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**"The EU as a Global Actor: Peace,  
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What about Ukrainian women? Structural  
silencing of post-Soviet feminism in  
academia and beyond

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## ***Introduction***

In 1988 Indian-born postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak published her highly influential Essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and thereby opened up the debate of how westernized knowledge production silences particularly subaltern women. She terms this structural exclusion of subaltern voices within academia epistemic silencing and ascribed it to neo-colonial practices which reproduce colonial and imperial structures (Motlafi, 2021; Spivak, 2010). Even though formal colonization ended in the aftermath of the WWII, invisible patterns of colonial practices remain, articulated through racialized knowledge production hierarchies which can also be understood as a form of epistemic violence (Zeiny, 2019). The peace studies are particularly impacted by Eurocentric thinking. With war taking place mostly outside of the European continent, the exclusion of local knowledge production can hinder meaningful peace-building initiatives (Gray, 2022). Recent research agrees that epistemic silencing of local voices causes problems within the peace-building missions of the European Union (Sachseder & Stachowitsch, 2023).

This paper picks up on research's concern of structural violence within feminist peace-building missions and aims to critically examine and decolonize academia itself, particularly its Eurocentric frameworks.

## **Theoretical framework**

To tackle this topic further, the 'Decentering Agenda', proposed by Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013), will be used to delve deeper into the issue of colonial dynamics within the Western scholarly community. The approach encourages a rethinking of how Europe as an international actor and its role as a global peacebuilder are studied. The core part of the 'Decentering Agenda' is the challenging of Eurocentric perspectives which are deeply embedded within European policy-making and academic research. Eurocentrism is rooted around the idea that European culture, history and values are universal and positioned as superior to any other non-European perspectives and experiences. Therefore, the authors do suggest using the concepts of *provincialization*, *engagement*, and eventually *reconstruction* to effectively decenter Eurocentrism within western research, with the first two categories being of particular relevance for this analyzation. The analytical category *provincialization*, adopted from Chakrabarty (2008), aims for decentering Eurocentric frameworks by not succumbing to the assumption that they are universal truths. Rather, other forms of knowledge production, histories, cultures and experiences should be recognized as well. The other category *engagement*, ought to emphasize the importance of dialogue between structural marginalized perspectives and Eurocentric

knowledge production. Research is encouraged to incorporate the experiences and perspectives of non-European actors and engage with empirical data.

Keukeleire and Lecocq (2018) built onto these two categories of *provincialization* and *engagement* (Fisher-Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013) and proposed further six categories on how to apply the framework in scholarly practice: (1) *spatial* decentering, by questioning geographical assumptions driven by Western understandings of spatial settings, (2) *temporal* decentering, which involves acknowledging other forms of historical periodization, (3) *normative* decentering which aims to unpack European values often seen as universally applicable, (4) *polity* decentering which ought to think outside the Westphalian state-centric understandings, (5) *linguistic* decentering, by widening dominant linguistic frameworks, and last but not least (6) *disciplinary* decentering, which will be applied here. The category *disciplinary* decentering aims to decenter Europe from an epistemological and methodological level within the practices of academia itself. To achieve this, it is crucial to in a first step analyze how Europe's foreign policy is shaped but also constrained by Eurocentric assumptions and traditions within the research itself (*provincialization*). In a second step (*engagement*), the authors suggest to actively interact with alternative understandings of foreign policies, beyond mainstream academic assumptions.

