowing the participants of the study to speak for themselves. The article draws on twenty (20) e-interviews with women who were involved in the war in Ukraine and five (5) semi-structured interviews with people who due to their professional activities were able to observe the conflict from the inside (journalists, NGO workers, and war photographers), as well as secondary sources available. Content analysis of the interview data was implemented. The article identifies four main motives for participation in war: patriotism, grievances, personal loss and suffering, and women's empowerment. This information corresponds with similar studies conducted elsewhere in the region.

**Keywords:** women, Ukraine, Russian-Ukrainian military conflict, motives, patriotism, women's empowerment.

**Summary:** Šiame straipsnyje yra analizuojami moterų tiesioginio (kariniuose veiksmuose) ir netiesioginio (administraciniuose, kariuomenės paramos veiksmuose) dalyvavimo kariniame Rusijos–Ukrainos konflikte, kuris prasidėjo 2014 m., motyvai. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra, leidžiant pasisakyti pačioms tyrimo dalyvėms, atskleisti motyvus, kurie paskatino proukrainietes moteris dalyvauti ginant šalį. Straipsnyje yra remiamasi 20 e. interviu su moterimis, kurios buvo įsitraukusios į karą Ukrainoje, ir penkiais pusiau struktūruotais interviu su žmonėmis, kurie dėl savo profesinės veiklos turėjo galimybę stebėti konfliktą iš vidaus (žurnalistai, NVO darbuotojai, karo fotografai), taip pat prieinamais antriniais šaltiniais. Interviu duomenys buvo analizuojami taikant turinio analizę. Šiame straipsnyje yra pristatomi keturi pagrindiniai dalyvavimo kare motyvai: patriotizmas, nuoskaudos, asmeninės netektys ir kančios bei moterų įgalinimas. Ši informacija atliepia panašius tyrimus, atliktus kituose regionuose.

**Keywords:** moterys, Ukraina, Rusijos–Ukrainos karinis konfliktas, motyvai, patriotizmas, moterų įgalinimas.

## Introduction

Some studies on women's participation in war argue that war is men's business<sup>1</sup>, and that women are victims of war and there is no place for them in it. Feminist academics argue that in this case, gender becomes an expression of power relations<sup>2</sup> and that we comprehend and evaluate wars, their causes, and consequences through a male prism<sup>3</sup>. In this article, women's participation in war is considered from a different perspective, by rejecting the external stereotypes and the conventional arguments that grant war a particularly masculine tone. By empowering

women's own voices, this article explores the motivations of women who have been fighting on the pro-Ukrainian side in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that began in 2014, participating in the defense of the state from hostile external forces. It aims to reveal the personal motivations of women and present a generalized analysis combining different voices into thematic blocs.

Generally, wars and their characteristics have been changing and their number has been increasing<sup>4</sup>. In the post-Cold War arena, Mary Kaldor advanced the term "New wars"<sup>5</sup>. This form of war can be fought by state and non-state actors; conflicts are based on identity politics (ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines); violence is directed against civilians; the distinction between combatant and non-combatant is breaking down; the role of professional armies is replaced by active civilian involvement. Moreover, these tendencies take place in the context of the international community's increasing focus on equal rights for women and men, the increasing impact of technology<sup>6</sup>, women's psychological, moral, and physical readiness to take part in defending their homeland and place of residence on an equal basis with men. As a result, it raises new debates about women's involvement in military and violent actions<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, it is important to investigate women's participation in war and the motivations behind it nowadays, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

The main academic focus of women's participation in military conflicts is based on their roles in military activities, their positions in war structures or in post-war contexts, when attention is given to women's participation in peace, economic, social or gender-based initiatives. However, there is a lack of understanding of the motives for women's participation in today's military conflicts. Historically, a number of studies have engaged with the topic of women in war, asking why they participate in military conflicts. Looking on the existing research on women's motivation, we see that motives such as "patriotism", "personal suffering", "internal resentment", "inability to come to terms with injustice" are often mentioned. Karen Hagemann wrote about female patriots in German Wars of Liberation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and found that women participated and created patriotic associations because of love to their country<sup>8</sup>. Miranda Alison analysed women's involvement as combatants in Sri Lankan Tamil guerrilla organisation *The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* and revealed that motivation to participate in the movement is related to nationalistic aspirations, communal suffering, oppression, and injustice<sup>9</sup>. Alexis L. Henshaw analysed why women participate in armed rebel groups and tried to find out which grievances (political, human security, economic, or ethno-religious) influence women's participation in combat or non-combat roles<sup>10</sup>. Jennifer P. Eggert makes a prominent contribution to the issue of women's participation in military conflicts. Her academic research proposed that the most-cited motivational factor for women to join the Lebanese civil war was the "wish to defend their communities and fight

against an unjust political system”<sup>11</sup>. Also, the author has challenged the claim about gender-specific motivations (women's rights and gender equality), because in her study these played a role behind the decision just for some women. These examples mainly illustrate why women participated in the military groups and conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; a continuous study could introduce how women participate in the armed conflicts of today.

