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Gendered Violence, Genderless Frames: The Politics of Domestic Violence in Russia and Ukraine on the Eve of Full-scale War

Natasha P. Bluth ^{1,*}

Although policies against gender-based violence gained widespread acceptance in the twentieth century, seemingly global gender standards have not evenly diffused. Indeed, despite shared (post)socialist experiences, Ukraine has criminalized domestic violence (DV) while Russia has not. However, discursive analysis of 127 public texts published from 2011 to 2021 reveals that public talk on DV in both countries retains a similar genderless character—a surprising finding for Ukraine, which continues to harmonize with liberal European gender norms. Extending the work of Popova and Shevel, I argue that the “escalatory cycle” characterizing Russo–Ukrainian relations in the post-Soviet period can explain their divergent policies on DV, as well as their shared frames. This study highlights the limited salience of Western feminist frames in DV prevention efforts. It contributes to scholarship on norm diffusion and backlash, exploring how push–pull mechanisms and geopolitics guide the adoption and durability of ideas about gender.

Key words: domestic violence; gender; norm diffusion; Russia; Ukraine.

Introduction

In the late twentieth century, policies against gender-based violence gained widespread acceptance, institutionalized in treaties including the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) (True 2019). These efforts culminated in the 2011 Council of Europe (2011) Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the

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Istanbul Convention)—a legally binding mechanism for preventing and prosecuting domestic violence (DV) that takes a “gendered understanding of violence against women and domestic violence” and recognizes that “domestic violence affects women disproportionately.” Signed by forty-four countries and the European Union, the Convention constitutes the strongest international measure against DV to date.¹ It typifies the dissemination of feminist principles on a global scale, thanks to which “[numerous] once-controversial issues concerning women such as property rights, suffrage, equal inheritance, and protection from domestic violence are now widely accepted around the world” (Boyle, Kim, and Longhofer 2015, 882–3).

While institutional sociology links the adoption of these liberal standards to the rise of “world culture” (Ferguson 2021), the “contentious aspects of global norm-making” prevents their even diffusion across and within nation-states (Kentikelenis and Seabrooke 2017, 1068). For example, despite shared experiences during the Soviet period and following Soviet collapse, gendered governance in Russia and Ukraine has diverged significantly, exemplified by their laws and policies on DV. Ukrainian legislators have increasingly adopted Western feminist models, recognizing DV as a gendered crime in 2017 and signing and ratifying the Istanbul Convention in 2011 and 2022, respectively. In contrast, while some forms of DV were briefly criminalized in Russia in 2016, no specific legislation targeting DV exists on the books today and the country is not party to the Istanbul Convention.

Despite their different approaches to DV, discursive analysis of 127 state, NGO, and mass media publications published between 2011 and 2021 in Russia and Ukraine demonstrate that public talk on DV in both countries retains a similar genderless character. Resistance to Western feminist frames may be expected of Russia, a country marked by consolidating authoritarianism and “backtracking on gender justice” (Johnson 2023a, 3). But opposition to gender-based framings in Ukraine is surprising as the country works to harmonize with liberal standards, including around gender equality, in its quest for EU membership—an objective long supported by the majority of the Ukrainian populace (Onuch 2024). What explains the gap between policy and discourse on DV in Ukraine—and what explains why public talk on DV in Russia and Ukraine looks so similar?

After presenting findings from my discursive analysis of Russian and Ukrainian texts, I draw on secondary literature to explain this puzzle. Extending the work of Popova and Shevel (2024), I argue that the “escalatory cycle” characterizing Russo–Ukrainian relations since the end of the Soviet Union can explain their divergent policies but shared public discourses on DV. While Ukraine has gradually accepted progressive gender policies as part of the country’s commitment to democracy, independence from Russia, and integration with liberal European institutions, Russia has more forcefully embraced an authoritarian and imperial program—most visibly in Ukraine—in which the rejection of liberal gender norms plays a central role. Domestic

interests and international pressures contribute to their divergent gender politics, but the escalatory, push–pull dynamic between Russia and Ukraine serves as a critical, if overlooked, mechanism guiding DV policy in the two locations. At the same time, this escalatory relationship also obstructs gendered frames in public talk on DV in Ukraine and Russia. While Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine have driven greater rapprochement between Ukraine and liberal Europe, unease within Ukrainian society about “European” values, as well as the growing legitimacy of conservative groups that promote a strong anti-Russian, but also antigender and anti-LGBTQ+ position, have fostered public talk that downplays the gendered dynamics of DV. In effect, Ukrainian discourses on DV look similar to those in Russia where the state and much of society continue to view gender mainstreaming as anti-Russian.

By considering not only policy adoption, but also public talk as a measure of norm diffusion (Gilardi 2012), this study enhances our understanding of the extent to and ways in which ideas about gender spread. In particular, it grants necessary attention to the countervailing norm diffusion agendas shaping gender politics in countries such as Ukraine. Although gender-sensitive language and policy do not in and of themselves prevent DV (Britton and Shook 2014), this research indicates that Western feminist frameworks may backfire in efforts to address violence against women—a growing concern as assaults against liberal institutions proliferate in Europe and farther afield (Dandashly and Noutcheva 2022).

The uneven diffusion of gender norms

Gender is a key organizing principle in everyday social relations, the construction of the nation, and the legitimization of the state (Gal and Kligman 2000). While gender relations, ideologies, and policies shape and are shaped by domestic politics (see, e.g., Orloff 1996 on the relationship between gender and the welfare state), gender is also “an important concern in international cooperation, with a large number of conventions and declarations [addressing] gender equality and inequality” (Fejerskov, Engberg-Pedersen, and Cold-Ravnkilde 2019, 3). These developments shifted international norms about violence against women, contributing to the “liberal international order” of the late twentieth century (True 2019).