Therefore, in this paper, I aim to decenter Europe's women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda which represents the commitment of the EU to gender mainstream within its peace-building missions by offering a decolonial and feminist critique. By building on emerging research, I will focus specifically on the structural silencing of post-Soviet feminism and its implications within the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine since 2022. Through a case study of Ukraine, I will engage with literature and research on post-Soviet feminist perspectives and the lived experiences of women affected by the conflict. This approach will allow me to engage with post-Soviet scholarship while parallel to that, Eurocentric assumptions of gender mainstreaming through its peace-building practices ought to be challenged and dismantled. The overall research questions therefore is:

*How does the structural and epistemological silencing of post-Soviet feminist perspectives within academia affect the gender mainstreaming in the EU's peace-building missions, in the context of the current war in Ukraine?*

## ***Unheard Voices: How Epistemic Silencing Distorts Knowledge Systems***

In order to explore this research question, this section ought to provide engagement with recent research on how western knowledge production constrains policies and decision-making processes, which can be transferred to a critique of EU's peace-building missions.

### **Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Caught in a neoliberal trap?**

The women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda is a framework which was established by the United Nation Security Council through the resolution 1325 in 2000. It calls for the importance of women's participation within peace interventions and the protection of women and girls in concrete conflict zones. Gender in that sense should be mainstreamed within all aspects of peace and security efforts of nations or international organizations. The European Union implemented this policy framework in 2018 and aims for the inclusion of women's voices in peace and security processes (Council of Europe, 2018; PeaceWomen, n.d.).

The WPS agenda has been frequently critiqued within feminist research. A growing number of studies point to the fact that western peacebuilding is constraint by its own neoliberal framework. Within this framework lies the assumption that western conceptions of peace are superior. Consequently, it is supposed that other regions must comply to these western models of peace, which are grounded in ideals such as individualism, liberal democracy, feminist-inspired anti-violence strategies, civil society development, rule of law, and free-market economics. These underpinnings are manifested in practices such as unfair trade agreements, exploitative working conditions and unequal resource distribution while disregarding the lived realities of people of the global south where especially poor women of color face a high vulnerability (Motlafi, 2021).

However, the neoliberal tendencies within the peace-building missions do not only affect women in the Global South. As Lyubchenko (2022) highlights, recovery and reconstruction plans in Ukraine since Russia's initial aggression in 2014 have contributed to the marginalization of rural women and those from working-class backgrounds, further undermining the goals of the WPS agenda. This is particularly evident in the growing loss of access to healthcare facilities and employment opportunities, sectors in which these women were predominantly represented.

Another reason for the failed integration and opportunities of the WPS agenda within the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions, especially within the civilian context, is that the missions are shaped of militarized nature. Militarized norms are discursively

connoted to masculinity. Studies show how this connection has limited the incorporation of humanitarian and feminist agendas, which manifests in a 'gender blindness' within the missions. Furthermore, gender policies within the foreign policies of the EU are still depended on the engagement and presence of 'femocrats' which are women who hold a significant political or administrative power and who actively advocate for gender mainstreaming within the policies (Guerrina, Chappell & Wriqth, 2018).

### **Silencing voices: the marginalization of non-western feminism**

Now let's critically address the problem of structural silencing of non-western experiences and what implications this might have on an academic and practical level.

Research within the West and the EU has established itself as a producer of superior knowledge, by historically devaluating the scholarly contributions of others. This very dynamic deeply ingrained in the academic tradition, has impacted the EU's identity and behavior when it comes to peacebuilding practices and limiting its gender mainstreaming by reinforcing the racialization of the 'Other' upholding postcolonial structures of inequality. For example, while the WPS agenda aims to mainstream gender across all EU peacebuilding missions, it falls short when it comes to addressing hierarchical power relations which impact the experience of women within conflict areas. This limits providing security needs for marginalized populations facing gendered and racialized violence critically needed by women in war areas (Sachseder & Stachowitsch, 2023).

Hoijtink, Mühlenhoff and Welfens (2023) claim that research on Europe's peace-building missions can be considered incomplete if Eurocentric framing remains resistance. Such knowledge production will perpetuate gendered and racialized inequalities even further and thus will not be targeting the peace goals of the civilian missions. Research and peacebuilding may be flawed due to the circumstance that only western knowledge production and experiences are considered. For instance, their research revealed that within CSDP missions, the EU does position itself as a protector for subaltern women. This leads to a framing of passive victims and undermines their agency. Furthermore, it reinforces the narrative of the EU being a 'protector' which solidifies neocolonial thinking. Moreover, the study also highlights how EU's security policies is largely based on a 'power over' rather than 'power with' framework, which is limiting the potential for transformative policies of the WPS (Hoijtink, Mühlenhoff, & Welfens, 2023).