With the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014, Ukrainian women and organizations founded by women became actively involved in the defense of the country. It should be noted that discussions on a broader participation of women in the political processes in Ukraine had already been present before the start of the war. With the wave of Euromaidan in 2013–2014, women participated and actively supported massive anti-government protests<sup>12</sup>, organized military and non-military Women's Sotnyas<sup>13</sup> (“hundreds”), and in the context of war it represents a unit of defense. At the time, Ukrainian women were already seen leading the change in the country.

The current war in Ukraine is relatively new, modern, and still ongoing<sup>14</sup>. There are few studies on women's participation, even though the general topic of motivation for participation in war has raised the interest of several scholars. Tetyana Malyarenko and David J. Galbreath have investigated the motives of participants in paramilitary organizations, revealing that they tend to justify their motivations ideologically, as many see themselves as pro-Ukrainian nationalists<sup>15</sup>. Ihor Prykhodko et al. have conducted similar research, looking into the motives of the National Guard of Ukraine<sup>16</sup>. The surveys conducted have shown that institutional and pragmatic motives were predominant. The former is related to patriotism as a desire to serve the country and one's society. Pragmatic motives are about treating the military as a potential employer on the job market. When it comes to the participation of women in war in Ukraine, there are several noteworthy studies. To begin with, Olesya Khromeychuk's research on women's participation at the Maidan and in the Donbas region reveals that motivations to join protests and the subsequent war vary from belief in the obligation to help the army and the country to solidarity with their partners, children, or friends who had joined the fight<sup>17</sup>. Jessica T. Darden et al. claim that another interpretation of women's participation in the war in Ukraine references the Second World War as the historical precedent for women's participation in the processes of political violence or the prevailing nationalist ideology as a driving force for the participation of women in nationalist organizations<sup>18</sup>. This historical dimension, combined with nationalist narratives, is believed to have created an opportunity for women to participate in the current armed conflict as well. Another article, “What Motivates Ukrainian Women to Choose a Military Service in Warfare” by I. Prykhodko et al., also suggests the importance of patriotic motives: “during the period of warfare, women are guided by patriotic motives when choosing military service”<sup>19</sup>. In

addition, researchers discovered that the general prestige of the military profession, self-realization, and material benefits or social guarantees were of importance. However, the research was focused on professional military service, whereas most of the women in this study began their participation in volunteers' battalions.

Generally, the question of women's participation is analyzed by Ukrainian human rights activists who tend to focus on gender equality issues, women's participation in the military, and the so-called anti-terrorist operations (ATO) <sup>20</sup>. They talk about the need to enable women to take a more active part in various social and political processes in Ukraine and point to a number of structural problems preventing such participation. At the same time, Mila O'Sullivan argues that although feminists were trying to actively contest the patriarchal societal norms, in many ways their efforts have been absorbed in the country's nationalist discourse, which emerged at Euromaidan and even escalated with the Russian invasion <sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, the active involvement and participation of women in the Russia-Ukraine military conflict reflects the changing strategic culture of the state and the understanding that everyone can contribute to the defense of the country, despite their age, status in society or military service, and education. In this context, the issue of motivation again becomes relevant and meaningful. All the abovementioned analyses provide an opportunity once again to look at how women understand and describe their motivation. On the one hand, most authors declare that the main motives for participation can include pragmatic aspirations, solidarity with others, nationalist discourses, or historical narratives. On the other hand, it reflects macro-level influences that do not always correspond with motivations stemming from individual incentives.

The purpose of this article is to show the motivation of pro-Ukrainian women participants in the war, explaining why they joined Ukraine's defense by looking at it from their own micro-level perspective, and contributing to the academic debate on this topic. The first part of the article presents the theoretical basis, distinguishing several groups of motives for participation in the war found in existing academic literature. The second part discusses the research methodology and explains how the data was collected. The third part describes the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict and provides a broader context for women's participation in it. Finally, the results of the research are presented, along with the analysis of women's experiences from their own perspective, using quotations and thoughts that best reflect and illustrate the main idea of the study.

## **1. Theoretical Framework: Patriotism, Grievances, Personal Loss and Suffering, Women's Empowerment**

The academic literature <sup>22</sup> provides various interpretations of the people's motives for joining the war. After analyzing the existing literature on

the subject, several common trends emerge. Most authors talk about four main or most common groups of motives for joining war and military conflicts, namely, patriotism, grievances, personal suffering, and women's empowerment. The analysis of the motivations for involvement of Ukrainian women in the military conflict will allow us to test whether the motives mentioned above are indeed present among the women in Ukraine; it will also enable us to see if new, previously undiscussed motives could be identified. In addition, looking at motivation from the micro-level perspective and allowing the participants of the study to speak for themselves in a largely unstructured manner will allow us to better understand the exact meaning women put in generalized concepts of "patriotism", "grievances", "suffering", "empowerment", etc. and to contextualize their motivation within the modern-day realities in Ukraine.