While dominant states and international organizations sometimes coerce weaker countries into accepting particular norms, the widespread acceptance of progressive gender norms is primarily recognized as diffusion via emulation (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007). Nevertheless, empirical research routinely finds that “global” standards have not spread evenly across or within nation-states. Analyzing the breadth and depth of norm diffusion (Meyer and Rowan 1977), in addition to norm durability (O'Brien and Walsh 2020) is important for understanding ongoing and intensifying backlash against

protections for women, as well as sexual minorities (Benstead, Muriaas, and Wang 2023; Corredor 2019). Indeed, Russia's decriminalization of DV in 2017 and Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 challenge the notion that feminist-minded interventions are in any way permanent.

A growing body of work on the patchwork adoption of progressive gender policies and their often-lackluster rollout investigates how countries accept, reject, or modify norms endorsed by liberal "norm entrepreneurs" such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and Council of the European Union (Gilardi 2012). This scholarship identifies local-level factors shaping norm diffusion: civil society groups and social movements (Guenther 2008), domestic politics and local norms (Krizsán, Roggeband, and Zeller 2024), religious-state ties (O'Brien and Walsh 2020), and the divergent governing logics of state agencies (Ferguson 2021). For example, Simmons, Lloyd, and Stewart (2018) find that while antitrafficking laws have proliferated since the 2000s, entrenched cultural beliefs about sex and sexuality hinder their implementation in some countries—a "decoupling" between policy and practice (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Additional work stresses the significance of interactions between and across nation-states. Krizsán et al. observe that "the EU has wielded great influence in gender equality policy development in Central and Eastern Europe through its accession processes"—i.e. norm adoption via conditionality politics (Krizsán, Roggeband, and Zeller 2024, 8). Others credit transnational feminist networks with driving expanded protections for women and sexual minorities (Keck and Sikkink 1999; True 2019). However, more recent work underscores "the development and increased sophistication of illiberal anti-LGBT+ networks" and the so-called antigender movement led by "actors such as the World Congress of Families, Alliance Defending Freedom International, the Vatican, and Putin's Russia" (Velasco 2023, 1382–3; see also Kalm and Meeuwisse 2023) who are hampering "the domestication and internationalization of pro-gender norms and feminist ideas" (Kuteleva 2024, 149; see also Fodor 2021). While this research deepens our grasp on progressive policy backlash and reversals, less is known about the potential impact of other geopolitical dynamics, including interstate conflict, on norm diffusion (Shor 2008).

Although most scholarship relies on policy adoption as a measure of norm diffusion (Gilardi 2012; Sloodmaeckers 2022), legal change does not necessarily entail societal acceptance. Public discourses on topics including LGBTQ+ rights (Shevtsova 2020) and minority protections (Sasse 2008) signal that these issues remain highly contentious in countries where progressive policies have been adopted, often into the long term. Quantitative analyses also find that greater integration with liberal institutions at the policy level can heighten normative struggles within a country (Velasco 2023), sometimes fanning illiberal public attitudes that threaten policy reversals (Patashnik 2019). To evaluate how ideas and policies about social issues are received in a given society,

discursive frames offer valuable data. Selectively organizing the “symbols, images, and arguments” available in the public domain according to the structural and cultural environment of a particular time and place (Ferree et al. 2004, 13), frames act as meaning structures that societal actors can mobilize to interpret and manage social issues (Benford and Snow 2000). In the study of DV, frames can enrich analysis of norm diffusion by shedding light on how different groups in society make sense of gendered violence and whether these meaning-making strategies align with or undermine policy decisions.

Understanding the divergence between policies and public attitudes is important in an increasingly multipolar world where many states are “targets of multiple, and often contradictory, influences” that complicate norm diffusion processes (Buzogány 2017, 3; see also Sloomaeckers 2022). As a geopolitically fraught setting in which countervailing norm diffusion agendas powerfully collide, Ukraine provides an ideal case for exploring how policymaking and public discourses on key policy issues develop. Since the early 2000s, the country has become a key battleground for a “normative competition ... largely defined by the confrontation between EU-inspired and Russia-related norms” (Dandashly and Noutcheva 2022, 417), which escalated into a Russia-provoked military conflict in 2014 after Ukraine renewed its push for EU membership and full autonomy from Russia. Although Russia’s ongoing war intensifies Ukraine’s commitment to these pursuits, unresolved conflicts in Ukrainian society remain over the country’s integration with liberal institutions—particularly gender and sexuality norms. The following sections explore these contestations through the case of DV.

Data and methods

This study discursively analyzes materials published between 2011, a landmark year for women’s rights with the passage of the Istanbul Convention, and 2021, just before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is important to acknowledge that in contrast to Ukraine’s relatively pluralist political system, consolidating authoritarian rule in Russia has increasingly constricted the spectrum of politically acceptable ideas in the country. Nevertheless, DV was “the most contentious political issue openly discussed in Russia” throughout the period under study, with public debate sometimes encouraged by the state (Johnson 2024, 557; Muravyeva 2021).

To generate my study sample, I began by reading widely from open-source texts to gain familiarity with the range of materials and existing DV frames available in the two countries. This review exposed a vast number of publications between 2011 and 2021 on government websites, legal databases, NGO websites, and media archives. From this pool, I manually assembled 127 sources—forty-nine Russian and seventy-eight Ukrainian texts (see Table 1 for more details).² Sampling was nonrandom, but purposive: each text explicitly

Table 1. Sources from Russia and Ukraine ($N = 127$).