Also, Haastrup & Hagen (2021) have produced extensively within the question of why WPS is not reaching its goals within peacebuilding missions. They claim the shortcomings of the WPS can be directly traced back to hierarchies of knowledge production within academia itself. Centers of Excellence have been established which act as the primary hub for professionalization surrounding the field of international interventions. However, these Centers of Excellence are primarily located in the US and northern European countries. This geographical centering, along with the associated methods of knowledge production, therefore, influences the training and education of interventionists and, as a consequence, their practices implemented in non-Western countries. The problem lies in the fact that the experiences and knowledge from third countries are not sufficiently considered.

This goes hand in hand with the discursive tool of 'othering'. Which is a colonial discursive pattern where inferiority of others is expressed through language. This maintains whiteness as the default within the research and practice of the WPS (Haastrup & Toni, 2020a). For example, Ivanovic (2019) argues that practices of peacebuilding are a way for the EU as a global actor to articulate and identify itself, by using the othering of Muslim people to solidify power relations between the global north and the global south.

Furthermore, Hagen & Haastrup (2020b) revealed by analyzing the National Actions Plans of countries that have adopted the WPS agenda, that western countries tend to apply WPS more pronounced within their external policies and to a lesser extent within an internal context. Therefore, this paints the picture of wealthier states located in the global north using the WPS agenda to dictate practices to the global south, while not raising enough awareness of gender-based violence within their own territories. Which, in turn reinforces otherness and superiority beliefs within peacebuilding and intervention missions. Therefore, the authors propose the argument that the WPS Agenda is politically instrumentalized as a way of othering and how black and brown women are perceived internationally as being inferior.

However, recently there has been a new branch of research regarding the WPS agenda outside a Eurocentric framing. There are claims that the 'global east' which refers to the geopolitical and epistemological positioning of regions that are traditionally categorized as Eastern, especially Central and Eastern European nations (Mälksoo, 2021), are broadly excluded within the academic discussion but show to have comparable problems when it comes to the implementation of the WPS agenda. For instance, Santoire (2023) also conducted research on National Action Plans and discovered that a similar dictating effect is true for the Eastern European space. Women in the post-Soviet space are othered by western countries which are

applying the WPS agenda to its foreign policy to the post-Soviet area. Therefore, Santoire (2023) argues that much of the literature on decoloniality within the WPS agenda predominantly focuses on the divide between the global north and global south and points out how this dichotomy emphasizes more on the sub-Saharan area and overlooks the post-Soviet space. Therefore, practices of othering are also very much present to the post-Soviet spaces since the historical distinguish between the first (the west), the second (the east) and the third (the south) world has contributed to the perception that the west is superior to all three (Santoire, 2024).

Picking onto this research gap, a case study of the Ukrainian situation, with a particular focus on the Russian invasion since 2022, should shed more light on the structural silencing of women's voices and knowledge production within the conflict. By examining this case this paper seeks to contribute to the literature by decentering western knowledge production and engaging with eastern European feminism and experiences.