The concept of patriotism answers to a feeling, a commitment to protect one's land and the people who live in it <sup>23</sup>. Patriotism as the primary motivation for joining an armed struggle for independence has been documented all over the world. Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo have also been documented to join the conflict (in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and then again at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century) because of patriotic values that inspired them not to be by-standers, but fight <sup>24</sup>. The stories of women who participated in World War II are particularly interesting, thus frequently discussed as historical examples. Those women told outright that their decision to join the front had been driven by patriotism <sup>25</sup>. They also mentioned that the belief that the enemy would be defeated and quickly overthrown also contributed <sup>26</sup>. Patriotism as motivation raises the idea of the relationship between the state and the individual as well as the transformation of internal commitment to real-life struggle. Quite often it is used to also explain why people are reluctant to surrender and choose to actively defend themselves, their loved ones, and their country. As a result, identity studies argue that the level of patriotism as national pride is higher precisely in conflict-ridden countries <sup>27</sup>.

The second group of motives described in the academic literature relates to historical, political, ethnic, racial, social, or economic grievances <sup>28</sup> that signify the importance of structural-level aspects and leads to collective behavior. The example of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) illustrates how structural inequalities in society have pushed women to contribute to the uprising and become members of the armed group. Perhaps it reflects not only social, but also gender-based grievances that encourage women to participate. Dara K. Cohen <sup>29</sup> and J. P. Eggert argue that women and men are engaged in armed groups or direct wars because of existing social pressures or the context in which they live <sup>30</sup>. For example, in the history of the Israeli wars, social narratives of public insecurity or collective traumatic experiences are often seen as providing opportunities to join the military <sup>31</sup>. Men and women take up arms to counter emerging security threats and dangers or because they

feel a lack of justice. Generally, this group of motives reflects the different types and aspects of grievances that accompany nations and states during their lifetimes.

Experiences involving the deaths or injuries of loved ones are a motivating factor to join the armed struggle, and the personal suffering caused by these events is one of the reasons for action<sup>32</sup>. This type of motivation is particularly noticeable in the studies of the phenomenon of female terrorists. In Chechnya, for example, women were willing to take revenge against Russia or commit murder for the deaths of their beloved men<sup>33</sup>. The stories of Russian women in the war in Svetlana Alexievich's book demonstrate that the question "why did you decide to go fighting?" often rests on the desire for revenge, (e.g., "to take revenge for my father"<sup>34</sup>). On the other hand, this group of motives also includes women who have themselves experienced violence and are joining the fight to ensure their personal safety<sup>35</sup>. The general tendency reveals that women engage in political violence for personal reasons: emotional or physical pain, revenge, solidarity with family members or friends<sup>36</sup>.

Women's empowerment is inevitably encountered when analyzing the relationship between war and gender. Participation in military conflicts is an opportunity to counter the patriarchal norms that prevail in societies<sup>37</sup>. Essentially, women seek to break free from narrow settings that limit them to one role or another. This includes several aspects: the pursuit of the right to self-determination; avoidance of discrimination; complete elimination of discrimination against women; and insurance that women can take control of their own lives. Women's fight for independence in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrates that next to other motives, the desire for equal rights and emancipation was one of the most prominent reasons to participate<sup>38</sup>. Also, one can draw attention to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Kurdish women who became politically active and demanded freedom from social and political patriarchal structures. Iraqi Kurdish women's political participation and resistance during the war in Kurdistan can be presented as a way of their empowerment and emancipation<sup>39</sup>. Trends in the African region reveal that women have joined various movements to expand the narrow gender-based categories of women's roles and demanded equal rights with men<sup>40</sup>. This group of motives indicates that the conventional relationship between war and gender is consistent and prominent across different cultures.

To sum up, several spatial-temporal trends have been observed, as certain motives tend to dominate in certain parts of the world at certain periods in time. For example, the motive of patriotism is often seen in the context of the liberation movements or during the great wars. Aspects of grievances (*inequality in society, feeling of injustice, social pressure*) have been mostly observed in Latin America or the Middle East. Motives for revenge or anger have been registered in Eurasia, the European region, or the Middle East, while the motives connected to women's empowerment are characteristic to both African and Middle Eastern regions and to the world in general. Even though the general categories of motives for

participation are similar around the world, each case/country tends to exhibit unique characteristics and requires a comprehensive, context-sensitive investigation.

## 2. Methodology of the Research

To analyze the motivation of Ukrainian women to participate in the current war, this article draws on twenty (20) e-interviews (conducted in Russian) with women, conducted between 2019 and 2020, five (5) semi-structured interviews with professionals who have been in a position to observe the ongoing military action (journalists, war photographers, members of NGOs), as well as secondary sources (*Ukrainian news portals, NGO reports, and academic publications*). The initial means to reach the female participants were collected through contacts with organizations working on Ukrainian affairs (NGO *Blue/Yellow*). After some of the female participants were contacted, their acceptance to participate in this research allowed to begin the process of interviews. After conversations and exchanging messages with some respondents, other participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique<sup>41</sup>, as at the end of each interview the women were asked to identify others who might be willing to talk. Nevertheless, due to a lack of time and professional tension, there were some women who did not have the opportunity to participate.