Russian sources ($N = 49$)	State ($N = 14$)
	• Drafted and passed laws and policies related to DV • Statements by president and other members of the political elite
	NGO ($N = 17$)
	• Reports, open letters, and statements from • The Association of Parents Committees and Societies • Consortium of Women’s Non-Governmental Organizations • The Justice Initiative • Nasiliyu.net • Ty Ne Odn • Women’s Union of Russia
Ukrainian sources ($N = 78$)	Media ($N = 18$)
	• News articles and op-eds published in • Federal News Agency • Kommersant • Meduza • Novaya Gazeta • Rossiyskaya Gazeta • Vedomosti
	State ($N = 34$)
	• Drafted and passed laws and policies related to DV • Statements by president and other members of the political elite
	NGO ($N = 23$)
	• Reports, open letters, and statements from • The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations • The Women’s Consortium of Ukraine • The Kharkiv Regional Foundation “Public Alternative” • KyivPride • La Strada Ukraine • Marsh Zhynok
	Media ($N = 21$)
	• News articles and op-eds published in • Hromadske • Segodnya • Ukraina • Ukrainskaya Pravda • Ukrinform • UNIAN

addressed DV, was open access, and was produced by a nationally operating institution with demonstrated reach or influence. The corpus also included both state and nonstate, as well as progressive and conservative perspectives, across three domains that reflect and shape public opinion: the state, NGOs, and news media. In addition to all drafted and adopted laws and policies related to DV, I sourced open letters, op-eds, and reports published by six prominent NGOs and six news outlets per country. Previous DV scholarship and my initial scoping highlighted which NGOs were most active in DV debates; audience size and engagement metrics were used to determine leading independent and state news outlets. Two to four texts were selected from each NGO and news outlet to ensure no single institution was overrepresented. This strategy reduced a much larger body of material to a manageable dataset for qualitative analysis that, while nonexhaustive, roughly captured the scope of public discourses shaping DV debates in Russia and Ukraine.

All texts analyzed were translated by the author from Russian or Ukrainian into English. A critical lens was applied to properly contextualize linguistic choices and avoid normalizing “Western” vernaculars around DV. For example, rather than using terms such as “battery” or “abuse” that may be more familiar to some readers, Russian documents often downplayed the severity of DV with euphemistic language (e.g. “slapping” or “quarrels”); in both countries, direct transliterations of the word “gender” (*gender*) sought not to emphasize gender as a social category that divergently shapes women’s and men’s experiences with DV, but to highlight the foreignness of (unwanted) liberal ideas such as DV reform (see also Kováts 2017).

Two rounds of coding identified the frames used in this article. Open coding first mapped how DV and DV reform (i.e. laws and policies protecting women from DV and/or prosecuting abusers) were discussed. This process uncovered several recurring concepts (e.g. national security, parent–child relations, rights) in Russian and Ukrainian discourse. A subsequent round of focused coding (Tavory and Timmermans 2014) refined and organized these concepts into three distinct DV frames: “family” (including codes such as child/children, family/familial, home/household, parents/parental, relatives), “foreign influence” (Europe, foreign, identity, international organizations, Russia, security, threat, Ukraine, United States, West/Western), and “human rights” (discrimination, equality, justice, rights). Although concepts such as “feminism,” “gender,” and “gender ideology” appeared in some texts, they did not constitute a “gender” frame that acknowledged DV as a gendered issue but reinforced other frames (e.g. some texts accused Western institutions of imposing a “gender ideology” on society—an instance of the “foreign influence” frame). Building on Benford and Snow (2000), my operationalization of frames involved analyzing not only how they were constructed but also how they were used by different actors and to what end. Coding, rereading, and continuously comparing sources broadened my understanding of frames and

their instrumentalization within and between the two countries, revealing that actors on opposite ends of the DV debate often employed the same frames.

The next section outlines the shared, genderless frames underpinning Russian and Ukrainian DV discourses. I subsequently draw on secondary literature to explain similarities and differences in the countries' DV politics as an outcome of the "escalatory cycle" guiding Russo–Ukrainian relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Popova and Shevel 2024). This framework also addresses a key challenge in the comparative analysis of Russia and Ukraine, providing a heuristic tool that accommodates their interrelated trajectories. Beyond accounting for Russia's long-standing imperialist interventions, which in part shape DV politics in Ukraine, it also enables examination of the ways in which Russian gender politics are conditioned by Ukraine. By taking Ukraine's influence on Russia seriously, this approach departs from most studies of the Russo–Ukrainian relationship, which pay greater attention to Russia's role as a hegemonic regional actor (Khromeychuk 2023; Popova and Shevel 2024).

Results: framing domestic violence in Russia and Ukraine

Their diverging gender policies notwithstanding, public talk on DV in Russia and Ukraine is structured around three shared discursive frames: "family," "foreign influence," and "human rights." While state, mass media, and NGO publications indicate that the instrumentalization of these frames varies within and between the two countries, they generate a similar effect, minimizing or denying the gendered aspects of DV (for a summary, see Tables 2 and 3). In Ukraine, debates reflect differing levels of support for DV reform, but overwhelmingly manipulate the issue to make claims about Ukrainian national identity vis-à-vis Europe and Russia and the relationship between DV reform and LGBTQ+ rights. In Russia, both antiviolence activists and their opponents absorb DV into broader ideological debates about national identity and sovereignty in relation to the "West" and prioritize the so-called "traditional" family over women's well-being. The remainder of this section cites primary documents to elaborate these findings.

Domestic violence as a family issue

The "family" frame confines the issue of DV to the private sphere and valorizes the "traditional," patriarchal family structure as the ideal form of intimate gender relations. Russian sources, which primarily refer to "family and household violence" (*semeino-bytovoe nasilie*), overwhelmingly cast DV as a familial issue between parents and children, aiming to discourage state intervention and dismissing women's particular vulnerability to DV. Although Ukraine's criminalization law has brought DV out of the private sphere,

Table 2. The instrumentalization of discursive frames and discursive outcomes in Russia.