### ***Case Study Ukraine***

Ukrainians suffer from Eurocentric knowledge production and policy implications which has heightened since the invasion of Russia in 2022. Hendl et al. (2024) have called out the tendency of western scholars to pretend to have a unique understanding of Russia's aggression against Ukraine by viewing the situation through a Russia/the west lens, which undermines the experience of Ukrainians. Thereby, Ukrainian resistance was underestimated, and their agency overlooked. They describe this dynamic and the tendency of Western experts to offer overly confident and simplistic explanations of the Ukrainian-Russian war as "Westplaining" (Hendl et al., 2024, p.177; Tyshka, 2023). Furthermore, knowledge production in IR has been largely shaped through a Russian-centered lens, often overlooking neighboring regions. This has led to a distortion in knowledge production itself, which is reflected in literature, politics, and historical studies. As a result, it may have contributed to a discourse that normalizes Russia's role as an aggressor. Additionally, scholars have criticized that this narrow view created a blind spot within IR, particularly regarding Russia's imperial ambitions. Postcolonial and feminist voices in IR, have largely remained silent and thereby neglected Russia's imperial and colonial tendencies, since conflicts were mostly viewed through a NATO-centered lens (Burlyuk & Musliu, 2023). These dynamics have also manifested itself within feminist debates and scholarly research which will be discussed below.

The war between Ukraine and Russia has been called out of having clear gender dynamics. Sexual violence is used from Russian aggressors. WPS framework therefore has become the standard for peace building and security approaches for women in the Ukraine conducted by



several international organizations like the EU or the NATO (O’Sullivan, 2024). The EU with its Action Plan for the WPS Agenda (2019–2024) already in 2019 committed itself to emphasize the promotion of women’s political participation within its peace-building efforts, particularly in CSDP missions. It highlights the protection of women and girls from sexual violence, the integration of gender mainstreaming into all levels of policy and practice, and the training of EU personnel on gender-sensitive approaches. Additionally, the Action Plan underscores the importance of collaboration with local organizations and prioritizes high-conflict zones, such as Ukraine, as critical areas for implementing the WPS agenda effectively within the CSDP missions (Council of the European Union, 2019).

The main problem lies within the fact that the policy is shaped by western and Nordic European countries, and direct knowledge from Eastern European feminists has been mostly absent. This manifests itself in the identifiable ambiguity between the concrete practices and the rhetoric of the WPS agenda, which have been called out to only be a ‘superficial strategic communication’ (O’Sullivan, 2024, p.561). Wright (2022) agrees that there is a discrepancy when it comes to the rhetoric and reality of the commitment to the WPS agenda within the NATO. This is also present in the increasing use of othering strategies within the Ukraine’s implementation of the WPS agenda. Jayasundara Smit (2021) examined the visual presentation of the EU’s Security Sector Reform mission in the Ukraine, which is aimed at reforming the country’s police and justice system established after the aggressions of Russia in 2014, revealed how Ukrainian female staff was depicted as inferior compared to the EU staff which further reinforces a superior-inferior binary narrative (Jayasundara Smit, 2021).

### **Consequences for the Ukrainian context**

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, international politics has mainly focused on the ‘hard politics’ therefore undermining and not taking gendered implications into account and thus failing the transformative project of the WPS. Moreover, also International Relations scholars have since more so analyzed the war from the perspective of an interplay between states and sidelining gender dynamics (Wright, 2022). This sidelining resulted in not considering the situation of women at all within the first months of the outbreak (Hendl et al., 2024). These findings support the assumption that the WPS agenda is often used as being a discursive tool for the external policies of the EU’s civilian missions but is relegated to the background in crisis situations.

This is also identifiable on the organizational level. As O’Sullivan (2024) implies that othering through several practices can also have an impact on the organizational level, where her

examination revealed that the WPS agenda is mainly used to be externalized onto sexual violence protection instead of being adopted on a more structural level where opinions and suggestions of feminists are getting pushed away.

Increasingly more eastern European scholars call out the fact that eastern feminist research has not reached mainstream within the academic institutions. For example, O'Sullivan (2024) points out how feminist backlash has only become a recent topic within the western knowledge production sphere but has been of particular concern of post-Soviet feminism for much longer. Silencing structures of post-Soviet feminism like this produce blind spots when it comes to conceptions of threats and dangers faced by Ukrainian women on a day-to-day basis. Ukrainian feminists do complain about misunderstandings and paternalistic attitudes from western counterparts within the conflict area. However, inferior portrayal of post-Soviet feminism undermines recent achievements of Ukrainian feminist, such as the adoption of the Istanbul convention in June 2022, which was an important step for a closer integration to the European Union (Le Threhondat, 2024). Or the fact that Ukrainian women are actively engaging in the war and have been within military structure's even before that (Hendl et al., 2024).