The aim of this sample was to include the widest possible group of women and to draw more general conclusions, describing a larger group of women who participated in a military conflict but not in the present study. As a result, the main criteria for selecting respondents were their participation and experience in the war zone. All relevant information about respondents is provided in the appendix. All the women interviewed were aged between 25 and 51 years and mainly declared their living place in Luhansk and Donetsk, the Kiev region, Rivne, or Kharkov. The age range had no significant effect on women's responses, even though it could be observed that responses of older women reflected greater experience, a better understanding of military affairs, and more solid preparation. Women who live within contested territories, such as those of Donetsk and Luhansk, expressed a high level of emotional attachment to Ukraine. One of the respondents said that after the outbreak of war she had "moved to the Ukrainian side" with her mother<sup>42</sup>.

According to the decision to protect the identity of women, there are some important socio-demographic features of the respondents which should be distinguished in this article and help contextualize their responses: marital status, education, and military preparation. Firstly, marital status demonstrates that part of the respondents have families and children. Secondly, part of the women interviewed had previous education in the field of social sciences, some in humanities or medicine. The majority of the women said that their education was not related to war and military practices. However, there were women who had a military background and were able to operate weapons and master tactics.

One respondent said that she had received military training after joining the war. Several women also had contracts with the Ukrainian army because they had prior military training experience. For example, one woman with strong military preparation went to the frontline in the place of her husband and son<sup>43</sup>. Other women said that they were volunteers who continued their journey after the Maidan protests. Working in different volunteer battalions<sup>44</sup> without previous training or military experience is what differentiates the women participating in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The interviews were carried out via e-mail, Skype, or telephone. Because of their engagement, lack of security and limited opportunities, most respondents wanted to answer the questions in writing. However, several respondents were interviewed by telephone and Skype, which proved an opportunity to see their living space and assess their emotional state.

The choice of Russian as the language of communication was determined by initial conversations with respondents. The majority of respondents said that they do not associate the Russian language with the military conflict, as they used this language in everyday life before the events of 2013–2014. Moreover, not all respondents could speak English, thus Russian was the only language that could be spoken by both the interviewer and interviewee.

The interviews with the women were conducted from January 2020 to May 2020. The newly elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had the chance to make some efforts to end the war in the Eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas, but the situation at the time was hopeless<sup>45</sup>, as there were no prospects for ending this military conflict and finding a peaceful solution. The women who have taken part in the study are currently still involved in military actions in one way or another.

The e-interviews with Ukrainian women provided an opportunity to ask all participants similar questions: why they chose to participate in a military conflict; what motivated them the most; and how do they perceive and express it. However, during each interview there was an opportunity to change the order of the questions and to introduce additional aspects or follow-up questions<sup>46</sup>. This provided rich ethnographic data for the study. In general, the women were eager to discuss in detail their experiences, which fall within the framework of patriotism, personal resentment, or solidarity with others. The material collected during the research was analyzed using content analysis. It is a research method that analyzes the content of communication<sup>47</sup> and in this research it helped to understand and distinguish the patterns observed in the communication, to understand what is said, to analyze the experiences of the respondents, and to assess whether they correspond to existing scholarly research on the subject. Even though this study is not representative of all women within the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it empowers the visibility of women who were motivated to defend the country.

### 3. The Russo-Ukrainian Military Conflict: An Overview

The Russian-Ukrainian military conflict began in 2014. Following a formal annexation, the Russian forces took control of the Crimean Peninsula and began arming Ukrainian separatists in the Donbas region. Ukraine entered a new historical and political stage to defend itself from the actions of a hostile force. Russia's aggression in Ukraine has caused one of the biggest security crises in Europe since the end of the Cold War<sup>48</sup>. It has raised concerns among the international community about the security on the continent and has prompted the pro-Ukrainian part of the society to take necessary steps to stop Russia's aggression – its ongoing attempts to deny the state's independent existence and development.

Looking at this situation from a broader perspective, the crisis in Ukraine began in 2013 with protests in Kiev against the decision of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to reject the agreement with the European Union on closer economic cooperation<sup>49</sup>. The Maidan revolution in 2013–2014 marked a national debate on the country's political and socio-economic future. The protesters essentially wanted to oust the government, which they believed was corrupt and prioritized close relations with Russia<sup>50</sup>. Russia viewed the removal of the Ukrainian president in 2014 as a direct threat to its own security, yet another “color revolution” initiated by the United States, which meant that the latter would continue to ignore Russia's privileged interests regarding its neighbors<sup>51</sup>. Finally, in 2014 the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict began, becoming a serious challenge not only for Europe but also the entire international community.

It is important to include the Maidan events in the analysis of this war, because many women in this study named this event as the beginning of their decision to fight: “My path to war began on the Maidan, Independence Square”<sup>52</sup>. Women were already actively involved in the Maidan events, but it was said that they were removed from activities that were more dangerous, and that all their contribution went unnoticed and unappreciated<sup>53</sup>. During the Maidan, feminists claimed that women behaved and spoke as conscious, autonomous, and active subjects of history<sup>54</sup>, because they performed various tasks that were necessary to support the process: coordinating the provision of medical supplies, compiling lists of missing people, offering legal aid to detained protesters, organizing public lectures and screenings of documentary films, and providing first aid. The existing analyses demonstrate that women joined the protest campaigns because they were dissatisfied with the government, wanted to show solidarity with the protesters, and that they were also affected by motherhood, civic duty, or professional service<sup>55</sup>. The main needs of the time, such as the free trade agreement with the European Union, the resignation of the government, the implementation of democratic reforms, and the eradication of corruption, were linked to the general structural inequality and grievances in the country and the desire to change the current situation.