Frame	Proponents of DV reform	Opponents of DV reform	Discursive outcome
Family	DV reform ensures family well-being	DV reform interferes in family life	DV is a family (not a gender) issue
Foreign influence	Western countries provide a model for DV reform	DV reform is a “Western” imposition	DV reform politicized as “Western”
Human rights	DV reform is a rights, but not specifically women’s rights issue	DV reform violates parents’ and men’s rights	DV reform not linked to women’s rights

Table 3. The instrumentalization of discursive frames and discursive outcomes in Ukraine.

Frame	Proponents of DV reform	Opponents of DV reform	Discursive outcome
Family	DV is a public and sometimes gendered issue	DV reform contradicts family values	DV reform linked to anxieties about gender and (homo)sexuality
Foreign influence	DV reform integrates Ukraine with Europe and distances Ukraine from Russia	DV reform takes European integration too far	DV reform politicized as Ukraine negotiates national identity vis-à-vis Russia and Europe
Human rights	DV reform is a women’s rights issue	DV reform advances women’s and LGBTQ+ rights	DV reform hindered by association with LGBTQ+ rights

references to gendered violence frequently tie women to their traditional family role as mothers while conservative actors castigate DV reform as endangering (heterosexual) family life.

A 2016 op-ed from the Association of Parents Committees and Societies exemplifies family-centric Russian discourse around DV. The author warns that the passage of a DV prevention bill would challenge parents’ rights to discipline their own children, thereby threatening family life:

Do you quarrel with your kid in the morning because he is getting ready slowly and is already late for school? Did you deprive him of a trip to the movies because he received a C in math? ... You can see how many serious reasons have accumulated for your child to be immediately sent to an orphanage or a children's home for such cruel treatment from their parents. (Alekseeva 2015)

Trivializing DV as everyday family squabbles is common elsewhere in Russian discourse, which effectively disregards the possibility of violence between intimate partners. For example, parliamentarians have dismissed proposed DV legislation as mere “slapping” or “spanking” bills (Bobrova 2016; Isaev 2017) while Senator Valentina Matviyenko downplayed increased DV rates during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gromova and Karacheva 2020). Although antiviolence activists in Russia repurpose the “family” frame to promote DV reform as a means of supporting family welfare, they too center child abuse rather than violence against women. Despite the involvement of prominent feminist activists, the 2016 draft bill on DV was proposed as a tool for the state to “[implement] the family's functions and [improve] the stability and quality of life of the family,” never referencing women (State Duma 2016b). While this language likely aimed to ease the bill's (ultimately unsuccessful) passage, it suggests that the gender-based language of Western feminist activism lacks resonance in Russia.

In contrast, Ukrainian law recognizes DV as a crime and a “public danger”; terms such as “gender-based violence” (*nasylystvo za oznakoyu staty*) and “violence against women” (*nasylytstvo stosovno zhinok*) have also gained some traction in law (Verkhovna Rada 2017a, 2017b) and public discourse (Marsh Zhynok 2024; Тамара Марценюк 2018). Yet legislation stops short of elaborating women and men's divergent experiences with DV, failing to incorporate the gender-sensitive language of the Istanbul Convention (Verkhovna Rada 2017b); women are mentioned only in relation to violence against pregnant women and mothers, reflecting greater concern for those fulfilling traditional family roles. Meanwhile, conservative actors in Ukraine deem DV reform “antifamily”—language that resembles popular discourses in Russia. The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations typifies this discourse, criticizing the Istanbul Convention for imposing a “gender ideology of the totalitarian type [that] threatens the very existence of the family as a union of fruitful and faithful love between man and woman” (Supreme Archbishop of Kyiv-Halych 2021). Conflating gender and sexuality distorts the convention's protections for women as a hazard to heterosexual-parent families, disregarding the issue of DV altogether.

Domestic violence reform as foreign

Although the “foreign influence” frame is divergently employed in Russia and Ukraine, public talk in both countries similarly subsumes DV into debates

about national identity and security vis-à-vis a foreign “other,” politicizing DV and overlooking its gendered dimensions in the process.

In Russia, both sides of the debate associate DV reforms with the “West.” For example, a 2019 petition by leading women’s activist Alyona Popova justified the need for DV reform by citing the European Court of Human Rights’ 2019 ruling in *Volodina v. Russia*, which deemed Russian law inadequate for protecting DV victims (Popova 2019). However, increasingly strained relations between Russia and many Western countries normalize the idea that DV reform is a Western scheme that violates Russian national sovereignty. The director of the Association of Parents Committees and Societies has warned that passing DV legislation would authorize “international organizations and ... foreign NGOs [to] identify family violence and bring perpetrators to justice” (Alekseeva 2015) while prominent Russian NGOs campaigning against DV have been discredited as “foreign agents” (Antonova 2016).

While Ukrainian legislation has gradually adopted EU gender policy standards, popular discourses consistently tie DV to concerns about Ukrainian identity and sovereignty, exacerbated by long-standing Russian interventions in the country. To take one example, right-wing and paramilitary groups identify DV reform as anti-Ukrainian. A joint statement by three such organizations claimed that the Women’s March, a frequent platform for antiviolence activism in Ukraine, “is not for women’s rights, but for abortion, antimilitarism, and the prohibition of [Ukrainian] nationalist organizations” (Mal’tsev 2019). At the same time, some women’s activists seek to delegitimize their adversaries by connecting them with Russia. One prominent feminist linked the far-right Ukrainian organization Katekhon to “those in support of the so-called ‘Russian World’ [*Russkiy mir*]” and declared that its “antigender initiatives receive support and training from similar Russian initiatives” (Тамара Марценюк 2018). Evidence of wartime sexual violence committed by Russians against Ukrainians (Amnesty International 2020) also creates the impression that DV in Ukraine is predominantly a consequence of foreign intervention (Anosova 2020).