Furthermore, recent interviews conducted with Ukrainian women actively engaging in feminist peacebuilding reveal that since the Russian invasion, there has been a high humanitarian focus of local feminist movements. They prioritize supporting women, children, and internally displaced persons by providing shelter and humanitarian assistance. Their scope therefore goes beyond 'mere' feminist activism. Therefore, the ability to receive funding is limited as their work defends human rights in a broader context (Le Threhondat, 2024). However, this contradicts goals of the EU when it comes to the implementation of the WPS agenda within their foreign policy which aims at supporting local women's organization (Council of the European Union, 2019). The representatives of such organizations do have very specific understanding of the complex local needs and the people affected by the war but will not be able to make a meaningful impact within the peacebuilding missions if they are not able to get adequate humanitarian support. In addition to that, a representative from the organization FeministWorkshop, also expressed frustration over being excluded from global discussion when it comes to the matter of the support of Ukrainian women (Le Threhondat, 2024).

Another feminist organization, FemSolution, is one of many grassroots feminist movements within the Ukraine which has been increasingly active since the Russian invasion in 2022. They do report a shift in public opinion within the Ukraine itself. Before the invasion women's organizations were often marginalized by far-right movements and struggled with assaults and

underfunding. Since the outbreak of the war, humanitarian action is now the focus of the movement, by providing hygiene articles and aid packages, feminist organizations have gained more acceptance within Ukrainian society. Moreover, perspectives of war and peace seem to have evolved. As one representative of the movement stated that they “live on the wrong side of the fence to have an anti-war stance” (Farbar, 2023). Hendl et al. (2024) also highlighted the voices of Ukrainian women who challenge western perceptions of pacifism and peace. Furthermore, by portraying the role of women within the war to be peaceful caretakers, also undermines the awareness of sexual violence of Russian aggressors within the debates. This reflects the complex realities of Ukrainian women and local feminist work, going beyond the western perceptions of peace ideals and tasks within women’s movements.

## ***Conclusion***

Referring back to the research question, this paper could reveal several dynamics on how westernized knowledge production is affecting gender mainstreaming and the implementation of the WPS agenda within the EU’s peace-building missions in the Ukraine. The exclusion of Eastern feminist perspectives has undermined and falsely calculated the agency and resistance of Ukrainian women. Consequently, not providing the women with adequate help. Furthermore, the centering of knowledge within the US and Nordic European countries has severe effects on the education of interventionist and impacts practices and organizational structures as well. Therefore, engaging with scholarly production specifically from the post-Soviet space is crucial to overcome Eurocentric narratives within the CSDP missions in the Ukraine.

This analysis once again highlighted how academia and politics are likely to sideline gendered aspects of war. This reveals that in the time of crisis feminist perspectives are being subordinated within the discipline of IR and therefore opportunities for impactful peace-building missions are missed.

However, it is important to note that, despite efforts to include Ukrainian scholars, this essay remains largely rooted in Western knowledge production. While it does incorporate critical voices within the field, its limitations stem from several factors: space constraints, language barriers, and the challenge of accessing a broader range of research due to the dominance of Western perspectives in major academic journals. Therefore, future research could research this further.

Questioning Eurocentric narratives of peace, engaging with Eastern European feminism and local feminist institutions is therefore crucial to not succumb to the reproduction of neo-colonial tendencies. Therefore, more bottom-up processes, as Hendl et al. (2024) suggests are needed. Moreover, within academia we should aim for questioning the helpfulness of the west/ east dichotomies and other forms of othering in order to not (un)intentionally reproducing hierarchies of knowledge productions.

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