Generally, in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine, which has been going for more than seven years now, one can see that the involvement of women in both combat and non-combat positions has been increasing<sup>56</sup>. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of women in Ukraine has surpassed that of men<sup>57</sup>. In 2020, the number of women working and serving in the Ukrainian army under contract was over 30 000<sup>58</sup>, and this number grows every year. It can be assumed that the issue of women's participation in the war remains relevant in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century military conflicts.

Thus, the military conflict in Ukraine provided an opportunity for ordinary citizens to help the army<sup>59</sup>, which was largely unprepared, and the unfolding events forced people to take urgent and courageous actions. Women have been quite active from the outset of the conflict and have contributed to the preparations, even though until 2016 they could only perform roles that were not formally related to the military (such as volunteering, journalism, etc.). Nevertheless, the conflict of 2014 provided opportunities for women to play a greater role in the society and seek leadership positions. In addition, the beginning of the conflict saw positive changes in gender equality, which allowed a growing number of women to join the war<sup>60</sup>. Changes that promote gender equality in Ukraine also correspond to the international community's consideration for reforms in the security and defense sector, creating equal conditions for women and men's military service.

#### **4. Motivation to Participate in War: Case Study of Ukrainian Women**

When analyzing the motives of the women who had taken part in the Ukrainian military conflict, one thing became apparent – they all named the same enemy, namely Russia. The public Ukrainian media describe this war as a war against Russian occupiers, Russian terrorists, and in general all the war actions are described as anti-terrorist operations (ATO)<sup>61</sup>. The main goal is to defend one's state from foreign forces and to protect its territory. At least one third (out of 20) of the women interviewed in the study made it clear that a state hostile to Ukraine had set foot in their territory, therefore it needed to be defended. It is illustrated by plain and strong female accounts: “While I was in the Maidan, I learned that the country had been attacked; no questions were asked, I immediately started to look for an opportunity to get there so I could defend it”<sup>62</sup>; “I felt a terrible injustice. I couldn't understand how our neighbor Russia could have attacked us. And I saw no other way out than to volunteer and go to the front. Women were not admitted to the army then. I became a volunteer in April 2014. I realized that I could die, be traumatized, but I saw no other way”<sup>63</sup>; “I was shocked by the thought that someone else would live in my house”<sup>64</sup>; “One couldn't watch the enemy loot and destroy the country”<sup>65</sup>. These quotes from women's stories illustrate

how individual-level motivations become the basis for collective, massive action.

It was also important for the women who participated in the study not only to support and participate in the defense of Ukraine but also to protect their place of residence. It is not just a territorial issue but also an important family and emotional attachment: “First of all, I went to serve so I could defend my native Luhansk, my native STAROBILSK”<sup>66</sup>, “I am from the Luhansk region, the war has started at my home. And I have kept thinking that I have to protect my home and my parents who live there”<sup>67</sup>. It can be said that on the one hand, the answers reflect the general fear of losing a state or a particular place of residence, resulting in a definite desire to contribute to the preservation of what is precious. On the other hand, these words reveal clear self-identification using the categories of the *self* and *other*. Women emphasize their Ukrainian identity and clearly distinguish it from the *other*.

The stories of women heard in this context demonstrate that the desire to defend one's country and place of residence strongly correspond with the first group of theoretical frameworks. This reveals a strong connection between the person and the place where they live and the determination to take actions necessary to maintain the integrity of the country and ensure the security of the population. Essentially, this has to do with the women's ability to clearly name the enemy and understand what they are fighting for. Several respondents said that patriotic motives encouraged them to contribute to the fight, prioritizing the state and often giving up their personal life opportunities and the future: “After graduating from university, I had a good chance of finding a job by specialty, but driven by patriotic motives I went to the military. I didn't want to read about the losses, I just wanted personally to be involved in liberating our land”<sup>68</sup>. In principle, women's stories reflect a fear for the future of the country, an unwillingness to welcome a foreign power, and a determination to participate in freeing the country or contributing to its security. In this case, personal priorities had already become a reflection of public welfare: “I went to the front [because] I couldn't have done otherwise. This is not a simple local conflict; it's a war for our freedom and existence.”<sup>69</sup>

Patriotism as a source of motivation to participate in war was not a direct consequence of the Russian-Ukrainian war. According to the women, it is an expression of their inner feeling and emotional relationship with the country, which formed before the war: “Well before the war, I belonged to that part of Ukraine which is further from Moscow, i.e., for ten years I was an active participant of patriotic ‘hangovers’”<sup>70</sup>. At the same time, the determination to contribute to military action reflects a sense of responsibility, which also falls within the framework of the relationship with the state and the importance of fulfilling one's civic duty: “I am a Ukrainian citizen and I have defended, and I will defend Ukraine at any time in the future. I have taken the oath, so my participation in the war is the fulfillment of my civic duty”<sup>71</sup>.