Domestic violence as a (selective) rights issue

Although framing women’s rights as human rights has helped regulate DV in other countries (Keck and Sikkink 1999), use of the “human rights” frame in Russia and Ukraine highlights disagreement around whose rights matter and how they should be protected. In Russia, critics of DV reform selectively champion the rights of parents, children, or families; antiviolence activists speak of “human rights” in general, neglecting the rights of women in particular. In Ukraine, concerns about the relationship between the women’s and LGBTQ+ rights agendas undermine DV advocacy.

The “human rights” frame in Russia blocks a gendered approach to DV reform in two main ways. First, because DV is often defined as violence between parents and their children, priority is given to defending a child’s right from

parental violence and the right of parents to discipline their children. Second, some actors maintain that DV reform should focus on the rights of men. According to the Russian Ministry of Justice,

Even if we suppose that the majority of people who are subjected to violence in the family in Russia are in fact women (although there is no existing evidence to confirm this), it is logical to assume that male victims suffer more from discrimination in these situations. They are in the minority and are not expected to request protection from abuse by family members, especially if they suffer from members of the opposite sex. (Chernykh 2019)

Likewise, antiviolence activists in Russia rarely employ the “human rights” frame to call attention to women’s rights. Despite their work on two draft bills in 2016 and 2019 for DV prevention, neither referenced women’s rights or women’s disproportionate risk to DV (State Duma 2016b, 2019).

In Ukraine, legislative texts and progressive NGOs consider state protection from DV a human right. However, public discourses highlight continued discomfort about the relationship between women’s and LGBTQ+ rights, obstructing DV reform. On the one hand, despite a shared interest in DV reform, women’s rights groups are often reluctant to collaborate with LGBTQ+ activists because the latter also campaign against DV based on sexual orientation and gender identity (KyivPride 2021; Marsh Zhynok 2024). On the other hand, opponents of DV reform exaggerate the affiliation between women’s and LGBTQ+ rights groups to stigmatize DV reform efforts. Emphasizing the Istanbul Convention’s “twisted,” socially grounded conceptualization of gender, for instance, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations conflates gender and sexuality, arguing that ratification would legalize same-sex unions, jeopardizing the “traditional” family (Гендеру – нет 2017).

Discussion

If Russia and Ukraine have legislated DV so differently, what explains the prevalence of genderless framings in both countries? To answer this question, I build on the work of Popova and Shevel, who contend that “an escalatory cycle between Russian imperialism and Ukraine’s commitment to its independent statehood” has characterized Russo–Ukrainian relations since the end of the Soviet Union (Popova and Shevel 2024, 3). In particular, diverging historical narratives, political regime change, and identity politics in the two countries have progressively strained their relationship, culminating in Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. I argue that tracing the evolution of gender politics in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine illuminates an additional and critical dimension by which the two countries diverged, gradually

inflaming bilateral tensions. Evaluating gender politics through the escalatory framework helps to explain how a push–pull dynamic in Russo–Ukrainian relations led to different policies on DV, but shared framing outcomes. It likewise indicates the centrality of gender politics to political processes and conflicts that may at first glance appear unrelated to gender—in this case, Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Recent examinations of gender politics in Russia consider the role of domestic factors such as intra-elite conflict, autocratic signaling, and public opinion (Johnson 2023a), as well as antigender and feminist mobilizations (Johnson 2024; Perrotta Berlin et al. 2022). Most scholarship on Ukraine focuses on the European Union’s role as a gender norm entrepreneur while the country pursues membership (Hrycak 2022; Shevtsova 2020, 2023). While some of this work acknowledges that “Soviet legacies of public patriarchy and imperialism continue to shape ... gender-based violence reform in Ukraine” (Hrycak 2022, 43), these mechanisms are largely understood as obstructing DV reform in the country despite Ukraine’s adoption of liberal gender policies; in addition, extant analysis does not address the potential effects of Ukrainian gender politics on Russia. Below, I apply the escalatory cycle framework to explore the co-development of DV policymaking and discourse in Russia and Ukraine.

Gender politics in (post-)Soviet states

To elaborate this argument, it is important to acknowledge that gender politics in contemporary Russia and Ukraine is rooted in the gender contract imposed by the Russia-led Soviet state. Although Soviet law granted equal rights, women were expected to bear primary responsibility for reproducing the family and nation while joining men in the labor force. These arrangements also transferred “the traditional masculine roles of father and provider” from men to the state, which became a “universal patriarch” (Ashwin 2012, 1).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union collapse, “discourses and practices of gender [played] a major role in the ... reconstitution of states and social relations” alongside substantial economic and political transformation (Gal and Kligman 2000, 3). A contracted socialist welfare system, high rates of unemployment, Orthodox religious revival, and the rejection of Soviet ideology in postsocialist states contributed to an “imagined ‘return’ to a patriarchal family structure” (Solari 2017, 35) and “strictly delineated gender norms” (Sperling 2015, 169). These conditions also created gendered anxieties: for example, men faced a masculinity crisis as market pressures undermined their performance as breadwinners (Sperling 2015).

Ideas about gender also shaped post-Soviet DV politics. While Soviet law largely neglected DV (Hrycak 2022; Muravyeva 2021), the issue gained some visibility via emergent women-led civil society organizations, although a robust women’s movement did not materialize. “Western”-style feminism, promoted by North America and Western Europe as a tool of postsocialist

democratization, lacked regional salience as women's "traditional" domestic role gained legitimacy after Soviet collapse. Overall, an "insufficiently critical societal attitude toward domestic violence against women" (Sperling 2015, 219; see also Hrycak 2022) hampered DV prevention efforts. These common experiences notwithstanding, gender politics in Russia and Ukraine have increasingly moved in different, often opposing directions. I investigate this divergence below, tracing the escalatory conditions that led the countries to adopt different policies but retain similarly genderless discourses on DV.