During the analysis it was identified that in general, patriotism in Ukrainian women's stories includes the concept of security, defense against the enemy, the liberation of the country, existence, the desire to be useful, and the resulting goal of living in one's own country and building a future there. A Lithuanian war photographer, who captured the events on the Ukrainian front line, mentioned that the women he met had clearly stated that they simply wanted to fight for their country [...]"<sup>72</sup>.

Another interesting observation linked to patriotism is the knowledge and the ability to fight. Several respondents said that when they decided to contribute to the war, it was important to understand what they wanted and what they knew: "I realized right away that I wanted to be of maximum use and I wanted to be directly at the forefront, so I decided to master tactics and weapons"<sup>73</sup>; "I already knew how to fight, and someone had to defend Ukraine (to be a military person who wasn't afraid to go to war)"<sup>74</sup>; "[...] we had military and sports training, thanks to which I knew the tactics of war and knew how to shoot [a gun]"<sup>75</sup>.

Therefore, patriotic motives are related not only to the ideological desire to act in the name of the state, but also to the responsible preparation and use of knowledge and tactics for effective combat. Interestingly, a more thorough preparation has given women greater opportunities to take positions that require more responsibility, including making military decisions. To conclude, the material collected during the interviews provided an opportunity to conduct a comprehensive and extensive analysis within the framework of this motivational group.

The second group of motives is related to Ukraine's historical past and the general people's resentment of structural inequality: "The current struggle for our history, culture, and the identity of our nation has been lasting much longer and is unlikely to end any time soon"<sup>76</sup>. The current war with Russia is essentially a continuation of what Ukraine has historically experienced in the past. Russia's previous actions in Ukraine have left painful psychological and physical traces: "During the 300 years of Russian occupation, we have experienced dozens of bans on the Ukrainian language and culture, systematic repression, and the physical destruction of Ukraine's elite, which has claimed millions of lives"<sup>77</sup>. In the context of current events, these thoughts correspond to the role of the historical element and the formed narrative. The strong connection between the past and the perception of the brutality of the current situation call to action: "We can resist or give up and return to the Soviet Union. I do not want to go back to the Soviet Union"<sup>78</sup>. These thoughts suggest that in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict, women's involvement in military action is not assessed and perceived only from the current perspective. The historical context and its importance in the Ukrainian events are an integral part not only of the participation of women in war but also of the history of the whole country. This can also be related to the first category of motives expressed by women, in which the

enemy and the negative image of Russia in the arena of today's domestic and international politics are explicitly stated.

Some respondents identified their personal incentives to contribute to the country's defense within this category of motives as a desire to break free from decades of social structural inequality and the need to change the situation within the country: "I'm tired of living in the slavery of 'criminal' oligarchs"<sup>79</sup>. Here, women shift their focus not only to external threats but to dissatisfaction with an internal structure based on the different treatment and positioning of social groups in society. At the same time, it is linked to the Maidan protests, in which many participants of this study took part and expressed dissatisfaction with the state's internal or external policies and the rejection of the idea of moving closer to the European Union. The motivations revealed by women demonstrate that they not only desire to shape the future of the country and not allow strangers to dictate them how to live. A particular identity is also being pursued: they want to be part of the Western community and identify themselves with its values and moral imagination. The second group of motives mainly corresponds with historical grievances and could be a starting point in deeper investigations of bilateral relations.

Experiences of Ukrainian women also correspond with the third theoretical group of motives. According to respondents, such events make one understand and conclude that staying close to those who fight for their country is one of the ways to contribute, as people are joining the defense positions at the risk of their lives. One respondent mentioned that the decision to join the war, even though she first considers herself a patriot of the country, was prompted by the death of a close friend. She illustrated her choice by saying: "My friend was killed in Ilovaisk; for a long time, we couldn't find his body, I was an independent volunteer at the time. When we found the body of [...] three friends, I decided I could [...] save people's lives."<sup>80</sup> In the background of these events, the woman realized that human life is one of the most important reasons to become part of the struggle. The tragedies caused by the war reinforce the desire to be where the bloodiest events take place. The painful experiences leave no room for doubt: "I joined the army in the spring of 2015, following the tragedy in Debaltseve where many people died. Then I decided that what I could do – it was simply to go and fight side by side."<sup>81</sup>

Women present these life events as the most painful experiences that motivated them to go on their own and fight and not remain in the position of an observer. On the other hand, although the women who had been fighting on the pro-Ukrainian side mentioned the loss of other participants of the war as one of their motives for joining, they described these events as the most haunting experiences: "The most striking moments that remain in one's memory are when your fellow comrades are killed. I lost a lot of people that I was close to in the war, this kind of experience [...] [is] the most painful, it's always painful"<sup>82</sup>. This idea is supported by the official data of the war in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war in 2014, more than 3 000 civilians<sup>83</sup> and more

than 13 000<sup>84</sup> soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces had been killed. The stories of Ukrainian women reveal that the fear of being killed or injured is weaker than the determination and readiness to join those who experience war through direct involvement, especially if it is part of their close environment.

The fourth group of motives distinguished by researchers is related to the relationship between war and gender and the criteria of femininity and masculinity. It is interesting to observe that women involved in the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict do not mention the influence of existing stereotypes and do not name it as a motivating factor to join the fight. In trying to understand and explain the context of Ukrainian women in particular, one can assume that the goals of women who had taken part in the war were not based on personal principles and aspirations. The answers received from respondents during and after the interviews on whether women's empowerment is important were quite definite and unyielding: "I wouldn't call it a main goal. Maybe [I'll] put it in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> place. I would say that the feeling of injustice is the main goal of the majority. The desire to protect one's family. The desire to be useful and important. In particular, the desire to protect the family and parents"<sup>85</sup>; "We didn't go to assert or change stereotypes. The one who was psychologically ready stood up to defend their land"<sup>86</sup>. Although Ukrainian society is traditional, it reflects the courage of women and everybody's focus on one fundamental goal – the defense of the state from a hostile force, fear about the future, and the desire to protect themselves and their environment.

From an institutional point of view, a Ukrainian female journalist who spoke on women's politics in this study said that during the Maidan protests, women formed groups called *сотня* (in Russian: "hundred"), which mobilized women who wanted to contribute. Because women had a variety of activities to perform, for them the riddance of stereotypical thinking was not one of the reasons for participating in the war. Examined in a broader context and compared to the experiences of women in wars and conflicts in other regions of the world, the Ukrainian case does not correspond to motivations expressed by Latin American or African women, who participated in liberation movements or military actions driven by a desire to empower their position and reinforce their influence in society. Perhaps such tendencies are also determined by women's self-assessment practices. As one respondent said: "Ukrainian women are usually very strong-willed and unlike in other countries, we generally rely more on women. It's sad but that's a fact [...]; therefore, we formed exclusively female battalions. More and more women join the war because they know [that] they will survive"<sup>87</sup>. Even though the direct thoughts of women's empowerment have been absent in the responses of the women interviewed for this study, it would be wrong to assume unequivocally that there are no practices and discussions of women's empowerment in Ukraine. The academic discussions mentioned in this article reveal that

women's empowerment and gender-based equality are important topics to investigate.

Based on the analysis of all groups of motives, the desire to protect and defend one's country and family against the enemy is the main source of motivation for women's participation in the war. According to the head of one voluntary Ukrainian women's organization, Ukrainian women have always been active and responsive to the situation, especially during the crisis<sup>88</sup>. Interestingly, Ukrainian women who participated in the war, when sharing thoughts on their personal involvement in military actions, often mentioned several different aspects interlinked in a comprehensible and logical sequence. For example, patriotism indicates not only an ideological desire to contribute or an intimate connection but also real actions that include mastering tactics, extending one's combat knowledge, or participating in various organizations and having experience even before the military conflict with Russia. The connection with the state and the desire to maintain it is motivated by structural problems, which do not allow to forget the painful historical and collective experiences and prompts people to active solidarity and liberation from injustice.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine began much earlier than in 2014. Women talked about Russia's attempts to deny Ukraine's freedom, existence, and the future of an independent and territorially integral state for centuries. It becomes a strong motivation on personal grounds and, in the context of the prevailing collective grievances of the society, a reason for uniting pro-Ukrainian groups. Other women were motivated by the fact that people close to them were killed in the war. As a result, they want to be by their side on the battlefield, as the most sure way to act is to be close to those who sacrifice themselves for the common cause.

Finally, the influence of women's empowerment mentioned in the academic literature had no impact on the choice of Ukrainian women to join the fight. It partially proves the value and moral basis of the perception of the situation of Ukrainian women participating in the study: putting the country's interests above personal principles; a strong organizational female culture not only during the war but also in the past (as evidenced by the protests in Maidan Square), which opens up opportunities for involvement and likely the positive self-assessment.

The earlier mentioned Ukrainian journalist quite correctly summed up the thoughts of women joining the war: "I don't know why they took to the streets and then went to fight; perhaps it's because that you feel that you're a Ukrainian, [that] you have some purpose, a national self-identity, and a sense of refusal to reconcile with injustice [...]. They just went because their husbands and sons went, because they wanted also to help and be useful to their country"<sup>89</sup>.

All the motives expressed by women partly reflect the same goal for all people who go through war – that of the defense, preservation, survival, and continuity of the state. One of the respondents, who openly told about the motives for her participation in the war, also named several

reasons for her personal choice. At the same time, it corresponds to the motives of all women in the study and the arguments supporting them:

“The decision to join the service was a family affair. We all realized that our country had been attacked by an enemy. And we considered it our duty to go and defend our Homeland. At first, my older brother and my husband went [there]. I was involved in gathering help for the soldiers and organizing the trips for volunteers to the front. After we all realized that the war would take a long time, I made the decision to join service as well. I thought I’d be more helpful there. I served with my husband. Unfortunately, my husband was killed. I stayed to serve after my husband’s death. And when my son turned 18, he also went into service. This is our family’s responsibility. It’s our common enemy and it’s our duty to defend our land from the enemy”<sup>90</sup>.