The consolidation of antigender politics in Russia

Despite some liberal political developments after the fall of the Soviet Union, President Vladimir Putin's protracted leadership (1999–present) has increasingly hardened state authoritarianism in Russia while engaging an imperial program abroad, framed as defense against a generalized "West." Developments in Ukraine, perceived as Russia's sphere of influence, have consistently challenged this enterprise (McGlynn 2023). Alongside other regional unrest, Ukraine's pro-democratic Orange Revolution (2004–2005) "rattled [the Putin administration]," revealing its limited grip on Ukrainian politics and raising concerns about possible dissent in Russia (Hemment 2015, 77). In 2013–14, Ukraine's "Revolution of Dignity" (Euromaidan), ousted a pro-Russian president, chose the European Union over joining a Russia-led customs union, and recommitted to a democratic and liberal path—actions the Kremlin interpreted as "yet another attack from the West, which needed to be fended off, [rather than] a complex event driven by a variety of domestic Ukrainian forces" (Edele 2023, 123). In response, Russia backed separatist forces in eastern Ukraine (the Donbas region) and annexed Crimea—a conflict that escalated into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At home, the Russian state tightened control over civil society and media as a further safeguard against presumed foreign threats (Johnson 2024; Kuteleva 2024).

During this time, the Russian state instrumentalized norms about gender and sexuality to advance its interests. Putin and the Russian political elite regularly engaged "machismo, homophobia, and gay-baiting ... to justify the power that they have or seek"—ideas that echo strongly in society (Sperling 2015, 4). While stymieing DV reform and passing anti-LGBTQ+ amendments at home, the government—in close partnership with the Russian Orthodox Church and transnational antigender activists—made "the protection of 'traditional values' a core part of its international agenda" (Edenborg 2023, 2; see also Velasco 2023), casting gender equality and rights for sexual minorities as "[incompatible] with Russian culture and tradition" (Muravyeva 2021, 7) and evidence of ongoing Western imperialism (Bias 2024). Following this perspective, the rapprochement with European liberal institutions in Russia's perceived neighborhood—including Ukraine's DV reforms and laws against discrimination based on sexual orientation—justifies Russian military

intervention “to protect families and children from gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights” (Johnson 2023b, 2).³ While censoring feminist NGOs as “foreign agents” has hampered DV advocacy in Russia, the antiwar position taken up by many Russian feminists will likely further impede efforts to protect women from violence in the future (Johnson 2024; Kuteleva 2024).

Although some social policy (e.g. the 2017 National Strategy for Women) and survey data cite a need for DV prevention in Russia, the government has repeatedly maintained that existing legal provisions sufficiently address the issue (Russian Federation 2017). The brief criminalization of assault to “close persons” (*blizkie litsa*) in 2016—part of an effort to “‘optimize’ the criminal and administrative justice system” and justified as a means of addressing child abuse—was later deemed antifamily (State Duma 2016a). DV was largely reduced to an administrative violation the following year (Muravyeva 2021, 10) and lawmakers shelved additional draft bills on “family-household violence” in 2016 and 2019, extending the lengthy list of DV policy failures in post-Soviet Russia (Johnson 2023a). A small reform passed in 2022 to streamline law enforcement protocols for DV, but did not indicate a “concern for gender justice” (Johnson 2024, 565). Moreover, Russia left the Council of Europe in 2022, placing the country outside the purview of the European Court of Human Rights—the judicial body that “ruled against Russia for its decriminalization of domestic violence” (Johnson 2023a, 1053).

(Limited) gender mainstreaming in Ukraine

While “divisions about what policies Ukraine should have toward Russia and toward Europe” (Solari 2017, 31) define post-Soviet politics in Ukraine, the country has increasingly moved in favor of “Ukrainian identity consolidation, democratization, and a pro-European policy orientation” (Popova and Shevel 2024, 18). Corruption, imperfect democracy, and political fragmentation notwithstanding, this path has been reinforced by several waves of popular unrest against pro-Russian policies and Russian interference (Hrycak 2022). In particular, the Orange Revolution overturned the fraudulent run-off election of Putin’s preferred presidential candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, and inaugurated a pro-Western president, Viktor Yushchenko, who embraced policies in support of Ukrainian identity, independence, and Western integration. After narrowly winning the presidency in 2010, Yanukovych attempted to reverse course, “bringing Ukraine’s political model closer to Russia’s”; however, “the strength of the pro-Western constituency in Ukraine, along with continued, although curtailed, political competition ... prevented Yanukovych from taking pro-Russian policies too far” (Popova and Shevel 2024, 7). When pressure from Russia drove Yanukovych to withdraw from an association agreement with the European Union in 2013, the Euromaidan Revolution unseated the president and reignited support for democracy-building, national sovereignty, and human rights (Nikolayenko and DeCasper 2018). In doing so, the Ukrainian populace overwhelmingly endorsed what it perceived as

“European tolerance, modernity, and open-mindedness” over the “[traditional] Slavic values of Russia” (Shevtsova 2020, 508).