The Ukrainian case illustrates that those certain tendencies of motivations to participate in the war exist and that they recur regardless of the country or region. Patriotism and the desire to protect the place you live in, the loss of the loved ones, or the determination to change the country’s existing structural foundation is a historically strong and recurring motif, expressed in the stories of war participants. This enables us to look at the meaning of patriotism in a new way, to understand its conceptual meaning and to see if / how it varies in different conflicts. In Ukraine, it is an expression of security, the division between *self* and *other* and the responsibility to one’s state. Personal loss, historical grievances and women’s empowerment are important, but less pronounced aspects. The Ukrainian case revealed that personal motivation is strongly related to political, communal, and emotional situation. Also, women’s stories demonstrate that in voluntary participation personal pragmatic motives are not found.

However, while it is difficult to draw a big generalization from a single conflict analysis, this research revealed an importance of identity politics: *to know who we are and defend it*. It can be said that the specifics of the Russian-Ukrainian war are like those of the countries where liberation movements take place, and which seek the right to free self-determination and existence. The interviews conducted in this study also reflect it. The respondents understand that the conflict with Russia has been going for a long time, that unfortunately, it has been escalating and there is no end to it.

## Conclusions

This article discussed the motivations of Ukrainian women who took part in the Russo-Ukrainian War to fight and defend their country. Twenty (20) e-interviews with women fighting on the pro-Ukrainian side revealed that patriotism and a desire to protect one’s country from a hostile foreign force that questions the very existence of the state was the main predominant motive. Other motives, also described in similar research projects (e.g., J. P. Eggert (2018); J.T. Darden et al. (2019)) were also found while analyzing the interview data. However,

rich, ethnographic data collected during this project enabled to situate them in a pro-Ukrainian women context. As we can see, Ukrainian women participated not only in military conflict with Russia, but previously defended their country from internal structures. Therefore, one new motive that was also discovered is the prior experience of participating in the Euromaidan protests. A significant part of the respondents participated in the protests and later decided to continue their fight via military means. Also, women's ability to fight, mastering tactics and sharing knowledge is what was mentioned when respondents talked about patriotism. This insight shows that education and personal capabilities help express patriotic motives in a broader perspective.

Although four groups of motives were researched, one of the most interesting and striking findings of this study was the latent effect of women's empowerment on women's rising motivation to fight, deriving from the relationship between war and gender. On the one hand, not only the interviews but also the analysis of the structural context of Ukrainian society reveals the portraits of women and their primary goal – the willingness to defend their country, refusing to put their personal goals above the state's interests. The study showed that the idea of defending the country was the main source of motivation. On the other hand, from 2016 onwards, there have been increased opportunities for women to take up military positions and to participate actively in military actions not only on a voluntary basis (until then, other positions and participation on other ground were offered to them). In relation to the groups of motives described in the academic theoretical literature, Ukrainian women and their stories are not that different, despite the underestimation of war and gender stereotypes and previous attempts of women to prove their abilities and capabilities in political or social space.

A general analysis of women's motivation for participation in the war also revealed their attitude towards the war. For them, war is not associated chiefly with military actions. War has become a part of everyday life. It penetrated the country, their place of residence, took away their loved ones and friends, and left painful experiences. The scale of the research project was small due to various budgetary and time constraints, but it did represent a small step in trying to understand the bigger picture of women's motivations to participate in today's armed combat. To sum up, this article mainly contributed to the already existing studies in two ways: firstly, it strengthened the nationalist patriotic narrative of Ukrainian society; secondly, it reflected the growing understanding of women's ability to fight and their visibility in military sphere. On the other hand, this article did not any reveal pragmatic or gender-based motives for participation in military conflict. This possibly relates to the uniqueness of today's military conflicts, where the main motives for participation are related to identity, women's ability to fight, and being on an equal basis with men.

However, in this research there were no strong distinction between women's involvement in volunteer battalions and the state-run military. It could provide additional information in the variation in motives,

depending on the type of a military unit women join. Also, there was no analysis of gender norms within the armed forces. Perhaps this could serve as an explanation of why women in this research did not mention women’s empowerment as a goal. Finally, further research involving not only women, but other groups of the society as well would be most welcome. This would provide an even broader perspective and enable to see whether only ideological moral values are important for participation, or whether pragmatism and external factors are at work as well.

## Appendix: Respondents

- When specific information was provided it is marked “+”;
- When specific information was not provided, it is marked “x”.

Respondent No.	Place of living	Age	Marital Status (Have families and children)	Military background and training	Voluntary participation	Interview date
1	x	38	+			March 26, 2020
2	Kiev	35		+		February 6, 2020
3	Luhansk	40				March 5, 2020
4	Kiev	45			+	February 22, 2020
5	Kharkiv	50	+		+	April 6, 2020
6	Kharkiv	48	+			April 12, 2020
7	Kiev	27			+	April 14, 2020
8	Kiev	34			+	March 11, 2020
9	Donetsk	x	+	+		January 30, 2020
10	Kiev	51	+	+	+	February 5, 2020
11	Kiev	x		+	+	February 4, 2020
12	Starobilsk	36				March 30, 2020
13	Kiev	44		+	+	March 14, 2020
14	Kiev	27		+		January 31, 2020
15	Luhansk	29			+	March 25, 2020
16	Lviv	27		+	+	February 10, 2020
17	Zaporozhye	43	+	+	+	February 10, 2020
18	x	41			+	April 3, 2020
19	Boguslav	x	+			April 29, 2020
20	Rivne	27			+	May 5, 2020

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