While advancing unevenly, gendered governance in Ukraine continues to signify a commitment to liberal European norms on the policy level. Although “lingering autocratic practices subverted implementation,” Yushchenko’s government expanded support for DV prevention and adopted gender equality policies to “bring domestic violence law in line with women’s advocates and EU recommendations” (Hrycak 2022, 456). With likely backing from Russia, “antigender equality organizations and concomitant discourses gained significant traction” in Ukraine following Yanukovich’s 2010 election (Hankivsky and Skoryk 2014, 22). However, Euromaidan rejuvenated both the LGBTQ+ and women’s rights agendas, culminating in a 2015 law banning discrimination against sexual minorities, the 2017 criminalization of DV, and ultimately, the 2022 ratification of the Istanbul Convention. While these reforms were in part a result of EU–Ukrainian conditionality politics (Shevtsova 2020) and women’s organizing in Ukraine (Strelnyk 2023), Russian aggression in Ukraine also served as a key driver. Indeed, Ukraine’s increasing integration with the European Union’s liberal standards—which has catalyzed the adoption of more progressive policies on gender and sexuality—is widely viewed in the country as central to future development and security vis-à-vis Russia.

At the same time that Russia’s war has sharply reduced tolerance for “Russian” values in Ukrainian society, the active participation of far-right groups in Euromaidan and the conflict in Donbas gained them and their “homophobic and antigender rhetoric previously used by pro-Russian actors ... substantial legitimacy” (Shevtsova 2020, 500; see also Gelashvili 2024; Mayerchuk and Plakhotnik 2021). In addition, the Ukrainian public struggles to reconcile the idea that Ukraine is “European” with certain values associated with Europe, and particularly support for LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality—“[positions] that the majority, historically, have not held” (Channell-Justice 2017, 719). Thus, while Russian hostilities enhance support among Ukrainians for EU accession (Onuch 2024), modifying perspectives on contentious gender and sexuality issues has progressed more slowly.⁴ Ukraine’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention in June 2022—a move obstructed for more than a decade due to objections from influential conservative lawmakers and religious leaders about its social, rather than biological definition of gender—is a case in point. As Almut Rochowanski argued at the time, “[there] had never been domestic constituencies strong enough to push through ratification [in Ukraine]. That did not change overnight on 18 June. The only thing that changed is that the EU tied ratification to candidate status” (Rochowanski 2022)—and, arguably, that Ukrainians saw EU membership as increasingly exigent in light of Russia’s full-scale war.

The escalatory gender politics of Russia and Ukraine

As observed in the Russo–Ukrainian relationship more generally since the end of the Soviet Union, gender politics in the two countries can be interpreted through an escalatory framework: as Ukraine pursued democratic development and a “European integration path,” aligning more of its gendered governance with EU standards, Russia doubled down on its authoritarian program and rejection of liberal gender norms (Popova and Shevel 2024, 16–17). Whereas Ukraine’s gradual acceptance of progressive gender policies was one of many strategies it employed to distinguish the country from and emphasize its autonomy vis-à-vis Russia, Russian gender politics have emphatically snubbed liberal norms as a way to defend Russia and its professed sphere of influence from the encroachment of liberal Western institutions—a defense that has grown more significant given Ukraine’s “commitment to its independence” (Popova and Shevel 2024, 15). This push–pull dynamic eventually drove Ukraine to recognize DV as a gendered crime and ratify the Istanbul Convention. Meanwhile, attempts to legislate DV—not to mention recognize DV as a gendered issue—have been consistently thwarted in Russia.

At the same time, this escalatory dynamic has also prevented the spread of gendered frames to public talk on DV in Ukraine, as some of the most fiercely anti-Russian sectors of society—far-right, militant groups that also disseminate homophobic and antifeminist rhetoric—gained credence against the backdrop of Russia’s 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine. Ukrainian public discourses on DV thus continue to de-emphasize gender, resembling those in Russia where the state’s antigender and anti-LGBTQ+ agenda significantly drowns out alternative viewpoints.

The escalatory cycle also helps make sense of why the “family,” “foreign influence,” and “human rights” frames on DV retain purchase in both countries. In Russia, the war in Ukraine is fought not only over territory but ideas, including those related to gender and sexuality: preserving the traditional, heterosexual family is viewed as a means of fending off the liberal Western institutions gaining traction in Russia’s supposed neighborhood. Despite notable gender policy change in Ukraine, which has also introduced some gender-sensitive discourses on DV, Russia’s ongoing war, fragmented political allegiances in Ukraine, and growing pains in Ukrainian society over the country’s geopolitical alignment with the European Union continue to ensnare DV in contentious debates. These conditions have emboldened and enhanced tolerance for discourses that denounce DV reform for its purported links to LGBTQ+ rights, endangerment of Ukrainian (heterosexual) families, and threats to Ukrainian identity and sovereignty. In turn, public talk about DV in Ukraine often looks similar to that in Russia.

Conclusion

This article contributes to a growing body of work exploring the “inconsistencies, persistent challenges, and an increasing backlash” against supposedly global norms by analyzing policies and public discourses on DV in Russia and Ukraine (Ferguson 2021, 700–1). Whereas DV policy is absent from Russia altogether, Ukraine identifies DV as a gendered crime. However, we have seen that the “family,” “foreign influence,” and “human rights” frames structure debates about DV in both countries, constructing a genderless understanding of DV that neglects women’s disproportionate vulnerability to domestic violence. I have argued that the “escalatory cycle” characterizing Russo–Ukrainian relations in the post-Soviet period is key to understanding this puzzle (Popova and Shevel 2024): as Ukraine has further committed to norms associated with liberal Western institutions in pursuit of full independence from Russia, Russia has more aggressively denounced these norms at home and abroad, going as far as to justify its war in Ukraine as a means of defending Russia and Russian families from “gender.” At the same time, the war has simultaneously enhanced the legitimacy of conservative Ukrainian actors who articulate a strong anti-Russian, as well as an antigender/anti-LGBTQ+ position; many Ukrainians also remain uncertain about liberal gender and sexuality norms, despite widespread support for EU membership in the face of Russian aggression. In turn, public talk on DV in both countries bears significant similarity.

One important takeaway from this research is that while Russian imperial interventions have significantly shaped politics in Ukraine, including around gender, actions taken by Ukraine have also shaped gender politics in Russia. In particular, Ukrainian reforms aligning with European gender frameworks have heightened countermobilizations against liberal gender norms in Russia. This runs up against popular narratives that interpret Ukraine as “a pawn in a geopolitical game being played between Russia and the collective West” and discount the significance of Ukrainian politics in their own right (Khromeychuk 2023, 22; see also Popova and Shevel 2024). Relatedly, antigender rhetoric in Ukraine does not simply parrot Russian discourse or the discourses endorsed by the transnational antigender movement in which Russia plays a leading role but adapts rhetoric to local conditions (Gilardi 2012; Kováts 2017). For instance, while conservative actors in both Russia and Ukraine discredit DV reform, the latter have framed progressive gender policies as threats to a strong Ukrainian military—a distinctly Ukrainian discursive tactic shaped by the country’s struggle against Russian threats.

Second, the pervasiveness of genderless framings indicates minimal traction for the gender-based discourses of Western feminism—not only in countries such as Russia that actively scorn “Western” norms, but also in countries such as Ukraine, which is increasingly embracing liberal Western institutions at the policy level. This trend is likely to endure in places where the “traditional”

family is upheld as the normative model of gender relations or where Western feminism is discredited—including in many countries across Europe, Latin America, and North America where discourses of the antigender movement have gained traction (Corredor 2019; Kováts 2017). The prevalence of genderless framings in Ukrainian discourse despite some discussion of gender-based violence in the law also highlights that policy reforms do not necessarily reflect and have not significantly reshaped cultural understandings of DV in the country—at least not yet. At the same time, the continued global prevalence of DV, including in liberal democracies, undermines the notion that adopting gender-based framings enhances protections for women (Britton and Shook 2014).⁵ Indeed, despite their divergent legislation on DV, gendered violence remained prevalent in both Russia and Ukraine during the period under study and has reached new heights since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Włodkowska 2023).

Third, this study expands the scope of traditional norm diffusion models by (1) moving beyond policy adoption to evaluate other metrics such as public attitudes, and (2) acknowledging the possibility of multiple and multidirectional norm agendas. The former deepens our understanding of changing norms and values and may help explain the often-limited implementation and effects of policy adoption. The latter enables an assessment of what happens when norm agendas converge and interact at a given site. This is crucial for understanding the mutual influences that Russia and Ukraine have had on each other's discursive landscapes, in addition to the role of the European Union and the transnational antigender movement, and may be useful for examining norm diffusion in other contexts.

While analyzing public discourses arguably enhances our knowledge of gender norms, one limitation to this study is the challenge of assessing public opinion in countries like Russia, where the state's heavy hand curbs the range of possible discourses in the public domain. For instance, while the gender-blind DV frames employed by Russia's progressive gender activists may be a rejection of Western feminist frames, they may also result from self-censorship. However, scholarship suggests that Russian citizens do not passively accept Kremlin messages (McGlynn 2023); the fact that DV was actively debated in Russia during the period under study (Johnson 2024; Muravyeva 2021) also helps offset concerns about the reliability of public discourse data in authoritarian settings. These points notwithstanding, discursive frames can meaningfully construct gender norms regardless of the grounds that gave rise to them.

Some may also question the applicability of the escalatory cycle framework to other case studies. While the escalatory cycle patterning gender politics in Russia and Ukraine emerged from a particular regional context, the push-pull dynamic underpinning it is arguably relevant beyond this case. Similar to studies that consider how “the interplay between [movements and counter-movements] influences strategy and resources on both sides,” the escalatory

mechanism can enrich work on norm diffusion by attending to the ongoing interactions shaping norm adoption or lack thereof (Corredor 2019, 617).

Finally, linking DV norms and policies to real-life consequences for women in Russia and Ukraine lies outside the scope of my analysis. Future research that evaluates other metrics beyond policy adoption and public attitudes (Gilardi 2012; Slootmaeckers 2022)—e.g. implementation and infrastructures of DV prevention such as crisis centers—will help uncover how adopted policies take hold in society over time. Relatedly, examining norm diffusion in other contexts where liberal and illiberal agendas collide can enrich our understanding of the still understudied mechanics behind norm backlash (Benstead, Muriaas, and Wang 2023; O'Brien and Walsh 2020). This remains an important undertaking as challenges to policies related to gender equality, women's rights, and protections for sexual minorities—as well as other core liberal institutions—gather momentum in and beyond Eastern Europe (Corredor 2019; Velasco 2023).

Notes

1. I use “domestic violence” to represent any form of violence between former and current spouses or partners. Although alternative terms (e.g. “intimate partner violence”) are gaining popularity, “domestic violence” remains more common in the countries under study.
2. The number of sources per country differed because of Ukraine's relatively greater attention to DV in policymaking.
3. In turn, “[some] Ukrainian feminists and even the Ukrainian government see antigenderism as part of Russia's decade-plus re-colonizing conquest, with the evidence of war rape, as the most extreme, violent version of anti-genderism” (Johnson 2023b, 5).
4. Rapprochement with the European Union, alongside LGBTQ+ military service, may be shifting public opinion in favor of LGBTQ+ rights. In contrast, despite women's contributions to the war effort and the proliferation of conflict-related violence against women, promoting women's rights is challenging in a context where the rights of men are significantly restricted by martial law (Strelnyk 2023).
5. Some criticize gendered frames for disregarding violence in same-sex partnerships and violence against men; others contend that they reinforce gender inequalities. Scholars have also noted the advancement of women's rights in authoritarian countries without reference to feminism or gender (Johnson 2023a).

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